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Workplace Basic Skills: Employer Demands and Worker Preparation

by Richard Froeschle and Teresa Theis

“Policy makers and economists strongly agree that a highly educated and skilled workforce is one of the indispensable keys to economic success, particularly in the kind of [global] economic environment the United States will face for the foreseeable future.” This statement from the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce is echoed in almost every white paper and research monograph regarding the contribution of education to America’s future competitiveness. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that half of the nation’s top 30 fastest growing occupations will require a bachelor’s degree or higher. In Texas, we expect 124,000 annual average job openings will require a Bachelor’s degree or higher, with a net 705,000 new job openings emerging between 2006 and 2016 requiring an advanced credential. Recent employment projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics clearly indicate an increasing percentage of the fastest growing, highest paying jobs will require a college education.



The implications of these observations emphasize the importance of increasing high school graduation rates and moving higher percentages of the population into college or, at a minimum, through some other route to additional postsecondary education.

There is little doubt that there are tremendous benefits accrued to both individuals and society writ large by increasing the percentage of students attending and graduating from college. But in survey after survey, employers offer another message that is equally compelling; the importance of workplace basics. Whether we call them “workplace fundamentals,” foundation skills or workplace readiness skills, workplace basics are critical for employers to build the competitive, productive, creative, synergistic and disciplined workforce that drives innovation and productivity.

What Skills Are Employers Seeking?

Industries as diverse as manufacturing, health care, energy and personal services have unique concentrations of occupational specialties that

demand highly skilled and educated workers. For example, the health care sector needs skilled professional nurses, physicians, and medical technicians while the manufacturing sector employs robotics technicians, production assemblers and welders. But all these industries have a common need for workers that can communicate verbally and in writing, show initiative and work independently, work as part of a team in both leadership and support roles, and demonstrate professional behaviors, strong work ethic and creative problem solving. These, and many other characteristics, can make the difference between a workplace that might be educated but dysfunctional, skilled but unproductive, knowledgeable and yet lacking synergy.

It is common for the education and workforce training community to conduct employer-based surveys to determine what employers need from these public intermediaries. The presumption is that employers themselves are in the best position to dictate whether they need more engineers, scientists, nurses, construction workers, etc. In many cases,

the survey responses set the tone for strategies for public investments made in education and career planning efforts.

However, employers have repeatedly returned to more fundamental worker requirements. According to the most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy, employers report that “many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today’s workplaces.” In a CEO survey conducted on behalf of Corporate Voices for Working Families, employers said the reason for their growing preference for college graduates is not just subject matter expertise, but rather that “a high school diploma is no longer a guarantee that the graduate will have key workplace skills.” They all emphasize the importance of workplace basics.

Among respondents to a 2005 survey of manufacturers, nearly half indicated their current employees have inadequate basic employability skills, such as attendance, timeliness and work ethic. Another 46 percent reported inadequate problem-solving skills and 36 percent indicated insufficient reading, writing and communication skills (2005 Skills Gap Survey). In a similar 2001 survey, employers cited basic employability skills as the single most frequent deficiency among employees. “The heart of most jobs, especially the higher-paying more interesting jobs, is teamwork” relates an executive from Johnson & Johnson, mentioning a frequently cited workplace basic skill. “Teamwork involves getting others to cooperate, leading others, coping with complex power and influence issues, and helping solve people’s problems in working with each other. Teamwork involves communication, effective coordination, and divisions of labor.”

A New List of Workplace Basics

There is clear and overwhelming evidence of the importance of workplace basic skills to the business community. Unfortunately, each research effort uses different terminology making it hard to organize and describe a concrete group of workplace basics. Gerald Harris comments in his review of the literature on this subject that it is apparent “[the] changing nature of work in the U.S. is dictating a new workplace requiring a changing workforce to demonstrate a broad range of skills that allows the flexibility to do a number of tasks that cut across traditional occupational lines.” Again, however, as noted in another resource publication, *The Mindful Worker*, there are no standardized listings, no centrally-accepted

research design and no universal adoption of a set of target workforce competencies.

