

Workplace Essential Skills

Introduction

We've heard often over the years that employers hire because of a person's hard skills, but promote, or fire, because of their soft skills. Yet, "soft skills" are loosely defined and hard to quantify. We don't even know what to call them: soft skills, workplace basics, job essentials, professional job skills. The task of including them in employment decision making, no matter which side of the table we are on, is made all the more difficult by this lack of a common language.

To bring some order to the chaos, in 2014-15, the Texas Workforce Commission funded research by the Texas State Technical College system to define and validate a common language to describe what we will call Workplace Essential Skills.

The result was this Workplace Essentials Skills analysis that for the first time gives company hiring managers, job seekers, employment counselors and students a common language and standardized definitions for the "soft skills" necessary better match individuals to specific job requirements.

Background

Everyone describes workplace essential skills differently. For some, they are basic manners; for others, they are higher-level thinking, or simply the unmeasurable, undefinable behaviors needed to get work done with customers and co-workers. Surveys of employers by groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable and Gallup concluded that American company executives are saying louder than ever that they need workers with better workplace essential skills. Yet companies define and measure these skills in different ways and even require different skills for the same types of jobs.

The Workplace Essentials project sought to define the "workplace essential skills," associate them with specific jobs and then validate those skills with hiring managers and recruiters. The work was actually an extension of research into "detailed work activities," which TWC began in 2009. That project provided the initial research that sought to define jobs by the work being done. Ongoing work by TWC and TSTC refined the list, further standardized phrasing and validated the results with employers. The result was a library of more than 2,600 detailed work activities, with up to 100 linked to each of the nearly 850 standard occupation codes (and 45,000 job titles) tracked by TWC for statistical purposes. Additional information about the Detailed Work Activities Common Language Project is available on the TWC web site at <http://www.lmci.state.tx.us/shared/DWA.asp> .

The Workplace Essential Skills research included a detailed survey of experienced human resources managers, hiring managers and recruiters across Texas and the nation. Hiring experts were identified and 140 responded by ranking the most important workplace essential soft skills that corresponded to tasks for more than 800 occupations.

To begin the process, researchers at TSTC collaborated with subject matter experts nationwide to define the 31 core workplace essential soft skills, listed in the following table:

Oral Communications
Written Communications
Application of Math and Numbers
Leadership
Teamwork
Appreciation of Diversity
Conflict Management
Customer Service
Work Ethic
Professionalism
Critical Thinking
Adaptability
Organization
Attention to Detail (Ability to Focus)
Stress Management
Multi-Tasking

Problem-Solving
Decision Making
Intellectual Risk-Taking
Thoughtful Reflection
Initiative
Creativity
Dedication
Technology and Tool Usage
Perseverance
Pride in Work
Following Directions
Information Gathering
Resource Allocation
Time Management
Integrity and Honesty

Hiring managers and recruiters were then asked to rank their top five workplace essential skills in order of importance, choosing from the complete menu of thirty-one skills. Respondents were asked to rank only their top five workplace essential skills because, according to researchers, that forced them to focus on the most important ones.

Across all occupations, the survey found that four workplace essential soft skills filtered to the top as being the most in demand across all employers:

- Information Gathering
- Attention to Detail (including Ability to Focus)
- Following Directions
- Critical Thinking
- Oral Communications

Some examples of the most in-demand workplace essential skills by job are listed below.

Accountant / Auditor

- Critical Thinking
- Attention to Detail
- Information Gathering
- Initiative
- Oral Communication

Truck Driver (heavy/tractor trailer)

- Following Directions
- Attention to Detail
- Work Ethic
- Information Gathering

Registered Nurse

- Information Gathering
- Attention to Detail
- Customer Service
- Decision Making
- Oral Communication

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- Following Directions
- Attention to Detail
- Information Gathering
- Oral Communication

The data were also compiled and grouped by occupation into the Achieve Texas career clusters as designated by the Texas Education Agency, listed below.

Business Management & Administration

- Information Gathering
- Critical Thinking
- Decision Making
- Following Directions
- Organization

Government & Public Administration

- Information Gathering
- Critical Thinking
- Decision Making
- Following Directions
- Attention to Detail

Marketing & Sales

- Information Gathering
- Decision Making
- Oral Communication
- Critical Thinking
- Following Directions

Finance

- Critical Thinking
- Information Gathering
- Decision Making
- Oral Communication
- Following Directions

Transportation, Distribution & Logistics

- Attention to Detail
- Information Gathering
- Following Directions
- Problem Solving
- Critical Thinking

Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources

- Following Directions
- Information Gathering
- Attention to Detail
- Critical Thinking
- Decision Making

Architecture & Construction

- Attention to Detail
- Following Directions
- Information Gathering
- Critical Thinking
- Problem Solving

Education & Training

- Information Gathering
- Oral Communication
- Critical Thinking
- Creativity
- Teamwork

Science, Technology, Engineering & Math

- Critical Thinking
- Information Gathering
- Decision Making
- Oral Communication
- Creativity

Hospitality & Tourism

- Customer Service
- Information Gathering
- Following Directions
- Decision Making
- Attention to Detail

Human & Social Services

- Information Gathering
- Customer Service
- Oral Communication
- Teamwork
- Creativity

Health Sciences

- Information Gathering
- Customer Service
- Following Directions
- Critical Thinking
- Attention to Detail

Arts, Audio/Visual & Communications

- Information Gathering
- Following Directions
- Creativity
- Attention to Detail
- Critical Thinking

Information Technology

- Critical Thinking
- Information Gathering
- Technology & Tool Usage
- Following Directions
- Decision Making

Manufacturing

- Attention to Detail
- Following Directions
- Information Gathering
- Critical Thinking
- Problem Solving

Law, Public Safety, Corrections, Security

- Information Gathering
- Critical Thinking
- Oral Communication
- Decision Making
- Following Directions

The Future

So, where do we go from here? We hope the initial research and detailed tabulations that resulted in this report help guide the workforce and education system toward a common language by which all players in the workforce marketplace can communicate their job requirements and fitness for that job.

However, for that to happen, additional research is likely needed and then employers, job seekers and education and training providers must incorporate these skills into their own language. These tools can then be used by secondary and post-secondary institutions to help instructors infuse the top workplace essential skills into classroom curriculum. This data set can also help students or job seekers improve their resumes by including information on workplace essential soft skills that they have learned.

For additional information, please contact the Texas Workforce Commission Labor Market and Career Information hotline at 866-938-4444 or email lmci@twc.state.tx.us.