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ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings of a regional survey of North Virginia businesses. The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) conducted the research in an effort to assess the educational and training needs of area businesses. Employers ranked employee desirable characteristics and skills on a scale of 0 for "not applicable" to 5 for "very important." Respondents rated 17 skills. The top five skills desired by employees are: (1) a solid work ethic; (2) communication abilities; (3) the ability to learn on the job; (4) motivation or initiative; and (5) the ability to work with others. Work experience, leadership abilities, and GPA or academic credentials ranked at the bottom of the list. Employers were also asked to name other characteristics that were not included in the survey. Among the "other" skills listed as very important were qualities such as: excellent customer service, positive attitude, professionalism, good writing skills, being a team player, and the ability to speak a second language. The authors of the study find that, in general, employers place greater emphasis on general skills than on specialized skills. NVCC can use the findings of the study to determine whether or not their students are learning the skills they need, and whether or not these skills can be taught in the community college classroom. NVCC also must examine what opportunities there are for helping students develop these skills in non-classroom settings as well. (NB)

BUSINESS NEEDS ASSESSMENT STUDY: NO. 1

**EMPLOYEE CHARACTERISTICS
AND SKILLS VALUED BY
NORTHERN VIRGINIA EMPLOYERS**



Research Report No. 19-00

Office of Institutional Research
Northern Virginia Community College

December 2000

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EMPLOYEE CHARACTERISTICS AND SKILLS VALUED BY NORTHERN VIRGINIA EMPLOYERS

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EMPLOYEE CHARACTERISTICS AND SKILLS VALUED BY NORTHERN VIRGINIA EMPLOYERS

Abstract

The Business Needs Assessment Survey was administered to businesses (private and public) in the College's service area by both telephone and mail. One of the purposes of the survey was to learn what employee characteristics and skills are most valued by area businesses.

Survey results indicated that employers appeared to place more emphasis on personal or general characteristics rather than on specific work-related skills. Work ethics, communication abilities, the ability to learn on the job, motivation and initiative, and working with others were skills considered by the majority of employers to be "very important". In addition, a large percentage of the employers also rated employee characteristics such as the ability to solve job-related problems, interpersonal skills, overall preparation for employment, and reading and comprehension skills as either "very important" or "important". In comparison, less than half of the employers indicated that skills such as special technical job skills or work experience were "very important". The findings of the Business Needs Assessment Survey are similar to the findings of some national studies. However, it is important to note that specific industrial sectors value certain skills and characteristics differently than other sectors.¹

The expectations of area employers responding to the Business Needs Assessment Survey might reflect in part the demands of "the new workplace", as described in a 1997 survey report of employers who use community colleges for workforce education.

The new workplace requires adaptive and innovative workers with strong interpersonal skills. Emerging and existing workers will be expected to have as broad a set of skills as was previously required only of supervisors and management.²

Learning what characteristics and skills area employers value in their employees poses challenges to NVCC and other educational institutions. Some questions raised by the findings from the survey include, is it the role of NVCC to teach students how to be good employees? Is it the role of the College to provide students with much more than, for example, the technical skills they need to be employed? If so, how might this be accomplished? And to what degree do the College's current programs of study address these issues?

The information gathered from the Business Needs Survey, regarding the characteristics and skills area employers value in employees, can help NVCC to evaluate its current efforts in preparing students for today's workplace. By recognizing what characteristics are most valued by local businesses, the College can help ensure that NVCC students have the opportunity to acquire and refine these skills in order to succeed.

¹ As noted in OIR Report No. 15-00, "Skill Sets Needed By the IT Sector: Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area", more emphasis is placed on work experience within the IT industry.

² Zeiss, Tony and Associates. *Developing the World's Best Workforce: An Agenda for America's Community Colleges*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Community Colleges, 1997, p. 35.

EMPLOYEE CHARACTERISTICS AND SKILLS VALUED BY NORTHERN VIRGINIA EMPLOYERS

Executive Summary

To assess the educational and training needs of area businesses, the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) conducted a Business Needs Assessment Study of businesses in the College's service area. Over ten thousand area businesses, were asked to respond to a survey designed to help the College learn more about the workforce needs of area employers. The survey was conducted by telephone and by mail. The response rate was approximately 16%.

One of the purposes of the Business Needs Assessment Survey was to learn what employee characteristics and skills are most valued by Northern Virginia employers. To find out, employers were given a list of seventeen different employee characteristics and skills and were asked to rate the importance of each of them, using a scale that ranged from 0 for "not applicable" to 5 for "very important".³ Additional information, views, and insights were gained from telephone interviews of selected employers.

This report is one in a series based upon the Business Needs Assessment Survey. The report presents an analysis and discussion of the responses given by area employers to the question of the importance of different characteristics in potential candidates for employment. It provides a profile of the "good employee" as seen from the point of view of area employers.

The following is a summary of key findings discussed in this report:

- Work ethics was ranked the most important of the seventeen characteristics and skills that were rated. This was followed by communication abilities, which was ranked a close second.⁴
- Over 90% of the respondents rated work ethics, communication abilities, the ability to learn on the job, motivation and initiative, and working with others as employee characteristics they considered either "very important" or "important".
- Large percentages of employers also indicated that characteristics such as the ability of employees to solve problems related to their job (87%), interpersonal skills (83%), overall preparation for employment (79%), and reading and comprehension skills (79%) were either "very important" or "important".
- More than half of the respondents rated all but three of the characteristics and skills as "very important" or "important". All of the ranked characteristics and skills were deemed to be important, to some degree, by area employers.

³ Respondents were asked to use the following scale: 0=not applicable, 1=not at all important, 2=a little important, 3=somewhat important, 4=important, and 5=very important.

⁴ The mean scores, which were used to rank the seventeen characteristics, ranged from 2.92 to 4.65, a difference of 1.73 points on a five-point scale.

- More than half of the employers indicated that computer skills (59%), analytical aptitude (59%), knowledge of technical job skills (59%), familiarity with equipment required by the job (58%), and mathematical skills (52%) were either “very important” or “important”.
- Work experience and leadership abilities were deemed “very important” or “important” by just under half of the employers (45% in each case).
- Only 25% of employers rated GPA or academic credentials as “very important” or “important”.

For the most part, employers appeared to place more emphasis on personal or more general characteristics rather than on more specialized or work-related skills. That is, employers regarded work ethics, communication skills, motivation and initiative, ability to learn on the job, and interpersonal skills as more important than, for example, work experience, special technical skills, or familiarity with equipment required by the job.

The present study, by adding to NVCC's understanding of what characteristics and skills employers value, will help NVCC provide its students with the education and training they need to ensure their success in today's workplace.

EMPLOYEE CHARACTERISTICS AND SKILLS VALUED BY NORTHERN VIRGINIA EMPLOYERS

Introduction

To assess the educational and training needs of area businesses, the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) conducted a Business Needs Assessment Study of businesses in the College's service area.⁵ Mail and telephone surveys were conducted to obtain information from area businesses about their current and future workforce needs.⁶ The study used more than one methodology in an effort to gain the participation of the greatest number of area employers.

This report focuses on the section of the Business Needs Assessment Survey that was designed to find out the characteristics and skills in employees that are most valued by area employers. It analyzes the combined responses to both the telephone and mail survey questions and, in addition, presents information, opinions, and insights collected from local businesses in the telephone interviews. By developing a profile of the "good employee," as seen from the point of view of area employers, the College can better evaluate the extent to which the education and training it offers to students prepares them to meet the expectations of area employers.

Methodology

The study was undertaken in two phases. The first phase consisted of a telephone survey of selected area businesses. The telephone survey gathered quantitative and qualitative data through surveys and interviews. The second phase was a mail survey. Surveys were sent to ten thousand area businesses. The total number of responses to the Business Needs Assessment Survey was 1,621, of which 279 came from the telephone survey and 1,342 came from the mail survey. The response rate for the Business Needs Assessment Survey was approximately 16%.

The participating businesses represented a cross section of area organizations, including retail and service businesses, high technology firms, healthcare and health-related businesses, and professional firms such as engineering companies. The contacted businesses and organizations were in both the private and public sector; each had ten or more employees.

As Table 1 shows, all of the major industry classifications were represented among the survey respondents to the Business Needs Assessment Survey. The Services sector accounted for the largest proportion of respondents (51%). The Services sector covers a wide range of industries, most of which fall under the Business Services category. The Business Services category includes high technology companies. Some of the other industries included in the Services sector are Health Services, Social Services, Educational Services, and Management Consulting Services. Given the economic structure of the

⁵ NVCC's service area includes the counties of Arlington, Fairfax, Loudoun, and Prince William, and the cities of Alexandria, Fairfax, Falls Church, Manassas, and Manassas Park.

⁶ A copy of the survey instrument is attached at the end of the report.

Northern Virginia area, it is not surprising that a large proportion of the respondents were included in this category.

In addition to the Services sector, the Retail Trade (11%), Construction (8%), and Banking/Finance (7%) sectors were well represented in the sample. It would be expected that due to the close proximity of Washington, D.C. there would have been more respondents from the Public Administration sector in the survey sample. However, many of the agencies linked to the government were classified under the Services sector.

Table 1: Business Needs Survey Respondents, By Industry Classification*

Industry Classifications	Number	Percentage
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	54	4.0
Mining	1	0.1
Construction	107	8.0
Manufacturing	46	3.4
Transportation and Public Utilities	43	3.2
Wholesale Trade	67	5.0
Retail Trade	152	11.3
Banking/Finance, Insurance and Real Estate	89	6.6
Services	681	50.8
Public Administration	10	0.7
Other	92	6.9
Total	1,342	100.0

* Standard Industrial Classification Code

The report is divided into two sections. Section 1 of the report presents a ranking of characteristics and skills based on a mean score calculated for each characteristic. The ranking shows the relative importance respondents placed upon the employee characteristics and skills they were asked to rate.⁷ Section 2 presents the data on each of the characteristics separately. Comments made in the telephone interviews are also discussed in this section, providing further information and insight into how employers viewed the importance of the characteristics and skills. After the presentation of the data on each characteristic, issues for discussion suggested by the findings are offered for readers to consider. The list of issues given is by no means exhaustive. Like the commentary and references provided for some topics, issues are suggested solely for the purpose of triggering thought and discussion.

