

Employability Skills Survey 2015

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of the 2015 Employability Skills Survey carried out by Victoria University's Careers and Employment Service in June this year.

The goals of the survey were to:

- identify the top ten skills and attributes which employers look for in new graduates and students
- explore the level of competency expected for each of these skills and attributes at the time of hiring
- identify employer satisfaction with the levels of competency that students and graduates demonstrate for the skills and attributes identified as the most important

Additionally, the survey explored employers' perceptions of the importance of attributes considered as the Victoria Graduate Profile, and their satisfaction with the levels of competency that students and graduates demonstrate for the skills and attributes associated with the Victoria Graduate Profile.

Survey population

In this research, we adopted a triangulated approach that included a survey instrument sent out to 1,378 employers who were actively recruiting, or who have recruited university graduates and/or students within the last two years (between January 2013 and May 2015), informal interviews with employers, and wider literature including recent employability surveys, employability frameworks and practice. We received 435 responses (31% response rate), of which 346 were deemed eligible. 14% of the respondents were from local and regional organisations, 44% from national, and 42% from international organisations. The respondent population consisted of 61% private, 28% public, and 11% non-profit organisations. To the best of our knowledge, this is the largest response set of an employability skills survey in New Zealand and Australia to date.

Skills & attributes ranking

The following skills and attributes were ranked as top ten by the survey respondents:

1. Work ethic
2. Verbal communication skills
3. Energy & enthusiasm
4. Analytical & critical thinking
5. Problem solving
6. Team work
7. Interpersonal skills
8. Written communication skills
9. Self-management
10. Initiative & enterprise

The skills and attributes in the top ten list tend to cluster, with a very close mean ranking for the first two, followed by another grouping of four skills and attributes between rank 3-6, and increasing differences in mean rankings between positions 7-10.

As far as levels of competency for each of the above skills and attributes are concerned, the highest expectations were for competencies related to Work ethic (such as being reliable, being responsible, and committed to high quality of work). Communicating in a clear and sensitive manner to different audiences both in writing and speaking were also areas where respondents expected students and graduates to demonstrate very high levels of competency.

Employers also commented on the importance of graduates demonstrating a genuine interest in the work of the organisation and good understanding of the industry sector. Another aspect considered important were extracurricular activities and life experiences such as living independently or overseas travel. Employers seek evidence of interests that go beyond the degree course, especially those that involve hands-on experience in a work environment. These comments highlight the value that employers place on students and graduates being well-rounded individuals who can demonstrate at least some strengths in all of

the skill areas within the top ten list. The results illustrate that the key to employability is the combination of the skills, and the best approach to the top ten skills and attributes is to view them collectively rather than individually.

Overall, the top ten list of skills and attributes has remained more or less the same since the last such survey carried out by Careers and Employment in 2006. Verbal communication skills remain at the top of employers' priorities when it comes to selection criteria. Of note, however, is the high ranking of Work ethic. Even though competencies associated with Work ethic were provided on the lists in previous years, this year's survey is the first time to place it so high. In addition, there are some notable changes to the position of the following skills and attributes:

- Analytical & critical thinking moved **up** to 4th rank in 2015 from 10th rank in 2006
- Energy & enthusiasm moved **up** to 3rd rank in 2015 from 8th rank in 2006
- Interpersonal skills moved **down** to 7th rank in 2015 from 1st rank in 2006
- Self-management moved **up** to 9th rank in 2015, but was not ranked in the top ten in 2006
- Written communication skills moved **down** to 8th rank in 2015 from 3rd rank in 2006
- Academic achievement does not appear in the top 10 (ranks 15)
- Flexible & adaptable 'can do' attitude does not appear – however, these attributes could be considered within Resilience and adaptability (ranks 11)

Employer satisfaction

This year's survey is the first to explore employers' satisfaction levels regarding the top ranked skills and attributes demonstrated by Victoria University students and graduates. Employers were asked to rate their satisfaction with skills and attributes as well as Victoria Graduate Profile attributes they ranked as top five. Of those respondents who indicated their level of satisfaction with the skills and attributes, 80% indicated that they are either satisfied or very satisfied with students' and graduates' Verbal communication skills; 76% were satisfied or very satisfied with the level of Energy and enthusiasm demonstrated by their student and graduate employees; 75% of the employers also rated Written communication skills in a similar manner.

Of those respondents who indicated their level of satisfaction for the Victoria Graduate Profile, the highest satisfaction levels were indicated for Degree-related knowledge & skills (83%), Ability to work both independently and collaboratively (64%), Intellectual integrity and understanding of ethics (60%), Intellectual autonomy and independent thinking (55%), and Ability to set and achieve personal and professional goals (55%).

Results commentary

The report concludes with a short commentary on the comparison to the 2006 survey, and the positioning of Work Ethic, Academic Achievement and Degree-specific Skills within the list of skills and attributes.

Acknowledgement

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