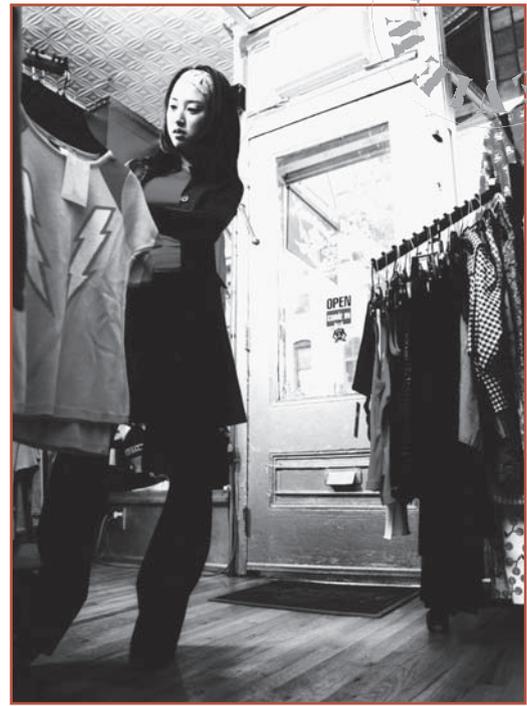


Much of the recent discussion around employability skills in the post-compulsory education sector has been based upon a deficit model of young people. While peak industry bodies propound this view, there has been comparatively little empirical research into the attitudes of individual employers. This paper reports on part of the findings of a research project carried out in 2002 into young people and employability skills.<sup>1</sup> A considerable amount of data was generated that described employers' experiences of, and opinions about, young people as potential employees.



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## Teenage employability Views of employers

Erica Smith

While substantial proportions of young people in developed countries continue their education to college and university level and, therefore, do not commence full-time work until their twenties, most teenagers who do not work full-time have part-time jobs. There is an increased incidence of part-time work among school students; such work may be commenced in the early rather than late teens (Hodgson & Spours 2001; Robinson 1999). Smith (2004) reports that 60% of Australian school students in the final three years of secondary schooling are in formal part-time work; and part-time working is also the norm

for university students. Thus the attitude of employers to the employability of novice workers in their teens is a matter of widespread interest.

American studies from the psychology discipline (e.g. Herr & Cramer 1984) have discussed the problems some young people experience when commencing work and the types of conditions and employer actions which aid or hinder the adjustments. Wellington (1994) in the UK has pointed out the types of "attitude" that employers want to see in new workers, pointing out the essentially conservative and discriminatory nature of such preferences. While there is some belief that young people who enter

the labour market later may be more employable, Roberts (1995, in Cregan 1999, p.194) maintains that this is essentially a conservative ethos, and is based on a belief that youth alone accounts for a lack of work ethic. Cregan (1999) establishes evidence that, in Britain at least, later entry to the labour market does not appear to lead to greater success in finding work.

A traditional role of workplaces that recruit school leavers has been to mould novice workers into effective participants in the work force. This role is seen most forcefully, and through centuries of practice, in systems such as apprenticeship (e.g. Lane 1996). Research with

employers of apprentices (e.g. Smith 1998; Harris et al. 1998) indicates that such employers are fully aware of the shortcomings of novice workers but, in spite or even partly because of them, many find great fulfilment in developing these workers.

Cregan (1997, p.8) has summarised earlier British research on the reasons some employers prefer young recruits:

- They are ideal candidates for training up in the company way
- They require much lower pay rates
- They lack bad habits
- They learn company culture quickly
- They are quick learners (especially of information technology)
- Their motivation is high
- It's company tradition
- They distrust qualifications

### The employability skills debate

The above discussion touches on specific aspects of teenage employability but without examining exactly what the term “employability” means. While the term has a well-understood meaning in general public debate, it has become used in a more specific sense in education policy circles in many developed countries over the past five years. It is viewed as a variant or extension of “generic skills”. The Australian Mayer “key competencies” (Australian Education Council and Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training 1993), which have been the accepted list of generic skills for young people in Australia for most of the past decade, have their counterparts in most developed countries. Kearns (2000) points out that while the key competencies are now firmly embedded within both school and VET curricula in Australia, they include neither personal attributes nor specific workplace-related skills, in contrast to American models, such as Carnevale (1991).

