

# What Employers Want

To NC employers, a good work ethic is just as important as the basics of reading, writing and math

North Carolina employers want workers with a strong grasp of the educational fundamentals — reading, writing and math. But they also want workers with a good work ethic — reliability, teamwork and good character.

Those wants — or needs — were re-emphasized in a survey conducted recently by the North Carolina Business Committee for Education, a nonprofit based in the governor's office to act as a link between business and the state's public education system. All NCBE members — more than 70 of the state's leading corporations and

businesses — participated in the survey.

"We asked the respondents to assess 15 skills, qualities and areas of knowledge and to give the importance of each," explained Tricia Willoughby, the committee's executive director. "We also asked for open-ended responses."

What the survey found was that employers considered the ability to apply basic mathematical skills and the ability to read and comprehend materials of the utmost importance for new workers, recent high school graduates. But equally important, the survey revealed, are the ability to

work effectively as a member of a team and the ability to "conduct oneself appropriately in line with social responsibility and sound ethics."

Skills such as clear communication, taking personal responsibility, flexibility in adapting to new situations, problem-solving and sensitivity to cultural or ethnic differences also ranked high on the list.

There were no surprises in the survey. "Our results reflected what we'd seen in other national surveys," Willoughby said. "Businesses at the national level identified the same skills that have traditionally been measured, including the so-called 'soft skills.' Those would include working as a team member, social responsibility, social ethics, being a self-starter and the flexibility to adapt to new ways of doing business, which is critical in a global business environment in which there may be cultural and ethnic differences."

While many of the traits in the survey may have been required of workers 10 or 15 years ago, the relative value of some of those traits may have changed. Willoughby said the survey supported that.

"For example, the ability to work as a team might not have been as important on an assembly line," she said. "But today it is that important because a worker may not be assigned to one job for eight hours."

The survey also pointed to the importance of understanding and applying the basic skills in math, science and, increasingly, in technology.

"Today's jobs require it," Willoughby said. "The jobs that Governor Easley has recruited to replace the textile and furniture and tobacco jobs we've lost are knowledge-based jobs."

"When we relied on manufacturing jobs or textiles, you could drop out of high school and find a job to support yourself and your family. But those jobs are rapidly decreasing. Now, working for a flooring

company in Davidson County requires more technical knowledge."

The survey is not intended to judge the state's educational system. In fact, North Carolina is about on par with the rest of the states in providing the skills that high school students and their employers need, according to NCBE Chairman Mary Linda Andrews.

"I think high schools in North Carolina are pretty much on track with schools across the United States," said Andrews, of GlaxoSmithKline. "But there's an organization — the OCED [Organization of Cooperation and Economic Development] — that looks at 32 countries, and the US is ranked 26th in math, 20th in science and 17th in reading assessment, so it's obvious we all need to make some changes."

Those changes are already on the way, said Willoughby. Last year, the State Board of Education changed its mission to more accurately reflect a more global economy, she said.

"What we've got to do is get our infrastructure right, to make sure our curriculum is aligned with what employers need," Willoughby explained. "... That means changing standards not just for students, but for teachers, principals, administrators and making sure those changes are passed along to our colleges and universities so that the changes are reflected in how we educate our teachers and educational personnel."

Both Willoughby and Andrews said that programs such as the North Carolina Graduation Project, Learn and Earn and job shadowing programs give the state a head start.

"We need a pipeline for students with 21st century skills," Andrews said. "We baby boomers are retiring, and we need replacements. And, if not for good schools, we would not be able to recruit new employees."

"And," she added, "we'd much prefer to hire students from North Carolina." ♦

## NCBCE PARTNER SURVEY RESULTS

### FIVE 'MOST IMPORTANT' SKILLS

- Apply basic mathematical concepts and skills.
- Work effectively as a member of a team.
- Use and integrate information and communication technology.
- Conduct oneself appropriately in line with social responsibility and sound ethics.
- Read and comprehend materials of varying complexity.

### SEVEN 'IMPORTANT' SKILLS

- Clearly communicate ideas and comments orally.
- Be a self-starter and take personal responsibility.
- Incorporate fundamentals, such as good grammar, spelling and sentence structure, in written communications.
- Identify a problem, develop and evaluate creative alternatives and recommend a solution.
- Demonstrate flexibility by adapting to people, new situations and challenges.
- Understand the sciences and their relevance and application in today's society.
- Understand and be sensitive to cultural/ethnic differences.

### THREE 'SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT' SKILLS

- Understand history, civics, government and economics and their relevance and application in the 21st century.
- Display leadership skills.
- Communicate in two or more languages.



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