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# Mixed Signals: Do College Graduates Have the Soft Skills That Employers Want?

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Many employers consider job candidates' **soft** skills as critical for professional success as traditional **hard** skills, especially in today's global marketplace. College graduates are increasingly confident of their soft skills, believing these interpersonal, non-technical competencies enhance their value as prospective employees. Recent studies, however, show a widening gap between employer expectations and college graduate abilities. This paper reviews desired soft skills, along with college students' self-ratings of these same competencies; explores how employers and job candidates 'signal' the need for and/or presence of these skills; and proposes further research to discern the true cause of this seeming "soft skill gap."*

Keywords: Soft Skill Gap, College Graduates, Signaling Theory

## INTRODUCTION

Entering the job market as a new college graduate is a daunting yet exciting prospect. Fresh from the higher-education buffet of learning, college grads seek employment opportunities to capitalize upon their academic knowledge and inherent talents. Even those with lingering doubts as to their true professional calling tend to believe they "have what it takes" upon graduating to succeed in the global market. Employers have a different perspective: The majority of college graduates are confident in the level of their abilities, while in reality their skills fall short of employer expectations.

Recent studies reflect this dichotomy of evaluation. College graduates are highly confident of their abilities in both traditional "hard" and "soft" skill areas (Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2012). Employers, on the other hand, are increasingly frustrated at what they see as a growing problem with graduates' soft skills, or rather, *lack* thereof (St. Louis Community College & Workforce Solutions Group, 2013). **Soft skills** – those non-technical competencies associated with one's personality, attitude, and ability to interact effectively with others (i.e., to be optimally employable) – are believed to be as valuable in the workplace as **hard skills** – technical, tangible, measurable competencies. Soft skills' interpersonal relations focus is especially important in our global marketplace (Nunn, 2013), where sensitivity to potential individual and/or collective diversity can tip the scale toward being hired or passed over. Despite college graduates' belief in the strength of their abilities, however, employers report a dearth of basic soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, and problem solving within this very group of potential job candidates (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

What accounts for this disconnect of perception, this "gap" between college graduate and employer perspectives? Acknowledging the gap leads to further reflection: Do college graduates understand the soft skills employers seek? What method or 'yardstick' is used for self-evaluation of these competencies? Are colleges providing adequate opportunity to learn and develop soft skills? Do employers appropriately recruit for these desired skills? These questions, along with many others, can help clarify the origin of the perceived soft skills gap and how to address it.

To get to the root cause, we need to first determine what employers consider to be top soft skills. Research shows use of varied terminology, with most skills falling into broad categories of communication, interpersonal relationships, professionalism, teamwork, problem-solving/critical-thinking, ethical behavior, flexibility, leadership, and diversity

awareness/sensitivity. These soft skills, and/or subsets of these skills, are deemed essential for professional success and so should appear alongside required hard skills, education, and other relevant candidate qualifications.

In this paper, we explore the soft skills considered most valuable in today's job market, as well as the level of preparedness in recent college graduates, from the perspective of both employer and college student.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As previously mentioned, soft skills are non-technical, applied skills that employees are expected to possess and are oftentimes difficult to measure. Soft skills such as communication, problem solving, and critical thinking are important skills to have in any industry but are especially important in a global environment. With advances in technology and the ever-changing scope of business competition, the need for soft skill sets has changed (Deepa & Seth, 2013). Employers are looking for people with a cross-cultural literacy with experience in areas such as global awareness, communication, economics and the knowledge of the cost of doing business globally (Gore, 2013).

Most soft skills cannot be learned in a classroom setting or by reading a textbook. People learn soft skills by doing them. Managers need to learn how to manage competencies and the most cost-effective way is through soft skills development training. This training would focus on building "essential skills and confidence in performance management, managing difficult conversations, effective team meetings, delegation and communication skills" (Jain & Anjuman, 2013, p. 35). The training should be focused on changing behaviors especially with managers who are newly hired or promoted. It should include activities that involve training of hands-on skills that are used with performance management and are evident. However, oftentimes this training is difficult to measure return on investment and is the first to be cut from the budget.

When faced with deciding between two candidates with similar backgrounds, hiring managers agree that the candidate with soft skills experience would have an edge over the other candidate with little to no soft skills competencies. From an employer perspective, soft skills competencies are necessary in order to remain competitive especially in a global world. Employers want those employees who have soft skills that are easily transferable from the classroom to the work place (Deepa & Seth, 2013).

