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College Grads Can't Get

good theories, but the problem with the unemployability of these young adults goes way beyond a lack of STEM skills. As it turns out, they can't even show up on time in a button-down shirt and organize a team project.

The technical term for navigating a workplace effectively might be *soft skills*, but employers are facing some hard facts: the entry-level candidates who are on tap to join the ranks of full-time work are clueless about the fundamentals of office life.

A [survey](#) by the Workforce Solutions Group at St. Louis Community College finds that more than 60% of employers say applicants lack “communication and interpersonal skills” — a jump of about 10 percentage points in just two years. A wide margin of managers also say today’s applicants can’t think critically and creatively, solve problems or write well.

Another employer [survey](#), this one by staffing company Adecco, turns up similar results. The company says in a statement, “44% of respondents cited soft skills, such as communication, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration, as the area with the biggest gap.” Only half as many say a lack of technical skills is the [pain point](#).



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As much as academics go on about the lack of math and science skills, bosses are more concerned with organizational and interpersonal proficiency. The National Association of Colleges and Employers surveyed more than 200 employers about their top 10 priorities in new hires. Overwhelmingly, they want candidates who are team players, problem solvers and can plan, organize and prioritize their work. Technical and computer-related know-how placed much further down the list.

Jobs are going unfilled as a result, which hurts companies and employees. The annual global [Talent Shortage Survey](#) from ManpowerGroup finds that nearly 1 in 5 employers worldwide can't fill positions because they can't find people with soft skills. Specifically, companies say candidates are lacking in motivation, interpersonal skills, appearance, punctuality and flexibility.

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One thing that does appear to make a difference is internships, according to a Harris Interactive [survey](#) of more than 2,000 college students and 1,000 hiring managers on behalf of textbook company Chegg: more than 80% of employers want new grads they hire to have completed a formal internship, but only 8% of students say interning in a field related to their major is something they spend a lot of time doing. Instead, the top extracurricular activities are hanging out with friends, working in an unrelated job and eating out.

And all internships are not created equal. Overall, only about half of college grads say they're prepared for the workplace — and the number of bosses who think they're prepared is lower than 40%.

Among students who don't intern, only 44% consider themselves ready for the job market. That improves for students with unpaid internships; 58% say they're prepared for the workplace. But among students who complete paid internships, that number jumps to 70%.

Part of the problem is that you don't know what you don't know, as the saying goes. Harris Interactive found a huge gap between students' perceptions of their abilities and managers' perceptions of those same skills.

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None of the students think they're entirely prepared for the workforce, but they're a lot more confident than the managers surveyed.

There's a 22-percentage-point difference between the two groups' assessment of the students' financial skills, which [Inside Higher Ed](#) calls "alarming," in an article about the research. Managers also take a much dimmer view of students' abilities to communicate with authority figures, prioritize and organize their work, manage projects, work in teams and with diverse groups.

It's just harder to teach these skills, experts say. "It is hard to correct a lifetime of bad habits in a short period of time," Roderick Nunn, vice chancellor for economic development and workforce solutions at St. Louis Community College, tells the [St. Louis Beacon](#).

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