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Giving Employers What They Don't Really Want

By Robert J. Sternberg JUNE 17, 2013



Brian Taylor for The Chronicle

Often what we think other people think is not what they think. For example, Michael Barnes and I conducted a study some years ago, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, on the extent to which partners in intimate relationships understood what each other wanted. We computed the correlation between what one partner actually wanted and what the other thought he or she wanted. On a scale of 0 to 1, the correlation was a meager 0.3. In other words, even people in intimate relationships don't know very well what each other wants.

The stakes for understanding our partner's wants in an intimate setting are pretty high. Equally high for academe are the stakes for understanding what employers want in college graduates. Students pay many thousands of dollars for a college education in order to prepare themselves for the job market. If the college or university is providing the wrong stuff, that's a poor investment for the students.

Reading the recent literature in the field of higher education, you might notice that what educators think employers want involves several trends:

1. Employers want students to have college majors that provide them with readily transferable job knowledge and skills. The more professional the major, the better.
2. They want students who have had access to top-quality means of knowledge transfer. In this view, perhaps MOOCs are hot because, in the ideal, the lectures would cost the students (and the colleges) next to nothing and be taught by the most famous scholars in the world.
3. They want students who have demonstrated, through grades and standardized-test scores, that they are high achievers. In addition, employers want evidence of knowledge acquired in college.

The problem is that none of those three assertions holds up well, at least according to two recent surveys of what employers really want, one conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the other by *The Chronicle*.

What do employers want? The association surveyed

(<http://www.aacu.org/leap/presidentstrust/compact/2013SurveySummary.cfm>) employers in the business and nonprofit sectors to find out what they most value in hiring college graduates.

With regard to Trend No. 1, 93 percent of the employers surveyed said that "a demonstrated capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems is more important than [a candidate's] undergraduate major." They were not saying that a student's major does not matter, but that, overwhelmingly, the thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills a job candidate has acquired in college are more important than the specific field in which the applicant earned a degree. Looking at successful leaders in business and in the nonprofit sector, you find that they have majored in everything under the sun. Many ended up, by choice, pursuing careers in fields other than the one in which they majored.

On Trend No. 2, the association's survey found that "more than nine in 10" employers surveyed said it was important that job candidates "demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity; intercultural skills; and the capacity for continued new learning. More than 75 percent of employers say they want more emphasis on five key areas, including critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings."

Those are not skills optimally developed through passive learning in lecture settings, including MOOCs. Rather, they are skills developed through active learning in settings that encourage dialogue, give-and-take, real-world problem-solving, and active mentorship. Put another way by the association, "Across many areas tested, employers strongly endorse educational practices that involve students in active, effortful work—practices including collaborative problem-solving, internships, senior projects, and community engagements."

As for Trend No. 3, educators seem to assume that employers want concrete evidence of achievement, in the form of grades, for example. But, the association's survey found, "employers consistently rank outcomes and practices that involve application of skills over acquisition of discrete bodies of knowledge." High grades on tests just don't cut it alone in terms of the broader knowledge and skills that employers value.

If we were to summarize the survey results, we might say that employers want the knowledge and skills that will be crucial not only to a student's first job, but also to his or her second, third, and fourth jobs. They want a student who has learned how to learn and how to adapt flexibly to rapidly changing demands. They're not all that concerned about specific majors or things like what gets academic credit and what does not.

The Chronicle also conducted a survey of employers (<http://chronicle.com/items/biz/pdf/Employers%20Survey.pdf>), with similar results. It found, for example, that employers tend to place more emphasis on practical work and internships than on academic work. As *The Chronicle* survey also reported:

- College graduates were most lacking in "written and oral communication skills, adaptability and managing multiple priorities, and making decisions and problem-solving."
- "Only 19 percent of employers look for specific majors and do not consider candidates without them, while the majority—78 percent—will consider any major."
- "Executives are least interested in considering candidates with specific majors (14 percent)."

Again, the survey did not say that major does not matter—simply that other qualifications matter more.

Why do we as educators often misperceive what employers want? Why are many of our impressions about what they want not entirely or even barely correct? At the very least, several current emphases in the higher-education literature do not seem to match well with the real demands of employers. Given that many students' main goal in going to college is to find a good job, why do we read so much about MOOCs, majors, and college-credit acquisition? Those issues may be important, but—according to the employer surveys—they are not central to generating the skills that best lead to employability.

Daniel Kahneman and the late Amos Tversky, two of the great cognitive psychologists, have proposed that many of our errors in thinking are a result of cognitive habits that work some of the time but not all of the time. Two such habits are representativeness and availability.

Representativeness is the degree to which something is similar in its essential characteristics to whatever population of things it is viewed as representing. The college major, for example, seems representative of what employers look for, because a major in a particular field seems to be what employers in that field want in a candidate. The student's major is viewed as representing the job. In some cases, it well may. But the association's survey makes clear that employers care more about ethics, critical thinking, creative thinking, and common sense. So in that case, representativeness leads us astray.

The cognitive habit of availability is thinking that what comes easily to mind must certainly be important. The more we hear about college majors, MOOCs, and college credit for knowledge acquired outside the campus, for example, the more we may think that those things are important and provide the answers to our problems, whatever the problems may be. So solutions to other problems somehow seem to become solutions to the problem of employability, even though they are not.

For those who really care about most students' No. 1 concern, employability, it would behoove them to read the results of those two surveys carefully. They tell us what employers really want—not just what we imagine they want—and, more important, what students need to succeed in life.

And they tell us that creative, critical, practical, and wisdom-based decision-making and problem-solving skills, along with a mindset of lifelong learning and a strong work ethic, are far more important than current fads in the literature.