

Skills, Knowledge and Abilities Employers Seek in New Professionals Entering Careers in the Fed Beef Industry

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Abstract

Plains Nutrition Council members that make hiring decisions (N=129 surveyed; 47 responded) were surveyed to determine skills, knowledge and abilities employers seek in new professionals entering the fed beef industry and to identify how well prepared new professionals were in these areas. For this study, a “new professional” was defined as a person who had completed or was working toward a masters or doctorate degree and was entering an initial career in the cattle feeding business. Of 41 individual skills employers assessed for new employee preparation, the ability to speak a second language was the only item new professionals were believed to be not prepared. Industry employers who participated in this study valued the importance of integrity, honesty and dependability over all other skills. Other skills employers valued included new employees understanding and following directions, listening, initiative and problem solving. General work experience and career-related employment were found as the most valuable experiential learning opportunities new professionals could acquire. Recommendations were made for all stakeholders to promote character education along with leadership and communication skills through both formal and non-formal means. These opportunities could come in the form of course offerings, conference activities, added responsibilities or extracurricular type activities.

Introduction

Pool and Sewell (2007) defined employability as “a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful” (p. 280). Gurcharan et al., (2008) found

employability skills are not job specific, but are applicable across all domains as well as all levels of employment. Even though many college graduates possess excellent academic qualification, a major concern from employers is many graduates do not have the right combination of skills and personal attributes (Daud et al., 2011).

In the rapidly changing business world of the 21st century, partnerships between industry and the educational institutions that produce their future employees are vitally important. Nowhere is this more critical than agriculture. To keep the competitive edge American agriculture has in the world requires a skilled labor force. According to Graham (2001), schools are calling for reform to better prepare their students in higher order thinking skills and reasoning skills. Because of immense increase in technology and the rapidly changing agricultural industry, a need has developed to determine what skills the new, entry-level employee needs in order to succeed. Andelt et al. (1997) posited the more is known about the competencies required for an industry the more employable graduates there will be in the marketplace.

The Plains Nutrition Council (PNC) is comprised of professionals from private consulting, cattle feeding companies, allied industries (feed, nutrition and animal health) and research and extension institutions. Its members account for 85 to 90% of the United States feed yard capacity. This group is vital to the proper nutrition, growth and overall well-being of beef cattle fed in our nation’s cattle feeding yards. However, PNC members also play a role in helping educational institutions prepare masters and doctoral students to become successful employees within this fed beef industry. For all stakeholders to best serve and prepare

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these students for career success several questions need to be addressed. How prepared for a professional career are students entering the fed beef industry? What employability skills are deemed most important to industry employers? What does the future hold in within the profession?

Theoretical Framework

Human Capital Theory served as the theoretical framework for this study. According to Oded and Moav (2002), investing in knowledge, skills and health of workers not only benefits them as a person, it benefits the employer and potential productivity of the organization. Becker (1975) believed declaring an investment in human capital through education and training is as important as investment in other tangible forms of capital. Higher education is a key to this process by improving the overall skills of its graduates, human capital is grown (Knight and Yorke, 2003).

Harvey (2000) listed two sets of attributes employers desire in their employees: interactive and personal. Communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills were described as interactive attributes required by employers. Intellect, knowledge, willingness and ability to learn and continue learning are all personal attributes needed to be successful in the ever-changing work place. Harvey added the willingness to continue learning has become far more important than knowledge to employers. Simmons-McDonald (2009) stated lifelong learning is a critical factor in the employability of an individual.

In a study of employers, Graham (2001) determined university graduates are prepared to enter into entry-level agricultural positions. Yet, Graham also determined a need for graduates to better demonstrate the ability to work in groups, show leadership, dedication and initiative. This need was theorized as “on-the-job awkwardness” which is potentially explainable by needed growth in business skills or even maturity. Graham (2001) recommended from this finding university curriculum needed to be assessed and continued employer feedback was essential.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to determine skills, knowledge and abilities employers seek in new professionals entering careers in the fed beef industry and to identify how well prepared employers perceived new professionals to be in these areas. For this research a new professional was defined as a person who had completed or was working towards a masters or doctorate degree and was entering an initial career in cattle feeding business. The specific research objectives were as follows:

1. Describe the preparation level of new professionals toward skills, knowledge and abilities as perceived by industry employers.
2. Describe the industry employer’s perceived importance of skills, knowledge and abilities needed by new professionals.

3. Determine if difference exists, in the preparation level and importance of skills, knowledge and abilities associated with new professionals to the entry-level positions in the fed beef industry.
4. Determine the value of experiential education in the preparation of new professionals for the fed beef industry.
5. Identify career growth areas in the industry that may affect the preparation of new professionals.

