

Profit, rules or values: Skills that lead to success on the labor market

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There is no specific set of skills that university graduates need in order to be successful professionally. Rather, the required skills vary according to different areas of the labor market and their specific requirements.

In a new study, Dr. Emilia Kmiotek-Meier and her colleagues at the

Institute of Sociology and Social Psychology, which is part of the Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences, define three labor market areas with different sets of skills needed: "The middle field," comprising mainly jobs in the [private sector](#) without specific classification; "The world of rules," a more hierarchically structured field comprising, i.e., the legal and medical professions; and "The people-oriented and critical market," to which jobs in NGOs belong, among others.

The study "All good things come in threes—Required skill sets in the graduate labor market in Germany" was conducted for the University of Cologne's ProfessionalCenter and is [published](#) in the journal *Education + Training*.

It appears self-evident that, in addition to specific skills and specialist knowledge, different skill sets are required in different areas of the labor market—especially in view of the increasingly complex requirements of many jobs. Nevertheless, according to the authors this aspect has not been sufficiently addressed in research. In addition, previous studies have tended to focus on employers' requirements and neglected the perspectives of employees.

"Our study brings together both viewpoints from different areas. As a result, we can say that there is no universal skill set that leads to success in the labor market," said lead author Kmiotek-Meier.

In research, the benefits of soft skills—in addition to specialist knowledge and the necessary job-specific skills—is generally recognized. They include communication, decision-making skills and creativity among others. The authors assume that, especially in jobs that require a [university degree](#), the importance assigned to specific soft skills varies greatly in different areas of the labor market.

In their current study, they analyzed this aspect in more detail. The team interviewed 26 employers and employees from Cologne and its vicinity. The data was collected in qualitative guided interviews, which were conducted between November 2019 and July 2020.

The relevance of the soft and hard skills required on the labor market was captured through a sorting process integrated into the interview. The interviewees were clustered based on the result of the sorting process. Afterwards, the interviewees explained their categorization. This method originates from the so-called Q-methodology.

In the first area, "The middle field," academic degrees (BA, MA or doctorate) as well as grade point average only play a secondary role. Instead, the focus is on certain soft skills, for example, that employees can express their thoughts clearly and communicate with different groups of people (supervisors, colleagues, customers) in an appropriate way. It is also important that they can deal with criticism. The necessary hard skills are typically acquired on the job.

In the area "The world of rules," specialist knowledge and formal degrees are more relevant than in the other two areas, since they are decisive for entry into the professional field, for example in academia or in the medical profession. Career paths are largely pre-structured here and there are clearly defined entry criteria. A willingness to learn is also important, as specialist knowledge can quickly become outdated. Adequate communication with different target groups (supervisors, colleagues and laypersons) is also important.

"The people-oriented and critical market" is particularly value-oriented. Here, the value of specialist knowledge is placed between the other two areas. Jobs in this field require a certain attitude and emphasize social responsibility, respect for others and personal development. Openness to new ideas and the ability to think critically are also important.

Emilia Kmiotek-Meier concluded, "Our results also show that a good 'match' between employer and employee is not achieved by a given set of skills. When choosing a career, graduates should also consider which values or attitudes are more prevalent in their 'dream job' and whether these are compatible with their own values and ideas."

More information: Emilia Kmiotek-Meier et al, All good things come in threes – required skill sets in the graduate labour market in Germany, *Education + Training* (2024). [DOI: 10.1108/ET-04-2023-0122](https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-04-2023-0122)

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