A change in terminology from “generic skills” to “employability skills” appears to denote a shift in thinking from skills for the whole of life to skills for the workplace. As Kearns (2000) points out using international comparisons, the term “employability skills”

can have a broad view that incorporates other types of generic skills or it can be viewed more narrowly as the skills that enable people to gain, keep and progress within employment. In Australia the tendency is definitely towards the second view. The employment environment of the 21st century, characterised by lean staffing and the need for high performance, requires all workers to perform at maximum effectiveness (Moy 1999) and this may account for the increasingly narrowly-focused view of generic or employability skills. Accordingly, Australian industry has taken an interest in this debate with, for example, a survey of employers carried out by the Australian Industry Group in 1999, revealing a view among the respondents that young people entering employment lack employability skills. The prominent role of industry in leading the policy charge on the issue is in line with an international trend noted by Trier (2001).

A recent Australian Department of Education, Science and Training-funded project carried out by the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry set out to identify “possible new requirements for generic employability competencies that industry requires or will require, in the foreseeable future, since the Mayer key competencies were developed” (BCA/ACCI 2002, p.2). Employability skills were defined in the project’s report as those “required not only to gain employment but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one’s potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions” (BCA/ACCI 2002) and were identified as:

- Communication skills that contribute to productive and harmonious relations across employees and customers
- Team work skills that contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes
- Problem-solving skills that contribute to productive outcomes
- Initiative and enterprise skills that contribute to innovative outcomes
- Planning and organising skills that contribute to long- and short-term

strategic planning

- Self-management skills that contribute to employee satisfaction and growth
- Learning skills that contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes
- Technology skills that contribute to effective execution of tasks

Attributes listed were:

- Loyalty
- Commitment
- Honesty and integrity
- Enthusiasm
- Reliability
- Personal presentation
- Common sense
- Positive self-esteem
- A sense of humour
- A balanced attitude to work and home life
- An ability to deal with pressure
- Motivation
- Adaptability (BCA/ACCI 2002)

The list of skills is similar to the Mayer key competencies. The “attributes”, or personal characteristics, had not been present in the key competencies and were the subject of some debate during the production of the report; the view of some of those consulted was that, as individual characteristics, they were to some extent no business of employers and were certainly less amenable to modification than those skills that can be directly observed through behaviour. Hughes and Stoner (2000, p.2) note that a British government report includes what are called “deployment skills”, meaning such things as self-presentation, self-confidence and basic work habits. These appear to be attributes which, although personal characteristics rather than skills, are deployed in employment situations in the form of skills. In a study by Smith (2003, p.14), such attributes appeared to be important for young people in their first jobs, in order to “function effectively in relationships with other workers and with

managers, as well as cope with unpredictable occurrences”.

## Research methods

The currency and importance of the area in policy terms was the catalyst for the research project reported in this paper. Twelve case studies were carried out in mid-2002 in organisations that employed teenagers in their first jobs (whether school leavers or part-time student workers). A qualitative research approach was used because the research area appeared to be under-explored in the literature. As Bogdan and Biklen (1982, p.28) put it, qualitative researchers can “learn what the important questions are”. Moreover, workplaces are not homogeneous environments, and a qualitative approach allows “a perspective that will lead to the description and understanding of phenomena ... in ways that reflect their complexity” (Guba & Lincoln 1982, p.71). Thus the ways in which employability skills were developed in the different enterprises could be examined in the full context of the enterprise’s business and human resource management environment.

