Hard Skills, Soft Skills, and Values of Engaged Young Employees

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The findings outlined below were gathered from 38 interviews, 17 of which were from exemplar young leaders (EYL) (18-34 years) who are actively engaged in their community or places of work. The remaining 21 interviews were gathered from industry leaders (stakeholders - S) who have demonstrated a value or capacity to support young employees. Those interviewed represent a diverse cross-section of both professional context, gender, sexuality, age, and cultural background.

This document offers hard skills, soft skills, and values identified by those interviewed as being important for young people to encapsulate as they enter the workforce, so that they can positively affect their places of work. It is important to note that these can be developed and is not meant to be a 'checklist' for employers.

This document's definition of hard skills, soft skills, and workplace values are below:

Hard skills: 'Hard skills' are often understood as more 'technical' skills related to job performance.

Soft skills: 'Soft skills' is an umbrella term covering various skills often related to internal capabilities or to capabilities relevant to interacting with others.

Values: 'Values' can be understood as a way of believing or being that is held with significant importance.

There were several characteristics and values that arose through the interviews. It was a challenge to 'categorize' what was a hard skill, soft skill, or a value. However, using the above definitions, an attempt at categorizing was done. The below characteristics and values are highlighted because of their direct connection to the unique needs of emerging adults and the amount in which they were emphasized by interviewees:

Hard Skills: Communication **|** Critical Thinking/Problem Solving

Soft Skills: Growth Mindset **|** Self-Assurance **|** Self-Awareness

Value: System Thinking **|** Open-Mindedness **|** Relational

The below findings are useful to help inform criteria consideration for hiring participants and different training elements of the Collective Impact for Inclusive Youth Employment (CIIYE) Initiative.

Hard Skills

1. Communication

"Not just the ability to articulate, but the ability to communicate in a way that is non-violent" -EYL

The most popular hard skill identified by both exemplar young leaders and stakeholders interviewed was the importance of communication. Both groups identified diverse aspects of communication. The ability to communicate via email, ability to communicate through a presentation, the ability to communicate in ways specific to different individuals. Despite these divergent means of communication, it was firmly validated that the ability to communicate clearly is important to being successful in the workforce.

2. Critical Thinking/Problem Solving

"That's crucial and I'm seeing a deficit there honestly with folks kind of taking things at face value without digging in and kind of pulling apart like a source or just even a logic of things, so I think critical thinking" -S

Critical thinking/problem solving was the most mentioned hard skill named by stakeholders. While not as prominent within exemplar young leaders' interviews, it was still a commonly mentioned skill. It is worth noting that multiple stakeholders identified critical thinking/problem solving as a deficit in many young people entering the workforce. This emphasis further heightens the importance of this skill.

Soft Skills

1. Growth Mindset

"You're not going to get there and all of a sudden be an amazing leader; to do great things you need to also learn and observe from other people. And maybe even take bits and pieces of what you learned with that too, that help develop who you want to become or develop how you want to lead others" - EYL

The soft skill of Growth Mindset was the most popular skill (soft or hard) arising out of all interviews. Both exemplar young leaders and stakeholders identified that for young people to positively affect their places of work there must be a willingness to learn from peers, admit they do not know, and pursue skill development.

2. Self-Assurance

"Being really confident in who they are and what they believe in, and making sure they are comfortable with themselves" -EYL

Self-Assurance (confidence) was the second most popular soft skill identified by both exemplar young leaders and stakeholders. This skill emphasizes the importance of young staff believing in their ability as they enter the workforce and being willing to share their thoughts and opinions. This connects with earlier research emphasizing the importance of employers creating welcoming and validating workspaces.

3. Self-Awareness

"Knowing yourself, knowing your own values, and what it is that makes you react certain ways. We don't spend enough time identifying, why this made me angry, and why I acted this way." -EYL

A significant value emphasized by exemplar young leaders was the importance of supporting young employees in their passions, their personal development, or professional skill development. 70% of exemplar young leaders identified this as an important characteristic of young employees.

Foundational Values

1. System Thinking

"Getting out of that mindset of only working on what's right in front of you and seeing how different elements of issues and systems are connected, and how you can mobilize at that level because I think if we are going to get anywhere with big change it needs to be that kind of collaborative ecosystem kind of approach." - S

The ability to consider the larger systems and influences of one's actions was identified as an important workplace value for young employees to hold. The importance of system thinking was identified as relevant to supporting self-awareness and the awareness of the different systemic influences which affect their places of work. Understanding the different pressures and forces which are at work in a workplace will contribute to young staff's ability to evoke positive outcomes in their place of work.

