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Focusing on the Skills at Work

What Do Employers Think?

Research indicated four key points based on employer thoughts and beliefs related to CTE, focusing on skill development with students, and about interest in supporting CTE programs within schools. These four takeaways are:

1. Employers view CTE very positively and see CTE as value-added.
2. Employers value skills over degrees, and believe CTE will help meet their skill-based hiring needs.
3. Employers overwhelmingly want to expand their partnerships with CTE programs
4. Employers strongly favor increased public funding for CTE.

As you progress through this module, you will see that key takeaways 1-3 are discussed and explored in greater detail.

1 Employers **view CTE very positively** and see CTE as a **value-add.**

2 Employers **value skills over degrees,** and believe CTE will help **meet their skill-based hiring needs.**

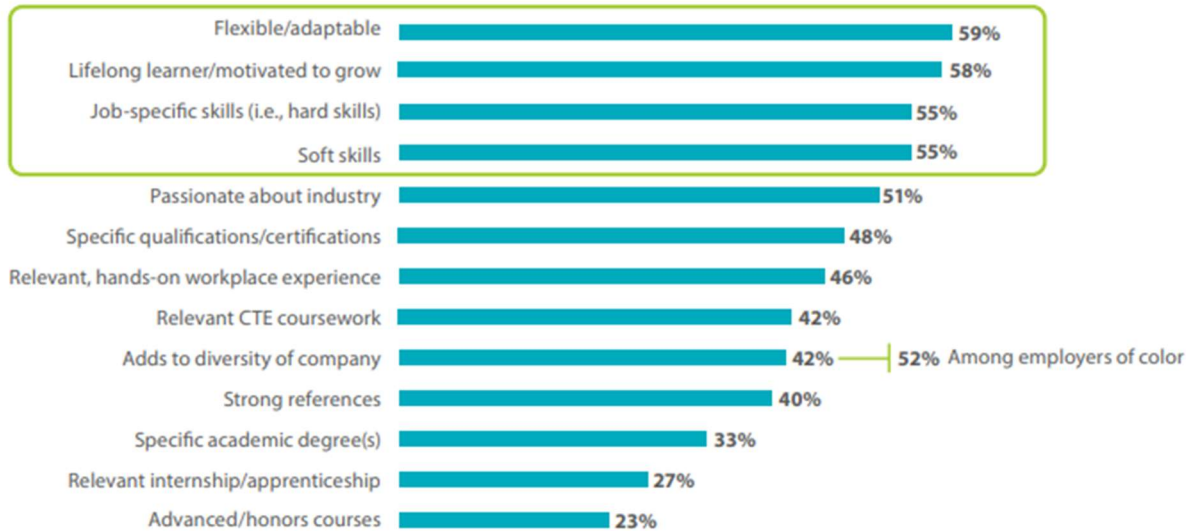**3** Employers overwhelmingly want to **expand their partnerships with CTE programs.**

4 Employers strongly favor **increased public funding for CTE.**

Alternative Text (Source)

Employers Value Skills Over Degrees

While existing hiring practices predominantly value degrees more than competencies, research indicates that internal mindsets are shifting. When respondents were asked to rank the value of 13 qualifications considered when hiring a recent high school or college graduate, Figure 2 illustrates that competencies including flexibility and adaptability, lifelong learner, and soft and hard job-specific skills were identified as "very important" by 55 percent or more of responding employers compared to more traditional qualifications, some of which may have more access barriers, including specific academic degrees (33 percent), strong references (40 percent), and advanced/honors courses (23 percent).

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FIGURE 2.

