

# FACULTY FORUM

## What Employers Want From Psychology Graduates

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*Most undergraduate psychology majors do not opt for graduate school but attempt to enter the workforce. We surveyed employers in 3 regions of the United States to assess the importance of qualities, skills, and abilities that psychology graduates need. Results indicate that the 5 most important qualities, skills, and abilities to employers are listening skills, desire and ability to learn, willingness to learn new and important skills, getting along with others, and ability to work with others as part of a work team. Faculty members advising students may wish to emphasize the importance of these people and teamwork skills in an effort to ensure that students have a sense of what is important to employers.*

In the last few years, psychology's popularity has grown tremendously at the undergraduate level. In the 1997–1998 academic year, higher education institutions awarded 73,972 bachelor's degrees in psychology (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). This number puts additional pressure on students to perform well to gain a competitive edge. Because of this pressure, graduates need to be aware of (and acquire) the qualities, skills, and abilities that will make them more marketable in the workforce.

Eison (1988) identified skills that employers wanted among applicants. Employment interviewers looked for characteristics such as enthusiasm and motivation, grades, communication and interpretation skills, the nature of students' noncollege jobs, and types of extracurricular activities. Self-presentation was of utmost concern to job interviewers. Similarly and more recently, Appleby (2000) found that social skills, personal skills, and communication skills were the highest ranked sets of skills identified by employers.

This emphasis on self-presentation appears to differ from findings by Edwards and Smith (1988). They conducted a structured telephone survey of 118 employers to determine the skills and knowledge employers sought among bachelor's-level psychology graduates. They reported that the highest rated skills included writing proposals and reports, the ability to identify problems and suggest solutions based on knowledge of human behavior, conducting interviews, and performing statistical analyses.

There are many reasons to reevaluate the qualities, skills, and abilities employers desire. First, there are record numbers of psychology graduates, and because most do not go to graduate school (American Psychological Association, 1994), graduates need to be prepared for workforce challenges. Second, the limited evidence lacks consensus about the types of

skills and abilities employers desire. Third, skill sets may change over time. For instance, none of the ranked items in the Edwards and Smith (1988) study included technology and Internet skills. The purpose of this study was to determine empirically employers' value of various qualities, skills, and abilities for psychology graduates.

## Method

### Participants

Using contacts from three states (Idaho, Illinois, Ohio), we surveyed business leaders in companies large enough to be likely to hire psychology graduates (i.e., with at least 75 employees) about the relative importance of skills and abilities. We mailed a survey to 323 businesses. The overall response rate was 26.9% ( $N = 87$ ). For the states, the responses were: Idaho 60 of 181 (33.1%), Illinois 20 of 100 (20.0%), and Ohio 7 of 42 (16.6%).

### Materials

An 88-item survey included skills and abilities used in previous research and career development resources. Employers indicated level of importance on a 4 point Likert-type scale from 0 (*not at all important*) to 3 (*extremely important*). The instructions read, in part: "Thank you for taking the time to provide feedback about the value of particular skills and abilities in the psychology graduates you may hire for employment." Another section of the instructions read: "Please rate the importance of these qualities, skills, and abilities listed below. Think of these items in the context of what makes employees successful in your organization."

### Procedure

We mailed the surveys from Boise, Idaho, to cities in Idaho, Illinois, and Ohio. Surveys sent to Idaho and Ohio had a return date of November 24, 1999. Those sent to Illinois were sent later with a return date of March 1, 2000. (The later mailing was because of the availability of mailing addresses.) The survey packet contained a cover letter from the authors, the survey items (see Table 1), and a self-addressed business reply envelope addressed to the director of human resources.