⁷ The terms "respondent" and "employer" are used interchangeably in this report. Area employers and businesses referred to are those who responded to the Business Needs Assessment Survey.

Section 1: Relative Importance of Employee Characteristics

The employee characteristics and skills, ranked by employers in the order of perceived importance, are presented in Table 2.⁸ All of the ranked characteristics and skills were deemed to be important, to some degree, by area employers. However, some characteristics were considered more important than others.

As shown in Table 2, the mean scores for characteristics ranged from a high of 4.65 for work ethics to a low of 2.92 for GPA or academic credentials. From highest to lowest, the mean scores of the characteristics differed by 1.73 points. Although the change is gradual, it demonstrates a clear pattern of preference.

According to the data presented in Table 2 and comments from area employers, it appears that many employers place a higher value on characteristics such as sound work ethics, communication abilities, and the ability to learn on the job than on more specific areas such as computer, technical, or math skills. Some employers indicated that they valued employees whom they considered "educated persons" with personal characteristics such as the ability to learn on the job or to solve job-related problems.

Comments made during telephone interviews also indicated that many employers, with the exception of those in technical areas, do not necessarily expect employees to be "content experts". Many respondents felt that if they have an "educated pool" of workers who could be easily trained, then teaching job-specific skills to employees would become easy. Some employers who were interviewed, for example, seemed to value analytical aptitude or the ability to solve problems more than specialized skills.

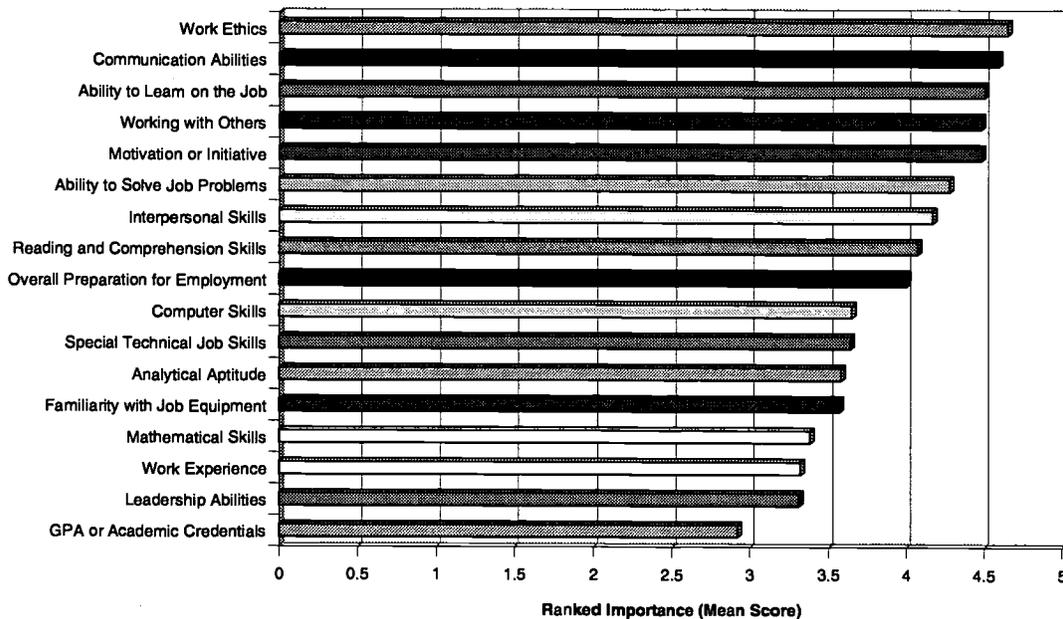
⁸ Respondents were presented with the seventeen characteristics and skills shown in Table 2 and asked to rate the importance of each based upon the following scale: 0=not applicable, 1=not at all important, 2=a little important, 3=somewhat important, 4=important, and 5=very important. Respondents' choices were aggregated and averages (mean scores) were computed for comparison purposes. These mean scores were used to rank the different characteristics in the order of importance.

Table 2: Ranking of Employee Characteristics/Skills

Characteristics/Skills	Rank	Mean Score
Work Ethics	1	4.65
Communication Abilities	2	4.59
Ability to Learn on the Job	3	4.50
Motivation or Initiative	4	4.48
Working with Others	5	4.48
Ability to Solve Job Problems	6	4.28
Interpersonal Skills	7	4.17
Reading and Comprehension Skills	8	4.07
Overall Preparation for Employment	9	4.00
Computer Skills	10	3.65
Special Technical Job Skills	11	3.64
Analytical Aptitude	12	3.58
Familiarity with Job Equipment	13	3.57
Mathematical Skills	14	3.38
Work Experience	15	3.32
Leadership Abilities	16	3.31
GPA or Academic Credentials	17	2.92

It is important to note that *all* of the ranked characteristics and skills were deemed to be important to some degree by area employers. Figure 1 presents, in order, the importance given by respondents to employee characteristics and skills.

Figure 1: Ranking of Expected Characteristics/Skills for Employees



The rankings, of the characteristics and skills presented in Table 2 and Figure 1, reflect the expectations of a cross section of businesses in the Northern Virginia area. The findings of the Business Needs Assessment Survey are similar to the findings of some national studies. However, it is important to note that specific industrial sectors value certain skills and characteristics differently than other sectors.⁹ For example, according to employer comments, businesses in the IT sector placed more value on analytical aptitude, computer skills, and special technical job skills than on other skills. In comparison, businesses in the retail and service industries placed more value on employees with communication skills and the ability to work with others. The findings presented in Table 2 and Figure 1 are from a wide variety of businesses, not a particular industry. The ranking of these characteristics would, more than likely, change if the survey responses were analyzed by industry sector, not aggregated for all businesses.

⁹ As noted in OIR Report No. 15-00, "Skill Sets Needed By the IT Sector: Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area", more emphasis is placed on work experience within the IT industry.

Section 2: Employee Characteristics Valued by Employers

In Section 1 the relative importance of employee characteristics as perceived by Northern Virginia employers was discussed. In Section 2 the data for each characteristic are presented separately, showing how the employers rated each of the characteristics and skills. Employers evaluated each of the characteristics and indicated whether they considered them to be very important, important, somewhat important, a little important, not at all important, or not applicable. In analyzing the data, representative comments made by respondents in the telephone interviews are integrated into the text, providing further insight from employers on the question of characteristics they valued in employees.

After the presentation of the data on each characteristic, issues for discussion suggested by the findings are offered for readers to consider. The list of issues given for any of the topics is by no means exhaustive. The commentary and references, along with the list of issues, are suggested solely for the purpose of triggering thought and discussion.

The data for each characteristic are presented in this section of the report in the order of the list below. The list provides a summary of the "very important" and "important" ratings. As can be seen in Table 3, more than half of the respondents gave "very important" or "important" ratings to all but three of the characteristics in the list. Five of the characteristics—work ethics, communication abilities, ability to learn on the job, motivation or initiative, and working with others—were rated as "very important" or "important" by over 90% of the respondents. In comparison, only 25% of respondents rated GPA or academic credentials as "very important" or "important".

Table 3: Characteristics and Skills Rated "Very Important" or "Important" by Area Employers

Characteristics and Skills	Very Important	Important	Combined*
Rated as "Very Important" or "Important" By More Than 90% of the Respondents			
Work ethics	72%	23%	95%
Communication abilities	73%	21%	94%
Ability to learn on the job	63%	32%	95%
Motivation or initiative	59%	34%	93%
Working with others	59%	33%	92%
Rated as "Very Important" or "Important" By 61% to 90% of the Respondents			
Ability to solve job problems	48%	39%	87%
Interpersonal skills	43%	40%	83%
Reading/comprehension skills	41%	39%	80%
Overall preparation for employment	37%	42%	79%
Rated as "Very Important" or "Important" By 50% to 60% of the Respondents			
Computer skills	29%	30%	59%
Special technical job skills	30%	29%	59%
Analytical aptitude	21%	38%	59%
Familiarity with job equipment	28%	30%	58%
Mathematical skills	20%	32%	52%
Rated as "Very Important" or "Important" By Less Than 50% of the Respondents			
Work experience	16%	29%	45%
Leadership abilities	16%	29%	45%
GPA or academic credentials	6%	19%	25%

*Total percentage of respondents who rated characteristic "very important" or "important".

I. The Importance of Work Ethics

Area employers rated work ethics as extremely important in the workplace. As shown in Table 4, a total of 95% of those responding to the question gave work ethics a "very important" or "important" rating. Seventy-two percent of respondents rated work ethics as "very important" and another 23% rated work ethics as "important".

During telephone interviews, most respondents not only stated that work ethics were important, but went on to define what they meant by work ethics. Interpretations of the term "work ethics" differed among respondents. To some respondents, it seemed to mean having strong moral principles and being professional, trustworthy, and honest. Others responded that employees who were respectful of the business, the patrons, and their co-workers exhibited work ethics they valued. Having a commitment to work, showing up on time, not calling in sick when well, and having good work habits were other standards of behavior that some respondents indicated they regarded as reflective of a good work ethic. Some respondents commented on work ethics in terms of specific business ethics they expected, such as assuming that employees would not engage in behavior that could put the company at risk, as for example, by accepting bribes or misrepresenting a product.

