

“THE RIGHT ATTITUDE” AS A KEY HIRING CRITERION FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS IN SWITZERLAND

KATRIN MUFF

katrin.muff@bsl-lausanne.ch

Business School Lausanne

MARY MAYENFISCH

mary.mayenfisch@bsl-lausanne.ch

Business School Lausanne

ABSTRACT. What do employers expect from recent business graduates or interns? And how do they think business schools should prepare students for their new positions? This practitioner-oriented article reviews these two questions which were addressed to a sample of executives in various job functions and across a wide range of industries. The answers are as surprising as they are enlightening: above all else, employers want new interns or entry-level employees to have “the right attitude,” outstanding communication skills and the ability to adapt and be flexible. The research methodology is based on 27 Swiss executives across seven industries and 4 senior management categories surveyed in individual 30 minute open-ended question interviews. The authors frame the responses in a three-level personal attributes framework which has been developed based on current literature in professional learning and development. This connects the attributes to the five stages of professional mastery. They also discuss the impact of these findings for business schools and close with suggestions for further research to deepen this discussion.

JEL Codes: E24; J21; M51

Keywords: employment criteria; hiring criteria; graduate students; soft skills; employer requirement; recruiting graduates; business school

1. Introduction

The survey conducted in 2013 in Switzerland reveals fascinating new insights in terms of priorities and preferences of corporate recruiters and senior managers in general with regard to hiring criteria of graduate business students. As such, it confirms numerous studies previously conducted which highlight the importance of “soft skills” over skills and competencies traditionally assumed critical for business students (also known as technical or “hard skills”).

The survey also provides insight into the shift of desirable attributes of future employees: while knowledge transfer has always dominated management education, that the most advanced attributes related to skills and competencies of a person are what should be the focus of management education. This survey takes us a step further by highlighting that was employers want is the most advanced element of personal attributes, namely a specific attitude, that of possessing the “right attitude.” Such attitudes comes as the cherry on the cake once a student has agreed the necessary knowledge, skills and competency in a given domain, and developing such attitudes remains a significant unresolved challenged for most business schools today.

2. Research Approach

Our analysis is based on a series of 30-minute interviews we have conducted in person and by telephone over a 12 week period (from mid-March to end of June, 2013). We focused on a balanced mix of organizations, including large Multinational Corporations (MNCs), Non-government Organizations (NGOs) as well as Small & Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).

Overview of organizations by sector

22% Food and Beverage
 19% Banking & Financial Services
 15% Consulting, security and IT
 12% Pharmaceutical or Biopharma
 12% Consumer Products companies
 12% Government and non-government organizations
 8% Materials and Energy
100% = 26 organizations

Of the 148 executives contacted, 28 people from 26 organizations agreed to be interviewed (a 19% response rate). As one interviewee was unwilling to allow the information to be used for publication purposes, our analysis is based on a sample of 27 interviewees, all of them located in Switzerland.

Overview of Executives interviews (by job function)

30% Management (incl. 19% Heads of Sustainability)
 26% CEOs
 26% Human Resources Management
 19% Senior Management
100% = 27 Executives interviewed

We asked the executives four questions during the 30 minute interview. This article reviews, analyzes and comments two of these four questions. The other two questions are treated in an article entitled “The Importance of Experiential

Learning in the Education and Development of Responsible Leaders” (Mayenfisch and Muff, 2014).

3. Related Literature

As stated in the Vision 50+20 Management Education for the World (2013): “leadership development is a life-long learning adventure following different stages of mastery.¹ This start with awareness, actionable knowledge and guided practice, moving to independent application, and finally leading to skilled performance.”

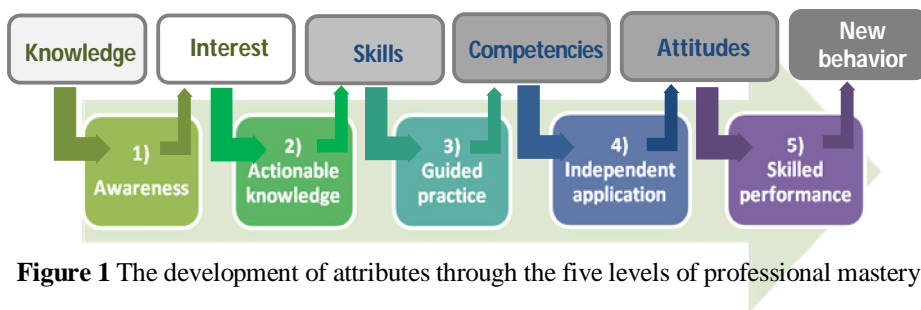


Figure 1 The development of attributes through the five levels of professional mastery

The true challenge in the educational system is not to enable students to reach stages 1 and 2, but to advance them through a life-long learning approach through all 5 stages of learning.