## Results

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for the 88 items rated for importance. As a quick summary, we present the top 10 qualities, skills, and abilities here. The top 10 most

**Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Employer Perception of Importance Ratings for 88 Qualities, Skills, and Abilities**

Quality, Skill, or Ability	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Listening skills	2.86	0.34
Ability to work with others as part of a work team	2.84	0.45
Getting along with others	2.83	0.40
Desire and ability to learn	2.80	0.45
Willingness to learn new, important skills	2.80	0.43
Focus on customers/clients	2.78	0.44
Interpersonal relationship skills	2.75	0.51
Adaptability to changing situations	2.75	0.48
Ability to suggest solutions to problem	2.74	0.46
Problem solving skills	2.73	0.49
Ethical decision making	2.71	0.52
Critical thinking	2.66	0.54
Ability to see the big picture	2.66	0.59
Flexibility/shifting gears	2.65	0.52
Being able to identify problems	2.61	0.55
Working smarter to improve productivity	2.61	0.64
Timely decision making	2.60	0.56
Time management	2.58	0.52
Problem-definition skills	2.54	0.59
Personality	2.53	0.59
Building team spirit	2.48	0.63
Managing with vision and purpose	2.46	0.77
Leadership skills	2.45	0.62
Coping skills and abilities	2.42	0.73
Versatility	2.41	0.68
Understanding of human behavior	2.41	0.68
Motivating others	2.37	0.82
Proper grammar usage	2.34	0.61
Commitment to total quality management	2.33	0.72
Collaboration/negotiation skills	2.32	0.68
Prior successful work experience	2.29	0.73
Effective writing	2.28	0.70
Organization understanding	2.25	0.66
Priority setting	2.24	0.84
Rapport in college	2.21	0.77
Business understanding	2.21	0.72
Telephone skills	2.18	0.74
Innovation skills	2.18	0.70
Ability to influence others	2.16	0.72
Public relations skills	2.16	0.82
Networking skills	2.15	0.79
Negotiation skills	2.10	0.83
Presentation skills	2.09	0.73
Global thinking skills	2.03	0.75
Use of technology	1.97	0.73
Strategic planning skills	1.86	0.87
Diversity of education/knowledge	1.84	0.73
Enterprising	1.79	0.87
Writing proposals and reports	1.78	0.90
Public speaking	1.77	0.81
Investigative abilities	1.74	0.77
Marketing talents	1.70	0.98
Communicate using e-mail	1.70	0.94
Industry or corporation awareness	1.64	0.82
Conducting interviews	1.63	0.97
How to run a meeting	1.63	0.80
Understanding of how bureaucracies work	1.63	0.89
Prior experience in dealing with diversity/ multiculturalism	1.62	0.79
Consulting skills	1.59	1.04
Reputation of recommenders	1.55	0.96
Letters of recommendation	1.54	0.72
Computational ability	1.51	0.80

(continued)

**Table 1 (Continued)**

Quality, Skill, or Ability	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Clerical ability	1.39	0.79
Interpreting trends	1.38	0.77
Affirmative action needs	1.34	0.91
Able to work with hands-on physical tasks	1.33	1.00
Able to research effectively on the Internet	1.31	0.82
Knowledge of interventions	1.29	1.03
Job analysis	1.23	0.93
Cumulative grade point average	1.20	0.71
Knowledge of research findings	1.13	0.89
Contracting skills	1.06	0.82
Difficulty of courses taken	1.05	0.78
Reputation of school(s) attended	1.01	0.80
Using canned computer programs to analyze data	0.98	0.79
Doing statistical analyses	0.95	0.85
Knowing how to design and conduct research projects	0.93	0.86
Speaking/writing ability in a second language	0.92	0.84
Honors and awards earned in college	0.90	0.69
Coding data	0.86	0.77
Participation in extracurricular activities in college	0.78	0.73
Able to work with machines or tools	0.76	0.86
Artistic abilities	0.76	0.79
Constructing tests and questionnaires	0.75	0.89
Administering standardized tests	0.67	0.77
Interpreting standard test scores	0.65	0.77
Publication in college	0.43	0.66
Musical abilities	0.29	0.50

*Note.* Based on a scale ranging from 0 (*not at all important*), 1 (*slightly important*), 2 (*moderately important*), to 3 (*extremely important*).

important qualities, skills, and abilities to employers were (a) listening skills, (b) ability to work with others as part of a work team, (c) getting along with others, (d) desire and ability to learn, (e) willingness to learn new important skills, (f) focus on customers or clients, (g) interpersonal relationship skills, (h) adaptability to changing situations, (i) ability to suggest solutions to problems, and (j) problem-solving skills.

