

FINAL REPORT -- SACE GRANT
College Student Workforce Skill Strengths and Weaknesses
John Liptak

Colleges and universities are growing increasingly concerned about the skill gaps in students looking for employment upon graduation. The National Association of Colleges & Employers (NACE) recently surveyed 640 randomly selected college recruiters in an effort to identify the most important performance dimensions currently being sought in prospective employers. In this study, the employers rated interpersonal skills as the most important skills they desired in recent college graduates, followed by ethics and integrity, leadership, perseverance, and then knowledge.

Radford University recently received a grant from the Southern Association of Colleges and Employers (SACE) to determine exactly how competent college students are in personal and social areas as compared with career management areas. The outcome of this research will be used help to guide the practice of career counselors working with college students in all phases of their academic careers.

In this study of 581 students at Radford University, The Job Survival and Success Scale (JSSS) was used to determine the types of workforce skills that college students possess. The JSSS was chosen for this study because it is specifically designed to meet the need for a brief assessment instrument to identify a person's attitudes and knowledge about keeping a job and getting ahead in the workplace. An assumption underlying the development of the JSSS is that people need to have a set of job-related skills, but they also need a set of job survival and success skills.

Because the workplace is changing so rapidly, people are having a harder time holding onto their jobs and succeeding at them. Therefore, employees and prospective employees need as much information about their strengths and weaknesses about job retention. In addition, career counselors and job search specialists who operate job search programs need to find ways to help clients be more successful in training employment after becoming employed. One way to do this is by first gathering information about each client's job retention strengths and weaknesses.

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Description of the JSSS

The JSSS has been designed for easy use. It is simple to take and can be easily scored and interpreted. Each JSSS inventory booklet contains 60 statements about surviving and succeeding on a job, scoring directions, interpretation guide, exploration guide, and career planning guide. Each of the items has been grouped into scales that are representative of a program that teaches job survival and success skills. The scales on the JSSS include:

Scale 1: Dependability -- Low scores on this scale indicate that you are not as dependable as you could be. You may not know how to dress for success on the job and might not be aware of the effects of poor personal grooming. You may have bad habits for the workplace or may not be very reliable in getting to work and putting in a full day.

Scale 2: Responsibility -- Low scores on this scale indicate that you are not as responsible as you could be. You may not be aware of the need to be a lifelong learner and are not in control of your own career. You may tend to have a negative self-image and are not a good follower of leadership. You may also have trouble communicating with your supervisor & meeting his/her expectations.

Scale 3: Human Relations -- People scoring low on this scale tend not to have the most effective human relations skills. You may have trouble getting to know your co-workers or do not value diversity in the workplace. You may not have good oral or written communication skills, need assistance in dealing effectively with customers, and need help in solving problems in the workplace.

Scale 4: Ethical Behavior -- People scoring low on this scale tend not to be the most effective ethical decision makers. You tend to have trouble making effective ethical decisions and you may not even be aware of all of the ethical problems that occur in the workplace. You tend to lack guidelines for making ethical decisions.

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Scale 5: Getting Ahead -- People scoring low on this scale tend not to be as career committed and career mature as they could be. You tend to undersell your skills and lack information about how to get promoted. You tend to not be very active in developing your career and need information about how to effectively leave a job.

Administration

The JSSS can be administered to individuals or to groups. It is written for individuals any age at or above the junior high school level. Since none of the items are gender-specific, the JSSS is appropriate for a variety of audiences and populations. The JSSS is self-administered and inventory booklets are consumable. A pencil or pen is the only other item necessary for administering, scoring, or interpreting the inventory. The first page of the inventory contains spaces for normative data including Name, Date, Gender, and Age. Each respondent should fill in the necessary information on this page. Specific instructions for answering items on the JSSS are included on the front page. Read the directions on the first page while all respondents follow along. Test administrators should ensure that each respondent clearly understands all of the instructions and the response format. Respondents should be instructed to mark all of their responses directly on the inventory booklet. The JSSS requires approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Completing the Scale

The JSSS uses a series of steps to guide the respondent through the administration of the inventory. Responses are marked on Steps 1 and 2 of the inventory booklet. Respondents are asked to read each statement and then circle the response that represents what they believe they would or would not do on the job or in a prospective job. Step 3 helps respondent to profile and to better understand their scores. Step 4 allows respondent to review suggestions for success and identify those suggestions that they are currently doing and those that they need to begin doing. Step 5 allows respondents to develop an action plan for being more successful in the workplace.

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Understanding Scores on the JSSS

The JSSS yields content-referenced scores in the form of raw scores. A raw score, in this case, is the total number of correct responses to each of the job search statements. The performance of individual respondents or groups of respondents can only be evaluated in terms of the mean scores on each of the scales.