Most important skills for recent job graduate candidates

Skill	Percentage
Flexible/adaptable	59%
Lifelong learner/motivated to grow	58%
Job-specific skills (i.e., hard skills)	55%
Soft skills	55%
Passionate about industry	51%
Specific qualifications/certifications	48%
Relevant, hands-on workplace experience	46%
Relevant CTE coursework	42%
Adds to diversity of company	42% — 52% Among employers of color
Strong references	40%
Specific academic degree(s)	33%
Relevant internship/apprenticeship	27%
Advanced/honors courses	23%

Alternative text (Source)

The skills outlined in this research as "very important" are directly connected to the Essential Skills and Technical Competencies. "Job-specific skills" as described in the table ARE the Technical Competencies that have been outlined for each Career Pathway. A quick comparison between the other skills listed and the Essential Skills identified in Illinois will quickly reveal that these skills ARE included as part of the Essential Skills. As you continue in this module, you will see a deeper dive into the importance of the Essential Skills, Technical Competencies, and your role with engaging partners with skill-focused activities and learning for students.

Why do Employers view CTE very positively and see WBL as a value add?

There are a lot of reasons. But one major reason is the fact that they want a workforce that is competent and capable to complete the work. The second most obvious one is that a properly educated workforce means less dollars they are spending on training workers.

Why do employers value skills over degrees?

With the postsecondary education system that has flourished over the years, it is evident that some institutions are more about obtaining a degree and less about providing the skills, training, knowledge and experience in being successful at work. These inequities in our system have led employers to value activities and experiences they view on resumes as key components of "excellent workforce talent." Most employers will tell you that they would rather recruit a 3.0 student with a part time or full-time job than a 3.2 GPA student with no part time work. Showing those skills on social media and in person are key for young people.

Focusing on the Skills at Work: Revisiting the Essential Skills and Technical Competencies

The overall key component in developing students for career pipelines is to develop their Technical Competencies and Essential Skills. This section will investigate how educators can support employers in understanding essential skills, supporting students in their WBL programs around Technical Competencies, and offering opportunities where schools and partners can assist in programming that promote both skill sets.

The Essential Skills

School districts can assist employers with understanding the Cross-Sector Essential Employability Skills by combining efforts to host programs and presentations on how they impact students in the workplace. Recognizing that many employers refer to these Essential Skills as "soft skills" development in their programs, it is important to encourage them to consider aligning their vocabulary with the Illinois State Board of Education and Illinois schools.

Essential Skills:

- Provide transferable life skills that can be used at any career setting
- Prepare individuals for future success regardless of the path they take
- Increase communication and provide clear activities to improve these skills
- Increase productivity
- Create safe, non-toxic, and trusting work environments
- Are hard to model, teach, and assess and need intentional training in the classroom and workplace
- Look different in diverse workplaces, cultures, and settings

Essential Skills are not the following:

- Easy or "soft"– if these were easy skills, why do so many adults struggle with these?
- Common sense– If it was "common sense" again, why are these so hard to learn?
- A waste of time or something that work environments should take for granted

Technical Competencies

Teaching technical competencies in your classrooms is not a hard sell. Every educator knows that in order to specialize in a field or career, that person needs to have certain technical skills that require them to master their craft. From a perspective of the field of education, every career is a mastery of art. To be the top in my field, I need to hone my skills, practice them, get better at accomplishing them in ways that improve my mastery. This could be increasing the speed by which I accomplish a completed task, or the level of success I meet in accomplishing the task in a timely manner. The state of Illinois has laid out Career Pathway Technical Competencies (introduced in Module 1) that are aligned to a career pathway that offer ways we can teach and hone these skills for our students.

Working with our Advisory and community organizations, we can identify key Technical Competencies through the state of Illinois, to focus our efforts around career training purposes. We can also map these competencies very similarly to the way Essential skills have been mapped in this document: Module 5 - Year Long Essential Skills Activities- Business-Spreadsheet. By mapping the Technical Skills, we hold ourselves and our students accountable to the learning and mastering these skills. Prior to this happening, conversations with your Advisory group are intended to spur ideas and career improvement strategies on how to teach these skills, what settings might be more appropriate to teach in, and what strategies could best get students to interact, while learning these skills. Encouraging conversations with your Advisory group a year in advance of making major curricular or Technical skills changes is recommended as these changes have major impacts in programming, equipment purchases, and other budgetary items that take time to address.