



# **ENTRY-LEVEL JOB REQUIREMENTS: An Assessment of Seattle-Area Employers**

Written by Jon Agnone, Ph.D. and Tyler Corwin, M.A.,  
Northwest Social Research Group

[www.northwestsocialresearchgroup.com](http://www.northwestsocialresearchgroup.com)



SEATTLE JOBS INITIATIVE

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The Northwest Social Research Group (NSRG) is based in Seattle. Founded in 2010, we provide high-quality research consulting to non-profit organizations, government agencies and private firms.

## **About Seattle Jobs Initiative**

Seattle Jobs Initiative creates opportunities for students, workers and business to succeed by helping education and job training programs meet the demands of a new economy. We find and apply solutions for people to gain the skills they need for good jobs that create prosperity for all in today's marketplace.

## **Special Thanks**

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## **Contact Information**

For questions or suggestions, please email David Kaz, SJI Director of Policy and Development at: [dkaz@seattlejobsinit.com](mailto:dkaz@seattlejobsinit.com)

**[www.seattlejobsinitiative.com](http://www.seattlejobsinitiative.com)**

# INTRODUCTION

For more than fifteen years, Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) has worked to help low-income/low-skill individuals acquire the skills necessary to obtain living-wage careers. For many participants in SJI's training programs, the initial step in building their career is securing an entry-level job with a well-defined pathway to advancement in a growing industry sector. SJI is continuously working to ensure that it is helping its participants – and other low-income individuals in the Seattle/King County area – to acquire the right skills to compete for these targeted entry-level jobs. Particularly over the past several years, anecdotal evidence has suggested to SJI and other workforce development providers that the skills and training required for most entry-level positions in the local labor market have increased. In an effort to empirically confirm this evidence, SJI recently completed research that examines shifts in job training and education requirements for entry-level positions over the past decade within the four industry sectors for which SJI provides training: professional and business services; transportation, trade, and utilities; manufacturing; and healthcare (Agnone & Corwin, 2012).

The findings of SJI's initial research were surprising in some important ways. Among the eighty entry-level jobs examined within the four industry sectors, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) did not show any change in the training and education requirements over the past decade. Yet nearly three-quarters (72%) of these same jobs saw a marked increase in the educational attainment of incumbent workers (Agnone & Corwin, 2012; see Appendix A for a detailed summary of the research findings). This suggests that the job requirements listed for entry-level positions (e.g., high school diploma, short-term on-the-job training) may not be sufficient for job seekers to remain competitive in today's employment landscape. This upward shift in the educational attainment of incumbent workers has been especially visible in the healthcare and the professional and business services sectors, both of which are projected to have higher than average rates of job growth over the next decade (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010).

In short, this research raised some critical questions regarding the level of education and skills actually necessary for workers to remain competitive in the labor market. If incumbent workers and newly-hired employees are more highly educated and skilled than the stated job requirements, SJI and other workforce providers should adjust their training for entry-level positions accordingly. Further, if the requisite skills and education needed to remain competitive (especially in the aforementioned four sectors) are increasing, it is essential to understand whether this shift is temporarily driven by economic conditions or is representative of a more systemic change. Using

the direct input of employers in the Seattle/King County area, this follow-up research intends to shed light on the employer-stated requirements for entry-level jobs and the determinants of hiring decisions for these positions.

This report seeks to answer the following research questions:

- **How do employers define “entry-level”? Does this differ from the conception of entry-level jobs as requiring less than a college degree and some on-the-job experience?**
- **Is there a difference between job requirements and actual educational attainment within entry-level positions? If so, is this difference economy-driven and cyclical, or systemic?**
- **How is turnover within entry-level employment affected by employee educational levels? Do higher-skilled, higher-educated employees experience higher rates of turnover, opening up positions for lower-skilled job seekers?<sup>1</sup>**
- **How are employers’ hiring practices for entry-level work affected by educational attainment? National certification? Experience?**

## DATA COLLECTION

A multi-method assessment was conducted with Seattle/King County employers on the topic of entry-level employment. The assessment involved a web-based survey distributed to local employers through direct emailing and through local business associations. Based on survey results, substantive areas of interest were identified and an interview questionnaire was developed. An in-depth, qualitative interview assessment was then conducted amongst a smaller set of employers (Appendix B provides a detailed description of both the survey and interview methodologies). In all, 85 employers completed the web-based survey and 30 employers participated in the in-depth interviews.