So how did we compile the following list of 30 Workplace Basics presented in this discussion? There is no monopoly on the terms we’ve adopted nor is there a shortage of employer surveys and research efforts from which to draw. We combed hardcopy studies and scoured the Internet for related references and identified twenty-two (22) primary source documents. From this research we exhumed 542 discrete workplace basic phrasings that ranged from ‘generating new ideas’ to ‘anticipating obstacles’ to ‘conflict resolution’. These statements were carefully analyzed for similarities and frequency of citation and compiled into a list of unique workplace basics skill categories.

There is no magic behind this list of 30 categories. Some might argue that our list can be further compressed, perhaps into 20 or fewer. The seminal research effort from Anthony Carnivale, *Workplace Basics: The Skills Employer Want* for the American Society of Training and Development included 36 worker characteristics in their framework. Others might argue that each of these categories is not of equal importance and that a list of perhaps the top ten “meta-skills” might be more valuable. We would not argue these points. We do believe, however, that the list has minimal redundancy and that each of the categories is important – perhaps some more than others depending on the workplace environment.



“[T]oday’s workplace demands more than competency in the three R’s. Employers want a new kind of employee with a broad set of skills, or at least a strong foundation in the basics, in order to facilitate learning on the job.”

**—Geraldyn McClure Franklin of
Stephen F. Austin State**

Workplace Basics

Skills for Baseline Job Preparation

1. **Oral Communication** – skill in expressing ideas and messages to others in a clear, concise and effective manner, including explaining and justifying actions convincingly
2. **Written Communication** – skill in effectively conveying written information and messages in a socially acceptable manner that is easily understandable to others
3. **Numerical and Arithmetic Application** – skill in compiling data, using numbers in various formats, and performing job-appropriate numbers-based problem-solving
4. **Leadership** – ability to guide, support, mentor, encourage and influence others, passing on knowledge, expertise and training where possible
5. **Teamwork** – ability to cooperate, contribute and collaborate as a member of a group in an effort to attain agreement and achieve a collective outcome
6. **Appreciation of Diversity** – ability to show empathy and embrace multi-cultural diversity, including viewing new ideas and varying perspectives in a positive fashion
7. **Conflict Management** – skill in assessing interpersonal situations and resolving or mediating conflict, including taking steps to avoid potential or perceived conflict
8. **Customer Service** – knowledge of how to ascertain, and respond quickly to, the needs of internal and external customers to meet expectations and achieve customer satisfaction
9. **Work Ethic** – consistent demonstration of punctuality, dependability, reliability and responsibility in reporting for duty and performing assigned tasks as directed
10. **Professionalism** – knowledge of how to dress appropriately, speak politely, and conduct ones' self in a manner appropriate for the profession and work site
11. **Integrity** – ability to be trustworthy and honest, to choose the ethical course of action, and to comply with all applicable rules, laws and regulations
12. **Attention to Detail** – skill in reviewing with a critical eye the fine, detailed aspects of both quantitative and qualitative work process and end products
13. **Adaptability** – ability to adjust to changing expectations, and be flexible when confronted with new or ambiguous circumstances or situations
14. **Organization** – skill in imposing order and ranking to materials, concepts, and tasks to efficiently manage and balance all types of workplace and personal situations

