Are educators and executives aligned on the creative readiness of the U.S. workforce?
Ready to Innovate
Are Educators and Executives Aligned on the Creative Readiness of the U.S. Workforce?

Innovation is crucial to competition, and creativity is integral to innovation. U.S. employers rate creativity/innovation among the top five skills that will increase in importance over the next five years, and stimulating innovation/creativity and enabling entrepreneurship is among the top 10 challenges of U.S. CEOs. But how to foster creativity in new entrants to the U.S. workforce? In November 2007, The Conference Board and Americans for the Arts, in partnership with the American Association of School Administrators, surveyed public school superintendents and American business executives (employers) to identify and compare their views surrounding creativity.

Overwhelmingly, both the superintendents who educate future workers and the employers who hire them agree that creativity is increasingly important in U.S. workplaces (99 percent and 97 percent, respectively), and that arts-training—and, to a lesser degree, communications studies—are crucial to developing creativity. Yet, there is a gap between understanding this truth and putting it into meaningful practice. Our findings indicate that most high schools and employers provide such training and studies only on an elective or “as needed” basis.

Other results of this survey:

- Eighty-five percent of employers concerned with hiring creative people say they can’t find the applicants they seek.
- Employers concerned with hiring creative people rarely use profile tests to assess the creative skills of potential employees (less than 20 percent). Instead, they rely on face-to-face interviews. More than 1 in 4 say they assess creativity based on interviewees’ appearance.
- Superintendents and employers cite many of the same skills as indicators of creativity. Yet when asked to rate mastery of these skills, superintendents are more likely than employers to rate graduates/new entrants as meeting or exceeding expectations.
- While 97 percent of employers say creativity is of increasing importance, only 72 percent say that hiring creative people is a primary concern.

Defining Creativity
We gave 155 school superintendents and 89 employers a list of 11 “skills or observable behaviors” and asked them to rank which ones best demonstrate creativity. Both groups agree that ability to identify new patterns of behavior or new combination of actions and integration of knowledge across different disciplines are foremost in demonstrating creativity. Other responses reveal a decided lack of alignment.

Employers say problem-identification or articulation best demonstrates creativity, while school superintendents rank it ninth. Superintendents rank problem-solving first; employers rank it eighth. These discrepancies bolster the view that while schools teach students how to solve problems put before them, the business sector requires workers who can identify the problems in the first place.

Most employers report that new workforce entrants meet or exceed expectations on seven of 11 creativity-related skills or behaviors. Most school superintendents report that high-school graduates meet or exceed expectations on all 11.

It is not clear what accounts for these differences. Perhaps it’s the varied perspectives of the respondents rather than a disagreement on the importance of creativity. The results suggest there needs to be more discussion between the
two groups—educators and employers—to be sure they understand each other’s points of view.

Diverging Views
Seventy percent of school superintendents presume employers seek out “creative thinkers” over “technically skilled” individuals. Employers, as a group, are evenly split (49/51). When employers are separated into two groups—those who say creativity is a primary hiring criterion and those who say it is not—differences emerge:

- Of employers seeking creativity, 63 percent prefer the creative employee over the technically skilled one.
- Of employers who do not see creativity as primary, only 16 percent prefer creativity over technical skill.

Playing a Guessing Game
Employers who are concerned with hiring creative people use job interviews as their primary tool for assessing creativity. In those interviews, employers evaluate the following:

- Ability to look spontaneously beyond the specifics of a question (78 percent)
- Responses to hypothetical scenarios (70 percent)
- Elaboration on extracurricular activities or volunteer work (40 percent)
- Appearance (style of dress, accessory, hair, etc.) (27 percent)

Asked to name the educational backgrounds and experiences deemed indicators of creativity, school superintendents and employers rank arts study among the top two.

- School superintendents rank arts study as the highest indicator of creativity, followed by experience in performing arts/entertainment.
- Employers rank arts study second, topped only by self-employed work, as an indicator of creativity.

Walking the Walk
Educators and employers both feel they have a responsibility for instilling creativity in the U.S. workforce (83 and 61 percent, respectively). However, their current creativity-building offerings don’t match this desire.

When superintendents were presented with a list of 12 creativity-promoting educational activities/experiences, more than three-quarters reported that each one (excluding study-abroad programs) is supported within their high schools. However, in more than half of these schools, only three of these activities/experiences are part of the required curriculum.

When employers were presented with a comparable list of eight employee activities/training options, at least half the employers identified seven of the eight as creativity-developing endeavors. Of this group, however, fewer than one in 10 say they provide those seven to all their employees. And only four of the eight options are offered even on an “as needed” basis by more than half the employers.

The picture isn’t much better among those employers who cite creativity as a primary hiring criterion. In this group, 80 percent provide the three activities/training options that they say best develop creativity—working in departments other than their own, managerial coaching, and mentoring—only on an “as needed” basis.

Given these findings, it is time for employers to evaluate how well their corporate support of education and their own employee training programs stack up against the strategic value they themselves place on innovation and its creative underpinning. It is also time for greater dialogue within and across all sectors to better understand and align efforts to foster creativity in current and future U.S. employees.

“We need people who think with the creative side of their brains—people who have played in a band, who have painted, been involved in the community as volunteers. It enhances symbiotic thinking capabilities, not always thinking in the same paradigm, learning how to kick-start a new idea, or how to get a job done better, less expensively.”

Annette Byrd, Manager, Healthy Work Environment, GlaxoSmithKline, Are They Really Ready To Work, 2006
About This Report

This Key Findings report is based on the upcoming Ready to Innovate: Are Educators and Executives Aligned on the Creative Readiness of the U.S. Workforce?, which has been developed as part of The Conference Board Workforce Readiness Initiative. Focusing on the skills and knowledge of current, new, and future employees, The Conference Board Workforce Readiness Initiative is committed to helping ensure that employers have the workforces they need to compete in the global marketplace. Our evolving work is validated by frequent interaction with our 2,000 member companies as we respond to their emerging business issues.


The Conference Board creates and disseminates knowledge about management and the marketplace to help businesses strengthen their performance and better serve society.

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The American Association of School Administrators, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders across the United States. AASA members range from chief executive officers, superintendents and senior level school administrators to cabinet members, professors and aspiring school system leaders.