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1. One study of a nationally-representative sample of American workers, for example, found that higher-educated workers are less likely to be engaged with their work, and that less engaged employees are more likely to leave their job (Blacksmith & Harter, 2011).

# FINDINGS

## SURVEY RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Of the 85 employers that were surveyed, approximately half represented the hiring decisions of an entire company or business, whereas the other half represented a division or department within a larger firm. The types of industry represented by the survey respondents are presented in **Table 1**. More than one-third of respondents represented the professional and business services sector, while between 15 and 20 percent of respondents represented healthcare, manufacturing, or transportation, trade, and utilities, respectively.

<b>TABLE 1. Industry representation among survey respondents</b>		
<b>Industry</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Professional & Business Services	30	36.1%
Healthcare	16	19.3%
Transportation, Trade & Utilities	15	18.1%
Manufacturing	14	16.9%
Education, Real Estate, Food Service & Hospitality	8	9.6%

The majority of employers surveyed represented small to mid-sized companies, with nearly 18 percent representing companies with more than 250 employees (**Table 2**).

<b>TABLE 2. Number of employees within the business or company in the Seattle/King County-area</b>		
<b>Number of Employees</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1 – 10	26	33.3%
11 – 50	18	23.1%
51 – 250	19	24.4%
251 – 500	5	6.4%
More than 500	9	11.5%
I don't know / Decline to answer	1	1.3%

Of the employers who knew the proportion of jobs (open positions or filled) within their company that would be considered entry-level, nearly 80 percent reported that fewer than half of the positions are entry-level, while 18 percent of employers stated over half of their positions are entry-level (**Table 3**).

<b>TABLE 3. Proportion of jobs within a company, open or filled, considered entry-level</b>		
<b>Range</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
0 – 25%	49	62.8%
25 – 50%	13	16.7%
50 – 75%	12	15.4%
75 – 100%	2	2.6%
Don't know / Decline to answer	2	2.6%

Based on the number of employees reported and the percentage of employees considered entry-level, the employers surveyed represented more than 4,000 entry-level positions (conservatively estimated). The wages offered by entry-level positions described in this survey ranged from minimum wage to more than \$24 per hour (**Table 4** provides the average entry-level wage indicated by employers).

<b>TABLE 4. Current average hourly wage for entry-level positions</b>		
<b>Wage Range</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Less than \$12 per hour	17	22.1%
\$12 – \$15 per hour	25	32.5%
\$15 – \$19 per hour	17	22.1%
\$19 – \$24 per hour	4	5.2%
More than \$24 per hour	7	9.1%
Don't know / Decline to answer	7	9.1%

## INTERVIEW RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Of the 30 employers that agreed to participate in a more in-depth interview regarding entry-level employment in the Seattle/King County area, 11 (37 percent) represented the healthcare sector, 9 (30 percent) represented manufacturing, 5 (17 percent)

represented the transportation, trade, and utilities sector, and 5 more (17 percent) represented the professional and business services sector. The majority of the employers interviewed (63 percent) represented businesses that would be considered small to mid-sized (fewer than 250 employees), and the remainder represented businesses with 300 to more than 5,000 employees. **Table 5** presents the proportion of jobs within the companies interviewed that would be considered entry-level.

**TABLE 5.** Proportion of jobs within a company, open or filled, considered entry-level (interview respondents)

Range	Count	Percent
0 – 25%	18	60.0%
25 – 50%	5	16.7%
50 – 75%	3	10.0%
75 – 100%	3	10.0%

#### DEFINING ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT

In the survey instrument, employers were given a typical definition of entry-level employment based on prior research from SJI and asked whether or not their view of entry-level employment was consistent. More than one-fourth of the employers surveyed indicated that their conception of an entry-level position differed from the definition that these positions require less than a 4-year degree, little to no prior work experience, and some on-the-job training. Some employer definitions were different, though somewhat consistent, with the definition provided (e.g., “these positions require a high school diploma or less and 3 months experience or less”), and other employers defined entry-level positions contrary to the definition provided (e.g., “Our entry-level positions require a bachelor’s degree and at least 3 years of relevant working experience”). Significant variation existed in how employers defined entry-level, even among employers whose definition *was consistent* with the one provided. Some employers stated that entry-level positions are those that require basic computing skills and a willingness to learn, or that require a vocational or two-year degree. Still others defined entry-level work as minimum wage work, or work that requires an employee to be teamed up with a more experienced employee in an assistant capacity.