There is some agreement, particularly in the medical field, that the development of skilled professionals involves the domains of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Coomarasamy and Khalid, 2004). While this view still has significant buy-in in the world of learning and teaching, which is predominantly focused on the provision of knowledge, the more applied sciences (such as the medical field) are exploring the possibility of shifting the focus from superficial learning to deep learning. Such an approach is based on the following understanding:

- **Knowledge** enables awareness which creates interest.
- Knowledge enhanced **interest** sets the basis for the development of actionable knowledge and results in skills.
- **Skills** are required to allow for a guided practice in which such skills are further developed and eventually translated into development of competencies.
- **Competencies** in a given domain are required to allow for an independent application which sets the basis for the development of new attitudes.
- Such **attitudes** are the basis which eventually enable a skilled performance which is measured through new behavior.

Rather than looking at the more traditional learning-oriented stages of knowledge, skills and attitudes, we will take a professional-oriented, applied approach to learning and thus focus on the three more advanced levels of attributes:

- **Level 1:** Skills
- **Level 2:** Competencies
- **Level 3:** Attitudes

Developing the right kinds of attitudes is at best a lucky by-product of a good education. Businesses have somewhat naively assumed that by recruiting from well renowned, top business schools, they will get future employees with such attitudes. But is this really the case?

The following survey shows that businesses primarily look for employees with certain attitudes, taking competencies and skills somewhat for granted. Our research suggests that it is indeed worthwhile to consider to what degree business schools are dedicated and able to consistently and effectively develop such attitudes.

Interestingly, the Swiss educational system, which favors an apprenticeship over an academic education, (78% of Swiss choose to do an apprenticeship, most in commercial business, rather than joining a business school), offers a concrete solution to ensure that such attitudes and competencies be developed. It is well known that one can acquire new skills easier and faster – relatively speaking – (level 1), with competencies (level 2) and attitudes (level 3) being significantly more challenging and requiring more time to develop, train and acquire. Level 2 and 3 training needs practical application, on-the-job, practical training in order to truly instill and embed these levels of mastery.

What are the key skills that employers want new employees to have?

As you can see from the title, we have deliberately asked employers to define the “skills”, not competencies or attitudes they look for in new employees. We had presumed that employers understood that competencies and attitudes were usually developed in conjunction with professional experiences in an ongoing and life-long learning process. However, the non-triggered answers that emerge show an entirely different picture:

Question 1: What are the key skills (personality and technical) that new employees need to have when they come to work for you?	Skills Competencies Attitudes	% of respondents
RIGHT ATTITUDE (perseverance, self-motivation, can handle pressure, humble, dedicated)	Attitude	59%
FLEXIBILITY & ADAPTABILITY	Attitude	37%
DESIRE TO LEARN (openness, curious, interested)	Attitude	33%

ETHICAL & VALUES-BASED	Attitude	26%
RESPONSIBLE	Attitude	19%
GETTING THINGS DONE (project management, rigor, sticks to plans)	Attitude	15%
COMMUNICATION SKILLS (effective listening and sharing)	Competencies	44%
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (empathy, people skills)	Competencies	30%
COLLABORATIVE SPIRIT (ability to work in teams)	Competencies	30%
STRATEGIC & VISIONARY SKILLS (innovation, creativity)	Competencies	19%
JOB SPECIFIC SKILLS (relevant technical skills)	Skills	33%
BROAD SYSTEMIC THINKING	Skills	22%
ANALYTICAL SKILLS	Skills	22%
GENERAL BUSINESS SKILLS (incl. professional skills)	Skills	22%
CUSTOMER-ORIENTATION (marketing, presentation, service-orientation)	Skills	19%
LANGUAGE SKILLS (incl. international skills)	Skills	15%
IT & COMPUTER SKILLS	Skills	15%

Table 1 Overview of open-ended survey of business leaders

In fact, our first open-ended question resulted in a clear hierarchy of graduate requirements:

First: Attitudes (level 3)

Second: Competencies (level 2)

Third: Skills (level 1).

These results are very similar to previous research results we conducted to determine the employment profile of MBA students (Muff 2012). The MBA survey conducted in 2010 demonstrated the clear expectation of employers of their future managers and executives. Such employees need to possess an advanced degree of “soft skills” which are represented in level 3 attitudes and to some degree level 2 competencies. We had expected that younger and less experienced graduates with little or no professional working experience (e.g. the typical Master graduate profile) would be expected to possess first and foremost the right skills (level 1) and to some degree level 2 (competencies) and level 3 (attitudes) attributes. The development of the latter two demands exposure, practice and experience within a practical working

environment, which Master graduates have typically accumulated through internship experiences.

