HIRING, RETENTION AND TRAINING
Employers' Perspectives on Trade and Soft Skills in South Carolina

A project conducted by the University of South Carolina for the South Carolina Workforce Investment Board

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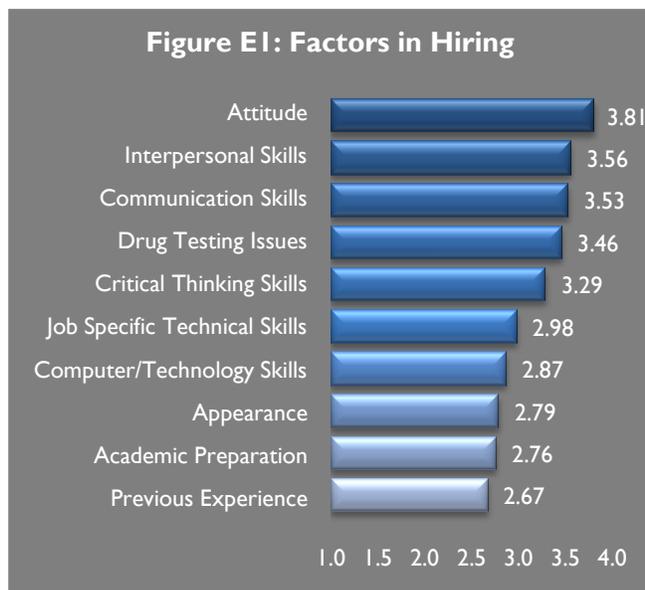UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

Successful placement in the workforce requires both the technical skills necessary for job performance and a broad spectrum of social and interpersonal skills often referred to as "soft skills." A thorough survey of business leaders across South Carolina finds that most of the failures among individuals in their job placement are because of deficiencies in soft skill development and not technical expertise.

This project aims to gather input from the South Carolina business community to identify competitive workforce training needs in academic, technical, and soft skill areas. A total of 328 individuals participated in one of 46 focus groups conducted in all counties throughout the state to quantify skills important in hiring and retention decisions, as well as those anticipated for the future workforce of South Carolina.

Figure E1: Factors in Hiring

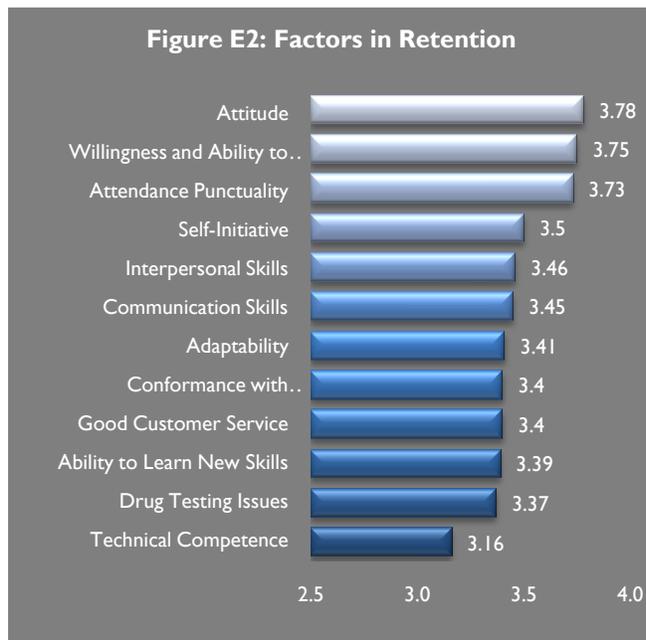| Factor	Score
Attitude	3.81
Interpersonal Skills	3.56
Communication Skills	3.53
Drug Testing Issues	3.46
Critical Thinking Skills	3.29
Job Specific Technical Skills	2.98
Computer/Technology Skills	2.87
Appearance	2.79
Academic Preparation	2.76
Previous Experience	2.67

Findings

Hiring

Participants in the focus groups viewed both soft and trade skills as important in the hiring process. The relative importance usually depends on the level of the job. Certain jobs requiring degrees or technical certification demand technical skills as a condition of employment. Although trade skills are necessary for certain jobs, soft skills frequently make the difference between candidates in the hiring process. Participants from businesses involved in customer service hire primarily on soft skills. Positions across all sectors which involved supervision responsibilities also put strong reliance on soft skills. Figure E1 displays the skills deemed most important in hiring by employers.

Retention

Participants almost uniformly mentioned that soft skills make the difference in employee retention. It was estimated by some to account for approximately 90% of employee dismissals. A common response revealed an employee with good soft skills would likely be retained even when not as adept with technical skills. Figure E2 shows skills considered most important for retention decisions.

Figure E2: Factors in Retention

Factor	Score
Attitude	3.78
Willingness and Ability to..	3.75
Attendance Punctuality	3.73
Self-Initiative	3.5
Interpersonal Skills	3.46
Communication Skills	3.45
Adaptability	3.41
Conformance with..	3.4
Good Customer Service	3.4
Ability to Learn New Skills	3.39
Drug Testing Issues	3.37
Technical Competence	3.16

Training

Focus groups were asked to identify an area where the state should provide training. Exhibit E1 lists the most commonly mentioned areas of training ordered by importance. These areas were ordered on level of importance based on the frequency the area of training was mentioned across groups. Both work ethic and comprehensive training in soft skills were mentioned more than all other categories combined, reflecting the high level of importance soft skills play in successful job placement. Some participants were more specific in their perceived training needs in soft skills and designated training in such areas as adaptability and/or multi-tasking, teamwork, customer service, etc.