Interviews with employers suggested that the requirements for entry-level positions differ somewhat depending on the industry. Employers in the healthcare sector noted that many of the entry-level jobs required certification from a two-year program (e.g.,

a Certified Nursing Certificate), and that even for those jobs that do not require a postsecondary certification, a high school diploma or equivalent is generally required along with some relevant work experience. Conversely, in the manufacturing sector, many employers commented that having a high school diploma is not required, and often no experience is required either. Employers from the transportation, trade, and utilities sector, as well as the professional and business services sector, varied in their characterization of typical entry-level job requirements. Evidence from this research would suggest that employers view entry-level positions differentially depending on the company or business that they represent; thus, when preparing workers for entry-level jobs, careful consideration should be given to how specific employers define these positions and the requisite skills and training required (if any).

#### SHIFTS IN JOB REQUIREMENTS AND APPLICANT QUALIFICATIONS

When asked about the education required of most entry-level job applicants, employer responses varied. For the entry-level positions represented by the employers surveyed, there was nearly an even split between positions that required at least a two-year degree, a postsecondary certificate, and no experience beyond a high school education (**Table 6**). Again, some variation existed across industry types; employers in the manufacturing and transportation, trade, and utilities sectors indicated more entry-level positions requiring no training beyond a high school diploma than positions requiring a two-year degree. The opposite is true for employers representing the professional and business services sector. In the healthcare sector, employers indicated that more entry-level positions require a short-term or one-year certificate than positions that require either a two-year degree or no training beyond a high school diploma.

<b>TABLE 6. Education required of most entry-level applicants at the company or business</b>		
<b>Education Requirement</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
No training or experience required beyond a high school diploma	25	31.3%
Short-term certificate or training	14	17.5%
One-year certificate or training program	9	11.3%
Two-year certificate or training program	7	8.8%
Two-year degree (i.e., Associate's Degree)	25	31.3%

When interviewed, employers generally responded that the education and training requirements for entry-level positions have not shifted much over the past decade, with a few exceptions. Several employers noted that computer skills are now required more so than they previously were. For example:

**“Education requirements for entry-level positions haven’t changed, [but] with the transition to electronic medical records, the training and expertise level has changed. Computer skills are more important. [Entry-level employees] have to have technology skills or they can’t do the job. These skills have become critical.”**

**– A LARGE, HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

**“Computer skills are far more important now. These kinds of jobs used to be answering phones, filing, typing a letter here or there, keeping a ledger... Of course now you have to be able to do all that on the computer, so it’s a little more technical than it used to be.”**

**– A SMALL, TRANSPORTATION, TRADE, & UTILITIES INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

**“Requirements haven’t changed, though technology shifts are important. People need to be up to date with new computer programs... Excel... Word... these skill sets are needed.”**

**– A SMALL, PROFESSIONAL & BUSINESS SERVICES INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

Other significant changes to entry-level job requirements noted by employers included the requirement that applicants are able to speak English and the requirement, by law, for many healthcare professionals to obtain certification (e.g., medical assistants and home care aides).

While the employment requirements for entry-level jobs may not have drastically shifted over recent years, or even the past decade, *who* employers are hiring is not consistent with this trend. When employers were asked on the survey whether or not they prefer to hire applicants with skills or education beyond the job requirements, two-thirds responded “Yes.” (For employers in the professional and business services sector, three times as many employers said they preferred to hire applicants with education beyond the requirements.) And, when asked whether they have been *able* to hire such workers in the current economy, over 70% responded “Yes.” This held true within every industry contained in this report. For the healthcare industry specifically, every employer surveyed indicated an ability to hire workers with education or training

beyond the job requirements. Interestingly, by and large, smaller companies indicated that they would prefer to hire entry-level workers with skills and education beyond the job requirements, yet this preference was not as dramatic for larger companies. Larger companies, however, asserted that they have been *able* to hire workers with higher skills or education at a greater frequency than smaller companies.

