

BRIDGING THE SOFT SKILLS GAP

Employers and new hires agree soft skills are critical but their views on preparedness are in stark contrast.




Allegany Conference
on Community Development



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This study can be downloaded at
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INTRODUCTION

As the Pittsburgh region and the nation face the realities of Baby Boomer retirements and the changing dynamics of key economic sectors, we must ensure that each and every worker is performing at the highest level possible if we are to sustain a globally competitive workforce.

Increasingly over the past decade, we have heard from employers that new employees, many of them recent college graduates, lack the soft skills required to operate successfully in the workplace. These soft skills include competencies such as effective communications, teamwork, critical thinking and an awareness of how the modern workplace operates. This soft skills deficiency limits new hires in contributing their full potential to their organizations.

Ironically, recently hired college graduates do not believe there is a problem. While they acknowledge the importance of soft skills, they believe they already have them. Therein lies part of the problem. Workers need to understand what it takes to help companies succeed and how they can position themselves to acquire the skills to do so.

In this report, we've provided a detailed analysis of a recent survey conducted by Campos Inc on behalf of the Allegheny Conference and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. Employers from across the region, as well as new hires, shared their views on soft skills and their importance in the workplace. This is the first step toward delivering a soft skills training and assessment program for college students that could be piloted in the Pittsburgh region over the course of the next year. The intent is to ensure that the more than 36,000 students who graduate from the region's colleges every year are fully prepared to participate in and contribute to the success of its economy. Just as importantly, employers will benefit from a pipeline of workers who are adept not just in the sciences, the arts, technical and other hard skills but in the soft skills that enable them to put those hard skills to optimum use.

Preparing young workers is a key element of the Allegheny Conference's Workforce strategy, chaired by Bill Demchak, chairman and CEO of The PNC Financial Services Group, Inc., and of a working group focused on soft skills preparedness, chaired by Dwight Mathis, managing director of Bank of America/Merrill Lynch. This is also important to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, which works to strengthen America's long-term competitiveness through initiatives that build skills, drive innovation and encourage growth.

Pittsburgh is well-positioned to serve as a potential pilot for a national rollout of a soft skills training and assessment program. We ask you, as employers, to join us in the effort to build and sustain the most competitive workforce in the world, starting with the Pittsburgh region.

Dennis Yablonsky
CEO
Allegheny Conference

John McKernan
Senior Advisor
U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Major employers in southwestern Pennsylvania are clear about what skill sets recent college graduates need to be successful in the workplace: They need both hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills are those teachable skills that can be defined, measured and listed in a resume, such as proficiency in a foreign language or demonstrated expertise in math or statistics. Soft skills are the behaviors and work styles that enable people to work successfully as part of an organization.

Soft Skills are Critical to Success in the Workplace

Both recent college graduates with four years or less experience in the workforce and employers from the Pittsburgh region recognize the importance of soft skills. While hard skills may help a job applicant “get a foot in the door,” it is a person’s soft skills – their work ethic, attitude, communication skills and emotional intelligence – that are crucial for career success. Delegating, motivating, team building and advancing a career, in general, are all much easier with good soft skills.

A Soft Skills Gap Exists

Recent college graduates and employers do not agree on everything related to soft skills,

and their differences are more striking than their similarities. Consider this: 63 percent of recent college graduates say they are very prepared in the soft skills required to be successful at their jobs, but just 14 percent of employers agree.

What’s more, employers’ and employees’ perceptions of levels of preparedness differ widely on all 11 of the soft skills evaluated in the study. The gap in perceptions is greatest in the areas of showing commitment/accountability, written communications, time management, professionalism and critical thinking/problem solving. These are soft skills employers identify as most critical to success in the workplace, yet they believe recent college graduates aren’t nearly as prepared as they think they are.