15. **Stress Management** – skill in working under pressure and handling deadlines, including balancing work and family responsibilities
16. **Multi-tasking** – skill in handling multiple tasks and assignments simultaneously by setting priorities and managing work flow under varying deadlines
17. **Problem-solving** – ability to evaluate systems and operations, identify causes, problems, patterns or issues, and explore workable solutions or remedies to improve situations
18. **Decision-making** – knowledge of how to ask questions, consider options, rewards, and risks, set limits, plan goals, and apply information to the process of choosing the best alternative
19. **Intellectual Risk-taking** – acceptance of the importance of lifelong education, including learning quickly and thoroughly, and continuously applying new knowledge
20. **Thoughtful Reflection** – skill in logical reasoning, conceptualizing abstract ideas, organizing symbols and graphs, seeing systemic issues, and evaluating data or outcomes
21. **Initiative** – ability to show self-motivation in getting work done, or done better, in the course of routine, daily work, or to take the lead in an unique way
22. **Creativity** – ability to conceive of, and contribute, new ideas, alternative pathways, or unique responses to a variety of situations
23. **Dedication** – ability to demonstrate endurance, follow-through and capacity to complete work tasks, including proposing, negotiating and implementing alternative approaches
24. **Perseverance** – ability to improve work, continuously monitor progress, and persist in successfully achieving results and goals regardless of obstacles encountered
25. **Pride in Work** – ability to take personal ownership over the amount and quality of individual performance, team assignments and other duties carried out
26. **Following Directions** – ability to follow written and oral instructions, and to adhere to established business practices, policies and procedures, including health and safety rules
27. **Information Gathering** – ability to observe, to listen to information provided orally, and to read material to gather and interpret information presented in various formats
28. **Resource Allocation** – knowledge of how to identify, leverage and distribute financial and material resources effectively and efficiently
29. **Time Management** – skill in prioritizing tasks, following schedules, and tending to goal-relevant activities in a way that uses time wisely and optimizes efficiency and results
30. **Technology and Tool Usage** – knowledge of how to use and apply job-appropriate computer applications and other office equipment, such as copiers and fax machines

A Special Word about Critical Thinking Skills

Noticeably absent from this list is the attribute termed critical thinking skills. We believe that critical thinking skills are so important, not just to the business community but in every aspect of a person's life, that they deserve special mention. There are numerous formal definitions for this term, also referred to as problem-solving skills, scientific method or the ability to apply logical or scientific thinking. Educator Steven D. Schafersman defines critical thinking as "a means of correct thinking in the pursuit of relevant and reliable knowledge about the world. A person who thinks critically can ask appropriate questions, gather relevant information, efficiently and creatively sort through this information, reason logically from this information, and come to reliable and trustworthy conclusions about the world that enable one to live and act successfully in it." However defined, critical thinking skills consistently top most employer lists of the most desirable worker attributes.

Essentially all education consists of transmitting to students' two different things: (1) the subject matter or discipline content of the course ("what to think"), and (2) the correct way to understand and evaluate this subject matter ("how to think"). In a world in which most factoids can be readily accessed via the Internet, and in which the body of knowledge writ large continues to expand exponentially, employers consistently report that they're looking for innovators, problem solvers and for persons with intellectual curiosity to contribute to projects whose outcomes are still unknown. These same employers expect the education community to recognize that if a student has intellectual curiosity they can and will learn whatever is necessary to accomplish the project at hand.

From an educational perspective, one can understand why teachers, in the face of an exploding body of new knowledge, work tirelessly to transmit as much factual information as possible in the time available. Some of this is a by-product of the "high stakes" testing environment. In any case, this leaves little time to teach students how to synthesize that knowledge. In truth however, new knowledge is being created so rapidly that any effort aimed at transmitting all the facts is doomed to fail. In a reference to critical thinking skills, Donald Norman notes that "[I]t is strange that we expect students to learn, yet seldom teach them anything about learning." Dr. Norman notes that we do an excellent job of transmitting the content of our respective academic disciplines, but "we often fail to teach students how to think effectively about this subject matter, that is, how to properly understand and evaluate it. This second ability is termed critical thinking."

From a business perspective there are two drivers that reinforce the importance of critical thinking skills: 1) in most cases, a competitive business edge is gained not just by knowing, but in the creative application of knowledge, and 2) the average labor force participant will spend almost 40 years at work. There is no way for a teacher to know what knowledge will be salient 20 years after a person graduates with a terminal degree. This is the premise behind the importance of lifelong learning. Teaching critical thinking skills is what allows students to excel in the labor market years after they graduate from school. It is no wonder that employers crave workers, at all levels of their organizations, who have augmented their subject matter expertise with strong critical thinking skills.

