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Skills employers seek in job candidates

Every employer is looking for a specific set of skills from job-seekers that match the skills necessary to perform a particular job. But beyond these job-specific technical skills, sometimes referred to as "hard skills," certain skills are nearly universally sought by employers. The good news is that most job-seekers possess these skills to some extent.

The better news is that job-seekers with weaknesses in these areas can improve their skills through training, professional development or obtaining coaching/mentoring from someone who understands these skills.

The best news is that numerous studies conducted over the years have identified critical employability skills which are sometimes referred to as "soft skills." Once you understand these skills and their characteristics, you can tailor your job-search communication - your resume, cover letter, and interview language - to showcase how well your background aligns with common employer requirements.

Hard Skills

Hard skills are specific, can be taught and include things like being able to read a book, read a cardiac monitor, add and subtract. Hard skills are the minimum skills necessary to do a job.

Most people with the same level of education and experience in their field of study should have roughly the same level of hard skills. This is why the employer uses the grade point average (GPA), test scores, examination results, college major, etc. to determine the level of proficiency a candidate possesses regarding the hard skills necessary to perform the job successfully. Typical career example include accountants, engineers, lawyers, nurses, teachers, veterinarians, etc.

Hard skills are the first screen used to weed out applicants who are obviously not qualified for a job. Beyond this, in the competitive selection process, most employers use soft skills to differentiate one candidate from another.

As a result, a job seeker can gain a competitive advantage over other candidates by gaining a firm understanding of their own soft skills and then clearly illustrating those skills to potential employers.

Soft Skills

Soft skills are usually identified by phrases such as "must be able to work well under pressure" or "must work well in a team environment." While many applicants consider such statements to be nothing more than an indication of the work environment, it is in fact a statement of the soft skills being sought.

While there is no perfect way of determining whether or not one possesses soft skills, most employers will look for an indication that an applicant has exhibited certain soft skills in the past. To do this, an interviewer will often ask a candidate situational questions such as, "Tell me about a time when..."

The typical soft skills sought by employers include communication skills which consist of writing, speaking and effective listening. Thinking skills is another soft skill that includes the ability to critically analyze as well as possess a creative ability to bring "newness" to the work assignment. A third soft skill is what is often referred to as people skills. This skill set involves working well one-on-one with others, as well as in a team situation and valuing what a diverse workforce provides the organization. Another soft skill includes leadership. Here the employer seeks individuals who provide initiative, drive, vision, integrity, ethics and dedication.

The final soft skill set is what is referred to as the procedural skills. These include good time management, being organized, and having the capability of using the latest technology (often computer related) to get the job done in the most effective and efficient manner possible.

These hard and soft skills combined are often referred to as the employability skills. These along with personal values are the critical tools and traits you need to succeed in the workplace - and they are all elements that you can learn, cultivate, develop and maintain over your lifetime.

Once you have identified the sought-after skills and values and assessed the degree to which you possess them start to document them and market them in your resume, cover letter, and interview answers for job-search success. You and your next employer will be glad you did!