A similar sentiment is reflected in the interviews. When employers were asked whether the skills and education of their entry-level workforce matched the job requirements of those positions, some employers noted that their workers have exactly the amount education and experience required, but *more than half* remarked that their entry-level workforce typically has more education and/or experience than required for the positions:

**“The requirements haven’t changed, they are basic for our entry-level [positions], but there have been increases in education within those jobs... 10% of the applicants [for these positions] have college degrees.”**

**– A LARGE, TRANSPORTATION, TRADE, & UTILITIES INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

**“We wouldn’t state that [applicants] have to have a 4-year degree on the application or online, but that’s generally who we hire... With a lot of these roles when they’re entry-level, it comes down to personality and general fit with the other people they’ll be working with. If there’s someone who’s super motivated and we see a lot of potential, they would certainly be considered. It has just ended up working out that our people have [4-year] degrees, because they tend to be a better general fit.”**

**– A SMALL, TRANSPORTATION, TRADE, & UTILITIES INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

Employers even speculated as to why it has been the case that they are able to – and prefer to – hire entry-level employees with education and training beyond the requirements:

**“I think with the nature of the economy right now, a lot of positions are being filled with people who have higher levels of experience.”**

**– A LARGE, HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

**“Requirements haven’t changed, though the high volume of applicants makes it easier to hire individuals with experience.”**

**– A MID-SIZED, HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

Employer reactions were mixed as to whether or not they are seeing more under- or overqualified applicants for entry-level positions, though the tendency was to mention that they are seeing overqualified applicants or *inappropriately* qualified applicants. The employers that mentioned seeing more overqualified applicants generally stated that they are seeing more college-educated applicants applying for positions that do not require such an education. Several employers noted that they generally see applicants with the right qualifications, but more experience than in the past. Several employers who noted receiving applicants with more education experience than required attributed this shift in the type of applicants to the economy:

**"Applicants aren't necessarily under-qualified, but don't have the appropriate requirements. [We're] seeing lots of applicants whose skills/experience don't meet up with the job requirements because people are so desperate to find employment right now."**

**– A MID-SIZED, MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

**"Other healthcare employers have been laying off, so there are a lot of people with good experience and training out there looking for jobs."**

**– A LARGE, HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

**"I think we're seeing more and more people who are looking just to have a job... More and more people who want to get a foot in the door in this kind of work. I would say about 75% are overqualified."**

*When asked why this might be the case, s/he responded:*

**"The economy, unfortunately."**

**– A MID-SIZED, HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

Evidence from this research suggests that while the education and training requirements for many entry-level positions differ across industries and employers, these requirements have not dramatically shifted over the last 5 to 10 years. The types of applicants for entry-level positions that employers are seeing (who they are able to hire), as well as the types of applicants employers *prefer* to hire, tend to be applicants that have education, training, and experience beyond the job requirements. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this trend is driven, in part, by the current labor market and economic conditions.

## ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT TURNOVER

Based on findings from Seattle Jobs Initiative’s earlier research on entry-level jobs, we hypothesized that a shift in the educational attainment among workers hired for entry-level positions could potentially affect turnover within these positions. This hypothesis was not supported by evidence from the employer surveys or interviews.

**Table 7** presents the responses employers gave when asked whether workers with more education or training have higher rates of turnover in entry-level positions. While slightly more employers tended to agree with this sentiment, the results primarily demonstrate no strong tendency in either direction.