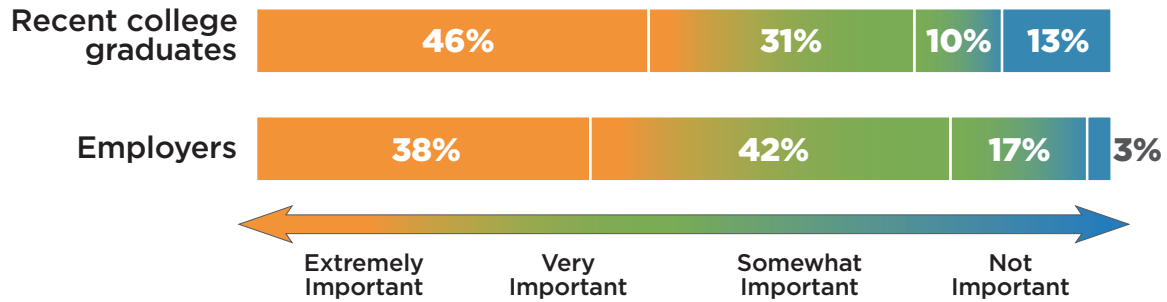
Perhaps the most important finding of the study is that both groups agree that a remedy is needed to close this soft skills gap. Employers would welcome a workforce prepared to contribute right away and recent college graduates said they would have been willing to devote time to soft skills training while still in school. This area of agreement will be the basis for work going forward to pilot a program to add soft skills to the preparation of students to enter the world of work.

Recent college graduates and employers agree that soft skills are important for workplace success.

01. Mastery of soft skills will lead to success.

Seventy-seven percent of graduates and 80 percent of employers agree that soft skills are important for success at their organizations.

Importance of soft skills in the workplace.



There is a gap between how prepared recent college graduates think they are, and how prepared employers find them to be. The preparedness gap in many soft skills is extremely large.



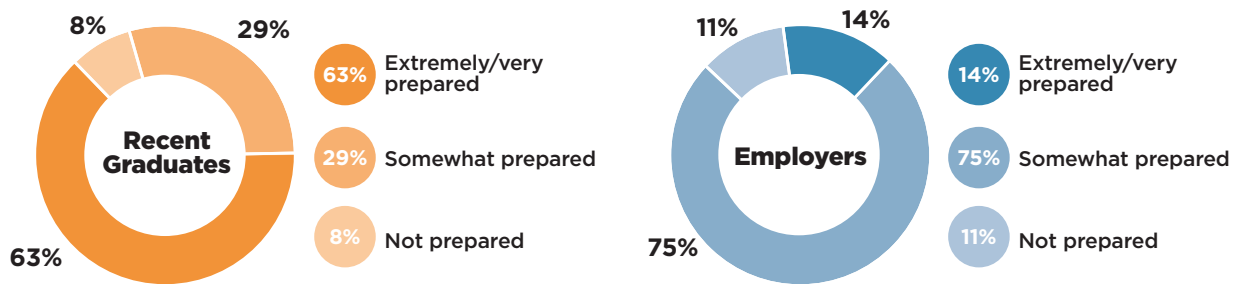
“Writing can be a challenge for new employees who are used to texting abrupt messages to personal contacts. You need to be thoughtful about the fact that your colleagues have demands beyond whatever you may need at that moment. The way you express yourself in writing can influence their willingness to help you. It’s not always about getting it done fast.”

Jana Sharlow, Human Resources Director
Eat'n Park Hospitality Group

02. Employers say recent graduates are only somewhat prepared in soft skills. Graduates say they are very prepared.

Only 14 percent of employers say recent graduates are extremely or very prepared, compared to 63 percent of the graduates themselves.

