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# Survey of Employers' Satisfaction with Western Washington Graduates

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Survey of Employers' Satisfaction  
with Western Washington Graduates

Report 1991-04

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## Executive Summary

This report compiled information gathered in interviews with a sample of personnel managers and direct supervisors of organizations employing Western Washington University graduates from one to three years after their graduation.

Personnel managers were questioned first. When asked to rate their emphasis of nine qualities of general employment, work or internship experience received the highest ratings of "great" emphasis. Having a broad liberal arts background received the highest ratings of "little" or "no" emphasis.

A majority of personnel managers preferred that employees be flexible (47.4%), or valued skill training and flexibility equally (41.8%). It was also discovered that while 58.8% of Western graduates were hired into jobs requiring a Bachelor's degree, another 27% were hired into jobs that required only an Associate of Arts, technical, or high school degree.

When asked how satisfied overall they were with Western graduates, personnel managers overwhelmingly said they were "very" satisfied (80.6%).

Next, interviews were done with the direct supervisors of the same Western graduates. Direct supervisors were asked to list the two most important specific skills required to do the job Western graduates had been hired into, then to rate from excellent to poor the graduate's performance in these two areas. Direct supervisors rated graduates excellent to good in both skills (89.8% for the first, 88.3% for the second).

Direct supervisors were also asked to characterize the skill demands of the job held by Western graduates. They rated reliability as the most important ability in any new employee, and rated reliability in Western graduates highest of sixteen listed characteristics. When compared, other characteristics most important to the skill demands of the job also generated the highest ratings of Western graduates.

When asked how well Western graduates were prepared for the job they were hired to do in relation to what was expected of a typical new employee, direct supervisors rated Western graduates as "much better" or "a little better" in the following areas: mathematical skills (68.6%); broad educational background (66.7%); and specific skills required for the job (66.4%).

## Introduction

The interviews that make up the main body of this report were conducted with the personnel managers and direct supervisors of organizations employing Western Washington University graduates from one to three years of their graduation. These interviews are referred to as protocols; there is one protocol for each group of interviewees. In the case of small companies, it was often one person who answered both sets of questions. The first section of this report reviews the data collected from those interviews.

The Career Planning and Placement Center supplied a list of recent Western graduates who had reported that they had found employment. From these graduates came a randomized and weighted sample of 440. After receiving the graduates approval, their employers were contacted and interviewed. In all, there were 250 respondents to the survey. A more detailed discussion of the research methods used in the administration of the survey can be found in Appendix A at the back of this report.

It should be noted that the information gathered in these interviews represents a broad mix of skills across various jobs, as well as within jobs. Thus, certain skills of great value to one employer may not be nearly as valuable to another--for instance, computer skills might be emphasized highly by a computer company, but emphasized little by a machine shop--and cause the percentage rating of a specific skill area to swing from quite high to very low and appear overall as a quality of "moderate" importance.

Additionally, since the graduates sampled were from one to three years of their graduation, in many cases the jobs they held at the time of the interviews were temporary, not within the graduate's degree area, or both. Of last introductory note is the fact that the sample was too small to analyze by college major or other such specific areas.

## First Protocol: Personnel Manager Interview

### Employers' General Hiring Practices

The first question asked of personnel managers was for the number of persons employed by their organization. Of the 234 respondents to this question, 112 employed from one to 100 people, 82 employed between 101 and 1000 people, and 40 employed 1001 people or more. For this report these organization sizes will be referred to as small, medium, and large.

Personnel managers were then asked: "When you are hiring college graduates, how much does your organization emphasize each of the qualities I will list? Do you emphasize each a great deal, a moderate amount, a little, or not at all." In all, nine qualities were listed.

Among those nine qualities, work or internship experience received the highest percentage of "great deal" ratings at 51.1%. Writing skills received the second highest percentage of "great deal" ratings at 44.7%. As well, these two qualities rated lowest in the "little" or "not" categories.

A graduate's college grade point average (GPA) rated low in the "great deal" category (18.1%), but was highest overall in the "moderate" category (54.0%). Having a broad liberal arts background received the highest percentage of "little" or "not" important ratings (51.4%), as well as being rated lowest in the "great deal" category (10.2%).