<b>TABLE 7. Agreement that higher education/training leads to greater turnover in entry-level positions</b>		
<b>Response</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Strongly Disagree	1	1.6%
Disagree	15	24.2%
Slightly Disagree	6	9.7%
Neutral	8	12.9%
Slightly Agree	17	27.4%
Agree	10	16.1%
Strongly Agree	5	8.1%

Further, most interview respondents noted little to no turnover in their entry-level positions. While some employers experienced higher turnover among more highly educated entry-level workers, the reason cited was typically not because the higher-educated worker was able to find a different job with requirements that better matched his or her skills. Instead, employers cited reasons such as:

**“I would say for folks who have a little more skill and education, the turnover will be higher because they’ll move onto another role. It’s more of a growth opportunity for them.”**

**– A LARGE, PROFESSIONAL & BUSINESS SERVICES INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

**“Turnover is higher for caregivers that have more education, because that usually means that they’re in nursing school and are leaving because they finished school and are getting a job as a nurse... It’s a very mobile workforce.”**

**– A MID-SIZED, HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

## HIRING PRACTICES AFFECTED BY EDUCATION, CERTIFICATIONS, AND EXPERIENCE

Employers surveyed were asked how much they value each of the following when considering an applicant for an entry-level position: A two-year (A.A.) degree, a vocational/technical degree, a nationally-recognized certificate, job-related experience, and job-related training. **Table 8** presents employer responses. Most employers surveyed value two-year and vocational degrees “somewhat” or “quite a bit”; no significant differences were observed across employment sectors, though employers representing the manufacturing sector tended not to value the two-year degree as highly as other industries.

**TABLE 8.** Employer value placed on education/experience of prospective entry-level employees

Value	Associate’s Degree		Vocational/ Technical Degree		Nationally-Recognized Certificate		Job-Related Experience		Job-Related Training	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Not at all	10	15.6%	4	6.5%	6	9.7%	–	–	2	3.1%
Not very much	8	12.5%	12	19.4%	8	12.9%	–	–	–	–
Somewhat	27	42.2%	28	45.2%	26	41.9%	8	12.5%	21	32.8%
Quite a bit	17	26.6%	14	22.6%	19	30.6%	34	53.1%	34	53.1%
More than any other factor	2	3.1%	4	6.5%	3	4.8%	22	34.4%	7	10.9%

Across all industries, employers surveyed value nationally-recognized certificates “somewhat” or “quite a bit;” employers from the professional and business services sector and the healthcare industry tended to value these certificates more highly. Nearly every employer placed relatively greater value on job-related training. Most striking about **Table 8** is that every employer surveyed values job-related *experience* at least “somewhat” (with over 85% valuing experience “quite a bit” or “more than any other factor”), a sentiment that was reflected in the interviews.

Many of the employers interviewed stated that educational attainment is not very important in the hiring process; or, when educational attainment is important and considered in hiring decisions, job-related experience usually trumps education. For entry-level employment, employers tended to view education as demonstrative of a person's discipline and work ethic, but the actual degree or credential only mattered to the entry-level employee for promotions and opportunities for advancement within the company. Several employers framed this issue as such:

**"People without the experience of having to go through school and establish that discipline don't stay around as long. That's probably the reason we end up hiring people with degrees (at least a two-year). It doesn't even matter what the degree is. Having a degree just demonstrates that they have discipline. We wouldn't hire based on education, it would mostly depend on personality, career goals, past experience, where they've worked... Education is a factor, but certainly not the only."**

**- A SMALL, TRANSPORTATION, TRADE, & UTILITIES INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

**"[For entry-level positions] compatibility is more important than anything, really. If you're talking an associate's degree versus a bachelor's degree and it's not a position that has a direct line to move up to other positions, we wouldn't care whether it was an A.A. or B.A. or no degree at all."**

**- A SMALL, MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

**"I find myself looking less and less at [education]. Because we're a niche company, I'm looking more at experience. If they have education to back that experience, that's important."**

**- A MID-SIZED, MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

With the exception of a few employers in the healthcare industry who represented entry-level positions that require a nationally-recognized certificate by law, nearly every employer stated that these certifications are not much of a factor, if at all, in their hiring decisions. Many employers in the healthcare and professional and business services industries emphasized the importance of job-related experience as a factor in hiring decisions. Conversely, in the manufacturing and transportation, trade, and utilities industries, employers tended to view experience as helpful or preferred, though not entirely necessary as many skills can be taught through on-the-job training.