## Discussion

The importance of interpersonal skills (e.g., listening, relationship skills), teamwork (e.g., work with others, getting along with others), and work ethic (e.g., desire and ability to learn, willingness to learn new skills) emerged as qualities important to employers. We expected to find somewhat similar results to Edwards and Smith (1988), but did not. Three possible explanations emerge to help explain the different outcomes. First, Edwards and Smith interviewed employers seeking to hire a person whose duties would include research, whereas in this study we did not include that limitation. Second, Edwards and Smith conducted telephone interviews in one region of the country, whereas we used mail surveys in three states. Third, the results may have changed because of our use of a comprehensive set of potential qualities, skills, and abilities (88), compared to Edwards and Smith's list of 11 items.

For the sake of comparison, however, we did include all 11 of Edwards and Smith's (1988) items in our listing of 88 skills

and abilities. The most useful skill that Edwards and Smith found was "writing proposals and reports." In our survey, this item ranked 49th and had a mean score of 1.78. "Being able to identify problems" was 15th in our findings ( $M = 2.62$ ), and it was the second most useful skill from Edwards and Smith (1988).

Carroll, Schmidt, and Sorensen (1992) suggested students should choose electives that would meet the needs of future employers, such as being knowledgeable about the field under consideration and participating in volunteer experiences to enhance their desirability to future employers. Our comprehensive listing may provide some insight concerning attributes currently desirable to employers. The organization of Appleby's (2000) categories mirrored the results of this study. Our study extends the results of Appleby due to a larger sample size, greater representativeness (three regions vs. one region), and a more comprehensive listing of potential skills and abilities. These important categories (i.e., social skills, personal skills, communication skills, information gathering skills, and numerical and computer skills) are helpful when trying to communicate the complexity of employer needs to students. However, the goal of a liberal arts education in psychology is much more than job training; it is preparation for life-long learning and good citizenship. Although educators want to help students increase their marketability, they should not lose sight of the overarching goals.

There are limitations to this study. Sampling respondents from three regions of the country did not provide a national sample, so generalizations are somewhat limited. However, based on this study, faculty members can advise students entering the workforce with a bachelor's degree in psychology to focus on developing listening skills, working with groups, and developing an eagerness to learn and adapt to new situations. The employment market continues to be volatile, and advisors of undergraduate psychology majors need to be aware of these changes. Studies such as this one should be repeated at regular intervals to keep abreast of the rapid changes occurring in the marketplace.

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1. We thank David Pittenger and Ken Gray in identifying employers to survey. In addition, we appreciate the support of the Psychology Partnerships Project of the American Psychological Association. Our thanks to the three reviewers and the editor for their helpful remarks about the article and for their patience.
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## Student and Faculty Perceptions of Effective Teaching: A Successful Replication

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*We surveyed comprehensive community college faculty and students concerning their perspectives on effective teaching. Our results closely paralleled Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, and Saville (2002). Both students and faculty ranked the following among the top 10 qualities or behaviors of effective teachers: (a) approachable, (b) creative and interesting, (c) encouraging and caring, (d) enthusiastic, (e) flexible and open-minded, (f) knowledgeable, (g) realistic expectations and fair, and (h) respectful. The few differences in faculty and student rankings in both samples reflected faculty emphasis on teaching technique and student emphasis on the student-teacher relationship.*

Investigations into what constitutes effective teaching follow three primary approaches: general writings on effective teaching (e.g., Roth, 1997), analyses of the credentials of award-winning teachers (e.g., Lowman, 1995), and analyses of student evaluations of teachers (e.g., Feldman, 1976). Each approach defines effective teaching primarily on the basis of a simple listing of the characteristics possessed by "master teachers": committed, inspiring, engaging, and so on (e.g., Baiocco & DeWaters, 1998). However, what causes a teacher to be perceived as committed or enthusiastic? Focusing on the acquisition of specific behaviors reflective of effective teaching would seem a more useful strategy for teachers to develop these traits or otherwise improve their teaching. For example, acquiring behaviors reflective of enthusiasm is likely to be more beneficial than merely telling oneself or someone else to be more enthusiastic.

Buskist, Sikorski, Buckley, and Saville (2002) determined the personality characteristics of teachers and then identified specific behaviors exhibited by these individuals. Undergraduates listed the primary characteristics of "master teachers" at the college and university level, generating a list of 47 characteristics. A second undergraduate group then assigned