At BSL, our pedagogical concept has always centered on experiential learning provided by a faculty of professional executives, rather than largely theoretical large-theatre learning. For more than 25 years, we have implemented this approach across all of our programs – yet it is only now that we hear that such an approach is more than a pedagogical preference but indeed a firm requirement by a representative sample of employers from all industry sectors. Let us look in more detail at the attributes that were spontaneously (not triggered results!) mentioned in our sample:

- **Fundamental attitudes** (59% wanted “the right attitude,” 37% required flexibility & adaptability, and 33% listed the desire to learn). This was followed by the need for
- **Key competencies** (communication skills 44%, emotional intelligence 30%, collaborative spirit 30%), and finally,
- **Specific skills** (job specific, technical skills 33%) were mentioned.

Having this “right attitude” (59%), knowing how to listen and share (communication skills 44%) and the ability to be flexible and adaptable (37%) all show what new employees need to possess. All these elements are rated ABOVE the very important job specific skills one would expect typically to come in first place. These basic requirements are either unheard of in classical business schools, or they are totally ignored. The alternative could be, of course, that it is not easy to develop such fundamental attitudes and competencies in students.

Higher education, including business schools, predominantly focuses on the development of skills, the so-called “level 1” of training & development skills. Such skills are clearly important and we saw that in our company outreach study (job specific skills 33%, broad systemic thinking 22%, analytical skills 22%, general business skills 22%, customer-orientation 19%, language skills 15% and IT/computer skills 15%). Interestingly, even amongst these teachable skills, there are a number that are not currently covered in business schools, namely:

- Broad systemic thinking
- Customer-orientation
- Language skills

Beyond skills trainings, only a few business schools pursue the development of competencies. These competencies require quite a different approach to learning: a move away from frontal lecturing to creating effective learning environments. If we look for outcomes such as effective listening & sharing (communication skills 33%), emotional intelligence (empathy, people skills

30%), a collaborative spirit (30%) and want students to be innovative & visionary (strategic & creative 19%), a different learning environment must be envisaged. Interesting approaches on how to develop such competencies exist; however, these demand a small classroom environment.

Advancing to “level 3” training & development requires the emergence of the sought after “new attitude” which can be measured in changed behavior and challenges even more business schools. As is clear from our outreach study, business professionals demand the following attitudes: perseverance, self-motivation, ability to handle pressure, humility and dedication (in short the “right attitude” echoing the needs of 59% of business leaders!), flexibility & ability (37%), desire to learn (33%), ethical & values-based (26%), responsible (19%), getting things done (15%). These may appear simple and yet business schools fail to prioritize the development of such attitudes in their learning objectives which create the foundation of their course and program structures.

The question needs to be asked as to whether employers know what business educators must do to produce the “right” type of employees. The following questions we asked in our study gave some interesting insights into this aspect of the equation.

How do employers expect business schools to prepare students for internships?

In this open-ended question we asked the 27 executives in the 26 companies: “What do you need us to do to prepare an intern/employee so that they are immediately useful?”

Interestingly enough, every response received suggested specific, desirable attributes that employers expect from interns. However, no suggestions were given as to what business educators should do to ensure that graduates acquire these attributes. One manager did, however, state that he did not know what needed to happen in education so that the right type of employees would be developed. It is fair to assume and to conclude that this is a question that may well be too far off the radar of managers. It appears, that from their perspective the only way to respond to this question would be to consider the kinds of “outputs” they expect from business schools, e.g. what types of students they would like to have apply for internships.

The lists of desirable skills, competencies and attitudes of our 27 executives were long and comprehensive, covering just about every dimension a professionally engaged person could possibly possess. We conclude from this that such an extensive and broad range of expectations needs to be very carefully managed and followed. To ensure a successful relationship with organizations, a business school needs to be prepared to clearly understand the specific needs of specific managers in specific organizations. Searching for the most

perfectly aligned student in the most suitable program at the right stage of development would require an ability to map such attributes in students. This certainly represents a challenge for any business school where the internship adviser does not personally know which students should to be placed in particular companies. This is likely to be a difficult issue to address for the majority of business schools.