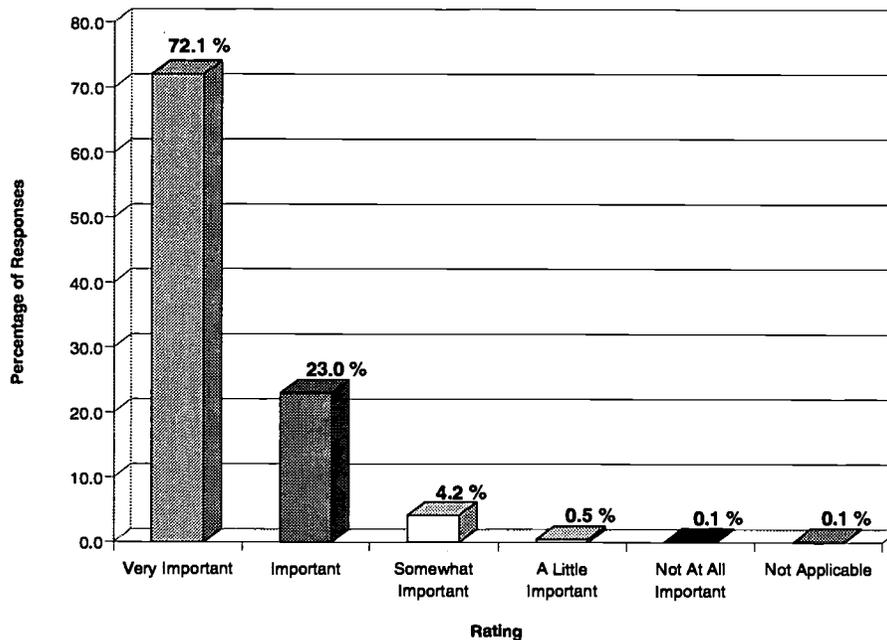
Respondents in telephone interviews repeatedly addressed the need and desire for ethical employees. Some indicated that they wanted "all of the ethical traits" in their employees. Others expressed the view that employees with good values supported the business in a way that guided the business toward prosperity. Many respondents stressed the need for "values" to be reinforced at the college level.

Table 4: Importance of Work Ethics

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	1,097	72.1
Important	350	23.0
Somewhat Important	64	4.2
A Little Important	7	0.5
Not At All Important	1	0.1
Not Applicable	1	0.1
Total	1,520	100.0%

Figure 2 further illustrates the degree of importance that area businesses attached to employees having sound work ethics.

Figure 2: Importance of Work Ethics



Given the importance that employers assigned to work ethics, as well as ethical standards in a broader sense, the question arises as to whether public educational institutions should play a role in ethics education. If educational institutions are to play a role, how should they accomplish this at the college level? Are there ways to build “values” into the curricula? Is the power and influence of the teacher to be used to give moral guidance that will impact students’ values?

C. David Lisman, in an article in the *Community College Journal*, states “Employers increasingly want a workforce that is not only educated in the more traditional sense, but also is ethical.”¹⁰ Lisman’s views reflect much of the thinking of those who advocate “ethics across the curriculum” in colleges. “Ethics across the curriculum” programs, similar to one started in 1991 at Utah Valley State College (UVSC), have been established at many colleges in recent years. According to a recent project description, the UVSC program involves faculty and students in “the study of professional, practical, and foundational ethics”.¹¹

¹⁰ Lisman, C. David. “Ethics in the Curriculum.” *Community College Journal*. Dec. 1999/Jan. 2000. Available: <http://www.aacc.nche.edu/books/journal/>.

¹¹ “Utah Valley State College: Disseminating Ethics Across the Curriculum: A Proven Reform.” Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) Project Descriptions. (1999). Available: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/FIPSE/99ProgBk/>.

II. The Importance of Communication Abilities

Employers also responded overwhelmingly to the importance of candidates for employment having strong communication skills. Communication skills ranked just slightly under work ethics (a mean score of 4.59 vs. 4.65). Ninety-four percent of the respondents to the question rated communication abilities as either "very important" (73%) or "important" (21%) in potential employees (Table 5).

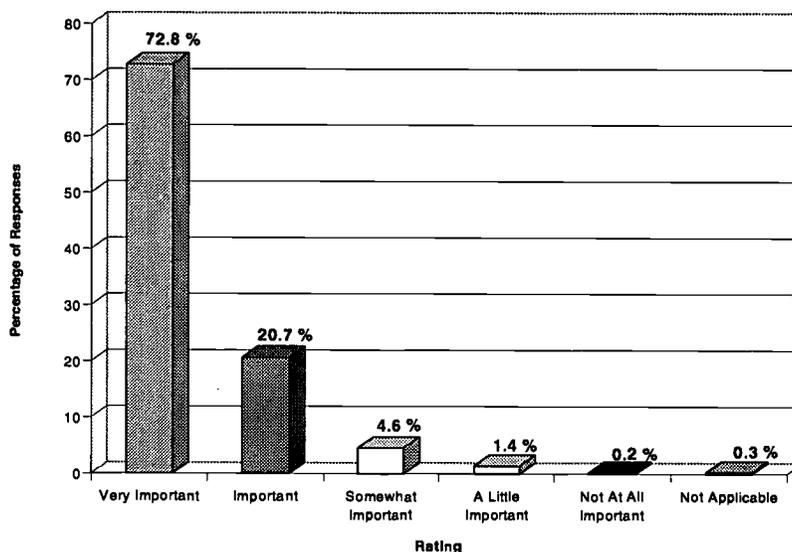
Comments from local employers supported the data presented in Table 5. Most respondents seemed to consider communication abilities as one of the most important characteristics in prospective employees. Many stated that the importance of effective communication is recognized now more than ever before. Other employers expressed the belief that an employee's ability to communicate was a vital attribute in promoting the business, and thus an ability they might prize over such skills as work experience or educational background. Many respondents emphasized the significant role their own ability to communicate had played in their advancement at work. In their written survey comments, many respondents emphasized that good communication skills meant competency in both oral communication and written communication.

Table 5: Importance of Communication Abilities

Rating	Responses	
	#	#
Very Important	1,113	72.8
Important	317	20.7
Somewhat Important	70	4.6
A Little Important	22	1.4
Not At All Important	3	0.2
Not Applicable	5	0.3
Total	1,530	100.0%

Figure 3 shows the value employers placed on communication skills.

Figure 3: Importance of Communication Abilities



What does this finding suggest? Are employers reaffirming what has been recognized for some time—that technical skills or expertise in a field are not enough, that employees must also be able to communicate well both in spoken and written language? A recent article in the *Washington Post* addressed the issue of highly trained technical employees who were unable to move up to management positions because they lacked communication skills.¹²

NVCC currently offers many courses and other resources specifically designed to help students develop their oral and written communication abilities. How well are the College's courses preparing students for the communication tasks that will be required of them? What are the workplace writing tasks most commonly faced by employees in today's workplace? Are students gaining the proficiency needed for writing tasks? Should students be required to hone communication skills by learning to develop and deliver presentations, for example, as was suggested by a task force of employers advising Prince George's Community College?¹³ Another question to ask might be whether too many students, in their rush to acquire job skills, bypass courses that would develop their communication abilities. If so, how can students be made aware that area employers look upon good communication skills as one of the most important characteristics they seek in job candidates?

¹² Johnson, Carrie. "When Speech, Um, Gets in the Way of, Ah, Getting Ahead." *The Washington Post* 20 Aug. 2000: L1.

¹³ Clagett, Craig A. *Workforce Skills Needed by Today's Employers*. Largo, Md.: Prince George's Community College, Office of Institutional Research and Analysis, 1997. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 413 949)

III. The Importance of the Ability to Learn on the Job

As shown in Table 6, employers rated the ability to learn on the job as a highly desirable characteristic in potential employees. Sixty-three percent of the employers indicated it was "very important" and 32% indicated it was "important". The ability to learn on the job was the third most highly rated characteristic in the survey.

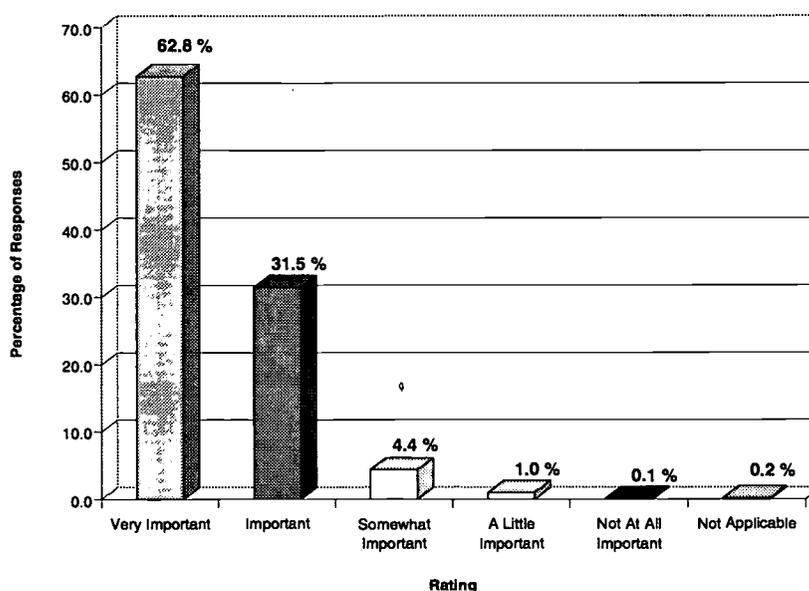
In telephone interviews, most employers indicated they wanted employees capable of learning on the job. Given the rapid changes in technology at the workplace, respondents pointed out that jobs are constantly changing and evolving. In order to cope with these changes, businesses want employees who are capable of learning on the job. Businesses want individuals who have the necessary skills to search for solutions, and who have the ability to identify the appropriate tools and apply them effectively to achieve the desired outcome.

Table 6: Importance of Ability to Learn on the Job

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	951	62.8
Important	476	31.5
Somewhat Important	67	4.4
A Little Important	15	1.0
Not At All Important	2	0.1
Not Applicable	3	0.2
Total	1,514	100.0%

Figure 4 illustrates the importance that employers placed on the ability of potential employees to learn on the job.