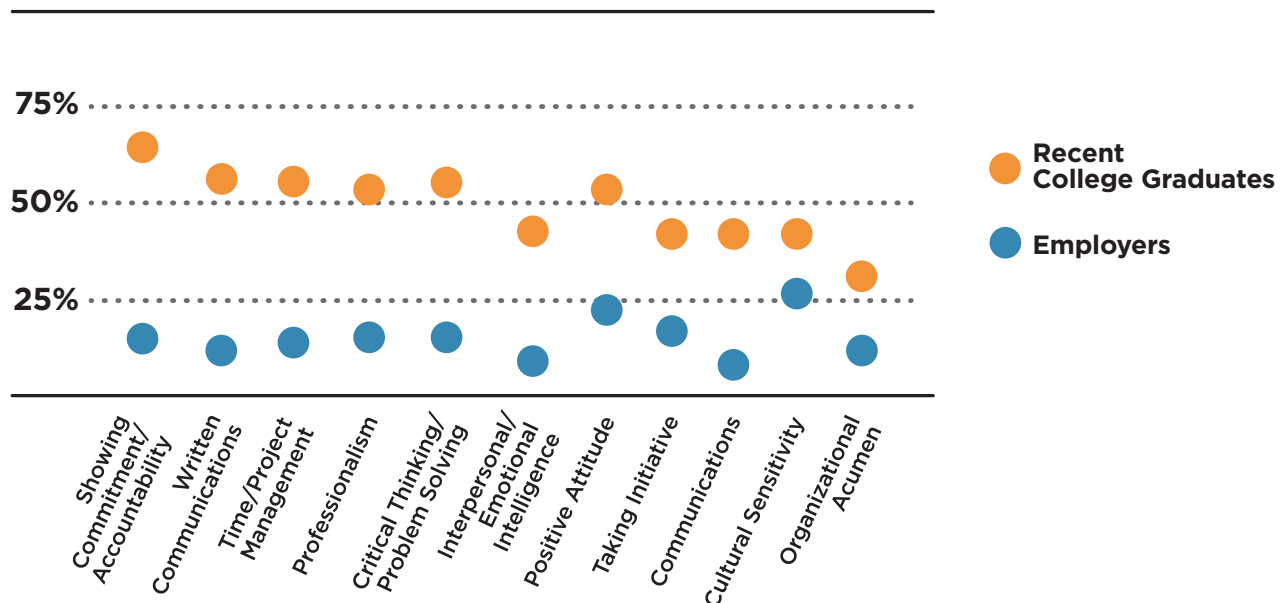
Large differences in perceived level of preparedness.



Perceived levels of preparedness differ widely on certain soft skills.

The gap in perceptions between recent college graduates and employers on preparedness is greatest in showing commitment/accountability, written communications, time management, professionalism and critical thinking/problem solving. But the gap is significant across every soft skill.

Significant differences on whether recent graduates are “very prepared” in key soft skills.



FINDING
03.

Recent college graduates and employers differ on which soft skills are most important.



