PROJECT
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NEWS

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Downside of Hiring College Grads in the Digital Age

A new federally funded study, conducted by Project Information Literacy with Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, found a critical mismatch between college graduates' research skills and employers' needs.

Today's graduates, dubbed the Net Generation, have grown up in a world more technological than tactile and where it's easier to text than talk. However, researchers found most employers are increasingly dismayed by these young workers' lack of old-school research skills.

Based on interviews with 23 U.S. employers at places such as Microsoft, the Smithsonian, the FBI, KPMG, Mother Jones Magazine, and Marriott International, researchers found bright new hires dazzle during interviews with their digital skills.

But once they were on the job, it became apparent they were missing essential traditional research tools like making a phone call, poking their head into a team member's office for help in interpreting results, or scouring printed reports sitting on a shelf. Most college hires, rarely go beyond the first couple of pages of a Google search, employers said.

"More than anything else, employers complained college hires failed to collaborate when doing research and with each passing year, fewer and fewer will leave their workstations when they try to solve information problems," Dr. Alison Head, the study's lead researcher said.

Thirty-three recent graduates were interviewed at four U.S. colleges and universities, including Harvard, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Puget Sound, and Santa Rosa Junior College. Graduates said they leveraged skills from college, such analyzing and synthesizing large quantities of content at work. But that got them only so far.

Many graduates considered thumbing through an old dog-eared copy of an annual report or calling a colleague as outdated and as foreign as writing letter or using a landline. Returning information with speed was the key factor.

"When you start working it becomes more that you want to demonstrate to the people that you work with and you work for that you can generate this information quickly, so whenever there is a need, you will go to the fastest source, the most reliable source," one fresh-from-college graduate explained.

But employers told us that instinct for "instant information," a characteristic of the digital generation, is simply not enough. Those making hiring decisions place a high premium on workers who are comprehensive and persistent researchers.

 "I don't think there's a lot of that desire to go deep; they expect information to be so easy to get, that when it's not, it's frustrating to them," one employer said, "they've lived in a world where it's always been there."

The low-tech skills are essential since they are often the only way to unearth the social and contextual information that can sometimes matter more than facts and figures, employers said. Yet, many employers failed to see past the tech savvy skills young recruits offered.

"We found employers mistake computer proficiency for research competencies, but the two capabilities are very different," Head said. "Workplace research requires a strategy that imagines all possible answers—rather than conducting a cursory search to arrive at a quick conclusion after a few keystrokes."

Researchers concluded the basic online search skills graduates bring with them are attractive enough to help them get hired. Yet, employers found that once on the job, these educated young workers seemed tethered to their computers.

"If employers do not retool their interview practices to get the skill sets they need from today's college hires at the outset, there will be far reaching consequences on workplace productivity, especially since the digital age is well upon us," Head said.

Head leads Project Information Literacy, an ongoing, national research study about how today's college students find and use information in the digital age. She is a research fellow at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society and an affiliate associate professor in the University of Washington's Information School.

The study was funded by the Institute of Museum and Libraries Services (IMLS), a federal agency creating strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas.

The full report is available at: https://projectinfolit.org/pil-public-v1/wpcontent/uploads/2020/08/pil_fall2012_workplacestudy_fullreport-1.pdf
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