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Hiring the Right Skill Set and Motivating the Millennials

By Tony Wagner



In an economic downturn, employers need to be even more careful with their hiring decisions. And recent graduates from some of the best schools may not have the skills that matter most in the new global knowledge economy. In researching my new book, *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach The New Survival Skills Our Children Need -- and What We Can Do About It*, I have come to understand that there are "7 Survival Skills" for the New World of Work, and that employers must look beyond applicants'

"pedigrees" to carefully assess whether they have the skills that matter most.

New Skills

Here are the **Seven Survival Skills**, as described by some of the people whom I interviewed:

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

"The idea that a company's senior leaders have all the answers and can solve problems by themselves has gone completely by the wayside . . . The person who's close to the work has to have strong analytic skills. You have to be rigorous: test your assumptions, don't take things at face value, don't go in with preconceived ideas that you're trying to prove."

--Ellen Kumata, consultant to Fortune 200 companies

Collaboration Across Networks and Leading by Influence

"The biggest problem we have in the company as a whole is finding people capable of exerting leadership across the board . . . Our mantra is that you lead by influence, rather than authority."

--Mark Chandler, Senior Vice President and General Counsel at Cisco

Agility and Adaptability

"I've been here four years, and we've done fundamental reorganization every year because of changes in the business . . . I can guarantee the job I hire someone to do will change or may not exist in the future, so this is why adaptability and learning skills are more important than technical skills."

--Clay Parker, President of Chemical Management Division of BOC Edwards

Initiative and Entrepreneurship

"For our production and crafts staff, the hourly workers, we need self-directed people . . . who can find creative solutions to some very tough, challenging problems."

--Mark Maddox, Human Resources Manager at Unilever Foods North America

Effective Oral and Written Communication

"The biggest skill people are missing is the ability to communicate: both written and oral presentations. It's a huge problem for us."

--Annmarie Neal, Vice President for Talent Management at Cisco Systems

Accessing and Analyzing Information

"There is so much information available that it is almost too much, and if people aren't prepared to process the information effectively, it almost freezes them in their steps."

--Mike Summers, Vice President for Global Talent Management at Dell

Curiosity and Imagination

"Our old idea is that work is defined by employers and that employees have to do whatever the employer wants . . . but actually, you would like him to come up with an interpretation that you like -- he's adding something personal -- a creative element."

--Michael Jung, Senior Consultant at McKinsey and Company

Looking Beyond the Degree

The conventional thinking of many who make hiring decisions is that graduates from "name-brand" colleges are likely to be more intelligent and better prepared than students who have gone to second or third tier schools. But, in reality, what the degree may mean is that these students are better at

taking tests and figuring out what the professor wants -- skills that won't get them very far in the workplace today. A senior associate from a major consulting firm told me that recent hires from Ivy League business schools were constantly asking what the right answer was -- in other words, how to get an "A" for the job they were doing -- and were not always very adept at asking the right questions, which was the single most important skill senior executives whom I interviewed identified.

So what does this mean for the interview process?

First, listen carefully for the kinds of questions the applicant asks. Are they probing? Insightful? Do they suggest that the applicant has really prepared for the interview by trying to understand your business? Do you feel as though you or your company are being interviewed? If so, that's a very good sign.

How a perspective employee asks these questions matters, as well. Does he or she listen carefully and engage you in discussions? Is the potential new hire both interested and interesting? In addition to the ability to ask good questions, senior execs told me that the ability to "look someone in the eye and engage in a thoughtful discussion" is an essential competency for working with colleagues and understanding customers' needs.

Finally, perhaps the most important question you might ask is, "what do you want to learn or how do you want to grow in this job?" This question is essential for two reasons: First, the quality of the answer will tell you how reflective this individual is -- and how intentional he or she may be about his or her own development. More than any specific skill, individuals must want to learn, grow, and improve continuously to be successful in today's workplace.

Motivating the Millennials

The second reason why this question is important goes to the heart of the problem of how to motivate new hires to do their best. In asking the question, "how do you want to grow," you are signaling to a prospective employee that you and your company are committed to developing the talents of your workers. Many employers worry that this generation lacks a work ethic. But in my research, I have discovered that this generation is not unmotivated but rather differently motivated to learn and to work. Above all else, they want opportunities to be challenged and to make a difference.

Describing the different work ethic of this generation, Ellen Kumata, who is managing partner at Cambria Associates and consults to senior executives at Fortune 200 companies, told me, "They don't see coming into a company as being a career experience. They don't want to climb the corporate ladder and make more money and please the boss. And so you can't manage them the

same way -- you can't just put them into a cubicle and expect them to perform." Tracy Mitrano, who manages the Office of Information Technologies at Cornell University, agreed: "You have to make the work more interesting and allow them to work in different ways. They are prepared to work just as much and just as hard -- but not at a desk 8 hours a day."

Andrew Bruck was finishing a law degree at Stanford when I interviewed him last year. "We want to feel ownership. We have a craving for an opportunity to do something really important," he told me. "People in my generation have been in a constant state of training. Now they're excited to go do something. The more responsibility you give people, the better they produce . . . There are more and more recent law school grads who are willing to take a lower salary in return for an opportunity for more meaningful work."

Ben McNeely, a journalist, described to me the difference between his former employer and his current one. "At the paper where I worked previously, the publisher would kill stories if they portrayed an advertiser in a negative light. At the paper where I work now, I have an opportunity to contribute something in a growing community. I was brought in to cover the new bio-tech research campus under construction nearby, where the Canon towel factory used to be, and to cover health care issues, as well. I have support from the editor and publisher who both have strong journalistic ethics. I like it that the editor pushes Windham, who wants us to dig deeper."

Carie Windham, who graduated from college in 2005, told me about the best boss she's ever had. "He asked me where I want to be in 10 years. He talked to me about creating the experience I want to have. He understood I wouldn't be there forever . . . Mentoring is a huge motivational tool, someone showing an interest in you and giving you feedback. We want to feel we have a creative, individual role -- that we're not just working on an assembly line. We want to feel like we have ownership of an idea."

Hiring the right talent, then, is only part of the problem employers face today. Equally important is how businesses create challenges and learning opportunities that motivate the Millennials to do their best. Google, which had more than one million applications for 5,000 jobs in 2006, is the number one pick of a place to work for many of the Millennials. Listening to twenty-two year old Matt Kulick talk about his work, one begins to understand how profoundly many companies will have to change in order to attract and retain the best talent: "First, they (Google) share ideals that I believe in -- open source software. And their products are solving important problems for people -- doing good in the world. I believe in what they're doing -- these values are very important to me. I wanted to help out, to make a contribution. The second reason I came to Google is because they give me the resources I need to accomplish major things that will really make a difference in world. The third reason is the

responsibility they give you from the day you start. It is a winning combination. It makes me happy to go to work every day."

About the author:

Tony Wagner is co-director of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His most recent book is *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills -- And What We Can Do About It* (Basic Books, 2008). Tony can be reached at www.schoolchange.org

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