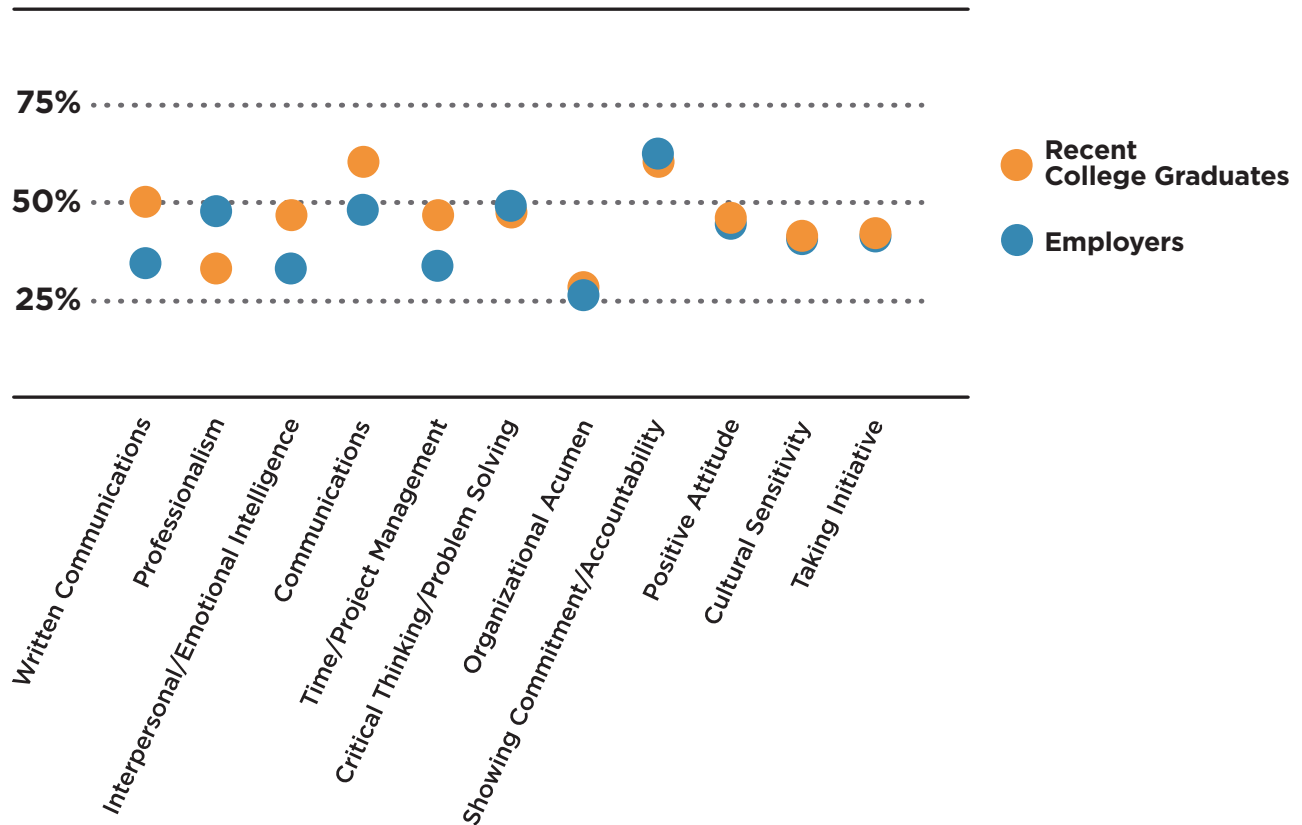
“Perhaps because we’re in the arts, some new employees seem to think that a tidy appearance, being on time and communicating in a professional manner are unimportant in the face of a larger mission. That’s a mistake. Especially when you’re new and still proving your value, those qualities demonstrate that you care about your job and our workplace.”

Eric Shiner, *Director*
The Andy Warhol Museum

03. Recent college graduates and employers value certain soft skills differently.

Recent college graduates think that communications and interpersonal/emotional intelligence skills are more important than employers do. Employers think that professionalism is more important than recent college graduates do.

The two groups differ on which skills are most important for workplace success.



Recent college graduates and employers differ greatly on which soft skills merit training.



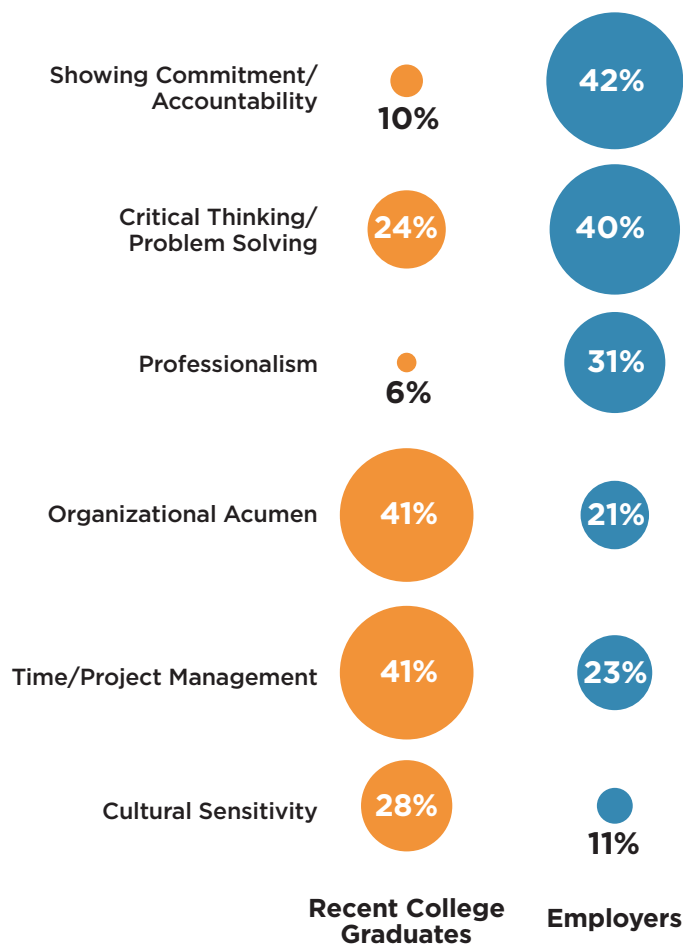
“Employers want to see that new hires care not just about their own careers, but what will benefit their workplace. A smart employee notices and learns from what cultural norms are practiced and valued – even if he or she doesn’t necessarily agree with them.”