Case studies were selected as being indicative of working environments in which first-time workers were likely to find themselves. It was not possible to distribute 12 cases across all possible variables, such as industry area, size of enterprise, ownership structure of the enterprise, type of location (rural/urban), composition of work force, history of employing young people, and so on. On the other hand, the aim of the study was to generate theory that might be generalisable, and so some attention needed to be paid to representativeness. Therefore Patton’s (1989) approach of “purposive sampling” was used with case studies in a mix of “old” (manufacturing) and “new” (e.g. hospitality) industries, small and large companies and metropolitan and rural locations.

Table 1 lists the case study sites and indicates whether the novice workers were predominantly full-time school leavers or part-time student workers. Some case studies are identified by pseudonyms at the request of the enterprise.

The sites included some Group Training Companies. These organisations are large employers of teenagers in apprenticeships and traineeships, “leasing” them to host employers and hence attractive to employers as the GTC takes the risk of employing the young person as well as undertaking all the paperwork associated with employment (Lane & Darveniza 2002).

Research was carried out by means of semi-structured interviews and, where appropriate, inspection of company recruitment and induction materials. Staff interviewed (with slight variations in smaller companies and in GTCs) were:

- Corporate staff, such as HR directors
- Site managers
- Supervisors of novice workers
- Novice workers
- Co-workers working alongside novice workers

In multi-site companies, visits were made to more than one site. For GTCs, visits to two host employers as well as to the head office were carried out.

## Findings

### How do employers view novice workers?

Staff at the research sites were asked to identify positive and negative attributes of novice workers (Table 2).

While there were a greater number of different negative attributes identified across the sites, this did not suggest that novice workers were viewed more negatively than positively by those interviewed. The very fact that these enterprises employed novice workers suggested that they found in general that positives outweighed negatives. Neither the positive nor the negative attributes were seen to apply to all novice workers; some respondents emphasised that there were great variations between individual novice workers.

The differences among employers often reflected their experiences with novice workers. In general, employers were tolerant of teenagers’ faults – negative attributes did not prevent them employing young people. The Hamburger House national training manager said:

*You’re lucky if anyone would own a diary and record when they’re working. In most cases they write it on a piece of paper and lose the paper and don’t turn up for their shifts.*

*They have no idea. They don’t understand the responsibilities associated with what they’ve entered into. They’re still in party mode: “If my friend’s got a party Friday night that’s more important than me going to work. If I don’t go it’s the end of the world”.*

**Table 1: Details of case study sites**

Employer (*indicates pseudonym)	Industry area	State	Full-time/part-time novice workers
Superfoods*	Supermarket	NSW	Both
MEGT	GTC	Vic	Only full-time examined
Autolight Manufacturing *	Manufacturing	SA	Only full-time examined
Courier Newspapers *	Newspaper delivery	SA	Part-time
Bakers Delight	Retail food	SA	Both
Portside Group Training*	GTC	SA	Both
Market-town Council *	Local government	NSW	Full-time
Hamburger House *	Fast food	Vic	Both
Fiona’s Hair Salon	Hairdressing	NSW	Full-time
Supernova Electrical*	Electrical	NSW	Full-time
Sound Fits	Electronics/IT	NSW	Full-time
CADET	GTC	Qld	Part-time

The same case study provided two examples from Hamburger House store managers of why employers continue to take on such staff:

*Kids are like a sponge. I like to take them on because I will be a major influence on them throughout their life. They will reflect back on it one day and say "Gee I learned a lot from George".*

*I prefer to have junior people. It's like, you know, if you have a puppy, like a pet, and training them to put in the work that you want.*

### Reasons for employing young workers

Senior staff at the case study sites were asked why they employed novice workers. Some employers placed a premium upon costs (sometimes this was explicitly mentioned and at other times it was assumed), others upon the attributes of young workers, and others upon the importance of young people to their company's image. It was clear that the nature of the business affected these differences profoundly. For example, businesses with high labour costs and low profit margins were influenced by the relatively low cost of employing

young teenagers, especially where the tasks were simple and repetitive and therefore high levels of skill and experience were not needed. But it was equally clear that reasons were not simple and one-dimensional.