For the JSSS, scores between 12 and 23 are LOW and indicate that the respondent needs to be more proactive and do more to both survive and succeed on a job. Scores between 24 and 36 are AVERAGE and indicate that the respondent is probably doing enough to survive, but needs to be more proactive and do more to succeed on a job. Scores between 37 and 48 are HIGH and indicate that the respondent is probably being proactive and doing the things that are necessary to both survive and succeed on a job.

Respondents generally have one or more areas in which they score in the low or low-average categories. That means that the respondent needs to learn more about that particular aspect of surviving and succeeding on a job. These are the areas that the respondent should begin gaining additional job retention skills. The place to start with this exploration is the next Section on the JSSS. Respondents should turn to those sections on which they scored the lowest and read the information provided about succeeding a job. They are asked to place an X in the boxes of things actions they are already doing to be successful.

Findings

The final findings of the research include:

- Overall, freshman students had the lowest job survival and success skills, followed by sophomore students. This was to be expected in setting up the research protocol. The results suggest that job survival skills training needs to be introduced in a person's first year of college. Interestingly, junior and senior students had very similar scores. This was the same result that was found all throughout the study. This suggests that more work needs to be done to help senior students better develop workforce skills.

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- Freshmen (See Table 1) scored highest on the Ethical Behavior and Human Relations scales and lowest on the Dependability scale. Freshman students tend to score highest on the non work-related scales. This is primarily because they are not yet concerned about acquiring job-related skills. It appears that talking to freshmen about how dependability and responsibility in college will translate to the world-of-work would be advantageous.
- Sophomores (See Table 2) scored highest on the Ethical Behavior and Human Relations scales and lowest on the Responsibility scale. Similarly, sophomore students have not developmentally translated the connection between college, career, and the importance of developing workforce-related skills. It appears that college courses that allow students to do self-exploration related to making career decisions and searching for employment would be very helpful.
- Students in their junior year showed a marked increase in scores from freshman and sophomore students. Juniors (See Table 3) scored highest on the Human Relations scale and lowest on the Getting Ahead scale. Although juniors tended to score higher than freshmen and sophomores, they still lack skills for how to be a dependable worker, be responsible in the workplace, and get ahead on the job. Programs that teach workforce skills to college students in their junior year and specifically to juniors preparing for internships are critical. Preparing students for internships will allow them to perform successfully in a “real-world” situation, but it will also allow them to better understand and practice Emotional Intelligence skills in the workplace.
- Like juniors, seniors (See Table 4) scored highest on the Human Relations scale and lowest on the Getting Ahead scale. It appears that senior students need specific training in how to succeed on the job following graduation. It seems that colleges do a great job of helping students find employment after college, but more

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needs to be done to help them succeed once they are in the workforce. A course for seniors in securing employment and then succeeding in the workplace is critically needed.

- In conclusion, college students show similar scores in their first two years of college. After the sophomore year, their scores increase tremendously. Similarly, college students who are nearing graduation (junior and senior years) show very similar test results. These students seem to have very good human relations skills, although there is significant room for improvement. These students also seem to lack general knowledge in two key areas related to job success: Getting Ahead and Dependability. It appears as though students graduating from college need significant instruction and counseling to make them more dependable on the job and to show them ways to get ahead once they secure employment.

Recommendations

Career counselors in college setting should:

Begin teaching Emotional Intelligence skills to students in the freshman and sophomore years.

Begin teaching job search skills at the beginning of the junior year. It seems that the optimal place to have a course of instruction in workforce skills would be prior to students doing formal internships. Career counselors could instruct students prior to entering internships so that they can practice some of the skills addressed on the JSSS in the internship setting.

Conduct research using the JSSS in other colleges or universities to develop a baseline measure of the strengths and weaknesses of college students.

Design and conduct workshops on emotional intelligence topics such as work ethic, time management, conflict resolution, and communication skills.

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TABLES

Table 1 Freshmen (N = 195)

JSSS SCALES	MEAN	SD
Dependability	27.80	6.99
Responsibility	28.11	6.83
Human Relations	28.88	6.68
Ethical Behavior	28.92	6.21
Getting Ahead	28.52	5.35

Table 2 Sophomores (N = 96)

JSSS SCALES	MEAN	SD
Dependability	29.92	5.96
Responsibility	29.47	7.31
Human Relations	31.51	6.48
Ethical Behavior	32.22	7.13
Getting Ahead	30.23	7.16

Table 3 Juniors (N = 150)

JSSS SCALES	MEAN	SD
Dependability	38.58	4.59
Responsibility	38.45	3.55
Human Relations	41.01	3.81
Ethical Behavior	38.73	5.12
Getting Ahead	35.95	4.12

Table 4 Seniors (N = 140)

JSSS SCALES	MEAN	SD
Dependability	38.54	3.39
Responsibility	38.73	3.54
Human Relations	40.99	2.79
Ethical Behavior	38.58	3.51
Getting Ahead	37.60	4.83