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

In addition to the aforementioned topics covered in the interviews and surveys, employers were also asked about professional development they provide, on-the-job training, current vacancies, processes to find applicants, and other factors considered when hiring. Eighty percent of employers agreed that their business or company provided additional job skills training and professional development to entry-level employees to help them advance in their careers. Similarly, 72 percent agreed that their business or company provided on-the-job training to help entry-level workers meet the job requirements. Nearly half of the employers surveyed indicated that they are currently hiring for entry-level positions. When asked where they find the majority of their entry-level workforce, almost half of the employers stated through an online job posting (either the company or a non-company website). An additional 28% of employers claimed to find the majority of their entry-level workers through word of mouth.

Employers were asked to indicate all of the other factors (outside of education, certification, internships, and experience) that would give applicants for entry-level positions an edge over other applicants. As **Table 9** demonstrates, soft skills are the most important additional factor for many of the employers surveyed, followed by applicants' demeanor or affect, and professional or personal referrals.

More than three-fourths and more than one-half of employers, respectively, stated that soft skills and personal demeanor are important factors in the decision to hire an entry-level worker. This was reflected in the in-depth interviews as well:

**“It does weigh in a great deal (in terms of experience), but I’m looking for somebody who is a better fit. Most often when you’re looking at a resume or whatever, you can see their education and experience, but it’s important when you’re sitting down with them to see that they’ll be a good fit.”**

**– A MID-SIZED, HEALTHCARE INDUSTRY EMPLOYER**

**TABLE 9.** Additional factors that give entry-level applicants an edge in the hiring process

Factor	Count	Percent
Soft Skills (e.g., communicates well, team player, problem solver)	50	76.9%
Applicant demeanor / affect	38	58.5%
Professional or personal referral	31	47.7%
Strong recommendation letter	8	12.3%
Persistence	5	7.7%
Appearance / hygiene	2	3.1%
Ability to link skills to new opportunity	1	1.5%
Union	1	1.5%

## DISCUSSION

The aim and intent of this research was to clarify how employers define entry-level work, identify any difference between job requirements and actual educational attainment within entry-level positions (and reasons behind this difference), examine how turnover is affected by employee educational levels, and elucidate how applicant attributes such as educational attainment and experience factor into employers' hiring practices. The survey research and in-depth interviews conducted in this report provide some relevant information.

Employers across and within industries define entry-level differentially. The skills and training required to adequately prepare workers for entry-level positions will largely depend on the type of business or company where jobs are available. Further, education and training requirements for many entry-level jobs across industries and employers have not dramatically shifted over the last 5 to 10 years. However, the types of applicants for entry-level positions and the types of applicants that employers prefer to hire tend to have education and experience beyond the job requirements. This trend may be driven, in part, by current labor market conditions. Evidence from this report does not suggest that turnover is strongly affected by employee educational levels. Further, educational attainment can be important for hiring decisions, though for many employers, experience carries more weight. Lastly, soft skills and personal demeanor may be essential determinants of the hiring decisions made for entry-level positions.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several important limitations of this research that should be noted before recommendations are made. First, this research provides further *evidence* that employers in the Seattle/King County area are hiring entry-level workers with education and experience beyond the job requirements. Because this study was qualitative in nature (and given the sample size and response rate for the survey), results should not be generalized to the entire employment landscape or even all employers in the four industries that were spotlighted in this report. Also, this report is meant to provide a snapshot of a cross-section of employers in the Seattle/King County region; findings herein do not necessarily represent the views of all employers in the area. Finally, while the qualitative results make a substantive contribution of information about local employers, the findings are subject to sampling bias as the results are based on a voluntary response from employers (and we cannot definitively determine the response rate).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

**Provide a consistent view of “entry-level employment.”** Employers differed significantly in their definition of “entry-level.” When conducting interviews or ascertaining any information from employers in the future, it is paramount for workforce development organizations to seek clarity around *how* entry-level is defined. This may prove especially critical when workforce development organizations are attempting to place workers in entry-level jobs or ascertain the availability of such jobs.