A review of the literature reveals strong communication ability, in both written and verbal form, to be a valued soft skill in new hires by employers (Hart Research Associates, 2015). In this day and age of technology and auto-correction tools, poor spelling and improper grammar are prevalent. Employers are looking for employees who master the English language well enough to maintain and nurture business relationships that focus on excellent communication skills. They do not want employees to ruin a business relationship simply because of poor communication skills (Deepa & Seth, 2013).

Accompanying communication skills as commonly desired attributes in job candidates are teamwork and critical/analytical thinking. In a survey conducted by the National Association of College and Educators (NACE), the top five soft skills employers *look for* on a candidate's resume are: Leadership (80.1%), teamwork (78.9%), written communication (70.2%), problem-solving (70.2%), and verbal communication (68.9%) (NACE, 2016, p. 31). Hart Research Associates found employers believe the following to be the top five most *important* skills when hiring college grads: Verbal communication (85%), teamwork (83%), written communication (82%), ethical judgment and decision making (81%), and critical/analytical thinking/reasoning (81%) (Hart Research Associates, 2015, p. 4). A similar survey conducted by the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM) lists the top five applied skills employers believe college graduates *lack* as: Professionalism/work ethic (43%), relationship building/soft skills (29%), business acumen (28%), written communications (26%), and critical thinking/problem-solving (26%). Leadership came in at number six (18%), with teamwork/collaboration number eight (12%) (SHRM, 2015, p. 24) (Tables 1-3).

Along with the acknowledgement among employers of these top soft skills' value is growing recognition of the dearth of these attributes among recent college graduates. The majority of employers find college graduates lacking and/or unprepared in the most desired skills (Tables 1 and 2). The majority of college students, however, feel *well* prepared for the working world in regard to top valued soft skills, including those involved in a recent survey at the four-year university selected.

## TABLE I: TOP 10 SOFT SKILLS EMPLOYERS SEEK IN COLLEGE GRADUATES

| Skill | Employer % | % Employers feel college grads well prepared | % College grads feel well prepared | % Students surveyed feel well prepared |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Hart Research Associates:** | | | | |
| Verbal communication | 85 | 28 | 62 | 72.4 |
| Teamwork | 83 | 37 | 64 | 83.6 |
| Written communication | 82 | 27 | 65 | 84.1 |
| Ethical judgment / decision making | 81 | 30 | 62 | 65.4 |
| Critical/analytical thinking | 81 | 26 | 66 | 86.9 |
| Applying knowledge & skills to real world | 80 | 23 | 59 | -- |
| Problem-solving | 70 | 24 | 59 | 87.9 |
| Locating, organizing, and evaluating info | 68 | 29 | 64 | -- |
| Innovation / creativity | 65 | 25 | 57 | -- |
| Staying current on changing technologies | 60 | 37 | 46 | -- |
| **NACE:** | | | | |
| Leadership | 80.1 | | | |
| Teamwork | 78.9 | | | |
| Written communication | 70.2 | | | |
| Problem-solving | 70.2 | | | |
| Verbal communication | 68.9 | | | |
| Work ethic | 68.9 | | | |
| Initiative | 65.8 | | | |
| Analytical / quantitative | 62.7 | | | |
| Flexibility / adaptability | 60.9 | | | |
| Technical | 59.6 | | | |

Hart Research Associates. (2015, January). "Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success"
National Association of Colleges and Employers (NAC E). (2015, November)."Job Outlook 2016"

## TABLE II: TOP 10 SOFT SKILLS EMPLOYERS BELIEVE COLLEGE GRADUATES LACK

| Skill | % Employers |
|---|---|
| Professionalism / work ethic | 43 |
| Relationship building / soft skills | 29 |
| Business acumen | 28 |
| Written communications | 26 |
| Critical thinking / problem-solving | 26 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Leadership | 18 |
| Lifelong learning / self-direction | 16 |
| Teamwork / collaboration | 12 |
| Coaching skills | 9 |
| Flexibility / openness to new experience | 9 |

Source: Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). (2015). "The Hiring of 2015 College Graduates"

## TABLE III: STUDENTS SURVEYED TOP SOFT SKILLS

| **Students soft skills survey – April 2016*** | |
|---|---|
| *Communication (written, verbal,* active listening) | *Teamwork* |
| *Flexibility / openness* | *Work ethic* |
| Ethical behavior | *Intellect / reasoning / problem-solving* |
| *Interpersonal skills* | Social / diversity awareness and sensitivity |
| *Professionalism* | Work experience |

**Italics* = Top soft skills in both SHRM–Students studies

## THEORY

There are multiple perspectives one could take to explain the gap between the levels of perceived soft skills graduating students possess. In this paper, we posit that based on signaling theory, students are adequately evaluating their level of soft skills, but are either failing to convey to employers that they possess the skills or the employers are failing to signal to the students that the skills are valued. Using signaling theory, the communication process is characterized by an informed party attempting to "signal" or convey that information to the other party in order to reduce uncertainty and improve the quality of the relationship, thereby increasing desired or favorable behaviors (Spence, 1973, 2002). Based upon the amount of information provided, the intent and quality of the relationship becomes clear as information asymmetry is reduced and the parties become aware of the characteristics, intents, and needs of the other party and are capable of engaging in appropriate responses (Stiglitz, 2002).