Conclusion

Both trade and soft skills are important in hiring and retention decisions across all industry sectors. Soft skills are most important in hiring decisions when applicants are deemed to have the required trade skills, for certain job levels where trade skills can be taught internally, and for customer service positions. Employee retention decisions are more heavily influenced by soft skills than trade skills. No distinct pattern of differences was noted between groups of urban and rural counties. The need for training in soft skill development was the highest priority for statewide training. Recommendations are provided in Exhibit E2.

Exhibit E1: Statewide Training Needs

1. Work ethic
2. Comprehensive training in soft skills
3. Increase high school graduates and GEDs
4. Oral and written communication skills
5. Basic academic skills
6. Listening and reading comprehension skills
7. Math and sciences
8. Employability skills
9. Adaptability/multi-tasking
10. Critical thinking/problem-solving/analytical skills
11. Appropriate behavior in the workplace
12. Teamwork

Exhibit E2: Recommendations

1. Preparation in soft skills would benefit portions of South Carolina's workforce.
2. Research has not established "best practices" for comprehensive soft skills training.
3. Integration of soft and/or life skills instruction should be investigated for the following:
   - Primary and secondary education
   - Job search and counseling
   - Workforce trade skill training
   - Adult education

Introduction

Successful placement in the workforce requires both the technical skills necessary for job performance and a broad spectrum of social and interpersonal skills often referred to as "soft skills." Soft skills are "people" skills for everyday life and work and involve how people relate to one another. Trade skills are technical or administrative competencies related to an organization's core business. It has been reported by employers throughout the state that most of the failures among individuals in their job placement are because of deficiencies in their soft skill development and not technical expertise. While back-to-work initiatives include training in both soft skill and technical development, there is no consensus about which behaviors constitute soft skills. This conclusion is based on an inspection of assessment tools which purport to measure soft skills and the research literature on successful employment placements.

The purpose of the present project was to gather input from the South Carolina business community to identify competitive workforce training needs in academic, technical, and soft skill areas. To meet this objective, focus groups were conducted in all counties throughout the state. The general goals of these focus groups were to:

- Determine the relative importance of soft versus trade skills in hiring and retention decisions,
- Identify specific soft skills that are related to successful entry into the workplace and deficits which lead to retention issues,
- Identify soft skills which will be important in the future,
- Determine what types of intervention strategies have been used successfully to address deficiencies in soft skills,
- Identify trade, technical, and/or academic skills needed in the future, and
- Determine what areas of training should be provided to prospective or incumbent employees.

Methodology

Participants

In order to obtain a comprehensive viewpoint of opinions and perceptions of employers, a series of focus groups were conducted in all 46 counties of South Carolina. Participants in these groups were selected to represent stakeholders in business, industry, and workforce development. Participants in each group included human resource (HR) professionals, managers/supervisors from the service and manufacturing industries, and other county professionals involved in business ownership or commerce activities. A total of 328 individuals participated in the groups. The average size of each group was 6.7 participants (range 1 to 17). A breakdown of focus group participants by business sector is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Focus Group Participants

Sector/Group	HR	Super visor	Other	Total	%
Manufacturing/Technical	69	58	0	127	**38.7**
Government	14	45	35	94	**28.7**
Service Industry/Retail/Banking	12	26	4	42	**12.8**
Economic Development	0	8	25	33	**10.1**
Health Services	16	10	0	26	**7.9**
Restaurant/Hospitality/Tourism	1	5	0	6	**1.8**
Total	**112**	**152**	**64**	**328**	

The selection of participants and meeting places for the focus groups were coordinated by the Department of Commerce in cooperation with each county's Chamber of Commerce, Council of Government, and/or Office of Economic Development.

Focus Groups

Each focus group was conducted by highly experienced group facilitators and held within the county of employment of the participants. The groups were usually held in a county library, county administration building, chamber of commerce office, or county economic development office. At the beginning of each group session, participants were provided an explanation of the purpose of the project and the sequence of the group proceedings. Any questions about the procedures were addressed by the facilitator. Participants were assured of confidentiality of their responses. Group proceedings were two hours in duration.

The focus groups involved discussion of eight open-ended or "grand round" questions. These questions were designed to elicit responses pertinent to the goals of the project. The same set of questions was used in each group to allow for comparison of responses. The questions and order used in the focus groups are shown in Exhibit 1.

All group proceedings were audio-taped and later transcribed. Qualitative methods of data analysis were used to identify common themes and trends in group discussions. Of particular importance was the evaluation of the convergence of themes and perceptions across the group participants.

To supplement the findings of the focus groups, three rating scales were developed to provide additional quantitative data. These rating scales were completed immediately before the last focus group question. One questionnaire was developed to rate 10 items important to hiring, another questionnaire was designed to rate 12 items important to employee retention, and the third rating form was designed to estimate the level of concern of 11 specific employee issues. For the hiring and employee retention questionnaires, participants were required to rate each item on a four point scale from 1 ("unimportant") to 4 ("very important"). These scores provided an absolute measure of importance. In addition, participants were asked to rank order the items from "most" to "least" important. These scores provided a relative importance measure when all items were compared together. A total of 300 participants completed the rating forms. Copies of these rating scales may be found in Appendix A.

Exhibit 1: Focus Group Questions

1. How do you compare the importance of soft skills versus trade skills in hiring practices and determining successful job placement? Retention? Why?

2. What are the critical soft skills for successful entry into the workplace? Do these skills vary with the experience level of the worker?