**Work with employers to provide skills training and education that are *job-specific*.** Several employers indicated that they receive applicants who are over-qualified, but more so, that they are receiving applicants that are not *appropriately* qualified. While soft skills and basic education are valued, programs can impart specific skills to unemployed workers that prepare them for jobs with specific employers. Certain training (e.g., national certification) is only relevant for particular positions and within particular industries. Workforce development organizations and community colleges should work closely with employers to train up workers with *relevant* skills and credentials that will make them employable. For most workers, this includes training in soft skills and how to work in a professional setting (several employers in this report noted simply looking for employees that would be compatible or make a “good fit”). For specific employment opportunities, this may mean helping guide workers through a

one-year certificate program and connecting them with potential employers upon their graduation. Training workers with skills and credentials that are known to be valued by employers that are hiring for entry-level positions may dramatically increase worker employability.

**Train workers in new technologies.** While the requirements for many entry-level positions are not changing in terms of education or experience, the skill-levels related to technology are constantly evolving. Though not universal across every type of employment, employers of varying types across all industries recognize the increasing importance of computer literacy. Many tasks (keeping records, filing, invoicing, tracking shipments, etc.) that formerly did not require technological training are now *solely* performed on a computer. Workers need to keep pace with the increasing technological requirements of jobs across all industries in order to remain competitive with younger workers who often have these skills. Beyond soft skills training and credentials that are specific to particular jobs or sectors, for *all* prospective workers, workforce development organizations and community colleges should stress the importance of attaining literacy in a variety of technologies (though computer literacy and knowledge of word processing programs seem to be most common).

**Never underestimate the value of experience.** While many employers noted that experience is not absolutely necessary to be considered for an entry-level position, they did indicate that experience is often an important factor and that some experience is often preferred over none when making a hire. While one does need to “have experience in order to gain experience,” the surveys and interviews demonstrated that this experience need not be extensive. A worker’s demonstration that he or she can hold a job, work well with other employees, or leave a good impression with his or her former employer can be all the experience necessary. Workforce development organizations can help job seekers to highlight the experience they have already gained in resumes and interviews, as well as develop internship opportunities that can provide valuable job experience.

**Soft skills and demeanor matter.** While certain entry-level positions do have education, experience, training, or certification requirements, many employers noted that they are simply looking for individuals who are compatible (who will work well) with the job and with fellow employees. Demonstrating soft skills, such as the ability to work well with others, and having a friendly affect, are just as critical to many employers as having a certain level of education. Workforce development organizations can help job seekers to improve their soft skills, connecting them to training opportunities that can develop these skills, as well as providing coaching to job seekers that will help them present themselves well in interviews.

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## **Appendix A – Summary of Initial Research Findings (Agnone & Corwin, 2012).**

The report from the Seattle Jobs Initiative, *Changes in Entry-Level Jobs over the Past Decade*, examined whether the skill and education requirements for entry-level jobs shifted over the past decade, specifically in the following sectors: professional and business services, healthcare, logistics (i.e. transportation, trade, and utilities), and manufacturing. These four industries were selected based on apparent shifts in educational attainment within the industries and their relative share of the labor force.

The authors identified 20 occupations within each industry that had listed requirements of no more than an associate's degree and little to no related work experience necessary. These occupations were each examined for any shifts in educational or training requirements from 2000–2010, as well as the educational attainment of incumbent workers within each occupation over the same time period. While fewer than 20 percent of the jobs identified showed an increase in the job training or education *requirements* (based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS]), more than 70 percent of these jobs showed an increase in the educational *attainment* of incumbent workers. This discrepancy between the shift in job requirements, or lack thereof, and the shift in educational attainment within entry-level positions was noted across all four industries; though, the difference was more striking and pertinent within some industries than others.

Within the professional and business services sector, many entry-level jobs require no more than a high school diploma and on-the-job training; however, the educational attainment of incumbent workers within this sector has been increasing, as has the demand for workers with higher levels of education. The same is true for the healthcare industry. The increased demand within these two sectors for workers with higher education is especially significant as these industries are predicted to have higher rates of growth than other industries in the Seattle/King County area over the next ten years; the healthcare industry, specifically, contains many of the fastest growing occupations.