By obtaining a degree or other education, an applicant is attempting to signal their quality to employers and convey valued information regarding their skills and abilities (Connolly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011). If employers are not "signaling" to graduating applicants that certain skills are needed, then students may not realize they need to signal to the employers that they possess those skills as the relationship expectations are not clear. In this view, both students and employers function as informed parties with neither party accurately conveying the specific information needed to improve the relationship quality and reduce information asymmetry. Further, when a party is uninformed, they are likely to look to environmental or interactional cues to guide their behaviors or attitudes (Connolly et al., 2011). This is why feedback is an important part of signaling theory; it allows the uninformed party to signal that information received was appropriately interpreted and valuable. If the organization is not appropriately rewarding or clearly displaying that they value these skills or behaviors, by hiring applicants or promoting employees who do not possess or display them and/or failing to provide learning and developmental opportunities, then they may be unintentionally signaling that those skills are not valued; thereby discouraging others from displaying those skills.

## METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study was to determine whether or not college students felt confident in their soft skills competencies. The survey was given to 214 college students in a four-year university in the northeast. Of those participating, 45.8% were

graduating seniors, 52.8% were juniors and the remaining 0.9% being sophomores. The survey consisted of twenty questions, where the participants were asked to rank their soft skill level based upon a Likert scale where the number "1" represented those who strongly disagreed with the question up to the number "5" which represented those who strongly agreed with the question. The Likert scale is often used in surveys to determine varying degrees of opinions. The survey was given to students over a two-week period and the findings were analyzed.

Although the number of females (52%) exceeded the number of males (48%) participating in this study, gender had little to no impact on the survey results.

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study supported what employers had previously stated: The majority of college graduates are confident in their soft skills competencies. However, the soft skills in which college graduates feel competent are the same that employers feel the graduates fall short of possessing. Using the NACE, Hart Research Associates, and SHRM studies as a guide, students participating in a 2016 soft skills survey were asked to evaluate their soft skills using standard Likert Scale 1-5 ratings. Results show problem-solving to have the highest degree of confidence (87.9%), followed by written communication (84.1%), teamwork (83.6%), and verbal communication (72.4%).

Jean Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego University who has studied data on college students' confidence and self-perception versus reality (and compared the data from present day to prior generations), has stated, "It's not just confidence—it's over confidence" (Irvine, 2011). Twenge points out that this level of self-confidence can lead to self-centeredness – even narcissism – that can eventually lead to problems in relationships and careers. She compared students' high level of self-confidence to "entitlement" in two ways: Students receiving good grades in school without earning them; and, students being rewarded for activities regardless of performance level (Irvine, 2011).

Twenge's critics disagree. Jeffrey Arnett, a research professor of psychology at Clark University, argues against Twenge's broad statements of narcissism and classifies her comments as stereotyping all college students based solely upon their level of confidence. Arnett points out that other behavioral factors need to be taken into consideration, such as crime, substance abuse and sexual risk-taking, all of which have declined among college students in recent years. John Pryor, director of UCLA's Cooperative Institutional Research program, disagrees with Twenge's research findings as well. Pryor points out that confidence is only one trait students possess– there are other traits that impact their confidence. His research included students' participation in providing community service, which studies show has increased over the past decade (Irvine, 2011), a possible correlation with the increase in student self-confidence.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While our study revealed the majority of college students are indeed confident in their level of soft skills, it did not explain how or what tool (criteria) students use to measure their competencies. For example, when asked to rate their written communication skills, do students equate getting an "A" in a college writing course as an indicator of their above-average communication competency? Or do they base their apparent self-satisfaction on something else entirely? Further research is needed to determine what criteria or tools are used for soft skill self-ratings.

## CONCLUSION

The study found that the majority of college students rate highly their levels of soft skill competencies. Employers and college students both agree that soft skills are important to obtain jobs post-graduation. Employers hire college graduates expecting some level of expertise in applied soft skills, but then often complain the new hires lack these soft skills or have

overstated their level of competency. More research is needed to determine the criteria students use to measure their abilities in order to offer a solution to close this "soft skills gap."

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