

The Skills Employers Want

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BEFORE READING

As a class, make a list of the skills you think employers want.

Many employers say that the most important skills for any employee are reading, writing, and computation. With increasing regularity, employers are telling the media, "Give me people who can read, write, and do simple math and I'll train them for the jobs I have available." But probing further, one finds that employers want good basic academic skills *and much more*. . . .

So what are [some of] these basic workplace skills that employers want? They certainly include basic skills associated with formal schooling. But academic skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic comprise just the tip of the iceberg.

Employers want employees who can learn the particular skills of an available job—who have "learned how to learn."

Employers want employees who will hear the key points that make up a customer's concerns (listening) and who can convey an adequate response (oral communications).

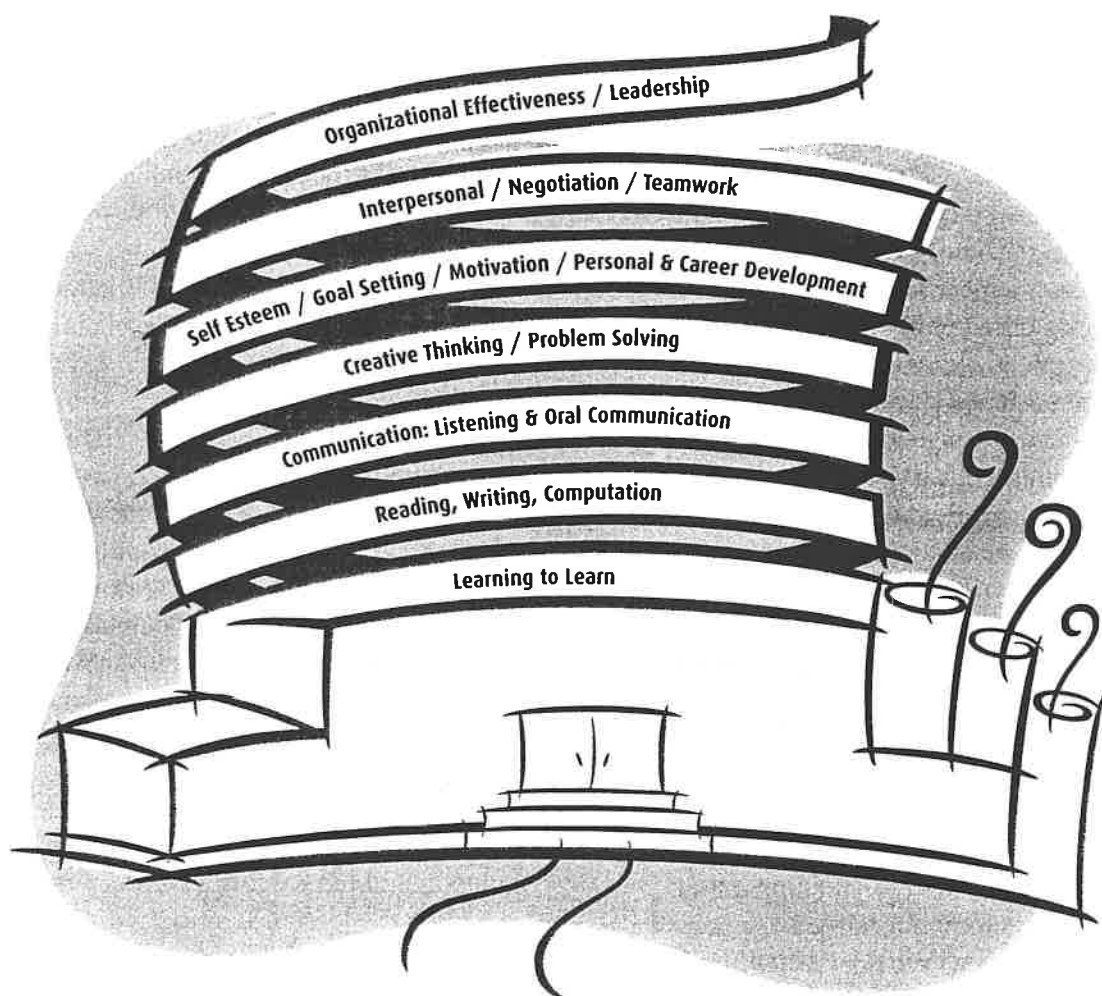
Employers want employees who can think on their feet (problem-solving) and who can come up with innovative solutions when needed (creative thinking). . . .

This is a prescription for a well-rounded worker who has acquired a number of discrete skills and who has the capability to acquire more sophisticated skills when necessary.

THE FOUNDATION: KNOWING HOW TO LEARN

Knowing how to learn is the most basic of all skills because it is the key that unlocks future success. Equipped with this skill, an individual can achieve competency in all other basic workplace skills, from reading through leadership. Without this skill, learning is neither as rapid nor as efficient and comprehensive. . . .

Learning is now a fact of life in the workplace. Even routine jobs are evolving as the demands of the workplace expand.



Competitive pressures compel employers to shift employees between jobs and responsibilities, putting a premium on the ability to absorb, process, and apply new information quickly and effectively. The complexity, amount, and availability of information compound the issue. . . .