Five qualities addressed areas of a graduate's background. These areas included the above mentioned background in liberal arts, as well as backgrounds in human behavior, business, computers, and technical skills. Of the five, backgrounds in technical skills and human behavior had the highest ratings of "a great deal" of emphasis at 38.8% and 35.2% respectively. (For a complete analysis of all the qualities see, Table 1 below.)

Cross referencing organization size with the qualities listed in Table 1 produced data of some interest. For instance, when hiring new employees, large size organizations emphasized computer background more often than did medium or small size organizations. On the other hand, strong letters of reference were of little or no importance to large size organizations, but of great to moderate importance to medium and small size organizations. Finally, writing skills, a background in human behavior, and college GPA were more important to medium and large size organizations than they were to small size organizations.

Next, personnel managers were asked which was most important: that prospective employees be trained in specific

**TABLE 1:**  
**Qualities Emphasized by Personnel**  
**Officers when Hiring New Graduates**

| <b>Qualities</b>   | <b>Percent Rating<br/>Importance<br/>"Great"</b> | <b>Percent Rating<br/>Importance<br/>"Moderate"</b> | <b>Percent Rating<br/>Importance<br/>"Little" or "Not"</b> |
|--|--|---|--|
| Work experience or internship<br>experience in the field | 51.1   | 36.2  | 12.7   |
| Writing skills   | 44.7   | 37.2  | 18.1   |
| Technical background                                     | 38.8   | 37.0  | 24.2   |
| Human behavior background                                | 35.2   | 36.6  | 28.2   |
| Strong letters of reference                              | 32.0   | 45.9  | 22.1   |
| Computer background                                      | 23.5   | 44.3  | 32.2   |
| Business background                                      | 21.2   | 44.1  | 34.7   |
| College grade point average                              | 18.1   | 54.0  | 27.9   |
| Broad liberal arts background                            | 10.1   | 38.5  | 51.4   |

skills required for the job, that they be flexible and able to learn new skills, or that they be both well trained in specific skills and flexible. Only 10.8% of the respondents favored training in specific skills. The majority of employers preferred that employees be flexible (47.4%), or valued skill training and flexibility equally (41.8%).

Cross referencing organization size and preferred type of preparation also produced data of some interest. Small and large size organizations valued flexibility most, while medium size organizations considered flexibility and skill training equally important. No employment manager in the large organizations indicated specific skill training as most desirable.

#### Employers' Hiring of Western Graduates in Particular

The majority of Western graduates were hired into jobs requiring the Bachelor's degree (58.8%). Another 27% were hired into jobs requiring either an Associate of Arts, technical, or high school degree. By a considerable margin, large and medium size organizations hired more graduates for positions requiring a Bachelor's degree (77.8% and 66.7% respectively) than did small size organizations (47.2%). Accordingly, the data indicates that 52.8% of small size organizations hired graduates into jobs requiring only high school, Associate of Arts, or technical degrees.

Nearly three-quarters (72.2%) of the responding employment managers were familiar enough with the Western graduates hired by their organization to answer the interviewers' questions about them. Of the respondents with that familiarity, 73.2% indicated they hired from one to five Western graduates, while the remaining 26.8% hired from six to forty Western graduates.

When personnel managers were asked, "Overall, how satisfied do you feel your organization is with the Western graduate(s) you have hired?", 80.6% said they were very satisfied. Another 19.4% indicated they were moderately to somewhat satisfied.

#### General Information on Jobs Held by Western Graduates

Most graduates participating in this study were hired in 1985 or 1986. By 1988, when the interviews were conducted, 60.2% of the graduates were still working for the organization that had initially hired them. Of the 39.8% who had left their initial jobs, their former employers listed the following reasons: 26.1% left because they had intended to stay on the job only

temporarily; 23.9% left because they had been hired as temporary employees and their jobs had ended; 6.5% were fired; and 4.3% had to leave because of layoff due to cut-backs. An additional 39.1% quit with no reason given.

#### Status of Western Graduates at the Time of Interview

The survey found that 67.4% of the 142 graduates still working for the same employer were also working at the same job, although 97.7% of those same graduates had received raises since the beginning of their employment. Of the graduates who were working at different jobs, most personnel managers (74.5%) indicated that a promotion had indeed been given.

When personnel managers were asked if the graduate(s) had received any reprimands, only one reprimand was reported.