Reasons are presented in Table 3 with an example for each, and a rationale derived from all of the case studies that mentioned this reason.

The study showed some disparity between the reason for hiring novice workers and what employers say they value in the novice workers they have employed. For example, physical fitness and the availability for shifts required were not mentioned as positive attributes of novice workers (Table 2) yet were mentioned as hiring reasons (Table 3). It could simply be that these features were taken for granted in novice workers.

### Employability skills most valued

At each research site, all respondents, including the novice workers themselves, were asked to identify what employability skills were most valued at that site in the jobs for which novice workers were recruited. This approach enabled comparison between similar roles across

companies as well as between stakeholders within a case study. The BCA/ACCI list of employability skills and attributes was used for this exercise.

While the results of the questioning were quite varied, the clearest findings were that reliability was a key *attribute* followed at some distance by sense of humour and enthusiasm; and team work and communication were the key *skills*. The lack of "popularity" of some attributes and skills, such as common sense, among respondents, was a little surprising. Some reasons for the lack of pattern in the results might be that the valuing of employability skills was not a major focus of the study, hence some of the researchers did not allocate a great deal of time to close questioning in this area. Moreover, it seemed apparent during questioning that varying levels of sophistication and understanding of workplace processes affected participants' responses.

As might be expected, some attributes and skills were more valued at some sites than at others: reliability was mentioned by all participants at Autolights and motivation by three out of four participants at Courier Newspapers, presumably in each case because of the particular requirements of the job; Autolights was a manufacturing plant where attendance was a problem, and the job of newspaper delivery required the very young workers to motivate themselves to carry out their rounds without on-site supervision; learning skills was mentioned by all participants at Superfoods, perhaps because of the attention to training at that site; planning and organising was mentioned by all participants at MEGT, perhaps because of the nature of the hospitality industry, the industry area the case study focused on.

There did not appear to be consistent differences among levels of workers in the number and nature of employability skills and attributes that were valued. For example, at Bakers Delight, the novice workers appeared to consider they needed a wider range of attributes than their managers considered they needed. The young newspaper deliver-

**Table 2: Positive and negative attributes of novice workers, as cited in the case studies**

<i>Positive attributes</i>	<i>Negative attributes</i>
enthusiasm	absenteeism/lateness
willingness to learn	home and personal problems
technology skills	lack of initiative
inquisitiveness	lack of work ethic
creativity	lack of commitment and ability to follow through
career oriented	unrealistic career inspirations
grateful/wanting to impress	inability to adjust to work i.e. the length of day, lack of structure, the shock of work
keen/hardworking	laziness
no bad work habits	inappropriate parental intervention
able to manage pressure	poor communication skills
"mouldable" and trainable	easily distracted
not disillusioned by previous work	know it all attitude
	shyness and nervousness
	lack of understanding of the purpose of work
	lack of independent means of transport
	lack of basic skills in hygiene and cleanliness

**Table 3: Reasons why companies employed novice teenage workers**

Reason	Example	Rationale
Cost	Hamburger House	Young people cost less to employ under certain awards simply by virtue of their age and may attract government subsidies (through apprenticeships or traineeships).
Youthful exuberance	Bakers Delight	Young people add energy to the workplace and give a favourable impression to customers.
Mouldability	Cadet GTC, Sound Fits	Teenagers are able to be trained and inculcated into the work habits and culture of the enterprise. They do not bring bad habits with them.
Technological skills and up-to-date knowledge	Playford Council (Portside GTC)	Teenagers may have good levels of skill with technology and bring new knowledge to an organisation.
Freshness	Playford Council (Portside GTC)	Teenagers keep staff in touch with a new generation and bring new ways of looking at things.
Social or industry obligation	Frankston Hospital catering department (MEGT GTC)	Employers want to provide employment for young people and/or build up skills pool in the industry.
Enterprise skill mix	Courier Newspapers	There is a need for very low-level skills in certain jobs, which are therefore suitable for very young teenagers.
Operating hours	Hamburger House and Superfoods	School and university students are available for part-time work at non-standard hours.
Company tradition	Supernova	Some employers have always employed teenagers.
Physical fitness	Hamburger House	Young people can maintain the required pace in physically demanding work.