3. How do you consider these soft skills in your hiring practices?

4. In terms of decisions related to retaining employees, what are the most important soft skills and work habits you consider?

5. From your perspective, what work habits will become most important in the future?

6. What type of intervention or remedial methods have you found successful in workers with deficiencies in their soft skills?

7. What technology/trade and academic skills will be needed in the future for successful placement in the workplace?

8. If SC could train prospective or incumbent employees on only ONE thing, what should it be? What would the second thing be?

Since this project involved data collection for all South Carolina counties, the findings from the rating scales were analyzed by population size. Using population information from 2008 County Profiles (South Carolina Association of Counties, June 2008), 12 counties in the upper and lower quartiles were compared on the three rating scales. The counties in the lower quartile, or 12 least populous areas, were labeled "rural." The upper quartile, or 12 most populous counties, were labeled "urban."

Findings

Hiring

Trade Versus Soft Skills

Participants viewed both soft and trade skills as important in the hiring process. The relative importance of trade versus soft skills usually depends on the level of the job. Certain jobs require degrees or certification (i.e., nursing, engineering, chemist, etc.), so trade skills are a necessary condition of employment. Although trade skills are necessary for certain jobs, soft skills frequently make the difference between candidates in the hiring process. This is illustrated by a comment made by an HR director that "trade or technical skills get you an interview but soft skills get you the job." For lower level positions, businesses usually train for trade skills and soft skills become more important in hiring decisions. In many of these instances, the unique nature of the work and company standards or procedures require workers to learn a new skill set.

The differential importance of trade versus soft skills was also observed to vary across business sectors. Participants from businesses involved in customer service hire primarily on soft skills. The general trend was that positions which involved interpersonal relationships considered soft skills more often in hiring decisions. Positions across all sectors which involved management or supervision responsibilities also put strong reliance on soft skills.

Critical Soft Skills for Entry into Workplace

Focus group participants identified numerous soft skills which were critical for successful entry into the workplace. These soft skills were ordered on level of importance based on the frequency the soft skill was mentioned across groups. Listed below are the most commonly mentioned soft skills ordered by importance:

> **"Trade or technical skills get you the interview, but soft skills get you the job."**
>
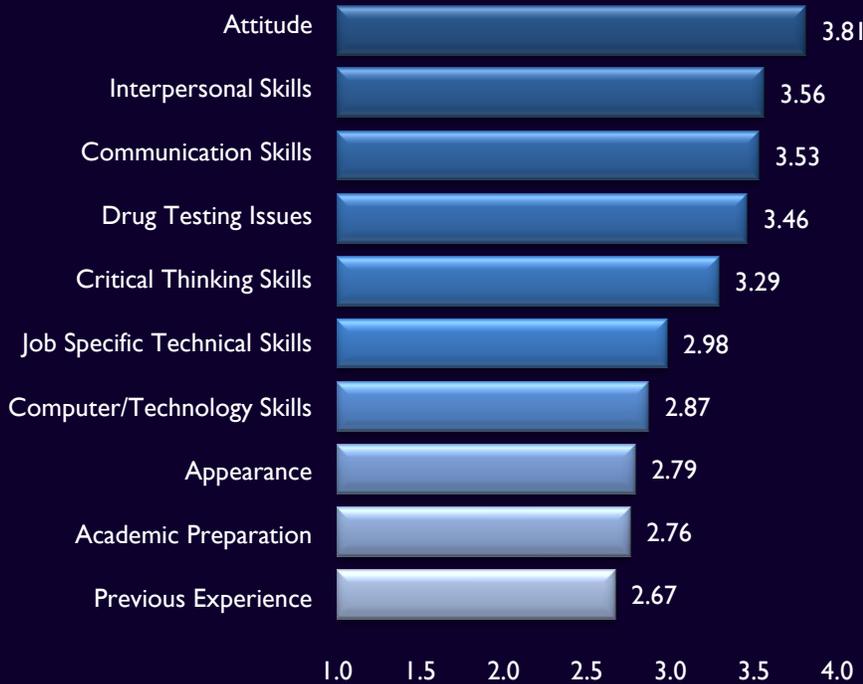> *- HR Director, Manufacturing Sector*

1. Work ethic
2. Attitude/enthusiasm
3. On-time/attendance/dependability
4. Interpersonal skills
5. Basic English skills/writing/language/reading comprehension
6. Math skills/applied measurement
7. Communication
8. Teamwork
9. Customer service/business etiquette
10. Initiative/implementing or presenting ideas
11. Problem-solving/critical thinking
12. Adaptability/flexibility
13. Accountability/meeting deadlines
14. Integrity/loyalty
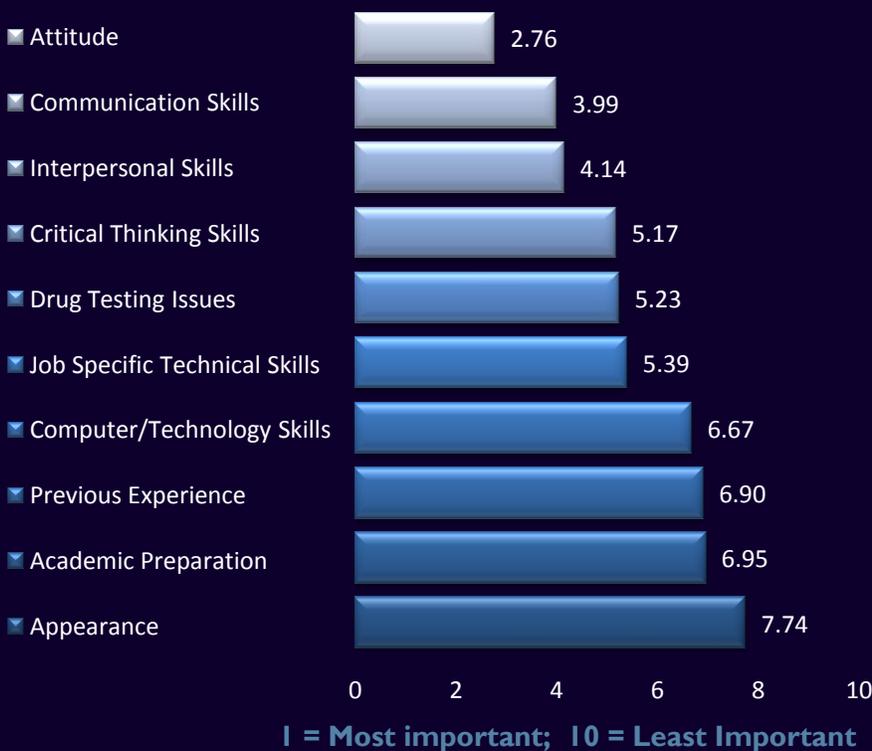15. Diversity awareness/getting along with different groups