#### Second Protocol: Direct Supervisor Interview

In the second part of the survey, direct supervisors were interviewed. The first question they were asked was: "What are the two most important specific skills required to the job well?" In other words, the direct supervisors were asked to make a short list of job-specific skills, a list, as would be expected, whose skills varied widely. After the direct supervisors had made their lists, they were asked to rate on a four-point scale ranging from excellent to poor the job performance of the Western graduate in regards to those skills. Direct supervisors rated graduates excellent to good in both skills (89.0% for the first, 88.7% for the second).

Direct supervisors were then asked to indicate how important fourteen different abilities were for good performance on the particular jobs held by Western graduates. They were asked to use the following four-point scale: extremely important, very important, moderately important, or not important. The four abilities that received the highest percentage of "extremely" or "very important" responses were: reliability (96.5%); the ability to cooperate with others (92.9%); the ability to work independently without supervision (92.4%); and the ability to organize well (88.8%). (For a complete analysis of this data, see Table 2.)

An area of interest arose when Tables 1 and 2 were compared. Although there were not many specific skills that were rated by both personnel managers and direct supervisors, one area that was compared was the importance of writing skills to being hired for the job. And on this issue there was a discrepancy.



**TABLE 2:**  
**Direct Supervisor Ratings of**  
**Importance of Fourteen Abilities**

| <b>Abilities</b>                          | <b>Percent Rating Ability<br/>Extremely or Very Important</b> | <b>Percent Rating Ability<br/>Moderately Important</b> |
|---|---|--|
| Reliability                               | 96.5  | 3.6  |
| Cooperate well with others                | 92.9  | 7.1  |
| Work well independently w/out supervision | 92.4  | 7.1  |
| Organize well                             | 88.8  | 9.8  |
| Strong oral communication                 | 85.3  | 13.8   |
| Locate and solve problems                 | 84.4  | 14.7   |
| Willingness and ability to follow orders  | 83.1  | 14.7   |
| Learn new material well                   | 81.3  | 17.8   |
| Deal with the unexpected                  | 81.2  | 17.9   |
| Imagination and creativity                | 56.1  | 37.2   |
| Training in specific skills before hire   | 54.6  | 37.2   |
| Strong writing skills                     | 47.6  | 39.1   |
| Strong management skills                  | 45.5  | 40.1   |
| Strong mathematical skills                | 41.3  | 39.0   |

While personnel managers rated writing skills high (second out of nine in percent of "great" importance), direct supervisors rated them much lower (twelfth out of fourteen in percent of "extremely" or "very" important). To further complicate this issue, cross referencing the importance of writing skills with organization size showed that writing skills were judged only moderately important by small size organizations, but very important by medium and large size organization.

A statistical comparison, or correlation between personal managers and direct supervisors of organizations with 20 or more employees was made. (For smaller organizations, the same individual usually answered both sets of questions, which data would not be appropriate to this discussion.) The figure arrived at (.44) indicated that while personnel managers and direct supervisors might very well agree as to the importance of writing skills, it is just as likely they might not agree.

To dig deeper, ratings by personnel managers of overall satisfaction with the Western graduate(s) they hired, and the ratings of direct supervisors in twenty-four different areas were correlated. Again running the correlations only for businesses of more than twenty employees, there were only three of twenty-four correlations even statistically reliable, and those less than .25. In essence, this one global evaluation by personnel managers is nearly random with respect to ratings by direct supervisors.

In the cases where the direct supervisors were rating specific skill areas like writing or mathematic ability, this finding would have been expected. But when rating general characteristics like reliability or the overall quality of work, such randomness would not have been expected. This discrepancy offers a strong caution in regards to the strategy of obtaining evaluations of university graduates from owners or personnel managers of medium or large companies. Regarding broad hiring policies, personnel managers may indeed be the right people to direct inquiries; regarding reports on the types of job skills necessary for graduates, they no doubt have some information. However, it may be difficult for one central source to provide information on the widely differing types of jobs inside their own organizations. The correlations in this report indicate that there is indeed a possibility that central personnel in large organizations would be unreliable in assessing the performance of graduates from any university except insofar as the evaluation involves whether graduates were promoted or fired, given raises or demerits, etc. Data obtained from personnel managers of large companies might reflect general reputation or status, or impressions based on some particularly noticeable single case, but this may not at all be the kind of knowledge that would help a university do its job better.

After reporting the importance of the fourteen different abilities, direct supervisors were asked to evaluate WWU graduates on sixteen characteristics. In some cases, these characteristics coincided with the abilities the direct supervisors had rated; in other cases, they did not.