The list provided here is in no particular order; but that doesn't mean that employers have not voiced their opinions on those skills that are most important. In the Corporate Voices for Working Families survey employers ranked professionalism, teamwork, communication and critical thinking at the top of their list. Gerald Harris conducted a study of the skills needed by entry-level workers in small businesses and found the seven highest rated skills were: integrity/honesty, listening, serves clients/customers, responsibility, participates as a member of a team, esteem, and sociability. Curtis Miles, in his book *The Mindful Worker*, compared competencies across eight well-known workplace studies and found that the ability to learn, problem solving, dealing with others, and working in teams were the most often cited characteristics. Regardless which of these characteristics is deemed most important, all of these foundation, transferable skills are important for success in the 21st century workplace. As GERALYN McClure Franklin of Stephen F. Austin State University notes, "[T]oday's workplace demands more than competency in the three R's. Employers want a new kind of employee with a broad set of skills, or at least a strong foundation in the basics, in order to facilitate learning on the job. Deficiencies in many of the basic skills are barriers to entry-level employees, experienced employees, and dislocated workers attempting to adapt to economic and technological change within organizations."

While we believe each of these workplace basics describes qualities and capabilities that should be embodied in all workforce participants, clearly higher proficiency levels in some workplace basics statements are more critical in certain work environments. Case in point, the O*NET data base content model, the nation's preeminent occupational classification system, catalogs occupation-specific skills along two dimensions: use level and proficiency level. This is necessary because someone employed as a Dispatcher, for example, needs a heightened sense and higher order abilities for time management, while Air Traffic Controllers need higher order stress management skills and Actuaries require greater skills in numerical and arithmetic application and attention to detail. Some jobs necessitate more skills in interpersonal relations and others require higher order mastery of workplace basics that fall within the realm of work responsibility and self-management. All workers will be well-served to understand the importance of each of these categories to the employer community.

Texas Workforce Commission chairman Tom Pauken echoed these sentiments in the Fall 2008 edition of *Texas Business Today*. Pauken writes, "[e]mployers report that such applied skills as critical thinking, teamwork, and effective communication are essential to the preparation for today's workplace. For some occupations, these applied skills are even more important than specific technical skills that can be gained on the job."

Workforce Basics and Higher Education

"In our economy, the most precious resource is the talent and ingenuity of the American people... This country has a moral and an economic obligation – a moral and an economic interest in seeing that our people have the skills they need to succeed in a competitive world." This quote from President George W. Bush underscores the importance of human capital development as fundamental to the American economy. In the publication, *America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation's Future*, the author takes the importance of knowledge and skill acquisition back to workplace basic skills. He writes, "[I]n fact, one can argue that most critical are those foundational skills that enable individuals to learn throughout their lifespan and, thus, be able



"[B]ecause these college readiness standards focus precisely on a strong foundation of knowledge and intellectual skills including intellectual nimbleness and adaptability, they will serve equally well those students heading to college and those to the workforce."

—Texas College Readiness Standards

to adapt to changing work conditions and demands. ...the lack of both cognitive and the so-called soft skills (workplace basics) makes it more difficult for [workers] to obtain and retain employment, especially for those jobs offering the potential for advancement.”

If it is true that workplace basics are so critical to employers and their ability to compete in a global economy, one might imagine that systems are in place to provide instruction, measurement and accountability. Ironically, workplace basics are so important that it is presumed that each actor in the public education and training system is addressing these skills as a part of their core curricula. Unfortunately, despite pockets of effort by some schools and training providers, the assumption that everyone is teaching workplace basics has resulted in a situation where no one is responsible or accountable for imparting these values and capabilities. This lack of emphasis and accountability serves none of the actors well.

Workplace basics are not just important for those entering the workforce. The new *Texas College Readiness Standards* delineate specific knowledge areas essential for success in college. In addition to college preparedness, the Standards emphasize that “[B]ecause these college readiness standards focus precisely on a strong foundation of knowledge and intellectual skills including intellectual nimbleness and adaptability, they will serve equally well those students heading to college and those to the workforce.” We believe it is incumbent upon all educational stakeholders (high schools, colleges, local workforce boards and training intermediaries, etc.) to find ways to teach core subject matter while also imparting these workplace basic skills.