The most commonly mentioned soft skill was work ethic. As described by participants, work ethic is a multi-dimensional concept which includes a number of behaviors such as "coming to work," having "pride in what they do," and "giving an honest day's work." Among the most important soft skills are work-related behaviors dealing with attitude, dependability, interpersonal skills, teamwork, and communication. Many participants specifically mentioned the importance of attitude, as evidenced by the statement, "Everything begins with attitude," given by a plant supervisor. As can be noted from the above listing, items 5 and 6 were frequently mentioned and involve proficiency in the application of academic skills. A number of definitions of soft skills include components of academic tasks and they were included in this listing because these skills are assigned a significant level of importance in determining successful entry into the workplace. This listing provides an excellent framework, giving examples of soft skills which will help guide the content of future training programs.

The results from the "Items Important to Hiring" rating scale are shown in Figure 1. As can be seen, "Attitude," "Interpersonal Skills," and "Communication Skills" are viewed as most important in hiring decisions. These findings converge closely with important themes identified in the focus group discussions. "Drug Testing Issues" was

"Everything begins with attitude."

-Plant Supervisor, Manufacturing Sector

Figure 1: Mean Importance Rating for Hiring

Category	Rating
Attitude	3.81
Interpersonal Skills	3.56
Communication Skills	3.53
Drug Testing Issues	3.46
Critical Thinking Skills	3.29
Job Specific Technical Skills	2.98
Computer/Technology Skills	2.87
Appearance	2.79
Academic Preparation	2.76
Previous Experience	2.67

Scale: 1.0 1.5 2.0 2.5 3.0 3.5 4.0

Figure 2: Mean Importance Ranking for Hiring

Category	Ranking
Attitude	2.76
Communication Skills	3.99
Interpersonal Skills	4.14
Critical Thinking Skills	5.17
Drug Testing Issues	5.23
Job Specific Technical Skills	5.39
Computer/Technology Skills	6.67
Previous Experience	6.90
Academic Preparation	6.95
Appearance	7.74

Scale: 0 2 4 6 8 10

1 = Most important; 10 = Least Important

an uncommon theme during focus group discussion, but was rated with a high degree of importance on the questionnaire. What is noteworthy from these ratings is that soft skills are rated higher as a group than Job Specific Technical Skills, Computer/Technology Skills, Academic Preparation, and Previous Experience. These ratings also reveal even the lower ratings have a certain degree of absolute importance in hiring.

Figure 2 shows the mean importance ranking of these items when they are compared to each other. In this analysis, participants were asked to rank order each item from 1 (most important) to 10 (least important). Lower scores were indicative of greater importance. These findings closely parallel the results of the importance ratings.

Comparisons of the importance for hiring ratings and rankings in rural and urban counties were also conducted. A summary of the average rankings are shown in the Tables 2 and 3. The general trend is that there are no systematic differences between rural and urban counties. The only significant statistical difference was that Attitude was ranked higher in importance in rural settings.

Table 2: Mean Importance Rating for Hiring, Urban Vs. Rural

Item	Urban	Rural
Job Specific Technical Skills	3.06	2.94
Computer/Technology Skills	2.91	2.82
Interpersonal Skills	3.58	3.61
Attitude	3.79	3.89
Academic Preparation	2.73	2.65
Previous Experience	2.65	2.75
Communication Skills	3.55	3.64
Critical Thinking Skills	3.43	3.20
Appearance	2.71	3.05
Drug Testing Issues	3.30	3.32

Table 3: Mean Importance Ranking for Hiring, Urban Vs. Rural

Item	Urban	Rural
Job Specific Technical Skills	5.15	5.90
Computer/Technology Skills	6.33	6.79
Interpersonal Skills	3.83	4.16
Attitude	3.10	2.11
Academic Preparation	7.15	7.53
Previous Experience	6.97	6.97
Communication Skills	3.95	3.79
Critical Thinking Skills	4.77	5.31
Appearance	8.07	6.56
Drug Testing Issues	5.55	5.82

Soft Skill Hiring Practices

Many HR professionals and others involved in the hiring process report that greater attention is now being placed on soft skills in making hiring decisions. In many cases, it is a given that the organization will do technical training, but prefer not to engage in soft skill training. It was frequently noted that soft skills are difficult to assess during the interview process and many businesses have changed the way they conduct interviews and make hiring decisions. A common theme which emerged throughout the focus groups involved the shift to more "behavioral interviewing" questions. Behavioral interviewing is a planned and systematic way to gather and evaluate information about what candidates have done in the past to show how they would handle future situations. Interviewers evaluate those skills, abilities, behavior, and competencies critical to successful job performance. Many of the domains included in behavioral interviewing include soft skills. Participants stated that this has helped improve hiring decisions.

