

# It's the Basics, Really! What Trips up College Seniors in the Job Search and Early Career?

Recruiting Trends Note 2010-11:1

Ian Render  
CERI Research Assistant

A recent CERI paper called attention to the widening skills gap between where college students are when they graduate and where they need to be in order to successfully launch their careers in the first positions they enter upon graduation. However, it appears that the higher level skill requirements are trumped by some basic issues that slam the door to the workplace. This is according to 1850 employers who responded to this question in the 2010-2011 recruiting survey: "In what areas do young adults need to develop better skills and competencies in order to secure a position and launch their career successfully in your organization."

It's the basics! After conducting a word sort that organized these employer comments into similar clusters of skills or competencies, three major groups emerged: basic skills, professionalism and maturity, and interpersonal skills. Other important clusters emerged but were not mentioned as frequently.

This short Trends Note provides the basic skills, competencies and behavioral aspects that trip students at the starting gate. We provide a summary of the content for each cluster, the total percentage of employers who mentioned this cluster in their comments, and selected quotes from employers to illustrate their concerns.

The **BIG THREE**:

**Basic skills:** writing (spelling, grammar, sentence structure, composition of letters, memos, simple reports), oral and visual communication, summarizing ideas and relevant points clearly and succinctly, and preparing reports. **26%**

- *"They need to work on cover letters and resumes! Many are embarrassing to read. If applicants would just use correct grammar, complete sentences, and run the whole thing through spell check to demonstrate they care, many more would be considered for our positions!"*
- *"Grammatical errors during the interview process are a huge problem. Most of our employees have direct contact with our franchises and the inability to communicate is a huge problem for us"*

**Professionalism and Maturity:** frame realistic salary and job expectations, act professionally in relationships with management and clients, understand job demands, be able to manage time and priorities, and accept feedback for improvement in job performance. **24%**

- *“Understanding a job does not adapt to their personal scheduling needs and desires, but rather that THEY need to accommodate, work hard, and demonstrate reliability and initiative”*
- *“How to deal with direction and criticism. Understanding that it is a job, there is a boss, and they are not the one in charge. You will not get praise for the work you do and no one is going to walk you through every step of your job”*
- *“Become more professional, particularly in communication skills, both oral and especially e-mail communication. Young adults are much too casual in their e-mail, and in their interactions with management. They need to learn to interact in a more professional manner”*
- *“They need to have realistic expectations of entry-level salary expectations. Also, they have to understand that promotional opportunities are granted to those that go well above and beyond normal position expectations and to those that show exceptional grasp of the technical content of the position”*
- *“I am continuing to find a resistance to receiving feedback. It may be an ongoing generational issue; however the ability to take feedback developmentally on any level is not something that a majority of recently hired college students can do well. With the workforce as strapped as it is, resources extremely limited, and learning curve expectations reduced, it is crucial that college grads understand that when they get a job, they need to hit the ground running and understand the culture and business dynamic in order to be successful”*

**Interpersonal skills:** ability to hold a one-on-one conversation with another adult, able to work in a team, and be able to establish rapport with clients, co-workers, and management. **23%**

- *“Ability to communicate how/what they have learned/experienced can translate into the workplace. They focus on what classes they have taken instead of what they have done and can do. Resumes are much more polished but new grads don’t interview any better than years ago”*
- *“Less emphasis on social media and a better understanding of mediation and face to face skills”*
- *“They need to be able to speak with their colleagues, and not hide behind their e-mail when they don’t want to do something. We’re losing the ability to converse with one another”*

The following skill and competency clusters were mentioned less frequently but remain important in the total consideration of a graduating student for employment and career advancement.

