

Business leaders share top components of career readiness for a Talent Strong Florida

Many employers find that recent high school and college graduates lack “soft skills” or are not “career ready.” A 2018 National Association of Colleges and Employers Job Outlook [survey](#) found that most college seniors think they are career ready across most competencies, while employers disagree. Today’s young adults are much [less likely](#) to have had a paid summer job or been employed in the last year, and the pandemic has only exacerbated these trends.

To learn more about the state of career preparation in Florida, in August, employers and education leaders gathered at FCAN’s first employer forum to discuss what it means to be “career ready.”

Sponsored by [UF Online](#), the forum brought together over 40 employers from around the state who represent chambers of commerce, education, IT, law, allied health, skilled trades, robotics, and nonprofits to share their perspectives on the attributes and skills needed to meet the demands of Florida’s dynamic workplace. Participants shared what career readiness looks like today and brainstormed ways for employers, communities, and higher education advocates to support students preparing for their careers.

Any gaps in expectations between employers and recent high school and college graduates are a concern for graduates, employers, educational institutions, and the community. When more potential job candidates are “career ready,” everyone benefits. After gathering the employer perspective on what it takes to build a Talent Strong Florida, several key **themes** stood out:



A 2018 SURVEY FOUND THAT MOST COLLEGE SENIORS THINK THEY ARE CAREER READY ACROSS MOST COMPETENCIES, WHILE EMPLOYERS DISAGREE.

“SOFT SKILLS” AREN’T SO SOFT

Employers across fields shared that job applicants today struggle with skills under the broad category of “soft skills,” etiquette, and professionalism. To employers, these may manifest in the form of qualities like adaptability, problem-solving skills, social intelligence, appropriate communication and appearance, and being a self-starter.

According to our participants, it is a red flag when employees do not demonstrate these skills immediately in their application and the interview process. For example, and not a surprise, employers are taking note of timeliness and appearance in an interview. One opportunity employers shared where candidates signify they are career ready is to show they have researched the job and company ahead of the interview. In the interview, knowing the roles of the position, as well as the mission and values of the employer, shows preparation and initiative. This is also a way to display aptitude in interviews for entry-level positions when candidates may not have much job experience.

Employers also are looking for continued evidence of these soft skills once candidates are on the job. Nearly every employer agreed communication skills – verbal, nonverbal, and written - are critical. Candidates should possess genial interpersonal communication skills and know what tone to use in an email and how to share and respond to feedback. Communication also segues into ideal attitudes in the workspace. Employers want to see workers who can interact as a team while possessing qualities like resourcefulness and knowing when (and how) to ask the right questions.

In a world of increasing automation, our participating employers highly value these “soft skills.” However, as soft suggests fluffy, light-weight, or even easy, the phrase may be a misnomer (and may even be [gender biased](#)). Instead, our employers made it clear that skills such as communication and conflict-resolution are essential and invaluable, and as important as “hard” or technical skills.



IN A SURVEY OF EARLY CAREER WORKERS IN TECHNOLOGY, THE MOST COMMON REASON FOR PURSUING THEIR CAREER IS THAT THEIR HIGH SCHOOL ENCOURAGED THEM TO DO SO.

HIGH SCHOOLS, FIRST JOBS, AND THE HOME DO THE HEAVY LIFTING

We asked employers where they believe students learn and develop employability skills. Overwhelmingly, they said these qualities are learned in school. They also noted that these skills can be developed in early job experiences and in the home. For example, employers noted young adults with jobs in fast food or retail often learn customer service skills, time-management, and punctuality from an early age. However, teens today are [less likely to have a summer job](#) than teens a decade ago. This is not from laziness – in entry-level jobs in fast food restaurants and supermarkets, young adults have to increasingly [compete](#) against older workers working later in life to supplement retirement. Further, many high schoolers have shifted to more school-related activities over the summer, like summer classes, sports, and unpaid internships. While these experiences are valuable, today’s young adults may be missing out on opportunities to cultivate specific skills that help them in the workforce.

According to employers, high school should be teaching young people most of their essential interpersonal, teamwork, technology, and problem-solving skills. Although these skills acuminate in the classroom, many students, teachers, and counselors may prioritize academic content over additional career-specific skill-building. Research agrees that

high school is a powerful place to learn basic career readiness skills and explore career pathways. In a survey of over 2,000 early career workers, among those aged 18-28 who have already begun a career in technology, the most [common reason](#) for pursuing their career is that they were encouraged to do so by their high school. Extra support built into the school culture, such as [Pinellas County's College and Career Centers](#), may help students consider their goals after high school and how they can set themselves on a path for success. Further, the Centers in Pinellas County rely on volunteers, many of whom come from local businesses, to help students prepare for life after high school, giving them more exposure to career options.