Shelley Fant Uku, *President*
FCG Solutions, Inc.

04. Recent college graduates and employers are of different minds when it comes to which soft skills merit training.

Employers think more training is needed in showing commitment/accountability, critical thinking/problem solving and professionalism. Recent college graduates are more likely to want more training opportunities in organizational acumen, time/project management and cultural sensitivity.

Great difference of opinion about which soft skills most merit training.



Recent graduates and employers agree that a certificate course in soft skills training would be beneficial for college students.



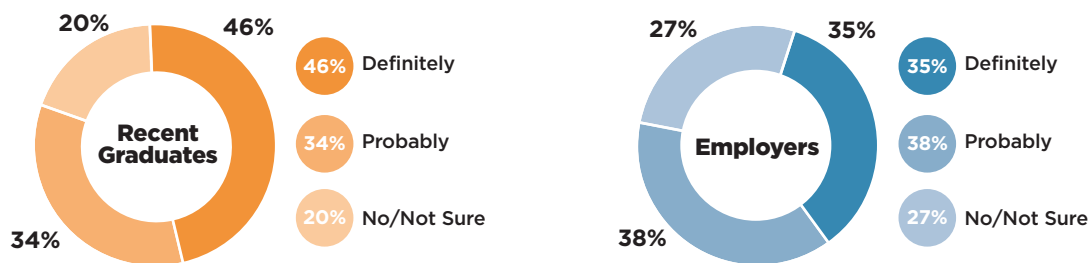
“There is a lot of complexity in what today’s students are taught through formal education, but they don’t always learn the day-to-day skills they need for workplace success. A certificate program could help if it were to offer opportunities for students to practice problem solving and critical thinking amid the reality of multiple ongoing demands.”

Mary Frances Cooper, *President & Director
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh*

05. Recent college graduates say a soft skills certificate course would have helped them. Employers agree.

Four out of five recent graduates say a certificate course that provided tips, tools and techniques to develop soft skills would have definitely or probably helped them, and that they would have invested personal time to learn these skills. Seventy-three percent of employers agree recent college graduates could benefit.

Certificate course on soft skills would help recent college graduates thrive on the job.



Recent graduates would have invested time in soft skills training while in college.



More than seven out of 10 recent graduates say they would have invested significant time for soft skills training while in college.

METHODOLOGY

Research conducted for this report consisted of the following two phases:

Employer Survey: A total of 159 online surveys were completed by employers who screen, hire, manage or work directly with employees who have graduated from a four-year college or university within the past four years. Respondents were members of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development's Regional Investors Council, the Pittsburgh Human Resources Association and the Pittsburgh Technology Council, whose members include large and small companies spanning every industry sector within the 10-county southwestern Pennsylvania region.

Employee Survey: A total of 113 online surveys were completed by employees who have graduated from a four-year college or university within the past four years. Respondents include employees of the Allegheny Conference on Community Development's Regional Investors Council and those contacted via the social media channels of the Allegheny Conference, including Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

TERMINOLOGY

Soft skills: Skills that have an impact on and characterize relationships with other people, including personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits and the ability to work with and lead people. Soft skills include listening, engaging in dialogue, giving feedback, cooperating as a team member, solving problems, contributing in meetings and resolving conflict.

Hard skills: Specific knowledge and abilities required for a job, including the technical or administrative procedures and processes related to an organization's core business.

Recent college graduates/new hires/employees: Those who have graduated with a four-year degree within the last four years.

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