Figure 4: Importance of Ability to Learn on the Job



What is the significance of this finding to NVCC? Learning that area employers rate the ability to learn on the job third in importance may raise educators' and students' awareness that this is a highly valued trait deserving their time and attention. Assuming that more than innate ability determines who learns best on the job, how can the College foster this ability?

IV. The Importance of Motivation and Initiative

As Table 7 indicates, motivation/initiative was considered to be a very desirable employee characteristic. Ninety-three percent of the employers considered motivation/initiative to be "very important" or "important". Motivation/initiative was ranked fourth among the seventeen characteristics rated by employers.

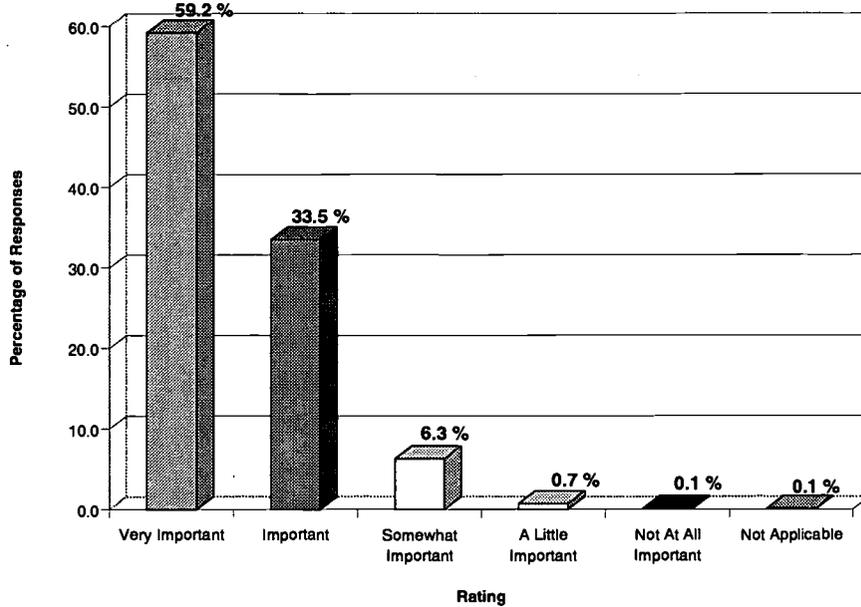
Most businesses indicated, by their comments, that they want employees to be willing to work hard and strive to succeed within their company. Some employers said being motivated and demonstrating initiative at work improves the worker's productivity. Motivation and initiative, according to other respondents, increases job involvement, increases satisfaction, and reduces stress in the workplace. According to others, it also enhances the reputation of the business to have motivated, resourceful employees.

Table 7: Importance of Motivation/Initiative

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	909	59.2
Important	515	33.5
Somewhat Important	97	6.3
A Little Important	11	0.7
Not At All Important	2	0.1
Not Applicable	2	0.1
Total	1,536	100.0%

As shown in Figure 5, almost 60% of the businesses considered motivation/initiative to be "very important".

Figure 5: Importance of Motivation/Initiative



How can NVCC use this finding to help its students? Employers indicated they want employees who demonstrate motivation and initiative. Can NVCC teach or develop the attributes of motivation and initiative in students? How? What might employers and educators learn from one another about how to motivate people and encourage initiative in the workplace?

V. The Importance of Working with Others

Businesses perceived the ability of potential employees to work with others to be of vital importance. The ability to work with others was ranked fifth among the characteristics and was one of five skills that over 90% of respondents rated as “very important” or “important”. As Table 8 shows, 93% of responding businesses indicated that this characteristic was “very important” or “important”.

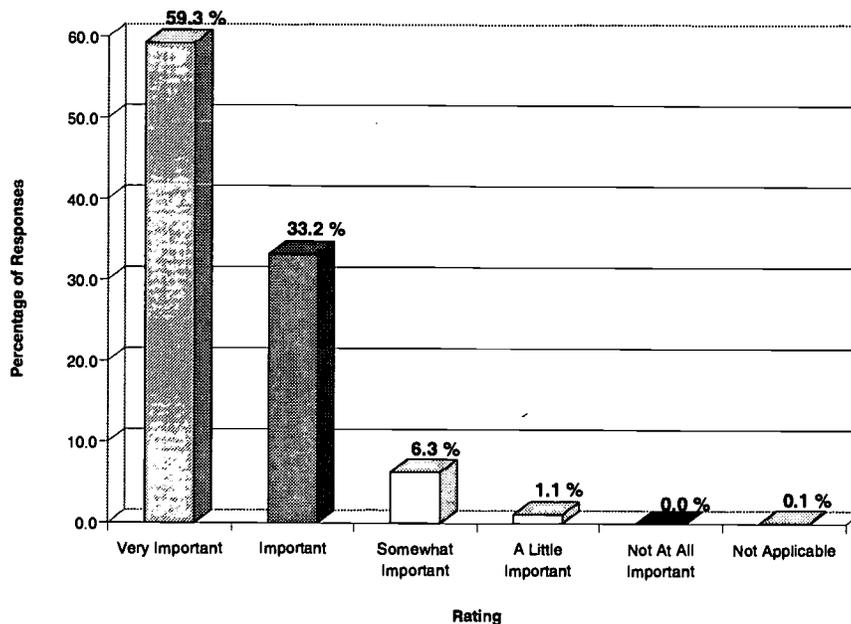
Most employers, when interviewed, said they require that people work together, to some degree, either directly or indirectly. Communicating with other employees is encouraged by employers, who said that employees’ sharing of ideas contributes to productivity. Some employers indicated that their employees prefer greater interaction with one another. According to employers interviewed, employees desire more control and a chance to make greater contributions to the company. Some respondents said that it appears that many employees are convinced that employee participation in workplace decisions improves their quality of life at work.

Table 8: Importance of Working with Others

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	906	59.3
Important	506	33.2
Somewhat Important	96	6.3
A Little Important	17	1.1
Not At All Important	0	0.0
Not Applicable	1	0.1
Total	1,526	100.0%

The ability to work with others and interact well within a diverse workforce appears to be a much valued characteristic that employers expect from their prospective employees. As Figure 6 shows, almost 60% of employers indicated this ability was “very important”.

Figure 6: Importance of Working with Others



Since many employers place a high value on an employee’s ability to work well with others, the question is, how can NVCC best prepare its students to work well with others in today’s workplace? The labor force has become diverse in terms of gender, age, and race. In addition, many employers want their workers to be able to work as part of a team. They want to prevent workplace conflicts and strain that can cause a decline in productivity and affect the business’ bottom line. Can classroom experiences teach students how to work well with others? What kinds of experiences outside the classroom might contribute to students’ ability to work well with others?

VI. The Importance of the Ability to Solve Problems Related to the Job

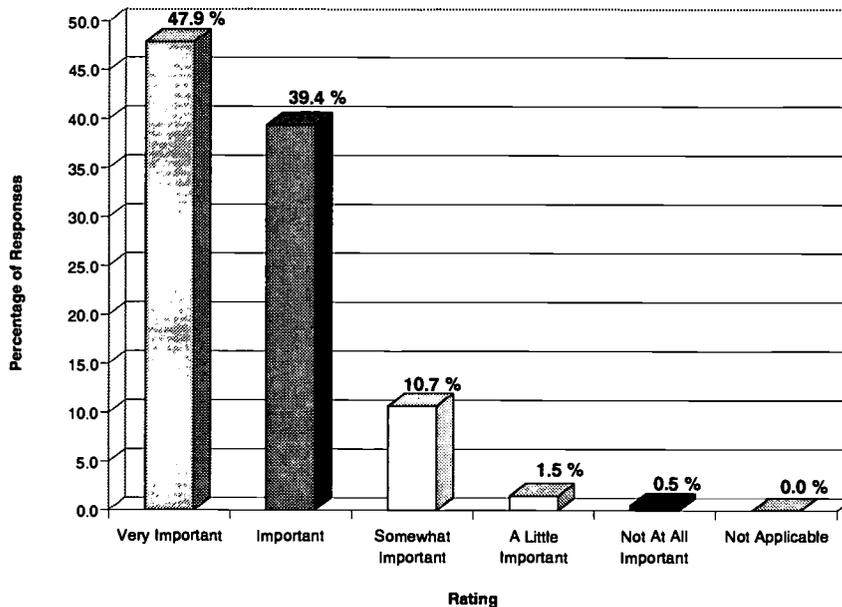
The ability of an employee to solve job-related problems was ranked sixth in importance by area employers. As shown in Table 9, 87% of the employers who responded to the question indicated that an employee's ability to solve job-related problems was either "very important" (48%) or "important" (39%).

Table 9: Importance of Ability to Solve Problems Related to Job

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	711	47.9
Important	584	39.4
Somewhat Important	159	10.7
A Little Important	22	1.5
Not At All Important	7	0.5
Not Applicable	0	0.0
Total	1,483	100.0%

As Figure 7 shows, many respondents said they wanted employees who are able to solve problems related to the job.

Figure 7: Importance of Ability to Solve Problems Related to Job



Based upon the surveys and telephone interviews, employers appear to want their workers to be good problem solvers. Some respondents emphasized that employees need more than just expertise in a particular discipline, that problem solving is also important. Whatever their area of work, many employers seemed to place a premium on how well employees solve work-related problems.

Many employers also seemed to believe that problem-solving skills can be learned, practiced, and perfected in a classroom. An article in the *Washington Post* reports that “a growing number of researchers and educators” also think that “the ability to think clearly and make smart decisions in the ‘real world’ can indeed be cultivated in classrooms”.¹⁴

Given the importance employers place upon problem-solving skills, NVCC may want to assess whether the current curriculum helps students develop such skills. To what extent do NVCC class assignments and other modes of learning teach students problem-solving skills? Do the problem-solving skills learned in the classroom translate to real-world problem solving in the workplace?