COMPETENCE: READING, WRITING AND COMPUTATION

Basic academic skills — reading, writing and computation — have long been

revered as the keys to success in society and the workplace. In theory these skills have been essential, but in practice workers have often succeeded because of “a strong back and willing hands.”

The workplace of the past was one in which those with limited academic achievements could succeed. Jobs often required going through the motions of a regularized process or repetitive interaction with machines. In that workplace, illiteracy and innumeracy could be hidden or ignored.

But today's workplace is one that increasingly involves interaction with sophisticated, computerized machinery that requires good reading skills for efficient use. The introduction of approaches such as statistical process control (SPC) demand higher mathematical skills. And writing is frequently the first step in communicating with customers, interacting with machines, documenting competitive transactions, or successfully moving new ideas into the workplace. . . .

Reading tasks on the job...require the reader to be analytical, to summarize information, and to monitor one's own comprehension of the reading task. This is an interpretive approach that requires the reader to have active involvement with the reading task. . . .

Workplace writing relies on analysis, conceptualization, synthesis and distillation of information, as well as clear, succinct articulation of points and proposals. . . .

Workplace math skills are taught contextually to reflect their actual use on the job; instructional materials simulate specific job tasks. Building on the prior math knowledge of the learner and emphasizing problem identification, reasoning, estimation, and problem-solving, this approach has been shown to produce the quickest, most effective results in employee performance.

Most employers today cannot compete successfully without a workforce that has sound basic academic skills. Workers spend an average of 1 1/2–2h per workday engaged in reading forms, charts, graphs, manuals, computer terminals, and so on. Writing remains the primary form of communication for transmitting policies,

procedures, and concepts. Computation is used daily to conduct inventories, report on production levels, measure machine parts or specifications, and so on.

Deficiencies in such basic workplace skills create barriers that impair an employer's ability to meet strategic goals and to be competitive. . . .

COMMUNICATION: LISTENING AND ORAL COMMUNICATION

Reading and writing are essential communication tools, but it is through listening and speaking that we interact most frequently. The average person spends 8.4 percent of communications time writing, 13.3 percent reading, 23 percent speaking, and 55 percent listening.

Workers spend most of their day in some form of communication. They communicate with each other about procedures and problems and they relay information to and receive it from customers. Success on the job is linked to good communications skills. In fact, recent studies have indicated that only job knowledge ranks above communication skills as a factor for workplace success. . . .

Employees who lack proficiency in oral communication and listening skills are handicapped as to their learning and communicating abilities, and their personal and professional development. Business leaders estimate that deficiencies in these skills cost employers millions each year in lost productivity and errors.

ADAPTABILITY: CREATIVE THINKING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

Problem-solving skills include: the ability to recognize and define problems; to invent

and implement solutions; and to track and evaluate results. Cognitive skills, group interaction skills, and problem-processing skills are all crucial to successful problem-solving. . . .

New approaches to problem-solving, organizational design, or product development all spring from the individual capacity for creative thinking. In the workplace, creative thinking is generally manifested as creative problem-solving or creative innovation. Often a group activity, creative problem-solving is characterized by effective teamwork, the examination of problems in new ways, and the invention of new solutions to existing problems. Either an individual or a group activity, creative innovation refers to the development of new activities that expand markets and improve such elements as productivity. . . .

GROUP EFFECTIVENESS: INTERPERSONAL SKILLS, NEGOTIATION, AND TEAMWORK

In the past two decades, there has been a tremendous increase in the use of teams in the workplace. The team approach has been linked conclusively to higher productivity and product quality, as well as to increased quality of worklife. . . .

Whenever people work together, successful interaction depends upon effective interpersonal skills, focused negotiation, and a sense of group purpose. The quality of these three factors defines and controls working relationships.

[Good] interpersonal skills [allow] the employee to recognize and improve the ability to judge and balance appropriate behavior, cope with undesirable behavior in others, absorb stress, deal with ambiguity,

listen, inspire confidence in others, structure social interaction, share responsibility, and interact easily with others.

Such skills are essential to successful **negotiation**. Conflicts, both major and minor, are a fact of worklife. They can sap productivity and short-circuit strategic plans.

The key to diffusing potential conflict situations is to enhance employee negotiating skills at all levels. . . .

Interpersonal and negotiation skills are the cornerstones of successful **teamwork**. Teams are organized in the workplace so that appropriate talents and skills can be directed through group effort to accomplish vital tasks and goals. This pooling of resources, however, frequently requires team members to have an array of skills that individual or routine jobs do not demand.

Quality teamwork results when team members know how to recognize and cope with various and unique personalities and when each has a sense of the cultures and approaches that other team members represent. Team members also need an understanding of group dynamics, which evolve and change as the team approaches its goal. Lastly, team members must be aware of the technical skills that fellow members have and how those skills can be applied.

Teamwork can only occur when team members provide and receive feedback in a focused manner. Individuals gather and process information in personalized ways; good teamwork calls for the recognition and use of certain valuable differences between members of the team. . . .