Methodology

The target population of this study consisted of Plains Nutrition Council (PNC) members who make hiring decisions within the fed beef industry (N=129). This group consisted of both private industry employers and post-secondary education faculty. Faculty members were included for their role in hiring masters and doctoral candidates who work on graduate assistantships along with their role in selecting new university faculty.

The survey instrument was a self-administered questionnaire adapted from Graham (2001). Section One of the instrument consisted of items to determine skills, knowledge and abilities needed by new professionals entering careers in the fed beef industry. Employers rated these new employees on their preparedness along with the perceived importance in six areas on a five-point, Likert-type scale. Part Two of the survey was the importance of life experiences for entry-level positions within the industry. Section Three was associated with perceived growth areas for future employment. Employers rated growth areas from one being little growth to seven being significant growth. A panel of three university faculty and four Plains Nutrition Council Members reviewed the instrument to establish content and face validity. Chronbach’s alpha was used to calculate reliability of the instrument at .93 (Gliem and Gliem, 2003). Review of the survey instrument by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the university was required. The chairperson of the university’s IRB approved the research.

Prior to the survey being administered, an introductory letter was sent to prospective survey participants explaining the purpose and importance of the survey. According to Dillman (2000) repeated contact with respondents will increase response rates by 20 – 40 %. Approximately two weeks after the introduction letter was sent, an email was sent with an online link to the survey hosted by Qualtrics.com. Three follow up emails were sent out by researchers. These emails thanked participants who had responded to the survey instrument and encouraged non-respondents their participation in the study was appreciated.

Forty-seven PNC members responded to the survey producing a 36.4% response rate. To control for nonresponse error, comparisons were made between early and late respondents as recommended by Miller and Smith (1983). Survey participants who responded within 21 days of the initial email were classified as early respondents while those completing the survey

after 21 days were classified as late respondents. No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups. Data were analyzed using the SPSS® statistical package for Windows™. For the objectives of this study, means and standard deviations were used for description of the data. With objective three a mean weighted discrepancy score (MWDS) was calculated by taking the importance rating minus the preparation rating and multiplying it by the importance rating.

Results/Findings

Objective One

Objective one sought to describe the preparation level of new professionals toward skills, knowledge and abilities as perceived by industry employers. New professional preparation was divided into five sections titled: interpersonal skills, communication skills, computer skills, character and technical competency. Table 1 lists all items included within the five sections.

Table 1. Employer Mean Values of Preparation Level of New Professionals

Interpersonal Skills	Rank	Mean	SD
Professional Appearance	1	3.41	0.98
Open-minded to new experiences/ideas	2	3.22	0.89
Teamwork skills	3	3.20	0.82
Employee Curiosity	4	3.13	0.89
Initiative	5	3.11	0.99
Willingness to Travel	6	3.00	1.00
Dedication to job	6	3.00	1.03
Etiquette	8	2.91	1.03
Organization skills	9	2.87	0.95
Problem-solving skills	10	2.81	0.97
Creativity skills	11	2.80	0.87
Willingness to Relocate/Move	12	2.65	0.99
Decision-making skills	13	2.64	0.90
Leadership skills	14	2.47	0.89
Global Awareness	15	2.36	0.84
Management/Business skills	16	1.89	0.87
Communication Skills			
Understand and follow instructions	1	3.53	0.87
Presentation Skills	2	3.24	1.15
Telephone Skills	3	3.16	1.00
Verbal expression in speaking	4	3.11	1.11
Technical writing	4	3.11	1.13
Listening	6	2.93	0.89
Creative writing	7	2.40	0.85
Ability to speak a second language	8	1.43	0.66
Computer Skills			
Ability to use the Internet	1	4.52	0.63
Word Processing	2	4.09	0.87
Spreadsheets	3	3.91	1.02
Databases	4	3.17	1.40
Computer graphics	5	2.52	1.21
Computer Control Systems	6	2.33	1.02
Computer aided design	7	2.27	1.12
Computerized accounting systems	8	1.80	0.73
Character			
Integrity	1	3.56	0.99
Honesty	2	3.53	0.92
Dependability	3	3.44	0.97
Technical Competency			
Biological Sciences	1	3.59	0.97
Physical Sciences	2	3.11	0.84
Mathematics	3	2.93	1.15
Environment Sciences	4	2.77	0.96
Social Sciences	5	2.50	0.63
Humanities/ Fine Arts	6	2.32	0.71

Scale: 5=Thoroughly prepared; 4=Good preparation; 3=Prepared; 2=Somewhat prepared; 1=Unprepared

The first section found in objective one was interpersonal skills and consisted of 16 items. Fed beef industry employers rated new professionals entering the field as best prepared in the area of professional appearance. This was followed by open mindedness to new experiences or ideas, teamwork skills and employee curiosity. Thirteen items produced means over 2.50 indicating the new employees were perceived to be prepared in these areas. The interpersonal items with mean scores less than 2.50 were management/business skills, global awareness and leadership skills.