VII. The Importance of Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills were highly regarded by most area businesses, ranking seventh in importance. As Table 10 shows, those employers who responded to the question indicated that interpersonal skills were either “very important” (43%) or “important” (40%).

Most of the employers responded to this question by emphasizing that they expect good interpersonal interaction between employees. Employers expect their employees to be able to interact effectively with others and respect others. Many employers placed interpersonal skills as a major part of an employee's job description. Some respondents defined their good employees as “team players”. Many employers deemed interpersonal skills to be very important to a good work environment and thus to productivity.

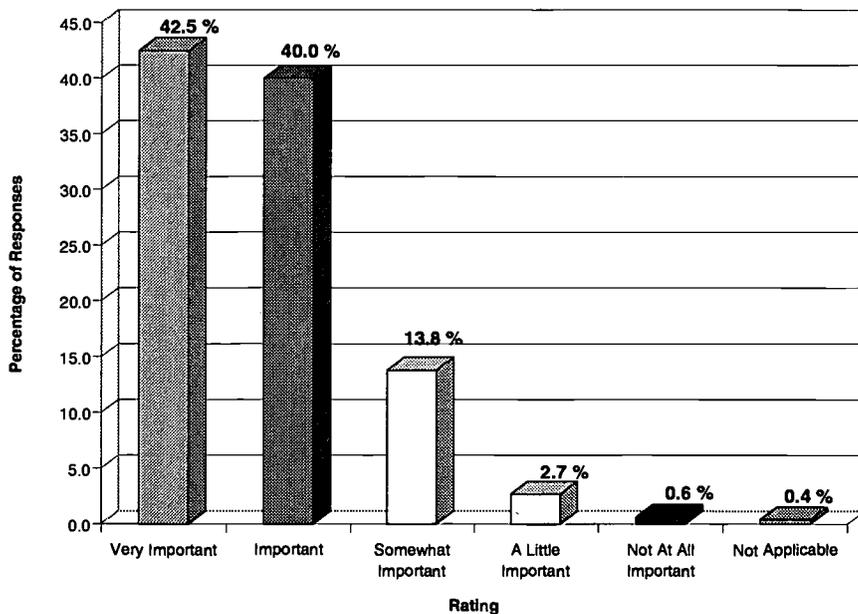
Table 10: Importance of Interpersonal Skills

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	647	42.5
Important	610	40.0
Somewhat Important	210	13.8
A Little Important	41	2.7
Not At All Important	9	0.6
Not Applicable	6	0.4
Total	1,523	100.0%

¹⁴ Strauss, Valerie. “Finding Ways to Make Sense More Common.” *The Washington Post*, 17 October 2000: A13.

Figure 8 illustrates how important interpersonal skills are to area employers.

Figure 8: Importance of Interpersonal Skills



What is the relevance of this finding for NVCC? Given the importance employers place upon interpersonal skills, should the College assess how to best help students develop their interpersonal skills? Do particular teaching practices foster the development of interpersonal skills? Do some students need specialized training in interpersonal skills, perhaps tailored to their chosen field? Besides considering the curricula, are there extracurricular activities the College sponsors that might help students develop their interpersonal skills?

VIII. The Importance of Reading and Comprehension Skills

The majority of employers indicated that reading and comprehension skills were important to some degree. As Table 11 indicates, 41% of respondents said reading and comprehension skills were “very important”. Another 39% said they were “important,” while less than 1% said they were “not at all important”.

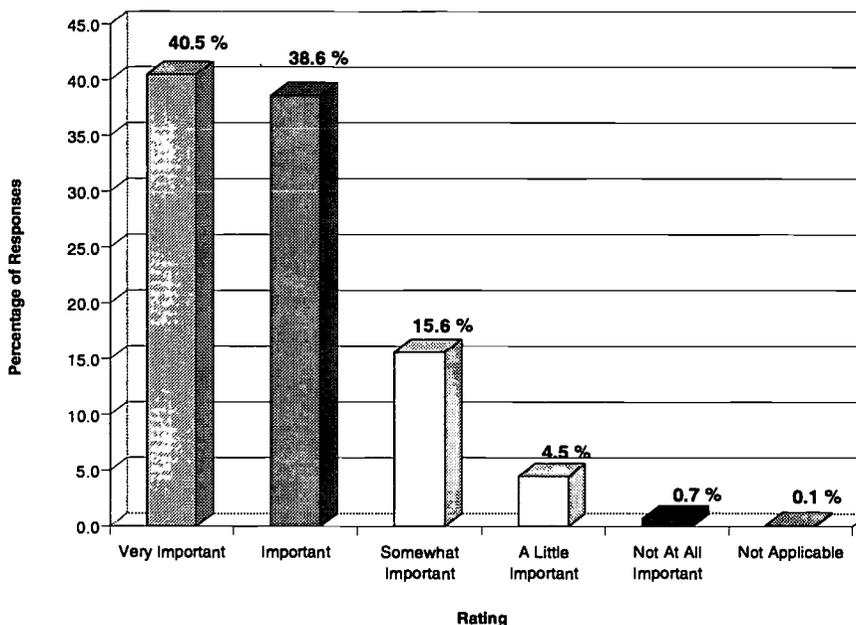
Most employers stated that they require potential candidates for employment to have reading and comprehension skills, but did not specify what levels of competency might fit their particular needs. Based on interview information, area employers appear to seek fundamental skills in reading and comprehension in their employees. Competency in reading and comprehension takes priority over areas such as computer skills for the majority of employers.

Table 11: Importance of Reading and Comprehension

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	607	40.5
Important	579	38.6
Somewhat Important	233	15.6
A Little Important	67	4.5
Not At All Important	11	0.7
Not Applicable	2	0.1
Total	1,499	100.0%

Figure 9 illustrates the importance that area employers attached to reading and comprehension skills.

Figure 9: Importance of Reading and Comprehension



What are the implications of this finding for NVCC? For employers who seek reading skills at the “fundamental” level, can it be assumed that NVCC students who complete college courses meet or exceed that standard? Can it be assumed that those students who complete NVCC degree or certificate programs possess an appropriate level of reading ability for their chosen careers or occupations? To what extent are reading skills taught in NVCC courses where this skill is not the primary objective?

IX. The Importance of Overall Preparation for Employment

As shown in Table 12, area employers who responded to the survey considered overall preparation for employment to be an important attribute of potential employees. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents considered overall preparation for employment to be “very important” and 42% considered it to be “important”.

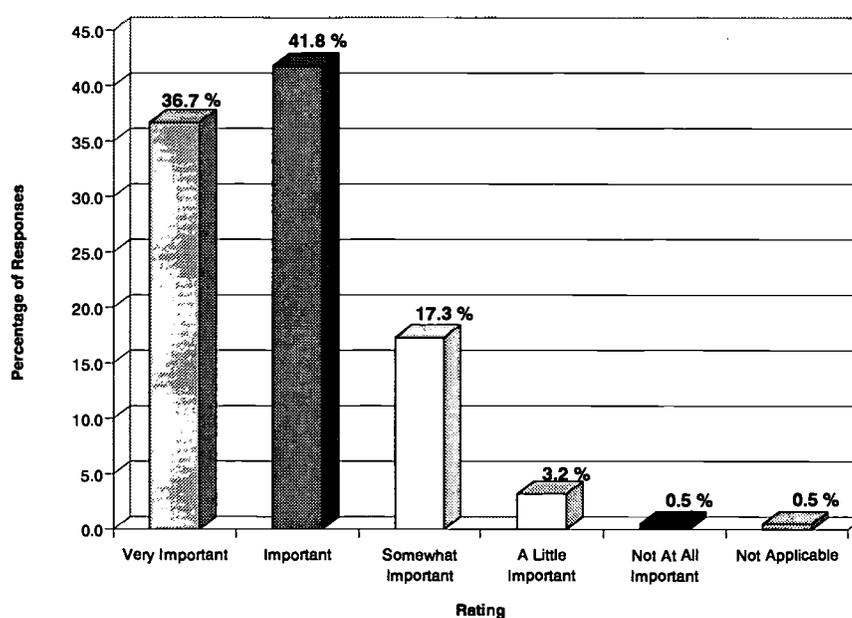
Respondents in telephone interviews interpreted the meaning of “overall preparation for employment” in different ways. A few respondents interpreted this characteristic as meaning being prepared with essential supplies, tools, and equipment. Good grooming was mentioned. Other employers suggested that it meant that an employee could not only do his or her own job, but was capable of filling in for others when necessary. Several employers suggested that overall preparation for employment meant that employees had the ability to learn quickly, pass training courses once hired, and do an overall terrific job.

Table 12: Importance of Overall Preparation for Employment

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	548	36.7
Important	624	41.8
Somewhat Important	258	17.3
A Little Important	4.7	3.2
Not At All Important	8	0.5
Not Applicable	8	0.5
Total	1,493	100.0%

As Figure 10 shows, more employers considered overall preparation for employment to be “important” rather than “very important”.

Figure 10: Importance of Overall Preparation for Employment



Since employers had different notions of the meaning of overall preparation of employment, the implications for NVCC are unclear. However, it might be noted that in the cited employer comments, it was more general characteristics or skills rather than specific or technical skills that were mentioned, a finding consistent with the overall results of the study.

