



THE IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS IN ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYMENT AND POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS:

Perspectives from Employers and Community Colleges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) is a nonprofit organization that creates opportunities for people to support themselves and their families through living-wage careers. SJI offers low-income individuals training that leads to college credentials in growing local industry sectors. A hallmark of SJI's program is the integration of soft skills into our training curriculum. This grew largely out of early and ongoing communication to SJI by our employer partners that soft skills are the most important attribute – and the most difficult to find – among entry-level job applications. Outside of this evidence, however, SJI has only a limited base of research supporting the importance of soft skills to local employers.

The purpose of this research is to gain perspectives from employers and postsecondary administrators on soft skills priorities and deficiencies, assessment tools, and training practices. The findings will help SJI to improve its soft skills curriculum and promote the integration of soft skills training within the regional workforce development system. Below are the major findings from this soft skills research, which includes employer and community college surveys, interviews, and literature reviews.

SOFT SKILLS ARE AT LEAST AS IMPORTANT AS TECHNICAL SKILLS FOR ENTRY-LEVEL WORKERS

More than 75% of employers surveyed said that soft skills were as important as – or more important than – technical skills in securing entry-level employment. National surveys of employers reflect similar views, showing that in many cases soft skills are even more important than technical skills. Research on predicting the future career success of students supports employers' opinions that some soft skills are a better predictor of adult success (salaries, graduation rates, home ownership) than technical skills.

SOME SOFT SKILLS ARE CONSIDERED MORE CRITICAL – AND MORE LACKING – THAN OTHERS

Local employers rank professionalism/integrity, reliability, communication, and teamwork as the top soft skills priorities for entry-level employment. Conversely, creativity/innovation and self-direction were viewed as the least critical of soft skills.

The soft skills categories that are both high priorities for local employers and most lacking in job applicants are communication, problem solving/adaptability, and reliability. Communication was by far the most common skill lacking in job applicants as reported by 55% of employers surveyed.

THERE ARE KEY DIFFERENCES AMONG INDUSTRY SECTORS IN DESIRED SOFT SKILLS

Employers in all three sectors analyzed (healthcare, manufacturing, and office occupations) listed communication as a priority skill. However, in manufacturing, written communication appears to be less of a priority compared to the other industry sectors. Other notable differences include the following sector priorities:

- Manufacturing – teamwork, problem solving, and reliability;
- Healthcare – customer service skills and positive attitudes;
- Professional services – teamwork, professionalism, and organizational skills.

EMPLOYERS AND COLLEGES SOMEWHAT DIFFER IN THE SOFT SKILLS DEEMED MOST CRITICAL AND MOST LACKING

Both community college administrators and employers surveyed agreed that communication is the critical skill most lacking in students and job applicants. Professionalism/integrity and reliability skills were also ranked by both groups as priorities. There are three notable differences in priorities: writing is more important to community college administrators than to employers while verbal communication is less important; community colleges see more deficits in reliability and professionalism skills in students than employers see in job applicants; employers see more deficits in problem solving skills in job applicants than community colleges do in their students.

EMPLOYERS APPEAR WILLING TO PLAY ONLY A LIMITED ROLE IN SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The top response from employers regarding who is responsible for soft skills development was “employees themselves.” Beyond the individual taking responsibility, about two-thirds (67%) of area

employers believe that the educational system has an important role in the development of soft skills. Half (54%) of the employers surveyed also stated that they are willing to play a role in soft skills development of their employees, but mostly on a case by case basis as opposed to fulfilling a formal training role.

BEST PRACTICES EXIST FOR SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT & ASSESSMENT

These best practice guidelines around assessing and developing soft skills were compiled from research focused on four year colleges, community colleges, and workforce development organizations, as described in detail in this report. The framework is meant as a guide for community colleges and training organizations that incorporate soft skills training in their curriculums.

1. Set clear expectations regarding soft skills.
2. Incorporate soft skills in grading system and assessment process.
3. Practice continuously and provide feedback.
4. Incorporate real world situations and environments.
5. Encourage professional communication between students and their peers, faculty, and community.
6. Maintain a learning organization culture.

EMPLOYERS ARE CONTRADICTIONARY IN THEIR OPINIONS OF THE VALUE OF SOFT SKILLS CREDENTIALS

Results of this research indicate that employers value soft skills credentials, with 74% of respondents identifying that the development of a soft skills credential is an important task for community colleges and workforce development providers. However, when employers were asked about the impact such a credential would have on the job application process, only 46% stated that it would have a positive effect on the job applicant's chances of gaining entry-level employment.

