

## Employer Expectations Just What DO They Want?

By Kristi Lockhart

How many times have you said to yourself: Employers are so difficult to figure out! They never hire my job-seeking clients! What do they expect – a *perfect* employee?! Sound familiar?

Perhaps we're losing sight of the big picture – the employer's point of view. They aren't looking for a perfect employee...they are looking for the *right* employee. We hope the employer will see that, with some guidance and training, the student or young adult will become a great employee. We know this individual, they don't. Right? Wrong. Employers know *employees*. They know what their business needs to succeed. We must operate with *their* objectives as our framework in *preparing* youth for employment. Can your job seekers answer these questions?

- What does the employer want from me?
- What do I need to know?
- How should I present myself?
- What resources are available to help me prepare?

Only when these questions have been answered can we teach these key points about employer expectations:

- Be on time – *always*.
- Follow directions and accept feedback.
- Don't text or talk on your cell phone when you're working.
- Maintain a positive attitude at all times.
- Treat your supervisor and co-workers with respect.
- Take job responsibilities seriously.
- Avoid the "that's not my job!" mentality.

Employers are looking for the right workforce to keep their operations running smoothly and

provide their customers with an excellent experience. They usually prefer candidates who are:

- Comfortable working as part of a team;
- Able to follow or lead when appropriate;
- Capable of hands-on participation – outside of their typical duties – when necessary;
- Willing to pursue ongoing training and education;
- Sensitive to diversity in the workplace and the community they live in; and
- Aware of, and can articulate, personal career goals.

### Real World Experience

These big-picture topics need to be *your* big picture, too. When work-readiness programs are designed to address these areas students are better prepared to meet the needs of any employer. The concept of self-determination can be best taught through real experiences and exposure to real workplaces. It's tough to teach some things in a classroom or school. Those sites are comfort zones and offer more support than might be found in the "real world". It's crucial that students have **multiple** internships, volunteer opportunities, or part-time jobs before they leave high school. This is common sense, which research has confirmed many times over. What better place to get direct instruction and feedback on areas such as:

- Soft skills (more on this in the next section);
- Integrity and personal and electronic ethics (including Internet and phone use);
- Customer service skills;
- Hygiene and appearance;
- Attitude and behavior;
- Punctuality;
- Ambition;
- Leadership;
- Teamwork;

- Problem solving and thinking outside the box;
- Collaboration and teamwork;
- Computer and phone skills;
- Active listening and questioning;
- Diversity awareness; and
- Time management.

### Soft Skills

These assets are the wish list of every employer. If all of them were available within a single person you'd have a perfect employee. Of course, no one is perfect. Each young person has strengths and areas where he/she needs to improve. Some will take lots of life experience to learn. Whatever the case, **experience** is the key, and soft skills are the glue that binds experience together. Experience allows a youth to develop skills (including hard skills) that ultimately advance their employment opportunities. Practicing a variety of interactions in real time leads to better employment prospects.

Companies often say they are willing to train candidates on the hard skills of the job, but soft skills need to exist from the beginning. (Hard skills are specific, teachable tasks that are required on the job.) On the other hand, soft skills relate to how the individual works, adjusts to the work environment, and interacts with others. *They can be just as important as education or experience.*

Paying attention to a candidate's soft skills can make a big difference. When *solid* soft skills are apparent, they can sometimes overshadow hard skills that may be a little lackluster. Employers routinely indicate that poor soft skills are the main cause of being fired. Having a positive attitude, however, can save one's job. *Soft skills are at the core of what employers want.* Ultimately, employers want employees who:

- Understand their role in the company;
- Respect that other employees also play an important role; and
- Demonstrate a positive attitude that leads to a better workplace for everyone.

These skills are more likely to occur when the candidate knows about the work site and has done some research ahead of time. Regardless of whether an interview is for informational purposes or for an actual job opening, employers appreciate the effort that goes into learning more about their company.

The young job seeker benefits from knowing if the work site offers a role they can – and will *want* – to play as an employee.

Everyone wins if the job match is a good one and the youth knows the employer before applying. They can visit the employer, check their web-site, examine online resources (online reviews, Facebook, blogs, etc.), and ask their friends and family about the business. These investigative skills will serve youth well as they transition into the adult world and need to research their next residence, career, health care provider, etc.

### Summary

When all of the areas discussed in this article have been addressed, your job-seeking clients will have what employers want. ...not a perfect employee...but a **prepared** employee.

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### Resources

For more information and resources check out:

#### ❖ Virginia Career VIEW (Vital Information for Education and Work)

This site is for all students in grades K-8 in Virginia – a career exploration and educational planning resource in one place! It provides extensive resources for researching careers, training, and employment.

<http://www.vaview.vt.edu/>

#### ❖ Virginia Education Wizard

Let the Wizard help you choose a career, get the information you need to pursue your career, find the college that is right for you, pay for college, transfer from a community college to a university, and get answers to questions about your future.

<https://www.vawizard.org/vccs/Main.action>

#### ❖ Workplace Readiness Skills for the Commonwealth

1. Personal qualities and people skills (soft skills)
2. Professional knowledge and skills (academic and knowledge)
3. Technology knowledge and skills

<http://www.jmu.edu/ttac/WorkplaceReadiness.shtml> ■