X. The Importance of Computer Skills

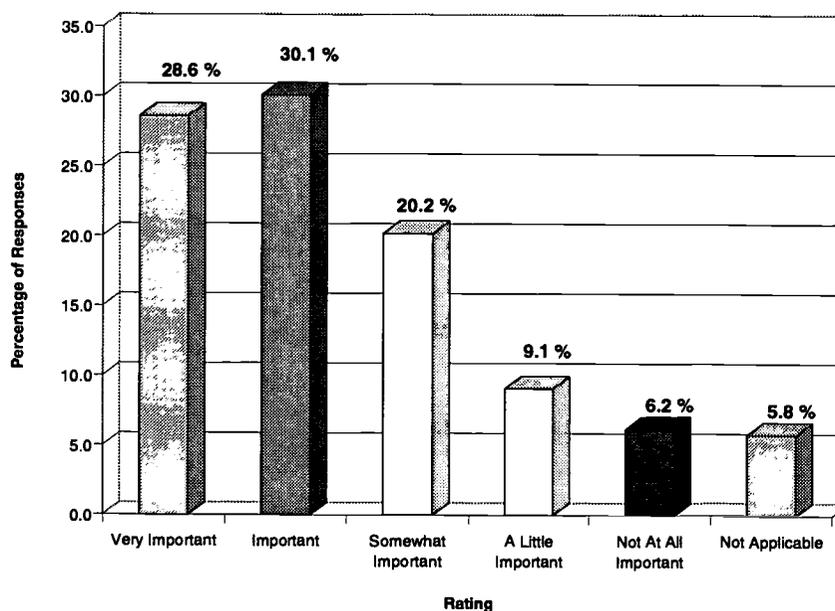
Table 13 shows that most companies responded that the computer skills of potential employees held some degree of importance to the business. Twenty-nine percent of the responding businesses rated computer skills as “very important” and 30% rated them as “important”. Six percent stated that computer skills were “not at all important”.

Table 13: Importance of Computer Skills

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	427	28.6
Important	448	30.1
Somewhat Important	301	20.2
A Little Important	135	9.1
Not At All Important	93	6.2
Not Applicable	86	5.8
Total	1,490	100.0%

Figure 11 illustrates the level of importance that employers attached to computer skills. Employers were more likely to indicate that computer skills were “important” than “very important”.

Figure 11: Importance of Computer Skills



Area businesses seem to expect their employees to possess moderate to advanced level computer competencies. The expected computer competencies range from proficiencies in word processing, spreadsheets, and databases to e-mail and Internet use. In addition to a working knowledge of common software packages, employers want prospective employees to have a basic understanding of computer operations, network environments, and the World Wide Web. Many of the employers indicated that the level of computer skills is a determining factor in whether or not a person is hired.

What are the implications of this finding for NVCC? Since fall 1999, NVCC has required students who wish to graduate from a degree program to demonstrate computer competency either by passing a computer competency exam or by taking an approved computer competency course. Do the competencies tested by NVCC correspond to those mentioned as "expected" by employers interviewed for this study? Should the College try to ensure that its non-degree students are able to meet employers' expectations for computer skills? How?

NVCC might be able to learn from Tek.Xam, a new test for computer proficiency designed for liberal arts students and others without technical credentials. According to its creators, Tek.Xam allows those who take it to demonstrate their proficiency not only in technology skills but in other capabilities valued by employers, such as analytical ability, problem solving, communication, and research skills.¹⁵

A related issue for consideration is the extent to which technology is integrated into the curriculum at NVCC, a practice thought by many educators to enhance both learning and computer proficiency. A two-year national project entitled "Advancing the Humanities through Technology at Community Colleges" is currently underway at NVCC. The project will develop models for "integrating technology and the newest approaches to the study of the humanities in community colleges."¹⁶ At George Mason University, the College of Arts and Sciences has established a program called Technology across the Curriculum (TAC), in which "technology is being systematically introduced throughout the undergraduate curriculum."¹⁷

XI. The Importance of Special Technical Job Skills

Fifty-nine percent of the businesses responding to this question considered special technical job skills to be "very important" (30%) or "important" (29%) for potential job candidates (Table 14).

Interview comments from businesses indicated that organizations dealing with technology were most likely to rate this skill as being important. Most of the employers who gave a high rating to technical knowledge thought that it was important as an element in an employee's success, and that it was also important in advancing the business as well.

High technology businesses and other organizations that are rapidly moving into the use of new technology want their prospective employees to come to them with technical skills. It

¹⁵ See the Tek.Xam website for information and news articles about the exam (<http://www.tekxam.com>).

¹⁶ "Advancing the Humanities through Technology at Community Colleges." Project Summary. Available: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/conference/details/Summary.html>.

¹⁷ See the TAC website for further information and examples of TAC courses (<http://cas.gmu.edu/tac/>).

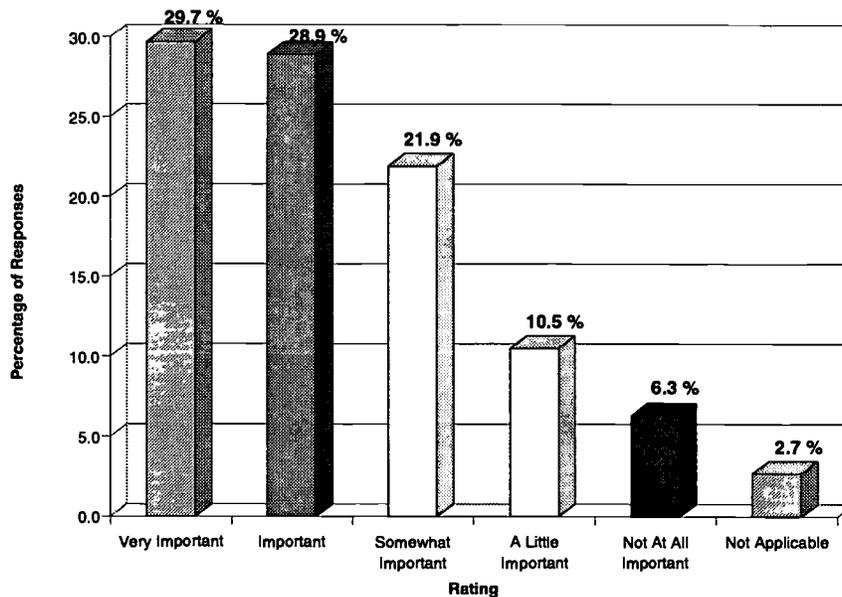
appears that, unlike other businesses, high technology employers prize technical skills over other employee characteristics/skills. For a large number of businesses, “technical skills” meant software and hardware training.

Table 14: Importance of Knowledge of Special Technical Job Skills

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	446	29.7
Important	434	28.9
Somewhat Important	329	21.9
A Little Important	158	10.5
Not At All Important	95	6.3
Not Applicable	41	2.7
Total	1,503	100.0%

Figure 12 shows that most area employers thought that special technical job skills were either “very important” or “important”.

Figure 12: Importance of Knowledge of Special Technical Job Skills



Interview comments suggest that high technology firms and firms utilizing technology place a higher value on technical skills than on other characteristics. Determining just what skills technology firms will need is a continuing challenge to educational institutions. Which skills are most likely to ensure students a career in the technology field upon graduation or completion of training? How can NVCC best prepare its students for the rapid rate of change they will face in the technology industry? How can NVCC help students gain the work experience that many high technology employers require?

XII. The Importance of Analytical Aptitude

Over half of the employers considered analytical aptitude as “important” or “very important”. However, as can be seen in Table 15, businesses were more likely to rate this characteristic as “important” (38%) or “somewhat important” (28%) rather than “very important” (21%). A plausible explanation for the relatively low rating of this ability emerged from the telephone interviews: Technical companies were more likely to rate this skill highly, whereas other companies not engaged in technical business were less likely to value this employee characteristic.

Interviews revealed that most technical companies responded to this characteristic as very important to the business. These companies emphasized that having logical/analytical abilities is directly related to the employees’ job performance.

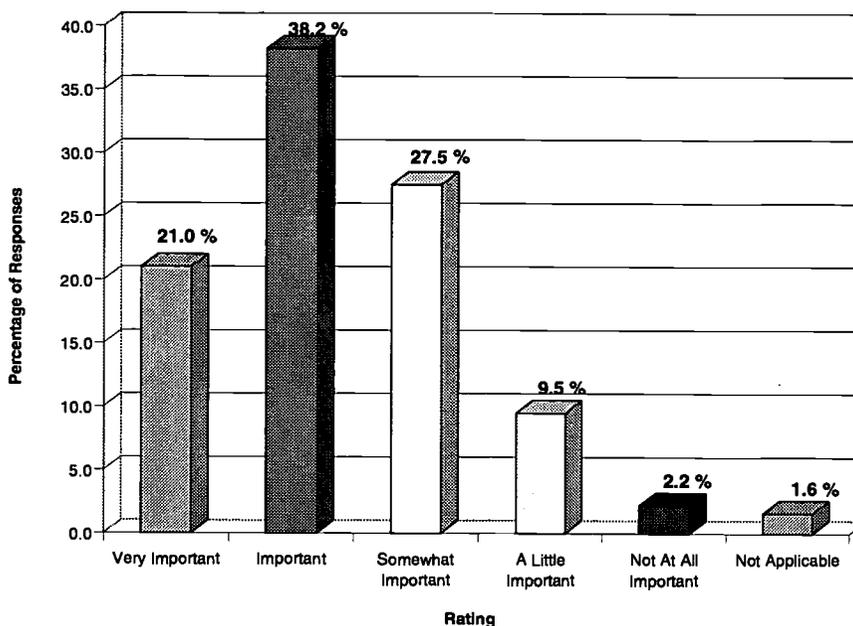
Table 15: Importance of Analytical Aptitude

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	313	21.0
Important	569	38.2
Somewhat Important	409	27.5
A Little Important	141	9.5
Not At All Important	32	2.2
Not Applicable	24	1.6
Total	1,488	100.0%

Many of the respondents who rated analytical aptitude as “very important” made a clear distinction between analytical aptitude and comprehension skills. While they expected each employee to have good comprehension skills, they wanted employees only in certain technical positions to possess good analytical abilities.

Figure 13 shows that the largest percentage of employers rated the importance of analytical aptitude as “important” rather than “very important”.

Figure 13: Importance of Analytical Aptitude



How might NVCC determine the kind and level of analytical abilities sought by technical companies? If determined, how might such abilities be fostered in NVCC students?