When the abilities and characteristics did align closely, responses by direct supervisors were reported among only those who deemed the particular ability as "extremely" or "very" important to the job. In other words, since rating job performance in areas not deemed important to doing the job well would not accurately report how well employees were performing, skills irrelevant to the job were not included in the overall response. This response number (N) was modified in skill areas with a high degree of specificity; in the cases where the rating was for a very general trait, all respondents were included in the comparison. The rating scale used was as follows: excellent, good, fair, and poor.

Comparing the data showed unmistakably that the ability rated most highly by direct supervisors, reliability, coincided with what these same direct supervisors perceived as the highest ranking characteristic of Western graduates--also reliability. The second highest rated ability, to be able to cooperate with others, was also the second highest rated characteristic of Western graduates.

From this point, abilities and characteristics didn't align as tightly, although Western graduates continued to receive high marks in the areas of greatest importance to direct supervisors. For instance, the ability to work well independently ranked third out of fourteen of most important abilities with a 92.4%. As a characteristic of Western graduates, this ability ranked eighth out of sixteen, but in terms of "excellent" or "good" ratings, Western graduates received a respectable 88.8%.

The numbers continued to praise. Direct supervisors gave high ratings to the ability to organize well (88.8% "extremely" or "very" important), and rated Western graduates high in the same area (85.0% "excellent" or "good"). The ability to learn new material well received a 81.3% rating under importance of abilities; it received 92.9% rating when applied directly to Western graduates. (For a complete analysis of the data, see Table 3.)

The last question asked direct supervisors how well Western graduates were prepared for the job they were hired to do. Eight areas were listed, and direct supervisors were asked to rank graduates' preparation as much better, a little better, average, a little worse, or much worse than they would expect for the typical worker new to the job. Again, in skill areas with a

TABLE 3:

Direct Supervisor Ratings of  
Graduates on Sixteen Characteristics

| Characteristics  | N   | % Rating Graduates<br>Excellent or Good | % Rating Graduates<br>Fair or Poor |
|--|-----|---|------------------------------------|
| Reliability  | 204 | 95.1                                    | 4.9                                |
| Cooperate well with others   | 199 | 94.5                                    | 5.5                                |
| Overall quality of work  | *   | 93.4                                    | 6.6                                |
| Learn new material well  | 170 | 92.9                                    | 7.1                                |
| Overall productivity on the job  | *   | 92.0                                    | 7.1                                |
| Overall ease of production   | *   | 92.0                                    | 5.2                                |
| Demonstrated ability to follow<br>orders                               | 175 | 89.7                                    | 10.3                               |
| Demonstrated ability to work well<br>independently without supervision | 196 | 88.8                                    | 11.2                               |
| Enthusiasm about work  | *   | 87.2                                    | 10.4                               |
| Organize well  | 187 | 85.0                                    | 15.0                               |
| Deal with the unexpected   | 170 | 84.1                                    | 15.9                               |
| Imagination and creativity   | 118 | 83.9                                    | 16.1                               |
| Locate and solve problems  | 178 | 83.7                                    | 16.3                               |
| Flexibility to meet changing job<br>demands                            | *   | 83.5                                    | 13.6                               |
| Handle on-the-job stress   | *   | 81.2                                    | 16.3                               |
| Self-evaluation skills   | *   | 75.4                                    | 21.8                               |

\* all 250 respondents included

degree of specificity, the response number (N) was modified to include only those direct supervisors who had deemed that skill area as "extremely" or "very" important to doing the job well.

Western graduates received ratings of over sixty percent "much better" or "a little better" than average than the typical new worker in six of the eight areas polled. The highest ratings were for mathematical skills (68.6%), broad educational background (66.7%), and specific skills required for the job (66.4%). In the area of management skills, Western graduates rated their lowest, but even then over half (52.1%) rated "much better" or "a little better" than the typical new worker. (For a complete analysis of the data, see Table 4.)