Looking at the distribution of the desired and required skills, competencies and attitudes, the responses of the sample of executives can be grouped as follows:

- Competencies (level 2): 41%
- Skills (level 1): 37%
- Attitudes (level 3): 22%

Total: 100%

Here we see a different response from our sample population than in the previous questions where executives placed the highest emphasis on level 3 attributes. When evaluating to what degree the functional roles were differentiated in their responses, the following patterns appear (see Table 2):

- CEOs and Senior Manager state the need to develop attitudes in future interns or employees more than the average of the sample (27% vs. 22%);
- Human Resources Directors are least focused on the development of level 3 attributes (attitude);
- Senior Managers deviate from the sample average by demanding more level 1 (skills) and less level 2 (competencies) development (43% vs. 37% and 29% vs. 41% respectively);
- CEOs and Management level positions find level 1 (skills) development less important than the sample average (33% vs. 37%).

Question: What do you need business schools to do to prepare an intern / employee so that they are immediately useful?				
Job function	Level 1: Skills	Level 2: Competencies	Level 3: Attitudes	Total
CEOs	33%	42%	25%	100%
Senior Managers	43%	29%	29%	100%
Management	33%	44%	22%	100%
Human Resources Directors	40%	40%	20%	100%

Table 2 Development requirements for interns or employees by job profile

Given the sample size and the relatively moderate deviations from the sample average, these conclusions serve as indications only which may enrich a further discussion or additional research on this topic.

4. Conclusions

Our 2013 research with executives across a wide range of industries suggest that employers have increased their expectations with regards to new employees from the more experienced MBA and Executive MBA graduates to the much less experienced Master graduates. Surprisingly, the study shows that “having the right attitude,” a level 3 attribute, was evoked by 59% of respondents, followed by communications skills, a level 2 attribute, with 44% respondents, and “flexibility & adaptability” (another level 3 attribute) with 37%. Job specific skills (level 1 attributes) were mentioned only by 33% of the respondents when asked what key skills (personality and technical) new employees need to have when they come to work?

A further question that investigated the expectations of employees from business educators highlighted the fact that employers expect that student interns and first employment jobs should be well aware of the company context, ensuring a very solid fit for the student in the company. This requires business schools to find ways to develop matching-tools between students looking for internships or jobs and the employers approaching them for potential employment. Interestingly, despite the clear demand for level 3 attributes (the right kinds of attitudes), executives focused their expectations of business schools mostly in the area of competencies (41%) and skills (37%), followed by attitudes (22%) last. This may either indicate a lack of knowledge of how a business school should go about developing the right attitude in future employees, or the experience of collaborating with business schools that shows that these are strongest in the development of level 1 (skills) and level 2 (competencies) attributes.

Business schools are challenged to find ways to effectively develop attributes in their studies that go beyond level 1 and 2 (skills and competencies) and expand into the more demanding level 3 professional attributes (attitudes). At BSL, looking back at more than a quarter of a century of focusing on level 1, 2 and 3 attributes development through our special pedagogical approach, we find ourselves both confirmed in our approach and worried about larger business schools and business educators. Will they be able to transform to adapt to the required experiential learning foundation for all of their students? Can they ensure that their students will be able to meet employer expectations by the time they graduate?

NOTE

1. Inspired by John Ryan of the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL).

REFERENCES

- Mayenfisch, M., and Muff, K., (2014), “The Importance of Experiential Learning in the Education and Development of Responsible Leaders,” Working Paper published on SSRN, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2411007
- Coomarasamy, A., and Khalid S. (2004), “What Is the Evidence that Postgraduate Teaching in Evidence Based Medicine Changes Anything? A Systematic Review,” *BMJ* 329(7473): 1017.

FURTHER READING

- Muff, K. (2012), “Are Business Schools Doing Their Job?,” *Journal of Management Development* 7: 642–662.
- Muff, K. (2013), “Developing Globally Responsible Leaders at Business School,” *Journal of Management Development* 32(5): 487–507.

→ Both articles are available on request and can be found on our website: <http://www.bsl-lausanne.ch/faculty-and-research/research-and-publications>

© BSL

Attachment 1 Full details of interviewees for questions 1

Question 1	Key skills employees need to have when they come to work for you	Skills Competencies Attitudes
RIGHT ATTITUDE (perseverance, self-motivation, can handle pressure, humble, dedicated)	1- willingness to work, motivation 2- timeliness 3- persistence, driven, work exp prior to joining business 4- mature 9- engagement 13- persevering 15- right attitude 16- motivation 17- attitude 18- attitude 19- modest 20- attitude 21- humble, articulate, know how to behave 22- self motivated 25- fit with organization, synergy, easygoing, calm, work under pressure 26- demonstrate they want the job = 16 = 59% of respondents	Attitude 59%
FLEXIBILITY & ADAPTABILITY	3- ability to adapt 8- adaptability 12- flexibility 13- flexibility 14- flexibility	Attitude 37%

