

The Hard Truth About “Soft Skills”

By Pete Humes
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There’s a crisis in the Hampton Roads economy that has nothing to do with the availability of jobs. In fact, the region could welcome a dozen new Fortune 500 companies with open arms and empty skyscrapers ... but it wouldn’t matter.

According to almost 20 years of studies and surveys, much of the region’s workforce just isn’t ready for the workplace.

While plenty of them are educated and available, they lack proficiency in the basics of business and the fundamentals of full-time employment. These so-called “soft skills” include things such as integrity, teamwork, conflict resolution and critical thinking.

It’s not just Hampton Roads. More and more U.S. companies are requiring potential employees to do more than list accomplishments on a resume. Businesses want new hires to show up on day one with a strong work ethic, a positive attitude, independence and initiative.

They’re looking for a balance of practical ability and interpersonal intuition. The hard truth about soft skills is that they’re no longer optional.

Workplace readiness is part of Virginia’s career path curriculum, and potential employees can be graded on core career concepts.

But is it really possible to teach people how to settle an office argument? How to properly surf the Net at work? Or understand the “big picture” mission of their role at a company?

Bert Schmidt is betting on it.

Early next month, the president and chief executive officer of WHRO will help launch a new series of online courses designed to better prepare Hampton Roads job-seekers for the 21st-century workplace.

“WHRO has been in the education game since we were founded in 1961,” Schmidt said.

Though it’s better known as home to public radio stations WHRO Classical (90.3 FM) and WHRV (89.5 FM), as well as PBS television, the nonprofit was launched 55 years ago by Norfolk and Hampton school divisions as Home Room One. Today, WHRO is owned by 19 Virginia public school divisions.

As part of its core mission, WHRO provides educational products to Virginia’s K-12 students. They produce content for students through video and online educational portals.

Last year, WHRO debuted SkillsOnline, its professional development training portal. The site features more than 4,000 industry-specific training courses, including several certification tracks.

“We thought it made sense to get into adult education,” Schmidt said. “We know the online education space and have those skill sets in house.”

As WHRO was developing SkillsOnline, Schmidt said that he heard a recurring concern from local and state businesses. There was a need for human resource development that went beyond traditional “hard skills.”

“One of the things that became really clear was the concept of workplace readiness,” Schmidt said. “Employers are really good at teaching people to do specific things within their company. But not many places teach the skills you need to be a quality employee.”

To create a separate collection of workplace readiness modules that could be integrated into the business community, the education division of WHRO looked to a 2010 study by the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center. WHRO also reached out to community colleges such as Thomas Nelson and Rappahannock, to ensure that their online material worked in tandem with other workplace initiatives.

Originally scheduled to launch last fall, the first five modules in WHRO’s Workplace Ready series will debut the week of April 4.

They will be available for free on the Workplace Ready website – workplaceready.org – and featured topics will include “Applied Math,” “Reading for Information,” “Locating Information,” “Understanding Health, Wellness and Safety” and “Internet Use and Safety.” Each online module covers material that recognized assessment organizations, such as ACT WorkKeys, NOCTI, CETECs, SkillsUSA and LRI/CASAS, employ in their Workplace Readiness Skills (WRS) exams.

Schmidt said that the WHRO modules will link people to online testing centers where they can take a credentialed, for-credit WRS test.

“We’re not a primary provider,” Schmidt said. “We work together with the community colleges, chambers of commerce, workforce investment boards and the employers themselves.”

The Hampton Roads Community Foundation and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting provided \$300,000 in funding to produce the initial modules. Schmidt said that WHRO plans to produce an additional 19 modules, and he is now actively soliciting for funding.

“We’re really reaching out to partners who can support this effort,” he said. “We’re very much dependent on money coming in to keep these available.”

Schmidt said that the Workplace Ready modules will remain free so that “the people who need them can get the skills they need to get the jobs they want.”

Workplace readiness skills for the commonwealth

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The first list of Virginia's Workplace Readiness Skills was drafted in 1997. In the years since, that list has been revised and updated for doing business in the 21st century.

The current list of 21 Workplace Readiness Skills was adopted by the Virginia Board of Education in April 2010.

Personal qualities and people skills

1. **POSITIVE WORK ETHIC:** Comes to work every day on time, is willing to take direction, and is motivated to accomplish the task at hand
2. **INTEGRITY:** Abides by workplace policies and laws and demonstrates honesty and reliability
3. **TEAMWORK:** Contributes to the success of the team, assists others and requests help when needed
4. **SELF-REPRESENTATION:** Dresses appropriately and uses language and manners suitable for the workplace
5. **DIVERSITY AWARENESS:** Works well with all customers and co-workers
6. **CONFLICT RESOLUTION:** Negotiates diplomatic solutions to interpersonal and workplace issues
7. **CREATIVITY AND RESOURCEFULNESS:** Contributes new ideas and works with initiative

Professional knowledge and skills

8. **SPEAKING AND LISTENING:** Follows directions and communicates effectively with customers and fellow employees
9. **READING AND WRITING:** Reads and interprets workplace documents and writes clearly
10. **CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING:** Analyzes and resolves problems that arise in completing assigned tasks
11. **HEALTH AND SAFETY:** Follows safety guidelines and manages personal health

12. ORGANIZATIONS, SYSTEMS, AND CLIMATES: Identifies “big picture” issues and his or her role in fulfilling the mission of the workplace

13. LIFELONG LEARNING: Continually acquires new industry-related information and improves professional skills

14. JOB ACQUISITION AND ADVANCEMENT: Prepares to apply for a job and to seek promotion

15. TIME, TASK AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: Organizes and implements a productive plan of work

16. MATHEMATICS: Uses mathematical reasoning to accomplish tasks

17. CUSTOMER SERVICE: Identifies and addresses the needs of all customers, providing helpful, courteous and knowledgeable service

Technology knowledge and skills

18. JOB-SPECIFIC TECHNOLOGIES: Selects and safely uses technological resources to accomplish work responsibilities in a productive manner

19. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY: Uses computers, file management techniques and software/programs effectively

20. INTERNET USE AND SECURITY: Uses the Internet appropriately for work

21. TELECOMMUNICATIONS: Selects and uses appropriate devices, services and applications

Source: Demographics & Workforce Group, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, University of Virginia