Communication skills were listed in section two and contained eight items. Survey participants deemed new professionals as having good preparation in the ability to understand and follow directions. The next highest rated item was presentation skills. Generated mean scores reflected new professionals to be prepared in six of eight communication items. Ability to speak a second language was rated as the least prepared communication skill.

Eight specific items were measured under computer skills. Ability to use the internet produced the highest mean. Word processing and spreadsheets ranked second and third for preparation. Least preparation was determined to be computerized accounting systems and computer aided design.

Entry-level preparation looked to describe how well new fed beef employees exhibit a variety of character skills. The three items listed under character were honesty, dependability and integrity. All three items produced similar means. Integrity yielded the highest mean and was closely followed by honesty and dependability.

Employers participating in this study were also asked to determine the level of preparation of new professionals in the technical areas of curriculum. From this employers determined this group to be most prepared in biological sciences, physical sciences and mathematics.

Objective Two

Objective two aimed to describe the industry employer’s perceived importance of skills, knowledge and abilities needed by new professionals. With this item researchers hoped to capture the skills employers attached the most importance to with new employees. The items discussed in section one, along with an additional section associated with specific coursework for graduate students, were assessed by survey participants. Table 2 displays findings for all items.

For interpersonal skills thirteen items rated as very important by employers yielding a mean greater than 3.50. The interpersonal skills survey participants rated as most important were initiative, problem-solving skills, dedication to job and decision making skills. Although all items generated means over 3.00, the least important items were determined to be global awareness, creativity skills and willingness to relocate.

Employers regarded listening as the most valuable communication skill. The next highest means were produced by verbal expression in speaking, understand and

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Interpersonal Skills	Rank	Mean	SD
Initiative	1	4.41	0.65
Problem-solving skills	2	4.40	0.61
Dedication to job	3	4.22	0.79
Decision-making skills	4	4.21	0.66
Teamwork skills	5	3.98	0.75
Leadership skills	6	3.77	0.90
Open-minded to new experiences/ ideas	7	3.73	0.69
Management/Business skills	8	3.66	0.82
Willingness to Travel	8	3.66	0.86
Organization skills	10	3.62	0.68
Professional Appearance	11	3.56	0.76
Etiquette	12	3.52	0.81
Employee Curiosity	13	3.51	0.86
Willingness to Relocate/Move	14	3.40	0.96
Creativity skills	15	3.39	0.95
Global Awareness	16	3.14	0.77
Communication Skills			
Listening	1	4.38	0.61
Verbal expression in speaking	2	4.11	0.83
Understand and follow instructions	3	4.02	0.75
Presentation Skills	4	4.00	0.77
Telephone Skills	5	3.61	1.02
Technical writing	6	3.55	0.93
Creative writing	7	3.02	1.13
Ability to speak a second language	8	2.50	1.04
Computer Skills			
Spreadsheets	1	4.10	0.82
Word Processing	2	3.83	0.82
Ability to use the Internet	3	3.80	0.90
Databases	4	3.48	1.09
Computer Control Systems	5	2.56	0.98
Computerized accounting systems	6	2.43	1.04
Computer graphics	7	2.23	1.01
Computer aided design	8	2.07	1.00
Character			
Integrity	1	4.96	0.30
Honesty	2	4.84	0.42
Dependability	3	4.82	0.44
Technical Competency			
Biological Sciences	1	4.30	0.77
Mathematics	2	4.21	0.80
Environmental Sciences	3	3.36	0.97
Physical Sciences	4	3.32	0.80
Social Sciences	5	2.65	0.92
Humanities/ Fine Arts	6	2.11	0.87

Scale: 5=Extremely Important; 4=Very Important; 3=Important; 2=Somewhat important; 1=Unimportant

follow directions and presentation skills. Ability to speak a second language was expressed as the least important communication skill by employers in this study.

Spreadsheets, word-processing and ability to use the internet were ranked as the three most important computer skills valued by survey participants. The next closest items were databases with a mean of 3.48 and computer control systems with a mean of 2.56.

The three items survey participants evaluated with character and importance all produced mean scores close to 5.00 (Extremely important). The mean scores produced for the three items were 4.96 for integrity, 4.84 for honesty and 4.82 for dependability.

