

Assessing the Common Employability Skills in Entry-Level Job Candidates

Four Companies' Approaches in the Spotlight



Introduction

To get and keep any job in the modern economy, every individual must possess a common set of foundational skills. These include a strong academic grounding in reading and math, as well as individual traits and abilities like teamwork, problem solving, work ethic and integrity. Yet, for employers, these skills remain among the hardest to assess when deciding whether to hire a new employee.

A COMMON LANGUAGE

As a first step, the National Network of Business and Industry Associations (National Network) – a cross-sector collaboration of national industry associations – tapped into the expertise of their employer members to create a common definition and vocabulary to explain these *Common Employability Skills (CES)*. This common language helps employers identify the common skills that all their employees should exhibit; lets potential employees know what basic skills employers expect them to have for any job; and tells educators and other learning providers what foundational skills to emphasize.

The Common Employability Skills are categorized into four thematic areas. They are:

- **Personal Skills** such as integrity, dependability and initiative
- **People Skills** like teamwork, respect and communication
- **Workplace Skills** including problem solving, customer focus and planning
- **Applied Knowledge** in the areas of reading, math and technology

These foundational skills are highly prized, particularly by employers seeking to fill entry level positions. It's not uncommon to hear an employer say, "Give me someone with the basics and I'll teach them what they need to know about our technology and processes." A job candidate with all or many of the employability skills is most likely to be a top candidate for any entry-level opportunity.

But therein lies the challenge for employers. As a hiring manager, how do you know if a job candidate will work well on a team? Or, under what circumstances will that candidate be able to adapt to new situations or challenges? How do hiring managers assess integrity or initiative? Approximately 70 percent of the skills outlined in the CES framework are considered 'non-cognitive,' and by their nature are difficult to assess. And yet, these are some of the most important skills an individual can bring to the workplace.

Assessment in Action

This document describes the approach four employers of different sizes and types use to assess the CES in ways that are appropriate and meaningful to their respective businesses. As these examples show, and other employers will attest to, no single technique has been devised to assess for many of the behavioral skills described in the CES. However, some general conclusions can be drawn:

1. Clearly defining the set of key skills most important to the job in question is critical to helping focus areas of inquiry during hiring.
2. A disciplined interview structure, with questions designed to elicit how the applicant has demonstrated the key skills in question, remains an important component of the hiring process.
3. The skills and competencies needed to conduct an interview and assess a candidate's answers and fit for the position are critical to the process. Providing training and support for the interviewer or hiring manager is vital.
4. If resources permit, the opportunity to observe a candidate through an internship or other work-and-learn process improves the chances of a successful hire.

We will touch on these again at the end of this document.

BizStrat Technology – An Emerging Technology Firm

In previous work led by the Center for Energy Workforce Development (a National Network member), “behavioral interviewing” was identified as a promising practice in assessing many of the Common Employability Skills. The basic premise of a behavioral interview is that past performance is a good predictor of future performance.

To prepare for and conduct a behavioral interview, the hiring manager or interviewer identifies the competencies needed for the position and develops a series of questions intended to elicit, through description and examples of past behavior, how the candidate will perform in future circumstances. For example, an interviewer might ask: “Tell me about a time when you dealt with a disruptive customer.”

BizStrat Technology is a small (12 employees) but growing software distribution and technology consulting company located in the Chicago area. Founded in 2012 by CEO Michelle Mikka-Van Der Stuyf, BizStrat uses a situational or scenario-based interview technique when assessing potential new hires. Scenario-based (or situational) interviewing is similar to behavioral interviewing in that “what-if” type questions are posed to job candidates that encourage them to draw upon their experience, knowledge base or common sense to answer. This differs from behavioral interviewing in that the “what-if” may or may not deal specifically with a previous experience.

However, with both interview formats, ideally, the scenarios and follow-up conversation encourage candidates to demonstrate – through examples – the skills and competencies that have been identified as critical for the job. As a project-based business where the team expands and contracts based on workload, BizStrat has identified certain skills and competencies it has found are critical to success.

BizStrat Technology
Critical Employability Skills

Adaptability

Communication

Integrity

Reliability

Initiative

BizStrat Technology

Situational Interviewing

Consistency in questions

Top management engagement in hiring

Pre-hiring internships to develop foundational as well as technical skills

BizStrat Technology uses up to 10 questions in each interview. There are never more than 10 questions but there can be fewer. The questions vary based on the job or project for which the individual is interviewing. For example, if the job is customer-facing, questions related to communications skills and customer focus are emphasized. Sample questions include:

- To assess basic communications skills: “I’ve reviewed your resume and LinkedIn; tell me about yourself.”
- On handling pressure and decision making: “The company/your team has two project deadlines set for 4:00 p.m. today. You don’t believe you can meet both deadlines. What do you do?”
- To understand adaptability, critical thinking and problem-solving skills: “Your team is working on a project with a deadline. Your team leader becomes unavailable due to illness. The project still needs to move forward, and decisions need to be made, but this is not your job or area of expertise. What action do you take, if any?”

