

Stakeholder Summary

Employers expect applicants for entry-level jobs to have previous work experience

Although the job ads are for entry-level positions, the employers placing the ads expect applicants to have up to two years of work experience, according to a new study from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

After examining more than 300 Canadian job ads for entry-level positions geared to postsecondary graduates, the study -- *The Great Skills Divide* -- found that less than one quarter of the employers would be willing to consider candidates with no work experience. On average, employers wanted more than one year of experience and as much as two years.

Project description

The study follows on sustained debate about Canada's skills gap and the role of higher education and employers in shaping the country's skilled workforce. The research is based on a literature review and content analysis of 316 entry-level job ads to better understand what skills employers are actually looking for and how they are articulating their demand for these skills. A second study will follow up with the employers on whether posted positions were filled; the skills, schooling and work experience of the successful candidates; and overall satisfaction with the hires.

Findings

In addition to employer preference for previous work experience, the study found that most employers value employees who work well with others, have effective oral communication skills and strong computer skills. Only those ads where employers specifically referenced some form of postsecondary education were examined and almost half the employers didn't care whether the credential came from a college or university. The same proportion also didn't care what field the candidate had studied, "suggesting that employers may well equate postsecondary education with stronger, broad employability skills rather than improved disciplinary knowledge," according to the report.

Understanding the extent of Canada's skills gap problem is hindered by disagreement over what actually constitutes such a gap. Employers tend to mean one of three different things when they talk about skills -- education, essential skills or work experience. Some employers cite an inability to find workers with the credentials and/or disciplinary knowledge they require. Others refer to a lack of essential skills in prospective employees, such as writing, oral communication and working with others. Still others cite an inability to find "work-ready" employees -- those with the skills believed to be acquired only through work experience.

"Unfortunately, these different employer concerns have too often been conflated into a single 'skills gap' narrative," says the report, "making it difficult to ascertain if there is a problem, what that problem is and what might be done about it."

Recommendations

The study identifies important questions for both employers and postsecondary institutions. Do employers prefer job candidates with work experience because they find recent graduates from postsecondary institutions to be ill-prepared for the labour market? Or are employers shirking their responsibilities to train new employees? More broadly, what skills should postsecondary institutions be teaching and what skills should properly be learned through on-the-job training? Better labour market alignment through active collaboration between employers and postsecondary institutions will be required to ensure that college and university graduates have the right skills for the Canadian labour market.

Author of *The Great Skills Divide* is HEQCO researcher Sophie Borwein.