Another common theme in hiring practices was the use of temporary hires. While employers commented that this is a more expensive strategy, it permits them to observe soft skills in the work setting. Temporary hires that demonstrate good work records are then likely to be offered full-time employment after their probationary period. This strategy may affect unemployment figures generated by state agencies.

There has also been an increase in the use of panel or multiple interviewers. The logic behind this strategy is that multiple perspectives of an applicant will assist in making more accurate appraisals. Many businesses also reported that they have asked peers to be involved in the interview process to provide opinions on how an applicant may fit into the culture of the organization.

An additional means of assuring that prospective workers have the requisite soft skills for a job involves seeking referrals or recommendations from current employees. This particular method was noted to be more common in rural counties. Other common methods involve referrals on persons screened and/or trained in various programs (i.e., One-Stop centers, technical colleges, etc.).

Employee Retention

Trade vs. Soft Skills

Participants almost uniformly mentioned that soft skills make the difference in retention. It was estimated by some to account for approximately 90% of employee dismissals. A common response revealed an employee with good soft skills would likely be retained even when they were not as adept with technical skills. Soft skills are considered when dealing with retraining and moving within the organization. Soft skills are also important for management and customer service positions, and

individuals who lack these skills are not likely to be retained in these positions. A small portion of the participants reported using measures of productivity in retention decisions due to the difficult nature of evaluating and documenting deficits in soft skills.

Soft Skills Considered in Employee Retention

Focus group participants identified numerous soft skills which were critical for employee retention. These soft skills were ordered on level of importance based on the frequency the soft skill was mentioned across groups. Listed below are the most commonly mentioned soft skills ordered by importance:

1. Reliability/Attendance
2. Attitude
3. Teamwork (ability to get along with others)
4. Communication Skills (with other staff and customers)
5. Initiative/Motivation
6. Taking Criticism from staff/supervisors
7. Leadership Skills
8. Accountability
9. Time Management and Organizational Skills

The most common problem in soft skill development related to retention involved reliability as evidenced by poor attendance and tardiness. This issue was virtually universal across all focus groups and a source of frustration for supervisors. Poor attitude, problems working within teams, and the ability to get along with others were also identified as prominent factors in employee retention. Poor communication skills were also observed to be linked with problems in teamwork. Employees that are rated poorly frequently do not demonstrate adequate levels of initiative and motivation and do not demonstrate accountability for their work. Difficulty with accepting criticism also was an issue in employee retention. Finally, poorly developed Time Management/Organizational Skills also was identified as a major factor which many times results in poor worker productivity and the ability to meet job demands.

The results from the "Items Important to Employee Retention" rating scale are shown in Figure 3. All ratings were viewed as at least important to retention decisions. A comparison of common themes identified in the focus groups and these importance ratings show strong convergence. This is particularly evident for top rated items. It is also noteworthy that "Technical Competence" was rated lowest in importance in retention which corresponds to participant comments suggesting soft skills play a more prominent role in retention than trade skills.

Figure 3: Mean Importance Rating for Retention

Category	Rating
Attitude	3.78
Willingness and Ability to Follow..	3.75
Attendance Punctuality	3.73
Self-Initiative	3.5
Interpersonal Skills	3.46
Communication Skills	3.45
Adaptability	3.41
Conformance with Organizational..	3.4
Good Customer Service	3.4
Ability to Learn New Skills	3.39
Drug Testing Issues	3.37
Technical Competence	3.16

Axis: 2.5 — 3.0 — 3.5 — 4.0

Figure 4: Mean Importance Ranking for Retention

Category	Ranking
Attitude	3.64
Willingness and Ability to Follow..	4.74
Attendance/Punctuality	5.08
Interpersonal Skills	6.42
Communication Skills	6.47
Drug Testing Issues	6.93
Self-Initiative	6.97
Adaptability	7.28
Good Customer Service	7.3
Conformance with Organizational..	7.48
Technical Competence	7.66
Ability to Learn New Skills	7.81

Axis: 0 — 2 — 4 — 6 — 8 — 10

1 = Most important; 10 = Least Important

Figure 4 presents the mean importance ranking of each of these items when they are compared to each other. In this analysis, participants were asked to rank order each item from 1 (most important) to 10 (least important). Lower scores were indicative of greater importance. In Figure 4, Attitude is clearly scored as the most important, followed by Willingness / Ability to Follow Directions and Attendance / Punctuality. The remaining item rankings are closely distributed with each other.

Comparisons between the importance for employee retention ratings and rankings in rural and urban counties were also conducted. A summary of the average rankings are shown in Tables 4 and 5. The general trend is that there are no systematic differences between rural and urban counties. The only significant statistical difference was that Attitude was ranked higher in importance in rural settings.