ers, on the other hand, considered fewer skills and attributes were required in their work than did their managers. Responses could depend as much upon individual differences as on differences among levels of workers and would need to be tested quantitatively for firm conclusions to be drawn.

### Employability skills and recruitment

Generally, young people needed to possess some level of employability skills before employers were willing to recruit them. Table 4 shows the recruitment strategies mentioned by case study enterprises. Few employers expected applicants to possess perfectly developed employability skills. Hamburger House knew that most of its new staff would be poorly organised and have relatively poor communication skills. However, there was generally a base level of employability skills that successful applicants were required to reach. MEGT GTC said they only forwarded about half of their applicants for consideration to host employers because they did not reach this base level:

*When you have a kid who comes in who slouches and chews and swears ... you would never put them forward to the host employer.*

The base level was not comparable in all cases. Some companies, like Bakers Delight, were more selective, only accepting a small proportion of applicants. Certain types of applicants were viewed more favourably than others in some cases. At Bakers Delight, which sought mainly part-time student workers, one manager said that those from a rural background, from families who practised a religious faith, and those who studied drama tended to be good employees; in general, Bakers Delight targeted university-bound young people. Employer preconceptions could work against certain groups. The field officer at Portside GTC said that some people had erroneous opinions about the work ethic of Indigenous young people. However, no instances of such beliefs were uncovered during the study.

Some employers routinely recruited new staff who were related to, or friends

with, existing staff. They were likely to fit in more readily and have realistic expectations about the job. Such practices can, of course, be regarded as unintentionally discriminatory since employment opportunities are thereby essentially limited to certain social groups (Grint 1998).

### Discussion

Employers' reasons for hiring teenagers (Table 3), can be divided into three groups: operational reasons, those related to the attributes of young people, and non-business reasons. Table 5 displays the reasons given for hiring novice workers classified into these categories. It also separates out the additional employers' comments about the positive attributes of novice workers (Table 2) not mentioned in relation to hiring decisions.

These reasons are partly in line with the literature, for example, Cregan's (1997) summary of reasons for hiring young workers. Cregan did not, however, mention a number of factors found in the current study. These were:

- The part played by low-skill novice

**Table 4: Employers' recruitment strategies**

Case study	Strategy
Bakers Delight	Required a high level of pre-existing employability skills. Rigorous selection process: handing in resume, interview, testing, oral presentation, stress test
Steak Bar (CADET GTC)	Two days' trial to assess applicants
Fiona's Hair	Assessed school students during work placements
Hamburger House	Interview evaluation form assessed many of the employability skills on a numerical scale. Parents involved in the first stage of the recruitment process.
MEGT GTC	Interview and screening at GTC followed by interview at host employer; pre-employment courses available in some industry areas
Courier Newspapers	Selected on neatness of application form and presence of references
Autolights	Staff recruited through a labour-hire company, which tested on a number of generic and manual dexterity tests
Supernova Electrical	Selected on the basis of the "right attitude"
Portside GTC	Did not take on young people "who were trouble". Selected on basis of interview, background checks, personal knowledge, attendance at school, pre-vocational courses.

workers in enterprise skill mix

- Availability for non-standard working hours
- Opportunity for development of existing staff
- Fresh views and ideas
- Physical fitness
- Organisational image
- Community obligations
- Maintenance of industry skills base

The current study appears, therefore, to extend the British research, which, as summarised by Cregan (1997), does not appear to attribute any non-business motives to employers of novice workers, nor does it seem to pay attention to student employment as the major entrée to the workforce that it has now become. The British research also appears to view novice workers in a less positive light, almost as passive units of production, whereas the current project's findings of employer concern about physical fitness, fresh views and ideas, and the part young people play in an organisation's

image presents a more positive and active view of novice workers. The study does not, therefore, support a deficit view of novice workers – but neither does it suggest there are no problems associated with hiring young people who have not worked before.

