

Examining the skills most necessary for success in today's workplace

January 23 2020



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The transition from college to the workforce can be challenging; however, a new University of Minnesota study shows how higher education institutions can more adequately prepare students for life after

school. While technical and subject matter expertise are important, researchers found that critical thinking and communication skills are some of the most valued by employers.

"In the U.S., there is a perception by employers that college graduates are unprepared for a workforce that is becoming technologically more advanced and increasingly globalized," said Joseph Rios, the study's lead author and assistant professor in the University of Minnesota's Department of Educational Psychology in the College of Education and Human Development.

"Such a context requires employees to possess more than technical and subject-matter expertise by demanding a combination of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills. Though there is agreement that students should be developing these skills, there has been little consensus among practitioners and researchers on which ones are of greatest importance for workplace success."

In the study, published in Educational Researcher, Rios and his colleagues conducted a content analysis of 142,000 job advertisements. They ranked skills described in the advertisements by demand (i.e., number of times mentioned) and also examined how demand varied by degree level and degree field requirements.

The study found that:

- oral [communication](#), written communication, collaboration and problem-solving skills were demanded by a minimum of 50% more than all other skills;
- when employers demanded multiple skills, the most in-demand pairing was oral and written communication—with this pairing being demanded 180% more than the second most popular pairing;

- buzzwords commonly used in more recent academic literature (e.g., [social responsibility](#)) were in relatively low demand by employers or, in many cases, simply not mentioned at all;
- the skills most sought after by employers varied slightly by the education level and degree field requirements for the role—the most in-demand skills for [jobs](#) requiring a bachelor's or graduate degree were oral and written communication, while job descriptions requiring an associate's degree most frequently mentioned [oral communication](#) and social intelligence.

These results were replicated with a sample of approximately 120,000 job advertisements collected one year later.

According to Rios, this study has implications for first-time job seekers and those preparing them for the job market in higher education.

"Our study illustrates a clear-cut demand for a limited number of skills, which—although are framed as being critical to the 21st century worker—have long been both important to employers and perceived to be absent in a large percentage of [college graduates](#)," said Rios. "It is our hope that the findings from this study can add to the discussion on establishing accountability standards for student skill development to promote workforce preparedness and the long-term success of the U.S. economy."

Rios specializes in educational measurement and aims to improve evidence-based practices in educational measurement by considering the social and psychological factors that influence assessment results and use of assessment feedback.

More information: Joseph A. Rios et al. Identifying Critical 21st-Century Skills for Workplace Success: A Content Analysis of Job Advertisements, *Educational Researcher* (2020). [DOI](#):

[10.3102/0013189X19890600](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19890600)

Provided by University of Minnesota

Citation: Examining the skills most necessary for success in today's workplace (2020, January 23) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-01-skills-success-today-workplace.html>

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