Because BizStrat Technology is a small business, CEO Mikka-Van Der Stuyf can be involved in every company hire. This provides for a level of consistency in the hiring process that may be more difficult to attain in larger organizations where a variety of people with varying levels of experience conduct interviews and make hiring recommendations. The key is that an individual skilled or trained in the interview technique is involved in the discussion with the job candidate and leads the assessment of the candidate’s responses and “fit” for the position.

In addition to using the scenario-based interview to assess candidates’ Common Employability Skills competence, BizStrat Technology has seen success through the development of an internship program to develop future candidates. To date, about half of the interns employed have been hired as full-time regular employees. Work-and-learn programs like internships provide individuals the opportunity for real-world work experience but importantly also offer the employer a window into an individual’s skills and competencies - both foundational and technical.

TradeWinds Island Resorts – A Privately-Held Hospitality Company

The Common Employability Skills define those competencies that individuals need for any job, but different industries may place greater emphasis on particular competencies based on the skill needs of a specific position in question. For example, the hospitality industry, represented by the American Hotel & Lodging Association (AHLA) and the National Restaurant Association Education Foundation (NRAEF), have defined the CES most important for jobs in their sectors and created a toolkit offering guidance to employers on how to attract, identify and hire applicants with a high ‘HQ’ (Hospitality Quotient).

TradeWinds Island Resorts is a two-property resort located in St. Petersburg Beach, Florida. It is the largest beach hotel on the west coast of Florida with about 1,100 employees. Approximately 130 of those employees are in management, the rest are hourly; about 80 percent of the hourly workers are full time and 20 percent part time. Because of the seasonal nature of the work and the turnover associated with that, TradeWinds hires 400 to 500 hourly employees each year.

Glenn Willocks, Human Resources Vice President for TradeWinds, participated in the development of the Hospitality Employability Skills framework. Aligned with the Employability Skills framework and in keeping with their company culture, TradeWinds prioritizes candidates with a ‘desire to serve’ – those who have a passion for hospitality and the ability to put their own interests aside to serve others. Customer- and people-oriented, the winning job candidate for an entry-level position at TradeWinds Resorts will bring energy and dedication to service to their daily work.

**TradeWinds Island Resorts
Critical Employability Skills**

Customer Focus

Desire to Serve

Personal Effectiveness

TradeWinds Island Resorts

Motivation-based Interviewing

Reward and recognition for demonstrating key competencies

Training and support provided for hiring managers

As TradeWinds recruits and aims to find employees who bring passion, customer focus and a desire to serve to the workplace, they have turned to a “motivation-based” interview technique. Motivation-based interviewing is a method specifically developed for hiring high performers. It is a system that seeks to identify people who will excel by uncovering their internal drivers and examining both their passion for the job and attitude toward overcoming obstacles to achieve goals. The approach focuses as much on the motivation, attitude and passion of candidates as on their job skills.

During the job interview process, the interviewer not only checks whether the person has the required skills and work culture to fit in well with the company, he or she also tries to observe whether the person has the motivation to sustain and deliver his or her best in the job. Sample questions include:

- Tell us one of the most exciting aspects of your previous job.
- What’s your biggest dream in life?
- Have you set a personal goal for yourself? Were you successful? Why?
- Describe a work situation in which you can demonstrate that you encouraged the motivation of another person. What actions did you take that helped the co-worker experience feelings of motivation or choose motivated behavior?
- How would you define success at work?
- Give an example of a situation when you went above and beyond your responsibility to get the job done.

Because of the large number of annual hires made at TradeWinds, the hiring process begins at a central location with Human Resources. HR screens all initial applicants. Once a candidate has passed the initial screening, the next step in the process happens in the hiring department where the candidate is interviewed by the hiring manager.

TradeWinds recognizes the importance of this part of the hiring process and has invested in training and supporting front-line hiring managers. Having a supply of questions that are created to elicit the needed competencies and motivations is only the start. The interviewer must be trained and skilled in assessing the candidate’s answers.

The company believes that reinforcing the critical competencies among the existing employee team is as important as identifying them in new hires. TradeWinds has created an employee “empowerment team” consisting of 270 of their 1,100 employees. These individuals are empowered to resolve guest dissatisfaction and to provide unique and memorable guest experiences. Each member of the empowerment team can spend up to \$500 to create a positive guest experience. By hiring individuals with the foundational employability skills that fit the hospitality culture and reinforcing those skills and values, the TradeWinds goal is to have an employee empowerment team numbering 1,100.