2. Open-Mindedness

"Regardless of what country you were born in and what language you speak, what religion you believe, like what your world view is, values that box but not being, not afraid to really expose yourself to these new experiences, new cultures, new language, new state of mind and in general" - S

This value is connected to the soft skill of self-awareness and Growth Mindset. This value was identified by stakeholders and exemplar young leaders as perhaps a 'foundational' value which precedes the soft skills. As young people enter the workforce

the data points toward the importance of being open minded to the norms of a new workplace environment, skills that may need to be developed, and the differing personality of peers.

3. Relational

"Relationship is the value, and the skill is how to navigate" - EYL

Consistent with workplace literature, the value of relationship was mentioned by exemplar young leaders and stakeholders. Relationship once again being identified as 'foundational' to ensure success for young people when entering the workforce.

Additional Characteristics and Values

The below skills and values were also raised within the interviews, and we thought it would be important to note them for consideration:

Hard Skills: Networking **|** Collaborative

Soft Skills: Adaptable **|** Emotional Intelligence **|** Humility

Value: Community Focused **|** Diversity and Inclusion (Awareness and Curiosity) **|** Hard worker

Conclusion

The above skills and values were identified by exemplar young leaders and key stakeholders as useful for young employees to encapsulate when entering the workforce. If young employees can develop these skills and hold these values, they will be more likely to positively affect their places of work. The reality that some places of work may not be open for young employees to demonstrate some of this is an important factor to acknowledge.

The implications of these for skills and values for the CIIYE initiative are important in considering potential training and criteria for participant selection. While the young employee may not currently show all these values and skills, it will be important to support their development. Through intentionally offering spaces where these skills are developed, CIIYE will attempt to better support young employees to engage and contribute in meaningful ways to their workplace. This list will be offered to the participants and any training offered will be done in partnership and collaboration *with what participants* identify as important to them.

Recommendations and Considerations

Based upon the full Internal Early Findings Report #2, three recommendations were developed for both employers and young employees to consider. These recommendations can also be considered in the formation of the CIIYE program design and support strategies for employers and employees.

Importance of Intrapersonal & Interpersonal Skills

Many of the skills identified to support young people meaningfully contributing to their place of work were categorized as soft. Most hard skills identified were less specific technical skills (coding, writing) and more broadly based skills; all of which had a significant interpersonal element to them. The importance of intrapersonal skills for the young people entering the workforce resonated throughout the interviews. The importance of both the ability to engage with others but also have internal personal development is relevant to the type of training specific to CIIYE, but also to organizations serving within the career development sector.

Creative Tension – Growth Mindset & Self-Assurance

An important emergence from the research is the perceived dichotomy of the two most popular soft skills, 'growth mindset' and 'self-assurance.' One skill highlights the importance of being humble and teachable, this inherently means the individual acknowledges they need to develop skills or understanding. This soft skill seems to be in contrast with 'self-assurance' which can be understood as the need for young employees to be confident in their abilities and understanding. This is a unique tension point for young employees and employers to engage with. Creating spaces where young people can be both confident in their skills but also be safe to admit weaknesses and pursue training and development is an important consideration for employers striving to develop young staff.

Professional and Personal Development

For many individuals interviewed, the connection between personal and professional development of young employees was blurred. Some went as far to say that they are the same. Regardless, this is an important consideration for employers; as they hire and develop young staff, what is the balance between technical training for roles and the intentional focus on internal capacity building and supporting the 'maturing' process of young employees? To support young employees to engage at an elevated level in the workforce, employers need to consider the investment in young employees not only as 'employees' but also consider value of investing in employees as humans also.

Affirming and Naming Transferable Skills

For many young people entering the workforce, there can be a misconnection that they do not have relevant work skills. However, skills such as problem solving, collaboration, and being adaptable can be developed outside of a formal workspace. Helping young people and employers understand that past experiences (sports, volunteering, etc.) contributes to their ability to perform in the workspace is important. Dependent upon the type of employment, young people may have more applicable skills than they realize. Likewise, employers ought to consider the value of diverse experiences as contributing to the assessment of employee candidates.