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Table 4: Mean Importance Rating for Retention, Urban Vs. Rural

Item	Urban	Rural
Willingness and Ability to Follow Directions	3.72	3.73
Technical Competence	3.18	3.13
Interpersonal Skills	3.50	3.63
Attitude	3.75	3.92
Attendance/Punctuality	3.58	3.75
Good Customer Service	3.39	3.45
Communication Skills	3.44	3.53
Conformance with Organizational Policy	3.36	3.36
Adaptability	3.47	3.40
Drug Testing Issues	3.24	3.27
Ability to Learn New Skills	3.34	3.36
Self-Initiative	3.51	3.58

Table 5: Mean Importance Ranking for Retention, Urban Vs. Rural

Item	Urban	Rural
Willingness and Ability to Follow Directions	4.67	4.85
Technical Competence	7.20	8.05
Interpersonal Skills	6.33	6.03
Attitude	4.17	2.48
Attendance/Punctuality	6.09	5.20
Good Customer Service	6.95	6.72
Communication Skills	6.44	5.90
Conformance with Organizational Policy	7.60	7.80
Adaptability	6.49	7.83
Drug Testing Issues	7.33	7.88
Ability to Learn New Skills	7.91	8.25
Self-Initiative	6.55	6.58

Interventions for Soft Skill Deficiencies

One of the aims of the current project was to identify intervention or remedial strategies businesses used for deficiencies in workers' soft skill development. The most frequently used strategy was direct teaching or coaching by another staff person or manager. This was also described as a good initial step in skill development of workers. This strategy was deemed most effective when follow-up feedback was provided. Another popular approach involves the "three strike rule" or "progressive discipline." With this strategy, a verbal warning is provided after the first problem incident, followed by a written warning for the second incident, with the third incident leading to dismissal. Coaching is also frequently combined in the initial steps of this progression. This approach is best described by a bank manager as "coach 'em up or coach 'em out."

In some instances when an employee's work problems are associated with psychosocial factors, many companies will arrange for personal counseling through employee assistance programs. Many times these psychosocial stressors are due to personal issues not associated with work or the work environment.

Other strategies involve staff training for both individuals and groups to either build skills or to address weaknesses within the trainees. Some businesses have taken a strong preventive or proactive posture by providing pre-hire training in soft skills and work behavior. Orientation programs are carefully crafted to provide corporate expectations and policies, good job descriptions, explanations of roles, and responsibilities.

Attendance has been identified as a key soft skill deficiency. While most companies have attendance policies and mandated sanctions, there is a surprising absence of strategies which provide incentives for good attendance.

Needs for Future Workplace

Soft Skills

Participants were queried about what type of soft skills would be particularly important in the future. The most common theme to emerge was Adaptability/Flexibility. Many voiced the perception that you need only to look at past and current manufacturing methods to observe the constant changes made in production based on

"Coach 'em up or coach 'em out."

- Branch Banking Manager

technology alone. Concurrent with technological advances are a number of other factors such as economic trends, global influences, emerging markets, etc., which add to the need for workers and companies to be ready to adapt to change. Companies in the future also seek workers that are able to multi-task and who have been crossed trained to perform several job tasks or roles.

Teamwork skills are also seen as becoming increasingly important in the future workplace. Many participants view the continued importance of work teams and cooperation between units as critical to organizational efficiency. They see the ability to use good oral and written communication skills as the foundation for effective organizational functioning. Self-initiative, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving were also considered important in the future workplace because of the potential decline in the number of employees in middle management.

Future workers will also need to demonstrate diversity awareness. Groups discussed the need to understand the global economy and to be able to interact with international firms. Others voiced the need for diversity awareness in view of the changing demographic characteristics of the United States population.

Trade, Technology, and Academic Skills

The future skills in most demand involved networking and computer technology. This category ranges from simple e-mail usage to very sophisticated computer and software applications. Participants from the manufacturing sector provided numerous examples of computer-based automated production, inventory control, quality assurance, etc., to support the need for continued workforce development in this area. With the continuing rise of computer-based applications also comes the need for personnel with skills in robotics, electrical/mechanical engineering, computer/network support, process engineering, and technical maintenance. Some companies have needed to recruit certain types of engineers from out of state universities.

The need for basic computer competence is also likely to affect prospective employees. Many participants related that their companies have gone "paperless" and accept only computer-based applications. If these individuals cannot successfully navigate the application process, it will result in a limitation of job opportunities.

Many participants mentioned a number of academic skills which will be needed in the future. These comments were discussed within the context of skills that many job applicants did not demonstrate. These include math skills, writing and business skills, listening and reading comprehension skills, and oral language skills. With the emergence of international business, understanding of the global economy and cultural difference is needed. Some participants also endorsed more training in foreign languages.
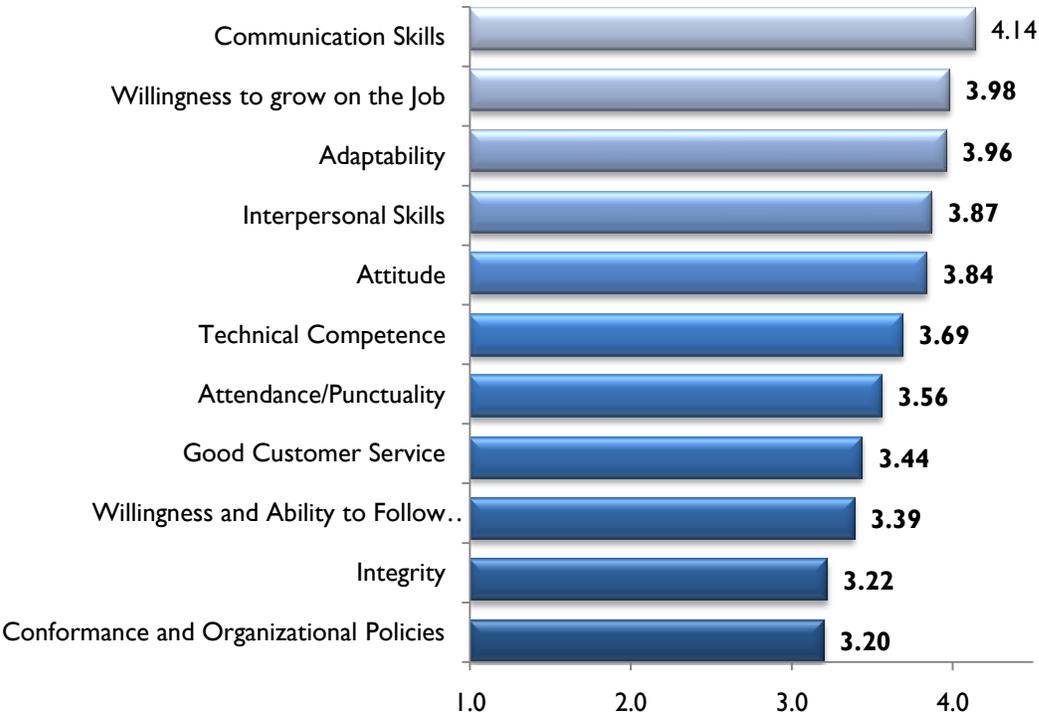
Another needed trade skill identified within the groups was welding. At the current time there is a projected shortage of certified welders. This has resulted in extraordinary opportunities for future employment. Several participants from the