XIII. The Importance of Familiarity with Equipment Required by the Job

Most of the businesses responding to this question regarded familiarity with the equipment required by the job to be an important skill. As indicated in Table 16, 28% of employers indicated that it was "very important", 30% indicated that it was "important" and 23% indicated that it was "somewhat important".

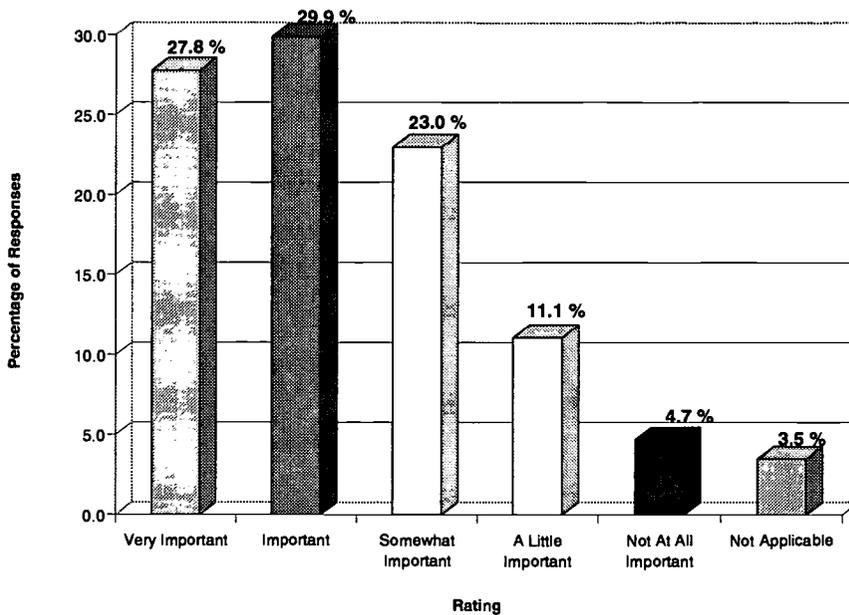
In telephone interviews, most respondents said that their employees use some form of equipment on a regular basis in their work. Some respondents commented that employees hired for particular positions are sometimes offered on-the-job training or some form of schooling to learn the use of the equipment required by the job. Comments by some respondents indicated that employees would be expected to master the use of equipment with relative ease. Being able to use computers at many levels in the workplace was offered, repeatedly, as an example of equipment that employees are frequently required to become familiar with on the job.

Table 16: Importance of Familiarity with Equipment Required by Job

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	417	27.8
Important	449	29.9
Somewhat Important	345	23.0
A Little Important	166	11.1
Not At All Important	71	4.7
Not Applicable	52	3.5
Total	1,500	100.0%

As Figure 14 illustrates, most employees considered familiarity with equipment required by the job to be an "important" or "very important" skill.

Figure 14: Importance of Familiarity with Equipment Required by Job



This finding supports other findings in the survey, specifically, that being able to learn on the job and having some knowledge of computers is important to area employers.

XIV. The Importance of Math Skills

As shown in Table 17, over half (52%) of the employers who responded to this question indicated that for potential employees math skills were either “very important” (20%) or “important” (32%).

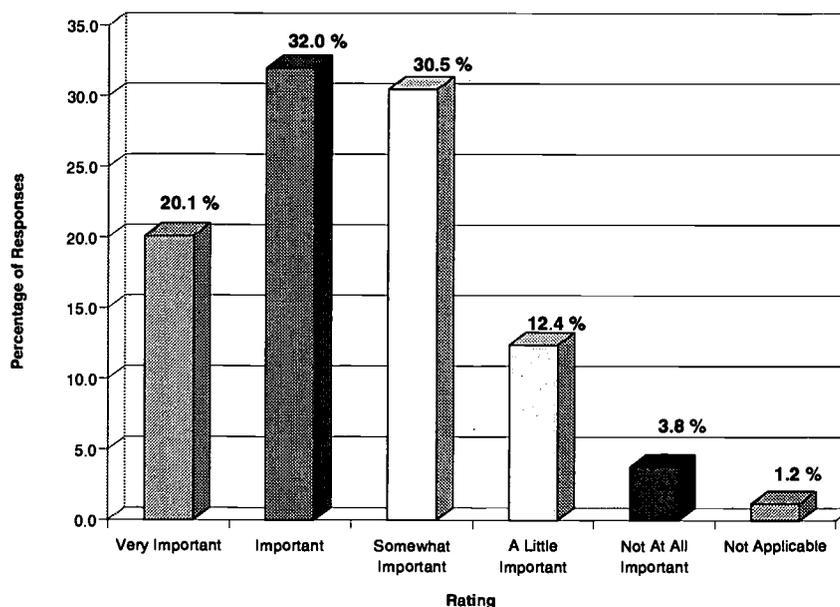
In telephone interviews, many employers said they require math skills for the job. Respondents appeared to differentiate between “math literacy” and “academic math” in rating math skills for importance. It appeared that while they did not place too much value on “academic math”, they assumed that basic “math literacy” is part of the skill set that prospective employees would be expected to have. Respondents seemed to suggest that the prevalence of calculators and computers with easy-to-use software makes it possible for employees to function effectively as long as they have a sufficient level of basic “math literacy”. At the same time, employers also indicated that for basic numerical computations, employees were too dependent on computers and calculators. According to some respondents, when these tools are broken or unavailable, some employees are unable to perform basic arithmetic computations.

Table 17: Importance of Math Skills

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	293	20.1
Important	467	32.0
Somewhat Important	446	30.5
A Little Important	181	12.4
Not At All Important	56	3.8
Not Applicable	18	1.2
Total	1,461	100.0%

Figure 15 illustrates that employers were more likely to rate math skills as “somewhat important” or “important” rather than “very important”.

Figure 15: Importance of Math Skills



Given NVCC's general education goals and objectives specifying that students seeking degrees should "understand and be able to interpret and manipulate numerical data," it would seem certain that students earning degrees at NVCC would meet or exceed the basic "math literacy" standard that employers indicated they expect. But what about students who are not required to take math courses? Or those who test into developmental math but fail to persist long enough to increase their math proficiency? Will they be adequately prepared for workplace demands?

XV. The Importance of Work Experience

Data gathered from the survey on desirable employee characteristics indicate that work experience, while deemed desirable, was not as major a consideration for area employers as some other characteristics. Less than half of those who responded to the question (45%) considered work experience to be "very important" or "important" (Table 18).

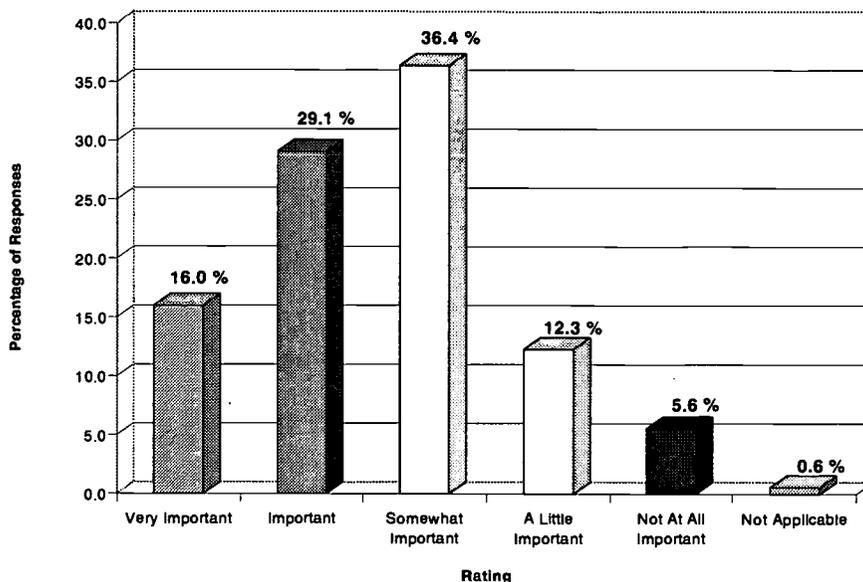
The information in Table 18 is supported by some of the comments made by area employers in telephone interviews. According to interview comments, work experience was considered to be important, but not a mandatory requirement for hiring. Many respondents stated that experience was not limited to job experience. Candidate's experience gained through college and other avenues could also be important and enhance an employee's on the job performance.

Table 18: Importance of Work Experience

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	242	16.0
Important	440	29.1
Somewhat Important	552	36.4
A Little Important	186	12.3
Not At All Important	85	5.6
Not Applicable	9	0.6
Total	1,514	100.0%

As shown in Figure 16, over 50% of the respondents did not seem to attach much importance to previous work experience when they made hiring decisions. However, it is possible that these employers are non high-level employers who prefer to train their employees on the job.

Figure 16: Importance of Work Experience



While area employers did not attach a great degree of importance to previous work experience, only 6% of employers responded that work experience was “not at all important”. It appears that some employers might find work experience a plus, but that they would definitely consider candidates without work experience.

How can NVCC use this finding to advise students? Perhaps NVCC can use this finding to help students weigh the advantages and disadvantages of working while in school. Learning that area employers rate several other skills higher than work experience might allow students to choose to concentrate their time and energy developing the skills employers say they most value. Others might decide that many of the characteristics employers value can

also be developed on the job, so for that reason and others they might choose cooperative education opportunities, internships, volunteer work or a paid position while attending NVCC.

XVI. The Importance of Leadership Abilities

As indicated in Table 19, employers did not attach a high degree of importance to a potential employee's leadership abilities. While leadership abilities were deemed to have some importance, only 16% of respondents indicated that leadership abilities were "very important" and 29% indicated they were "important". The greatest proportion of employers (42%) indicated that leadership abilities were "somewhat important".