In the technical areas of curriculum the employers who completed the survey instrument placed the greatest importance upon biological sciences. Mathematics produced the second highest mean and was followed by environmental sciences and physical sciences.

Finally within objective two employers rated the importance of eleven academic courses for graduate

students. The courses employers rated as most important to new professionals entering the fed beef industry were nutrition courses, leadership courses and research methods courses. The courses with the lowest means were social science, human resources and foreign language.

Objective Three

The third objective aimed to determine if difference exists, in the preparation level and importance of skills, knowledge and abilities associated with new professionals to the entry-level positions in the fed beef industry. An overall mean for interpersonal skills, communication skills, computer skills, character and technical competency was calculated for preparation and importance. The difference between these two sets of numbers (multiplied by importance rating) was also figured as a mean weighted discrepancy score (MWDS). Table 3 shows complete findings for this objective.

The section of character produced the highest overall mean score for both importance and preparation. However, this section also had the greatest MWDS at 6.64, indicating the largest need for better preparation of graduates. The next greatest MWDS was found between importance and preparation in the area of interpersonal skills. A similar MWDS was found for the area of communication. The smallest MWDS between perceived importance and student preparation was for computer skills.

Objective Four

The fourth objective of this study looked to determine the value of experiential education in the preparation of new professionals for the fed beef industry. Eight items comprised this objective and were led by general work experience closely followed by career related employment, career related internship and thesis/ dissertation. The four experiences employers put the least value toward were international experience, officer

	Preparation		Importance		MWDS ²
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Interpersonal Skills	2.84	0.38	3.76	0.38	3.46
Communication Skills	2.86	0.66	3.72	0.71	3.20
Computer Skills	3.08	1.00	3.06	0.82	0.04
Character	3.51	0.05	4.87	0.06	6.64
Technical Competency	2.87	0.45	3.33	0.86	1.51

²MWDS=(importance-preparation) x importance

	Rank	Mean	SD
General Work Experience	1	3.86	0.88
Career Related Employment	2	3.70	0.88
Career Related Internship	3	3.52	0.98
Thesis or Dissertation	3	3.52	1.27
Bilingual	5	2.65	1.09
Active Student Club Member	6	2.26	0.93
Officer of a Student Club	7	2.16	0.94
International Experience	7	2.16	0.97

Scale: 1=not important; 2=somewhat important; 3=important; 4=very important; 5=extremely important

of a student club, active student club member and bilingual. Complete results are listed in Table 4.

Objective Five

The fifth and final objective of this study identified changing trends in the industry that will affect the preparation of graduate students for the fed beef industry. Specifically top growth areas for employment in the fed beef industry for the next five to ten years were evaluated. Technology knowledge was projected to have the most future growth potential. This future growth area was followed by data management, logistics and international relations. The area determined to show the least future growth was cooperative extension. Table 5 highlights scores for the fifth objective.

Conclusions

Of the 41 individual skills assessed in this study, the ability to speak a second language was the only item where employers perceived new professionals to be unprepared but this was also the lowest ranked item in importance by employers. On the other end of the scale new professionals were felt to be most prepared in regards to the three computer skills which included use of the internet, word processing and spreadsheets. Other items employers felt entry-level employees had received good preparation included technical competence in biological sciences, the ability to understand and follow directions in communications and all three skills listed under character. Professional appearance and open minded to new experiences were the highest rated items measured under interpersonal skills.

Employers who completed this study rated 36 items higher in importance than preparation. Integrity, honesty and dependability were the three skills survey participants valued as having the greatest importance. Other skills employers ranked highly were ability to understand and follow directions, initiative and problem-solving skills. Items determined to be least important in

this study included four of the eight computer skills along with the ability to speak a foreign language.

In evaluation of differences between preparation levels and importance of skills, the area of character produced the greatest separation of means. This was due primarily to the high value placed on the importance of character; new professionals were evaluated to be best prepared in these skills. The other two skill areas that highlighted a potential need for improved education or training were interpersonal skills and communication. Less need for enhanced preparation of new professionals was found for technical competence in curriculum and computer skills.

Employers valued general work experience and career related employment as the most valuable experiential learning opportunities new professionals could acquire. Not surprisingly, course work was shown to be most valued for nutrition. This was followed by courses in leadership and then research methods. The projection of top growth area for employment in the fed beef industry within five to ten years showed technology knowledge, data management and logistics as having the most potential for future growth.