manufacturing sector also mentioned the need for individuals skilled in tool and dye work. These skills are critical in certain manufacturing situations and are becoming a lost art.

Areas of Concern

Group participants were asked to estimate the percentage of their employees for whom each of the skills was a concern. Participants were instructed to select one of eight of the following alternatives: 0%, 1-5%, 6-10%, 11-20%, 21-30%, 31-40%, 41-50%, and more than 50%. These responses were then converted to a numeric weighting system as shown in Figure 5, where 0% = 1, 1-5% = 2, 6-10% = 3, 11-20% = 4, 21-30% = 5, 31-40% = 6, 41-50% = 7, and more than 50% = 8.

Figure 5: Mean Areas of Concern

Area of Concern	Mean
Communication Skills	4.14
Willingness to grow on the Job	3.98
Adaptability	3.96
Interpersonal Skills	3.87
Attitude	3.84
Technical Competence	3.69
Attendance/Punctuality	3.56
Good Customer Service	3.44
Willingness and Ability to Follow..	3.39
Integrity	3.22
Conformance and Organizational Policies	3.20

Percent of Workforce: 0% 1-5% 6-10% 11-20%

An analysis of the overall responses across areas reveals that the mean scores span from 4.14 for Communication Skills to 3.20 for Conformance of Organizational Policies. An inspection of scores in Figure 5 indicates virtually no difference in the top group of scores which approaches 11-20% of employees in the rater's organization. Lower scores in the distribution may be conceptualized as greater than 6-10%. These results suggest there are significant concerns about employees across all areas rated in many businesses in the state.

A comparison of the area of concern scores in rural and urban counties was also conducted. A summary of these mean scores is shown in Table 6. The general trend is that concern scores are slightly higher in rural counties. The only significant statistical difference showed greater concern about the "Technical Competence" of employees in rural settings.

Table 6: Mean Level of Concern for Urban and Rural Counties

Item	Urban	Rural
Willingness and Ability to Follow Directions	2.99	3.80
Technical Competence	3.46	4.12
Interpersonal Skills	3.73	4.05
Attitude	3.68	3.95
Attendance/Punctuality	3.18	3.57
Good Customer Service	3.35	3.82
Communication Skills	4.04	4.48
Conformance with Organizational Policies	3.06	3.47
Adaptability	3.78	4.07
Integrity	2.93	3.50
Willingness to Grow on Job	3.67	4.22

Training Needs for Prospective or Incumbent Employees

Areas of Need

Participants were asked to identify an area where the state should provide training. These areas were ordered on level of importance based on the frequency the area of training was mentioned across groups. Listed in Exhibit 2 are the most commonly mentioned areas of training ordered by importance.

Both work ethic and comprehensive training in soft skills were mentioned more than all other categories combined. This reflects the high level of importance soft skills play in successful job placement. Some participants were more specific in their perceived training needs in soft skills and designated training in such areas as adaptability/multi-tasking, teamwork, customer service, etc.

Many respondents urged the state to further develop programs to increase the number of high school graduates in their county. Graduation from high school was viewed as a means to increase job opportunities and to provide access to postsecondary vocational or technical education. The high school dropout rate in the state is high and certain counties have alarmingly high dropout rates. Adult education programs aimed at acquiring GEDs have been extremely helpful, but many participants are concerned that funding for such programs may be decreased in the future.

Participants also identified training needs in areas of academic skill development. These involved basic academic skills, oral and written communication skills, listening and reading comprehension, math skills, and knowledge in the sciences. Training in these areas was primarily focused on the preparation of prospective employees. These skills were viewed as the foundation for learning new skills on the job.

Several of the identified training needs can be clustered as employability skills. These areas include employability, appropriate behavior in the workplace, and knowledge of the world of work. Examples of employability skills identified by participants were how to prepare for an interview, resume writing, etc. Training in appropriate behavior in the workplace and knowledge of the world of work were viewed as guiding behavior and promoting an understanding of the individual's contribution to organizational functioning. Participants strongly endorsed an experiential component to these training activities.

