

5 skills college grads need to get a job

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(Photo: Thinkstock)

The job market for recent college graduates is improving, according to a new survey by CareerBuilder. Sixty-five percent of employers report that they plan to hire new grads this year, up 8% from last year.

Not only should it be easier for newly-minted degree holders to land a job, but they can also expect higher salaries than in the past. One-third of employers say that they plan to pay more this year than in 2014, with 25% offering salaries of \$50,000 or more. Overall, hiring for the class of 2014-2015 should be up by 16%, according to a survey of 5,700 employers by [Michigan State University](#).

But all is not rosy for today's young workers. While many companies have open positions and are eager to hire, they report having trouble finding qualified candidates to fill those positions. Twenty-one percent of employers surveyed by CareerBuilder said they didn't feel that colleges were doing enough to prepare students for the working world.

The problem isn't that new grads don't have the right degrees or technical know-how. Only 10% of employers said there weren't enough graduates with the appropriate degrees and just 13% said students lacked computer or technical skills. But employers are troubled by graduates' lack of soft skills. Many report that college grads are lacking in people skills and have trouble solving problems and thinking creatively.

New degree holders often fail to make a positive impression from the get-go, with employers surveyed by Michigan State reporting problems with "lackluster resumes and slipshod cover letters." Recruiters report that many interviewees are unmotivated and unfocused, and that they have unrealistic expectations when it comes to salaries.

The lesson for young grads? Having a college degree and technical skills isn't enough to land their first job. They also need these five other skills, according to employers who responded to the CareerBuilder survey.

1. People skills

Being able to appropriately communicate and interact with other people sounds simple, but it's something a lot of young workers struggle with, say employers and educators. Fifty-two percent of companies that responded to the [Career Builder](#) survey said recent grads lacked interpersonal skills.

MORE: [Your employer is not your friend, and young people know it \(http://www.cheatsheet.com/business/your-employer-isnt-your-friend-and-millennials-know-it.html/?a=viewall\)](http://www.cheatsheet.com/business/your-employer-isnt-your-friend-and-millennials-know-it.html/?a=viewall)

Young people looking for their first job shouldn't underestimate how far strong people skills can take them. Good interpersonal skills can make even a candidate with a less-marketable degree an appealing hire, said Lee Burdett Williams, the dean of students at Wheaton College in Massachusetts, in an essay for [Inside Higher Ed](#), while a lack of people skills may doom a college graduate to unemployment. "Liberal arts plus decent interpersonal skills — the ability to converse, to make eye contact, to speak in complete sentences, to recognize one's responsibility, to listen to another perspective — equal fairly decent job prospects," she wrote.

"We need to be certain our students know how to give a good firm handshake, look someone in the eye and introduce themselves. We need to reinforce the importance of deadlines. We need to address (dare I say it?) personal hygiene and appropriate dress," she added.

2. Problem-solving skills

Forty-six percent of employers said that recent college graduates have poor problem-solving skills. Tests of students' skills suggest they're right. When researchers at the Council for Aid to Education recently tested the problem-solving and critical thinking abilities of college seniors at more than 150 schools across the U.S., they found that although the majority demonstrated adequate skills in this area, 40% were deficient.

MORE: [Should you get a job in college? \(http://www.cheatsheet.com/personal-finance/should-you-get-a-job-in-college.html/?a=viewall\)](http://www.cheatsheet.com/personal-finance/should-you-get-a-job-in-college.html/?a=viewall)

"This is a generation that has been 'syllabused' through their lives," Marie Artim, vice president of talent acquisition for Enterprise, told The Washington Post. "Decisions were made for them, so we're less likely to find someone who can pull the trigger and make a decision."

3. Oral communication skills

Oral communication is another area where employers say that recent graduates need help. Forty-one percent of employers say the young people they're looking to hire lack this skill. Given that this generation has grown up in a world where digital communication is the norm, it's not surprising that some may struggle with more traditional ways of sharing information.

Struggles with verbal communication for young graduates go beyond not being able to give a polished presentation or answer the phone (the latter is a task that many of them would prefer to avoid). Recent graduates may also not understand how to adjust their speaking style in different situations. A style that is perceived as too casual or laid back can be a big turnoff to employers, especially those in more conservative industries.

MORE: [The 5 worst things to do in a job interview \(http://www.cheatsheet.com/personal-finance/the-5-worst-things-to-do-during-a-job-interview.html/?a=viewall\)](http://www.cheatsheet.com/personal-finance/the-5-worst-things-to-do-during-a-job-interview.html/?a=viewall)

"Students can be a little too open and too friendly and that makes recruiters concerned about how they will handle things when they work with clients," Michael Meredith, an assistant professor at the Kenan-Flager Business School at the [University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill](#), told the BBC.

Many graduates may not realize that their oral communication skills are a turnoff to potential employers because they tend to rate their abilities highly in this area. Sixty-two percent of students surveyed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities said they were well prepared in the area of oral communication. Just 28% of employers felt the same way.

4. Leadership skills

Sixty-three percent of millennials want to lead in the workplace, according to The Hartford's 2013 Millennial Leadership Survey. But this is another area where they seem to be falling short, say employers. Forty percent of companies looking to hire new graduates say that this group needs better leadership skills.

Generational differences in leadership styles may be one reason employers are giving recent graduates low marks in this area. Millennials are less interested in traditional, hierarchical leadership structures (less than one-third are aiming for C-level positions) and are instead looking to lead in ways that allow them to have a direct impact on their company, according to the Global Workforce Leadership Study.

"They define (leadership) not by title, status, or hierarchy," Emily He, chief marketing officer of office solutions company Saba, which sponsored the study, told the Boston Globe. "They look for a direct linkage between what they're contributing and the direct result of the company."

5. Written communication skills

Being able to write clearly and professionally is an essential workplace skill that many young people don't have. While 65% of recent graduates are confident in their writing skills, according to the American Association of Colleges and Universities survey, employers are less sanguine, with only 27% of them reporting that recent college graduates have the written communication skills needed to succeed in the workplace. In the CareerBuilder survey, 38% of employers said that recent grads need better written communication skills.

"Incorrect grammar, spelling and language usage can make a very bad impression. Using an informal style — relying on abbreviations, not using punctuation and failing to capitalize — does not come across as professional," wrote Joyce E.A. Russell, the director of the Executive Coaching and Leadership Development Program at the [University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business](#), in *The Washington Post*.

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