Recommendations and Implications

The target population of this study consisted of Plains Nutrition Council (PNC) members who make hiring decisions within the fed beef industry (N=129). This group consisted of both private industry employers and post-secondary education faculty. Forty-seven surveys were completed for a response rate of 36.4%, caution should be utilized in interpretation of results and generalizations to other populations should not occur. However based on this benchmark data it is recommended all parties involved consider the following:

1. Fed beef industry employers who participated in this study valued the importance of integrity, honesty and dependability over all other skills. Additionally, survey participants believed new professionals entering the field had received good preparation in this area. However the greatest discrepancy between skill importance and preparation was found between these three items. With this in mind, new fed beef industry professionals need not take the significance of character for granted. Further, those teaching and training future employees must remember the importance of not only teaching character skills, but also of modeling these characteristics. With this all business professionals should recall education of students or even employees does not just include training associated with technical skills, but also personal attributes such as honesty and integrity (Harvey, 2000).
2. Each year PNC members meet at their annual conference in order to share information and exchange ideas. This gathering includes industry professionals, university faculty and masters and

Table 5. Predicted Change in Trends Relative to Employment in the Next 5-10 Years

Career Areas	Rank	Mean	SD
Technology Knowledge	1	5.35	0.97
Data Management	2	4.95	1.27
Logistics	3	4.88	0.97
International Relations	4	4.67	1.29
Consumer Relations	5	4.57	1.13
Cattle Health Assessment	6	4.56	1.35
Cattle End Point Selection	6	4.56	1.37
Communications	8	4.53	1.30
Education & Training	9	4.33	1.18
Middle Management	10	4.12	1.13
Ingredient Procurement	11	4.07	1.42
Equipment Knowledge	12	3.90	1.30
Marketing Consultant on Staff	13	3.88	1.22
Nutrition Consultants on Staff	14	3.76	1.30
Upper Management	15	3.74	1.18
Cattle Procurement	16	3.63	1.40
Veterinarian Consultant on Staff	17	3.60	1.22
Human Resource Management	18	3.37	0.95
Grazing Management	19	3.37	1.13
Cooperative Extension Agents	20	1.88	0.96

Scale: 1= Little Growth in this Area; 7=Significant Growth in this Area

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doctoral students looking to enter the profession on a full time basis. One feature of the conference is a poster competition for the graduate students in attendance. This study supports the inclusion of this activity to enhance the student's communication skills. Discussions of research along with follow up questions and answers can promote better listening and oral communication skills. In this study a slight discrepancy was shown between importance and preparedness for listening which ranked as the most important communication by employers but was in the bottom half of this category for preparation. Findings also showed employers valued all verbal skills ahead of either writing construct with exception of ability to speak a second language. Additional communication within the conference is recommended between personnel in private industry and our educational institutions. Although informal conversations occur between these two groups, round table discussions might provide a formal avenue to address best opportunities to enhance and update curriculum along with other educational activities. Past research supported discussions such as this (Graham, 2001; Oded and Moav, 2002; Becker, 1975; Knight and Yorke, 2003).

3. General work experience rated as the most valuable experiential learning opportunity by participants in this study. This information should be shared with undergraduate or even high school age students. Career internship opportunities should also be explored by both graduate and undergraduate students alike based on study findings. It is plausible this experiential education will heighten student's abilities in understanding and following directions, initiative and problem solving.
4. In line with the profession, nutrition courses were ranked as most important to entry-level employees with ties to the Plains Nutrition Council. However leadership courses came in second out of the 11 course options. This was ahead of research methods, biochemistry and statistics. However, leadership skills ranked near the bottom for preparation of all interpersonal items. With this university, faculty should look for curriculum opportunities to enhance leadership development of its graduate students. These opportunities could come in the form of course offerings, added responsibilities or even extracurricular type activities. PNC members should also explore potential leadership workshops at its annual conference or other educational events graduate students might attend.
5. This study provides baseline data regarding the perceptions of PNC members who make hiring decisions relative to new employees and their level of preparation for entry-level jobs. More in-depth research with employers should be performed to add to this pool of data (Graham, 2001). An addi-

tional study with new fed beef industry employees should also be conducted to analyze their self-perceived preparation level relative to their new career. Further, qualitative research methods such as one on one interview and focus groups should be considered as well. As previously stated, the more is known about the competencies required for the industry the more employable graduates there will be in the marketplace (Andelt et al., 1997).

6. Although entry-level employees were considered to be prepared for entry into the fed beef industry, room for improved training of graduate students was also shown. Industry employers should keep in mind all new employees no matter age or experience will require some level of training (Graham, 2001). Graduate students entering the fed beef industry should also keep in mind the value of personal initiative in learning a new career. All stakeholders should also be aware of the need for continual assessment of best educational practices for best preparation of future fed beef industry employees.

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