TABLE 4:

Preparation of Graduates Compared  
to Typical New Workers

| Area of Preparation                               | N   | % Rating Grad<br>"Above Average" | % Rating Grad<br>"Average" | % Rating Grad<br>"Below Average" |
|---|-----|----------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Mathematical skills                               | 86  | 68.6                             | 31.4                       | 0.0                              |
| Broad educational background                      | *   | 66.7                             | 31.4                       | 1.9                              |
| Specific skills required for job                  | 110 | 66.4                             | 30.9                       | 2.7                              |
| Oral communication skills                         | 169 | 65.7                             | 32.0                       | 2.3                              |
| Ability to contribute new<br>ideas or information | *   | 62.0                             | 34.6                       | 3.4                              |
| Written communication                             | 98  | 60.2                             | 36.7                       | 3.1                              |
| Knowledge of what is expected on the job          | *   | 58.3                             | 35.1                       | 6.6                              |
| Management skills                                 | 96  | 52.1                             | 43.8                       | 4.1                              |

\* all 250 respondents included

## Discussion

According to the data analyzed for this report, Western graduates, overall, are doing well in the workplace. Over 80% of the responding personnel managers were "very satisfied" with Western graduates as employees. As well, direct supervisors rated Western graduates high in the following areas: reliability; the ability to cooperate with others; and overall quality of work. Direct supervisors also rated Western graduates as "much better" or "a little better" than typical new employees in the following areas: broad educational background; oral communication skills; and the ability to contribute new ideas or information.

What is not found in the data, however, is conclusive or extensive evidence of how well Western graduates may be doing in specific skill areas--nor did it expect to. Undoubtedly, knowing how well Western graduates write, compute, manage, or research could be of inestimable value to individual academic departments. If the survey had included a section that made in-depth inquiries into specific skill areas, data concerning how well Western graduates are prepared for jobs requiring those skills could have been gathered.

However, such skill-specific enquiry may very well have effected the interviewing process detrimentally. Busy employers were already being asked to take valuable time from their day; moreover, they had been promised that the interview process would be kept as brief as possible. A more fruitful and wieldy process might be for individual departments to generate surveys specifically oriented to their needs and interest. Indeed, such a survey was designed and implemented by the Human Services Program in the fall of 1990.

One last particular issue of interest was found when looking at what qualities personnel managers were most interested in seeing in new employees. The quality emphasized least by personnel managers was for a potential employee to have a broad liberal arts background. Since Western places a broad liberal arts education in high regard, the possibility of a strong disagreement exists, especially in the current political climate of holding higher education accountable for the quality of its work. Ultimately, however, the question is accountable to whom? To the students who come to Western for an education, or to private industry? It could be argued that private industry is the ultimate consumers of the university's product, educated men and women. It could also be argued that it is students who pay tuition, and students who choose to attend a university with a reputation for a strong liberal arts education.

As in the case of skill-specific inquiry, if the issue of the value of a broad liberal arts background were deemed worthy

of further study, surveys would need to be developed that factored in the attitudes of all three points of view: that of the university, its students, and private industry.



Appendix A

## Research Method

The survey process began by obtaining from the Career Planning and Placement Center a list of 745 recent Western graduates who had reported that they had found employment. After randomization and weighting to more accurately represent the characteristics of Western's graduates, a stratified sample of 440 graduates was drawn. This sample contained 62 graduates employed by the Boeing Company and 378 graduates employed by other organizations.

A letter was then sent to these graduates requesting approval to contact each of their employers. Once approvals were obtained, a letter was mailed to the employer informing them of their inclusion in the study. Employers were also informed that the purpose of the study was not to evaluate their employees, but to assess Western's ability to prepare students for the work force. Assurances were given that interviews would be kept brief and confidential.

A few weeks following the mailing of the employers' letter, twelve sociology students, under professional direction, began conducting the telephone interviews.

As previously noted, both personnel managers and direct supervisors were interviewed. In the cases where more than one graduate had been hired by the organization, separate forms were used for each employee.

Representatives of the Boeing Company expressed reluctance to participate in the survey due to company policies concerning an individual's right to privacy. In an attempt to allay the Boeing Company's concerns, a special short questionnaire (containing 14 rather than 21 items) was customized for them and thirty copies sent. Boeing's education liaison office distributed the questionnaires, but only seven were returned. This low response was explained by Boeing's manager for college relations, who stated that ". . .this is an extremely busy time for the supervisors of most Western graduates since the majority are in production or production support roles."

The final sample on which this study is based consisted of 250 employer interviews. Thus, slightly over half of the interviews were completed, either totally or partially. Most partial interviews did not include the direct supervisors' portion. Usually this omission was due to a change in personnel at the direct supervisory level, with the new supervisor not feeling comfortable enough with the Western employee to comment on their performance.