Equity Residential – A Large National Real Estate Management Company

Just as TradeWinds seeks to align the foundational competencies of new hires with their company culture, the culture at Equity Residential defines the framework of their hiring process. Equity Residential is a large (about 3,000 employees) real estate management company that owns and manages multi-unit residential buildings in growing markets across the country. The company expects team members to “Live the Ten Ways.” These are:

- **Question Authority.** Question the direction, offer new ideas and help us make the right decision when something appears inefficient, ineffective or just plain wrong.
- **Do the Right Thing.** Let your conscience, and good sense, be your guide. Honesty, integrity and personal responsibility are basic tenets of a winning culture.
- **Listen, Not Just Hear.** Give others your full attention, acknowledge – and consider – what they’re saying.
- **See the Glass Half Full.** Be optimistic and bring positive energy to your team and your customers.
- **Take Educated Risks.** Confront new or difficult situations, weigh the upside and the downside of options with others and make the best decision together.
- **Share Knowledge.** Be open to different perspectives and sharing expertise. Top performance comes by collaborating with others. Be a student and a teacher every day.
- **Walk the Talk.** Do what you say. Practice what you preach. Deliver on your commitments.
- **Share the Spotlight.** Our own success always involves the efforts of others. Recognize those people who have contributed to your success. They’ll feel appreciated and you’ll have gained their respect.
- **Enjoy the Ride.** Keep fun in the agenda.
- **Test Your Limits.** Embrace change and push past your comfort zone to reach new levels of success. When you grow, we all grow.

The alignment of the “Ten Ways” with the Common Employability Skills is clear. For example, “question authority” requires strong communication skills. And, “sharing knowledge” – being open to different perspectives – equals teamwork. “Walking the talk” – doing what you say and delivering on your commitment relates to integrity.

Equity Residential Critical Employability Skills

Communication

Teamwork

Integrity

Respect

Equity Residential

Hiring process aligned to
company culture

Behavioral interviewing in
the context of culture

Hiring done by three-person team

Equity Residential has developed a hiring process that seeks job candidates who will embrace the “Ten Ways” and possess the foundational skills that enable them to do so. The hiring process itself also exemplifies the company culture in its focus on team and consensus decision-making. Each entry-level hire – of a leasing consultant, a customer service associate or a maintenance technician – is interviewed by a three-person team after an initial screening process by the recruiter. Each hiring team consists of:

1. Subject matter expert or peer to the new hire who deeply understands the job and what it takes to be successful.
2. Human Resources representative who frames and assesses responses to behavioral interview questions.
3. Hiring manager who assesses the candidate’s fit for the team.

This team meets with and interviews job candidates as a group. A behavioral interview process is used with the questions framed in the context of the “Ten Ways.” “Tell us about a time when you had to ask a supervisor a question that made you nervous,” is an example of a question used in the process.

The hiring team ultimately comes to a consensus decision as to whether or not to hire the candidate. No single team member has more ‘votes’ or influence than another. In the rare case there is absolute disagreement and a consensus cannot be reached, another member is added to the team to interview the candidate.

Equity Residential takes great pride in the fact that the company has one of the lowest employee turnover rates in their industry. Jonakan O’Steen, First Vice President, Organization and Talent Development, credits that low turnover to a strong commitment to maintaining the company culture and to a recruitment and hiring process that is built around those Ten Ways.

Roll Forming Corporation – A Mid-Sized European-Owned Manufacturing Plant

As employers identify the foundational skills most critical for their workplace and seek to develop hiring policies and processes that can assess those skills in potential employees, the impact of the external environment – society, the economy – inevitably becomes a part of the equation. Roll Forming Corporation is an Austrian-owned, metal-shaping manufacturing company with its U.S. headquarters in Kentucky. The company recognizes that the current tight labor market makes it difficult to find and hire individuals with both the technical and foundational skills the company needs. This has led to an adjustment of policy and the adoption of tools to address these challenges.

The current low unemployment rate and slow growth of the labor force have created a situation where employers may not be able to be as selective about new hires as they might prefer to be – particularly for entry-level positions. It is, therefore, even more critical to understand the foundational skills and competencies that an individual has or lacks.

As Ray Leathers, recently retired President at Roll Forming, puts it, if you must hire a square peg to fill a round hole because you simply cannot find a square peg, then understanding that person and how and why they will react and behave the way they do is critically important. Why? Because then there is an opportunity, through coaching, training and leadership, to ‘round off’ the square edges and help the employee succeed in his or her role.