	16- flexibility 17- adapt and change in moving environment, agile 20- adaptability, shapeable 21- agile 22- adaptability = 10 = 37% of respondents	
DESIRE TO LEARN (openness, curious, interested)	3- desire to learn 4- understands cultural diversity, curious 5-interested 7- openness and curiosity 8- openness 17-openmindedness 18- openness 21- quick learner 26- open-minded and curious = 9 = 33% of respondents	Attitude 33%
ETHICAL & VALUES-BASED	7- understands values and principles 9- individual values mindset 11- vision driven approach 19- sense of ethics, values 20- ethical, integrity, courage dealing with employment 21- purpose driven and purposeful - challengers who question the status quo 24- have orientation and values, broad in knowledge with convictions = 7 = 26% of respondents	Attitude 26%
RESPONSIBLE	2- personal responsibility 13- ownership, result oriented 17- credibility 22- trustworthy, good behavior, accountable and reliable 25- take responsibility = 5 = 19% of respondents	Attitude 19%
GETTING THINGS DONE (project management, rigor, sticks to plans)	7- sticks to plans 8- has rigor 13- project management 14- entrepreneurial, autonomous, hands on approach, personality = 4 = 15% of respondents	Attitude 15%

COMMUNICATION SKILLS (effective listening and sharing)	3- understanding of communication media 6- sense of humor 7- communication skills, 8- communication skills 11- listening well 13- communication, 15 -effective communication, 20- communication, persuasiveness, storytelling skills 23- ability to get message through 25- constructive in communication 26- speak the same language 27- entry level must be able to extract salient messages from senior management = 12 = 44% of respondents	Competencies 44%
COLLABORATIVE SPIRIT (ability to work in teams)	2 - collaboration 4- team player, participative 13- team spirit 15- teamwork 17- collaborative 19- team player wants to contribute not just gain 22- want to contribute 25- team players = 8 = 30% of respondents	Competencies 30%
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (empathy, people skills)	4- potential for leadership 5- people oriented 6- empathy 9- emotional intelligence 10- emotional intelligence 11- patience and coaching and investment in people 13- leading teams 20- people need to be great leaders, competent to empower and to handle = 8 = 30% of respondents	Competencies 30%
STRATEGIC & VISIONARY SKILLS (innovation, creativity)	13- for managers-leadership impact, strategic thinking 17- Innovative 19- out of box thinking 18- good vision and creative ideas 27- capacity and interest to challenge corporate assumptions = 5 = 19% of respondents	Competencies 19%
JOB SPECIFIC SKILLS (relevant technical skills)	4- technical experience in the chosen field 5- financial accounting, financial analyst (for a bank) 10- relevant technical skills 12- relevant technical skills 14- relevant technical skills 20- functional skills but not so relevant	Skills 33%

	24- good technical skills, key intelligence in subject matter 26- higher education in economics, Masters-Swiss federal banking diploma (for a bank) 27- subject matter experts = 9 = 33% of respondents	
BROAD SYSTEMIC THINKING	9- understands contextual complexity, mind mapping skills 14- ability to work with ambiguity 17- move beyond silos 18- systemic thinking skills 21- global thinkers interested in global content 23- understand the detail and big picture = 6 = 22% of respondents	Skills 22%
ANALYTICAL SKILLS	3- analytical skills 6- get to topic quickly 19- quantitative skills 22- intelligent, not just theory but added value 23- analytical skills, sift through information 27- strong analytical skills = 6 = 22% of respondents	Skills 22%
GENERAL BUSINESS SKILLS (incl. professional skills)	6- know to conduct meetings for administrators 15- good general business knowledge, academic and practical, professional skills 16- legal skills, competent 17- professional skills 19- teaching , writing, fluency 25- no fixed skill set = 6 = 22% of respondents	Skills 22%
CUSTOMER-ORIENTATION (marketing, presentation, service-orientation)	6- public relations skills 8- customer orientation 12- service oriented 16- marketing and fundraising skills, 23- know how to make presentations = 5 = 19% of respondents	Skills 19%
LANGUAGE SKILLS (incl. international skills)	5- multilingual 12- skilled in languages 16- international skills 19- language skills = 4 = 15% of respondents	Skills 15%
IT & COMPUTER SKILLS	8- management systems 9- computer skills 19- good with computers 23- understand data protection, math, data mining = 4 = 15% of respondents	Skills 15%