**Work Ethic:** coming to work prepared and on time, working diligently, avoiding distractions, such as texting and Facebook, and a will to work the full amount of hours. **11%**

- *“Young people need to learn to show up prepared, professional and to show how they can contribute to an organization. Many candidates seem half asleep, are either texting, listening to their iPod’s or looking at their Facebook account”*
- *“We find that recent graduates are not generally prepared to be at work ON TIME each day, and tend to have more attendance issues than graduates did 5-10 years ago”*
- *“We are very much focused on motivational fit and work ethic. Grades are important but technical skills can be taught”*

**Research and Preparation:** having knowledge on the company where applying and basic understanding of position in terms of skills and experience required, having a sense of the direction they want their career to take. **8.0%**

- *“Understanding and developing a career path early on. No more than any time I can recall, employees are expected to manage their career rather than companies focusing on it. Know what your next steps are and build a timeline. Have an idea of what you will do to get there and seek validation of your plan from internal resources such as your manager and HR”*
- *“I do training for various university classes to students that have never written a cover letter and they are seniors in college”*
- *“Just not prepared at all for interviews, resumes from career services centers are a mess, they have outrageous career and salary expectations, and most are totally unprofessional (whether showing up late, not doing any research on the company, chewing gum, wearing tight and inappropriate clothing, slouching, discussing boyfriends/drug habits/family problems in the interview and on assignment at a company). A lot of students say they want to be a manager or a consultant when they graduate, not sure if anyone tells them they need experience before they can do that. Just overall not prepared at all to make the transition”*

**Initiative:** expressing a general interest in the position for which they are applying, showing drive in your position once employed, and seeking higher roles within the company. **7%**

- *“Engage in supporting a team until they learn the ropes. The new hires are the support to the more experienced consulting team. They must engage and place themselves into the project team and search for tasks they can do... Grab hold of opportunities; don’t make folks find you to do a task, find it”*
- *“In order to secure a position in our company, you need to be a motivated, self-assured, and driven individual who is a team player and can work with others to get the job done”*

**Software skills:** knowledgeable in Excel and Word but also efficient in networking. **7%**

**Experience:** have an internship supplemented with volunteer work, or any kind of professional training before entering the workplace. **6%**

- *“Do something! Take a leadership role that means something, work part time, tutor, write, have meaningful internships”*
- *“The largest challenge we face in hiring is theoretical understanding but no hands on experience of the skills required to execute the job correctly. The lack of skills ability has increased significantly over the last five years”*

**Leadership and Project Management Skills: 5%**

**Focus and Time Management Skills: 5%**

- *“A lack of awareness that unlike in school where there is a deadline for a project in the workplace, others in the organization will want to see tangible progress toward completion along the way because their own work is relying on its timely and successful completion”*

**Skills in Problem Solving and Critical Thinking: 4%**

**A Good Education: 4%**

- *“I have a problem with so many students being able to get their entire degree online. How are students learning to interact and work with people with different backgrounds/personalities if all communication is done through technology?”*
- *“Simply put, students need professional development skills on a grand scale. I taught at Eastern Michigan University before moving to New York City to work for Jumpstart. Students simply do not have opportunities for professional development in the workforce. They do not know the process for applying to jobs; they do not see the venture of professionalism as a valuable skill outside of gaining a degree. Students desperately need pragmatic advice and preparation all 4 years of school to find a job. I support liberal-based education as very few markets require one concrete unchanging skill set. Students need to be flexible on multiple levels, and be encouraged to think creatively about the job force and their place in it. Most liberal education institutions are missing the pragmatic and practical applications of how these broad skills transfer into actual positions. This needs to be integrated into curriculum development”*
- *“Most people are going to college, which is a great thing. However, by the time these graduates are interviewing with me, it is apparent there are some individuals that should have not gone to college, or majored in something else. There needs to be more advising in high school and the early years of college. These kids are racking up tremendous debt for a degree that others say they need. But it is not their passion, and it is not what the graduate wants to do. I interview for chemistry in our organization. The graduates today may have the technology advantage compared to prior generations, but the work ethic and customer skills are lacking. They expect everything to be given to them, and it is not their fault”*