Although managers, supervisors and co-workers were able to list a number of negative attributes, these were generally described as only to be expected among teenagers, and did not appear to deter enterprises from continuing to hire novice workers.

Moreover, employers were clear that these negative attributes were not applicable to all novice workers (to a lesser extent, this was also stated in relation to positive attributes).

There were, however, some major perceived negative attributes of novice workers that emerged from the study. The following list is based on the full research data from the study, and not just those attributes that employers listed when asked:

- Difficulty in adjusting to full-time work in comparison to the school environment – length of working day, lack of structure, need to take initiative;
- For younger student-workers, difficulty in viewing work as a serious activity rather than a setting for social interactions;
- The impingement of personal matters upon work – transport problems, relationship difficulties, occasionally drug or alcohol difficulties;
- Poor communication skills (basically, shyness);

- Lack of basic work skills, such as the need to keep working environment clean;
- Lack of a "big picture" understanding of the operation of a business;
- Unwillingness to ask questions if unsure; and
- Lack of understanding of the impression the novice worker is making on other workers.

The data in Table 5, and the list of negative attributes reported above, can be compared with the list of employability skills (BCA/ACCI 2002) that formed the basis of the research study. The hiring reasons and additional positive attributes reported in Table 5 relate most closely to the employability skills "learning skills" and "technology skills" and to the employability attributes "enthusiasm", "personal presentation" and, more by inference than by explicit mention, "loyalty" and "flexibility". The list of negative attributes suggest that some novice workers might not score highly on the employability skills of "communication", "teamwork" and "initiative and enterprise" and the attributes of "reliability", "balance between work and life" and "commitment". As reliability was the key attribute reportedly valued by employers, and teamwork and communication the key skills, there is something of a contradiction between the negative attributes and the employers' generally positive view of young people. This can be explained partly by the fact that only a minority of young people were perceived to display the negative attributes and, more generally, the finding that employers did not mind if novice workers did not possess well-developed employability skills before starting work.

### Conclusion

It is important to note that the research project focused on employers who *did* employ teenagers rather than those who *did not* because the overall aim of the project was to uncover how employers successfully worked with novice workers to turn them into effective members of the work force. Inevitably this choice

**Table 5 Reasons for hiring novice workers, and their perceived positive attributes**

Type of reason	Reason for employing novice workers
Operational	Low cost Technology skills and up-to-date knowledge Enterprise skill mix (only basic skills needed) Availability for the hours required Opportunity for development of existing staff through supervision of novice workers
Young people's attributes	Youthful exuberance Mouldability Fresh views and ideas Physical fitness Organisational image Lack bad habits
Non-business reasons	Tradition Community obligations Maintain industry skills base

Additional positive attributes
Willingness to learn Inquisitiveness Creativity Career oriented Grateful/wanting to impress Keen/hardworking Able to manage stress Not disillusioned by previous working experiences

will skew the data reported in this paper because employers who have irretrievably negative views of young people are not represented. However, the list of negative attributes of novice workers is comprehensive to the degree that it would be difficult to imagine any additional features that such employers could mention. It should also be remembered that the research only examined 12 companies and there is scope for a larger project to confirm the findings.

The most encouraging finding, from the point of view of teenagers looking for their first job, is that employers, despite a full understanding of the negative attributes arising from inexperience and youth, are still willing to employ such

workers. This willingness does not arise merely from a sense of community duty (and, as one employer pointed out, that employers have teenage children themselves) nor even from the cheap labour costs associated with teenagers. The employers held strong positive views as to why novice workers were desirable employees for them.

### Notes

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