The outlook is somewhat different within the manufacturing and logistics industries. Job growth within the logistics sector is expected to be relatively slow over the next ten years, while manufacturing jobs are actually expected to decline. Furthermore, the job training and education requirements, as well as the educational attainment of incumbent workers, are not projected to change significantly over the same time period within these two sectors. Despite the relative lack of change within these sectors, evidence does exist that the educational attainment of workers in many jobs within the logistics sector is higher than the stated requirements and, within the manufacturing industry, the jobs that remain may require more than a high school diploma.

This shift in educational attainment among workers raises important questions about the education and skills necessary for workers to remain competitive in the local labor market. Further, the shifts in education and job training requirement noted through this research are based on national data (from the BLS); for the vast majority of occupations examined in this initial report, educational attainment among incumbent workers is higher in the Seattle/King County area than in the State of Washington or the nation. Thus, if the education, skills,

and training required to remain competitive for entry-level jobs are increasing at-large, the credentials required to be competitive in the Seattle/King County labor market may be even higher. It is essential to understand whether this shift is being driven by recent economic conditions or if the shift is more systemic, as Seattle Jobs Initiative may need to adjust how they train workers for entry-level positions. This need to further understand employer-stated requirements for entry-level jobs and the determinants of hiring decisions for these positions prompted the follow-up research conducted in this report.

## Appendix B – Survey and Interview Methodology

### SURVEY ASSESSMENT

In order to gather pertinent information, a brief survey was designed and distributed to local employers. The survey took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete and asked questions pertaining to entry-level job requirements and employer hiring practices, such as:

- **Please rate how much you value job-related experience when considering a prospective employee?**
- **Do you prefer to hire entry-level employees whose skills, education, or certifications are beyond what is required in the job description?**
- **Over the past ten years or so, education and training requirements for entry-level positions at your company have: increased/remained unchanged/decreased.<sup>2</sup>**

Participation in the survey was voluntary and employers were offered the chance to receive a \$10 gift card to a local coffee shop for their participation. The survey was administered to local employers through multiple Seattle-based business and trade organizations. These organizations agreed to distribute the survey via e-mail and to send a reminder e-mail before an agreed upon follow-up period. For some business associations, a link to the survey was embedded in their monthly e-mail newsletter, while other associations contacted employers in their membership directories via direct e-mailing. In addition to employers reached via business associations, an internet search elicited the names and contact information for a number of additional businesses that were contacted directly by members of this research team. While the internet search specifically targeted employers in the four industries aforementioned in this report, business associations were not instructed to send the survey only to employers within these four sectors.

If the e-mail reached an inappropriate party, recipients were asked to forward the survey link to the person or persons in charge of hiring at the business or company. Through direct e-mailing, over 400 employers were contacted; however, because the membership directories for business associations are often proprietary, we cannot know for certain how many employers the survey reached when the associations opted to send the survey. Furthermore, it is impossible to distinguish how many employers received the e-mail (rather than having the e-mail forwarded to a “junk mail” folder, for example).

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2. A complete survey instrument is available from the authors upon request.

## INTERVIEW ASSESSMENT

Based on survey results, substantive areas of interest were identified and an interview questionnaire was developed. Employers that indicated a willingness to be interviewed (from the internet survey), and employers whose contact information was discovered through the aforementioned internet search, were contacted as potential interviewees. Employers were asked if they would be willing to consent to an interview, with the understanding that their responses would be kept confidential and summarized with the responses of other employers. Interviews were conducted at the time of contact, or scheduled for a later date that was more convenient for the employer. In all, 30 employers agreed to take part in a telephone interview that lasted between 10–25 minutes.

Employers were asked about the types of entry-level positions available at their companies, the skills and education required to fill those positions, whether or not applicants and new hires possessed more or fewer skills than required, and how company requirements for those positions has shifted (if at all) over recent years. Furthermore, employers were asked about turnover within entry-level positions, if turnover is impacted by employee education and training, and how hiring decisions are affected by educational attainment, national certification, and job-related experience. Probativ and follow-up questions were asked of employers when interviewers believed more detail was necessary. Open-ended responses from the employer interviews were analyzed to obtain a sense of the pervasive themes. Results from the analysis of the surveys and interviews are presented below.