Roll Forming
Critical Employability Skills

Initiative

Teamwork

Integrity

Respect

Roll Forming
Predictive Index Tool

Focus on coaching to develop
Common Employability Skills

Roll Forming Corporation uses the Predictive Index (PI) Behavioral Assessment to better understand current and potential employees. The PI is a scientifically-validated assessment that measures four core behavioral drivers that predict workplace behaviors and motivating needs. In an ideal hiring situation, the open position would be profiled and only candidates whose PI Assessment fits the profile would be considered for the opportunity.

But, because the pool of candidates for entry level positions is currently so small, it is counterproductive to use the PI to further narrow the pool to only those candidates who fit the position profile. In this tight labor market then, the PI transforms into a management rather than a hiring tool. It allows management to understand why an individual behaves the way he or she does, and can help frame a coaching and training plan to address those behaviors.

Moving Forward

Four very different companies. Four different approaches, each in a different sector, each with its own challenges, but each with a desire to hire entry-level employees with the skills and attributes that position them to succeed in the immediate job and potential future jobs. Each company values the various employability skills differently. And each company has integrated the assessment of these skills into their hiring processes.

While there are many differences among these companies, the common thread is that each can clearly articulate the foundational skills and competencies needed by entry-level employees, and they have intentionally created processes and policies to identify, assess and coach those skills. In reviewing these four profiles, a few generalized conclusions emerge:

- The size of company, the industry sector, the functions of the open position, the company culture, etc., all influence which Common Employability Skills are critical, and the importance placed on one skill or competency over another.
- There is no single answer on how to assess the Common Employability Skills in job candidates.
- Company culture is an important lens through which employers' view and assess the Common Employability Skills.
- Defining the set of key skills most important to the job in question is critical to developing areas of inquiry during the hiring process.
- A disciplined interview structure, with questions designed to elicit how the applicant has demonstrated the key skills in question, is often an important component of the hiring process.
- The skills and competencies needed to conduct an interview and assess a candidate's answers and fit for the position are critical to the process. Providing training and support for the interviewer or hiring manager pays dividends.
- The opportunity to observe a candidate through an internship or other work-and-learn experiences improves the chances of a successful hire.
- The current economic environment of "full employment" significantly impacts hiring, particularly at the entry level. The pool of applicants is small, so employers are often faced with hiring whoever shows interest regardless of a demonstration of the Common Employability Skills. The opportunity, then, is to coach and train to develop these critical skills and competencies.

RESOURCES AND READING

National Network Common Employability Skills

http://nationalnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Common_Employability_Skills-03-30-152.pdf

A Guide to Conducting Behavioral Interviews with Early Career Job Candidates

[https://www.shrm.org/LearningAndCareer/learning/Documents/Behavioral Interviewing Guide for Early Career Candidates.pdf](https://www.shrm.org/LearningAndCareer/learning/Documents/Behavioral%20Interviewing%20Guide%20for%20Early%20Career%20Candidates.pdf)

Hospitality Employer Toolkit

<http://nationalnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Hospitality-Employer-Toolkit-AHLA.pdf>

Predictive Index

<https://www.predictiveindex.com/>

12 Effective Ways to Assess Candidates' Soft Skills

<https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/interview-questions/2017/assessing-soft-skills-is-one-of-the-biggest-interviewing-challenges-here-are-12-ways-to-overcome-it>

Don't Hire Anyone Without Me!

A Revolutionary Approach to Interviewing & Hiring the Best

<https://store.shrm.org/don-t-hire-anyone-without-me.html>

Report from Burning Glass Technology:

The Human Factor: The Hard Time Employers Have Finding Soft Skills

<https://www.burning-glass.com/research-project/baseline-skills/>

About the National Network of Business and Industry Associations

The National Network includes leaders in the manufacturing, retail, professional and business, real estate, health care, energy, construction, hospitality, transportation and information technology sectors, which represent the source of nearly 75 percent of projected U.S. job growth by 2020 (an estimated 30 million new jobs). These leaders are united in their commitment to help individuals understand and gain the skills they need to enter into and advance in the jobs of today and tomorrow. This unprecedented collaboration of typically competitive industries signals a commitment to support a better prepared and more fulfilled workforce. For more information, please visit nationalnetwork.org.

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MEMBERS

American Hotel & Lodging Association

American Land Title Association

APICS

American Public Transportation Association

American Trucking Associations

American Welding Society

Argentum

Association for Manufacturing Technology

Center for Energy Workforce Development

CompTIA

Food Marketing Institute

Home Builders Institute

IPC- Association Connecting Electronics Industries

International Code Council

Interstate Renewable Energy Council

The Manufacturing Skill Standards Council

National Apartment Association Education Institute

National Center for Construction Education & Research

National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence

National Institute for Metalworking Skills

National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation

National Retail Federation Foundation

National Tooling and Machining Association

Society for Human Resource Management

Transportation Intermediaries Association

Western Association of Food Chains