The Role of Business in Worker Preparation

So what can be done to improve the caliber of workplace basics credentials among workers? It is easy to point fingers at those we think should have better met the challenge, but not very useful in improving the condition. Clearly families should play a role and public education and workforce intermediaries should also step to the fore. Business can play a crucial leadership role by continuing to clearly articulate the importance of workplace basics. **Employers are acutely aware that deficient workplace skills contribute to low productivity, workplace accidents, poor product quality, costly errors, and lost management and supervisory time.** Dr. McClure Franklin warns that “for the first time in

American history, employers face a proficiency gap in the workforce so great that it threatens the well-being of organizations both large and small.” The Corporate Voices study suggests some possible roles for the business community:

1. Business can consistently and forcefully communicate those workforce basic skills and competencies students need to succeed in the workplace.

2. Business can work across industry sectors to provide opportunities for students to develop workplace basic skills, including partnering with schools to provide internships, job shadowing and summer jobs, and encouraging their employees to serve as mentors and tutors at their local schools.

3. Business can strongly encourage government policymakers to contour an educational system that supports the teaching of workplace basics, including requirements for students to demonstrate their mastery.

4. Business can endeavor among themselves to present a cohesive and coordinated front throughout the business community to leverage the power of a broader constituency.

5. Business can create, participate in or actively encourage the development of verifiable assessments and certification instruments that require proficiency in workplace basics, including lending their expertise in innovation and competency measurement

6. Business can financially support in-school and after-school programs at the state and local level that have demonstrated their ability to effectively communicate the importance of workplace basic skills.

Implications for Students and Job Seekers

This paper has firmly established the importance of workplace basic skills to the employer community. Such a foundation makes the recommendations for students and job seekers straightforward: 1) if you have not achieved awareness of and proficiency in the list of workplace basics outlined in this paper you should endeavor to do so, and 2) regardless of your occupational-specific qualifications and formal education resume, if you have mastered these workplace basics do not hesitate to include them in your resume and promote these abilities during the job search and interview process.

In their article *Top Skills and Values Employers Seek from Job-Seekers*, Randall and Katherine Hansen communicate the importance of translating your workplace basics skills to your resume. They explain that since these crucial employability skills are so important to employers, job seekers benefit by letting employers know that they possess these qualities.

For example, *communications skills* are frequently cited by employers as a crucial success criterion. In your resume or job interview you can say that you are **an exceptional listener and communicator who effectively conveys information verbally and in writing**. If you have the ability to be *flexible and adaptable* and manage multiple work activities, you might say that you are **a flexible team player who thrives in environments requiring ability to effectively prioritize and juggle multiple concurrent projects**. If you know that you excel at *planning and organizing*, even if that means that you successfully organized a neighborhood garage sale, you can say that you are **a results-driven achiever with exemplary planning and organizational skills, along with a high degree of detail orientation**. If you have a thirst for knowledge and an interest and *willingness in continually learning new things* you can say that you are **an enthusiastic, knowledge-hungry learner eager to meet challenges and quickly assimilate new concepts**.

You can create similar resume-worthy statements for each of the 30 workplace basics listed in this paper. Be careful not to over-emphasize abilities that you cannot document and defend. Allowing an employer to establish expectations of your abilities

and then not delivering as needed only jeopardizes your job and your reputation – with this employer and perhaps in future employment opportunities.

American business is faced with major problems due to the decline in workplace basic skills among potential workers in the labor pool. And yet, despite a mountain of anecdotal evidence of the importance of workplace basics to employment success, teaching and mastering these competencies remains a marginal exercise among primary education and training stakeholders.

It is clearly in the best interests of employers, workers and educational intermediaries alike that the articulation and communication of workplace basic skills receives greater attention. A skills enhancement coordinator for a large hospital remarked on her company's investment in workplace basic skills training for their workforce: "[T]he training helps people dream – that there is another world beyond the job they have been doing. A lot of them didn't realize how bright they were." We hope this paper will contribute to a greater understanding of the significance of workplace basic skills to the business community. We encourage students and job seekers to not only dream of better jobs but improve their qualifications to help turn those dreams into reality.

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