The need for supervision training for managers was also suggested. Skills such as providing effective feedback, communication abilities, conflict resolution skills, etc., were suggested as components for such training. This was endorsed by several participants because effective management strategies can facilitate employee functioning and productivity.

1. *Work ethic*

2. *Comprehensive training in soft skills*

3. *Increase high school graduates and GEDs*

4. *Oral and written communication skills*

5. *Basic academic skills*

6. *Listening and reading comprehension skills*

7. *Math and sciences*

8. *Employability skills*

9. *Adaptability/multi-tasking*

10. *Critical thinking/problem-solving/analytical skills*

11. *Appropriate behavior in the workplace*

12. *Teamwork*

13. *Supervision training for managers*

14. *Cultural understanding*

15. *Customer service*

16. *Knowledge of the world of work*

17. *Drug education*

Another perceived training need, primarily from participants who worked for foreign-owned businesses or whose company was involved in international business, was cultural understanding. Understanding of cultural norms, traditions, and customs was viewed as essential in these work environments.

Important Issues Related to Training

Soft skills have been identified as important in hiring and retention decisions across all industry sectors. Because of this, comprehensive soft skill training has been identified as the most important area for training. A critical issue is how and when soft skill training should take place.

Many participants noted that there is a "disconnect" between what is learned in school and what is needed to move into the workplace. The paradox for many employers is that although students may pass the high school exit examination, they lack some basic academic skills which are required to function on work tasks. There is a need for improvement of training/transitional programs from high school to manufacturing or industrial jobs.

Participants believe that the value of technical education programs needs to be enhanced. Many felt current educational programming at the high school level does not pay enough attention to students who are not college bound. Recent educational initiatives (i.e., Pathways to Success) should provide students with a better understanding of career options. The efficacy of this program will be evaluated in the future.

The implementation of a strategic plan for economic development to establish training priorities is needed. It was noted that employment concentrations are shifting from manufacturing to service industries and training should keep pace with these changes.

It was observed that many individuals from industry were unaware of available services and programs which would be beneficial in employee recruitment, training, and retention. This lack of awareness may suggest the need to improve communication between these entities.

While training is highly valued, some companies have limited budgets for training activities. Others reported that they find the task of identifying quality training packages overwhelming. It was recommended that the Department of Commerce construct a training inventory/clearinghouse which would assist companies in identifying well reviewed training packages.

Conclusion

The need for training in soft skill development was the highest priority for statewide training.

Both trade and soft skills are important in hiring and retention decisions across all industry sectors. Soft skills are most important in hiring decisions when applicants are deemed to have the required trade skills, for certain job levels where trade skills can be taught internally, and for customer service positions. Employee retention decisions are more heavily influenced by soft skills than trade skills.

A constellation of soft skills important in hiring and retention decisions was identified and closely corresponds to the findings of national and local studies (e.g., Dillon and Greenwood Counties). No distinct pattern of differences was noted between groups of urban and rural counties. The need for training in soft skill development was the highest priority for statewide training.

Recommendations

Based on the overall findings of this project, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Preparation in soft skills would benefit portions of South Carolina's workforce. Integration of soft and/or life skills instruction should be considered for inclusion in primary and secondary education, job search and counseling, workforce trade skill training, and adult education.

- Soft skills which have been identified as important in successful entry into the workplace in the present project can serve as a beginning framework in creating a soft skills curriculum.

- There are currently no "best practices" for soft skill training. As soft skill training packages are developed and implemented, they should be validated against relevant criterion measures.

- Educational agencies should monitor how academic competency tests correspond to skills important in the workplace. Consideration of including additional criteria more consistent with work related skills may improve the connection between what is learned and what is needed to move into the workplace.

- A strategic plan should be constructed for economic development to establish training priorities throughout the state.

- An organizational analysis of workforce development agencies should be conducted to examine ways of facilitating communication with each other and industry.

Appendix:
Participant Questionnaires

Items Important to Hiring

Directions

From the list provided below, please indicate the relative importance of each item in terms of hiring. Check the box to indicate whether an item is "very important," "important," "less important," or "not important."

After you have rated all 10 items, please rank the items in order of importance. Assign a rank of "1" for the most important, etc. Please be sure to rank all items.

Item	Very Important	Important	Less Important	Not Important	RANK
Job specific technical skills					
Computer/technology skills					
Interpersonal skills					
Attitude					
Academic preparation					
Previous experience					
Communication skills					
Critical thinking skills					
Appearance					
Drug testing issues					

Items Important to Employee Retention

Directions

From the list provided below, please indicate the relative importance of each item in terms of employee retention. Check the box to indicate whether an item is "very important," "important," "less important," or "not important."

After you have rated all 12 items, please rank the items in order of importance. Assign a rank of "1" for the most important, etc. Please be sure to rank all items.

Item	Very Important	Important	Not Very Important	Unimportant	RANK
Willingness and ability to follow directions					
Technical competence					
Interpersonal skills					
Attitude					
Attendance/punctuality					
Good customer service					
Communication skills					
Conformance with organizational policies					
Adaptability					
Drug testing issues					
Ability to learn new skills					
Self-initiative					

Areas of Concern

Directions

From the items below, estimate the percent of your employees for whom the item is a concern. Check the box that corresponds to this percentage.

Percent of Your Employees

Item	0%	1-5%	6-10%	11-20%	21-30%	31-40%	41-50%	More than 50%
Willingness and ability to follow directions								
Technical competence								
Interpersonal skills								
Attitude								
Attendance/punctuality								
Good customer service								
Communication skills								
Conformance with organizational policies								
Adaptability								
Integrity								
Willingness to grow on the job								

SC Workforce