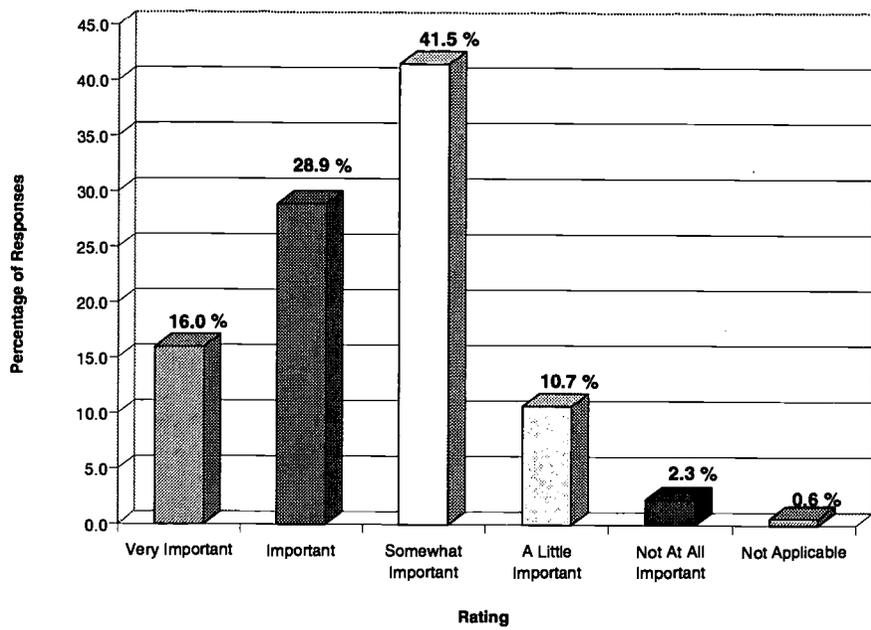
Most employers interviewed agreed that some leadership abilities are important to the job, but it appears that many do not look for it at the entry level. The relatively low rating for the importance of leadership abilities and comments from area employers may reflect that many employers were thinking of entry-level employees in rating this characteristic. It appears that they do expect management personnel to possess leadership abilities. Comments from some employers indicated that they expect employees to demonstrate initiative, but do not attach as much importance to leadership abilities. In discussions of leadership ability, some respondents indicated that they placed a high value on the ability of employees to follow instructions carefully and to do well on what they are instructed to do.

Table 19: Importance of Leadership Abilities

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	237	16.0
Important	428	28.9
Somewhat Important	614	41.5
A Little Important	159	10.7
Not At All Important	34	2.3
Not Applicable	9	0.6
Total	1,481	100.0%

As Figure 17 shows, employers were more likely to rate leadership abilities as “somewhat important” rather than “important” or “very important”.

Figure 17: Importance of Leadership Abilities



NVCC can use this finding to inform students that while the leadership abilities they develop and hone while at NVCC may not initially be utilized by their employers, leadership abilities are of value. Employers may not appear to highly prize leadership abilities in entry-level employees, but definitely expect their managers to possess leadership skills.

XVII. The Importance of GPA/Academic Credentials

Only 6% of respondents rated GPA or academic credentials as “very important”. A majority rated them as either “somewhat important” (40%) or “a little important” (21%). Eight percent of the businesses indicated that GPA or academic credentials were “not at all important” (Table 20).

Comments from some local employers indicated that unless the business offers tuition benefits, where employees were expected to achieve a certain grade in order to be reimbursed for the course, most businesses were not overly concerned about GPA or academic credentials.

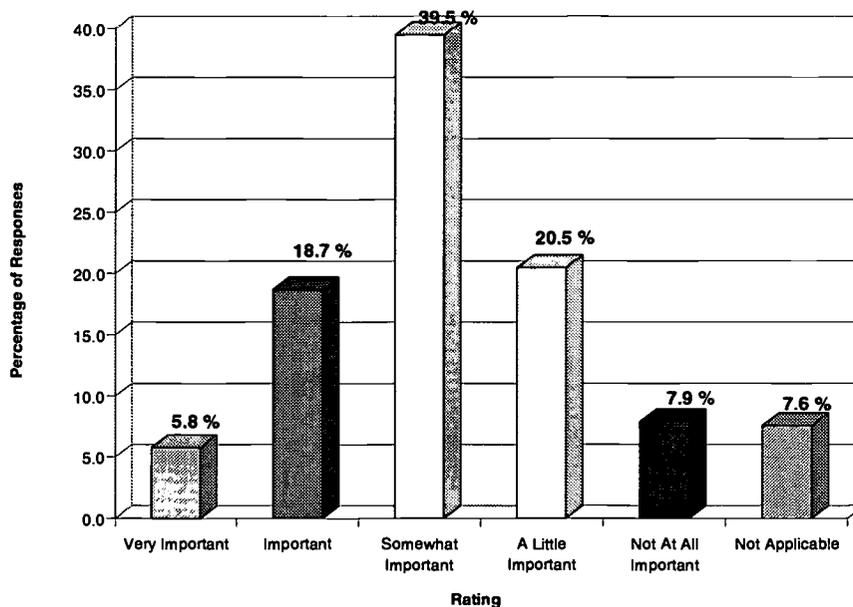
Based upon comments from respondents, it appears that employers pay attention at the point of hiring to whether or not applicants have earned a diploma or a degree. Whether or not an applicant has a degree or diploma may be used as a screening device.

Table 20: Importance of GPA/Academic Credentials

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	87	5.8
Important	281	18.7
Somewhat Important	593	39.5
A Little Important	308	20.5
Not At All Important	118	7.9
Not Applicable	114	7.6
Total	1,501	100.0%

As Figure 18 shows, almost 40% of employers thought that academic performance or credentials were “somewhat important” when considering the attributes of a prospective employee.

Figure 18: Importance of GPA/Academic Credentials



What can NVCC learn from this finding? The College should not underestimate the importance of academic performance or credentials to area employers. NVCC students need to be aware that area employers, in selecting potential candidates for employment, consider academic performance and credentials. Academic performance and credentials may be a deciding factor in whom a company invites for an interview. Academic performance and credentials may also be important to job candidates who lack specific work experience or skills. Students should know that, ultimately, other skills and attributes will probably play a larger role than academic performance or credentials in their employability, but by performing well at NVCC and gaining academic credentials students add to their employability.

XVIII. “Other” Characteristics

Respondents were asked to suggest other characteristics not listed in the survey that they considered important in potential employees. As Table 21 shows, of the respondents who mentioned skills or characteristics under the “Other” category, 78% of them considered these particular skills or characteristics to be “very important”.

Responses covered a wide range of skills and characteristics. Employers suggested skills and characteristics such as:

- excellent customer service and relationships
- positive attitude
- professionalism
- good telephone communications
- good writing skills
- ability to speak a second language
- being a team player
- having sign language skills
- having good morals
- being reliable
- being committed to the job
- having a willingness to learn and add value

Many businesses, especially in retail and food industries, stated that the ability to provide good customer service was a highly valued employee characteristic. Some respondents repeated this comment several times. Another characteristic that was mentioned in the interviews was the ability of an employee to be a role model for other employees. Employers placed a high value on employees who enjoy acting as trainers or coaches, especially to co-workers who may not be as quick to learn as others. According to respondents, employees who act as role models are generally recognized for their contributions in many ways, including promotions and recognition.

Table 21: Importance of “Other” Characteristics

Rating	Responses	
	#	%
Very Important	151	75.1
Important	22	10.9
Somewhat Important	3	1.5
A Little Important	1	0.5
Not At All Important	0	0.0
Not Applicable	24	11.9
Total	201	100.0%

Summary

As a part of the Business Needs Assessment Survey, Northern Virginia employers were asked to rate the importance of seventeen different employee characteristics and skills. Analysis of the responses indicated that employers valued all characteristics and skills to some degree. Of the seventeen characteristics and skills rated, a majority of respondents rated fourteen of them as "very important" or "important". Over 90% of the respondents rated five of the characteristics and skills as "very important" or "important": work ethics, communication abilities, ability to learn on the job, motivation/initiative, and working with others.

Analysis of the employers' assessment of desirable employee characteristics and skills indicates that, for the most part, area employers appeared to place more emphasis on personal or general skills rather than specialized skills. That is, employers regarded skills or characteristics such as work ethics, communication abilities, motivation, or interpersonal skills as more important than attributes such as work experience, special technical skills, or familiarity with equipment required by the job. However, it is important to note that specific industrial sectors value certain skills and characteristics differently than other sectors. As noted in OIR Report No. 15-00, "Skill Sets Needed by the IT Sector: Washington D.C. Metropolitan Area", more emphasis is placed on work experience within the IT industry.

What are the implications for NVCC of the findings of this study? Having gained up-to-date information about the characteristics and skills area employers value in employees will help NVCC to evaluate its current efforts in preparing students for today's workplace. Are NVCC students learning to develop or refine the characteristics and skills valued by employers while attending the College? Which of the skills valued by employers can be taught in the classroom? What other means for developing these skills can NVCC provide? Answering questions such as these will help the College ensure that NVCC's students have the opportunity to acquire the skills and refine the characteristics that employers value. By accomplishing this, NVCC will help ensure the employability of its students and continue to provide businesses with good employees.

NORTHERN VIRGINIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

COLLEGE MISSION AND GOALS

The mission of Northern Virginia Community College is to respond to the educational needs of its dynamic and diverse constituencies through an array of comprehensive programs and services that facilitate learning and workforce development in an environment of open access and through lifelong educational opportunities.

To achieve this mission, the following strategic goals for 1999-2001 are established:

- I. Sustain and Strengthen Academic Quality and Teaching Excellence.
- II. Enhance the Quality of Services to Students.
- III. Expand the Integration of Technology in Instruction and Administration.
- IV. Increase Access to College Programs and Services.
- V. Improve the Quality of Institutional Communication.
- VI. Strengthen Programs That Help Build a World Class Workforce.
- VII. Promote Responsiveness to Diversity of Students and Employees.
- VIII. Strengthen and Develop Additional Linkages with Community Groups.
- IX. Integrate College Planning and Facility Requirements.
- X. Enhance the Overall Wellness of Our Working and Living Environments.



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