However, what happens when career ready skills are not taught in school? When that is the case, some employers shared that they would hope these qualities are honed in the home, through mentorships, and even by self-reflecting on early experiences in extracurricular activities. However, we know that young adults today come from diverse cultures and backgrounds. For example, if you are the first in your family to be in a white-collar job, you may not have had conversations in the home about resume formatting or sending a thank you note after an interview. Certain norms and expectations in business settings may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable to students from low-income backgrounds.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The forum culminated in a discussion of what employers and the community can do to ensure students are on their way to career readiness. This is particularly important in a context where employers expect a lot from the home or school setting, but these spaces may not provide the dispositions that employers are looking for.

One way employers can help train young people is through early career opportunities. For example, [NextEra Energy](#) has a rotational program where new hires gain leadership and functional training while engaging in a range of projects across four rotations, every six months. Not all workspaces can offer such training, but some employers noted other ways to support career readiness. If a candidate has potential but may not check all of the career readiness boxes, during onboarding, some employers can choose to offer further training or professional development to supplement the candidate's skillset.

Employers also universally agreed that mentorships are great places to learn interpersonal and social-emotional skills, as well as college and/or career-savvy, but some vagueness remains regarding how to get young people connected to mentors. Beyond teachers and parents as mentors in young adults' lives, the community can also step in. Organizations like [Take Stock in Children](#) offer a powerful model of mentorship for low-income and underrepresented youth.

One particularly strong way employers can support career readiness is to offer tuition reimbursement to workers looking to upskill or get a degree. This is a [win-win](#) for employers and employees: employers gain better-trained employees who are [more likely to stay](#), and employees earn more skills that may enable them to advance in the organization. For example, [UF Online](#) currently partners with JPMorgan Chase and the Walt Disney Corporation to help their workers earn degrees online without incurring debt.



TAKEAWAYS

Florida recognizes the value of a degreed workforce and aims to increase the percentage of working-age Floridians with a high-value postsecondary certificate, degree, or training experience to [60% by 2030](#). This is particularly important in the aftermath of COVID-19, where some jobs are increasingly at risk of disappearing due to automation. Floridians need to prepare for the jobs of the future, and this preparation requires knowing and understanding the skills that employers are seeking. The employer forum helped shine a light on some of the key skills gaps employers have identified and offers suggestions for FCAN's areas of focus moving forward.

College and career readiness is bigger than one sector. Most employers are primarily expecting education to provide students with opportunities to learn career readiness, but schools can't do it alone. If schools, whether K-12 or higher education, attempt to teach career readiness in a vacuum, they won't know if they align with industry needs. And most K-12 spaces are focused on getting students to graduation, not necessarily for success after (although we've seen several districts sign onto postsecondary success as a district goal). Employers, the education sector, communities, and the entire state all have an interest in today's young people possessing the right skills and aptitudes to be "career ready." Florida has done great work to better align education with what comes after graduation, but this is a statewide problem, and we need to continue to make strides towards a more coordinated and seamless system.

Accordingly, there are many opportunities for communities to establish partners with employers and schools to better support students for jobs of the future. Some of our employers offered examples of ways to work hand-in-hand with educators to provide career skills training. For example, offering

mentorship and mock interview opportunities in classrooms can help strengthen what educators are already doing in the school space.

Further, one of the clearest takeaways of the event is how integral “soft skills” or interpersonal skills are, and that employers feel these important skills are not being taught in schools or in the home. However, standards of business professionalism and etiquette are often rooted in [White, middle-class, Western values](#). This may mean certain styles of speech, dress, work style, and timeliness are preferred and deemed as “professional,” particularly in the hiring process, while anything beyond that narrow range of acceptability can be deemed unprofessional.

While employers can determine their own standards of professionalism, they should consider if their hiring metrics may favor certain groups or work styles over others. [Research suggests](#) employers are likely to unconsciously prefer people who



IN A 2021 SURVEY, 1 IN 5 BUSINESS LEADERS SAID THEY DO NOT HAVE ANY ANTI-BIAS HIRING PRACTICES.

OF THOSE THAT DO, THE VAST MAJORITY HAVE NOTICED AN IMPROVEMENT IN HIRING.

are like themselves. While nearly 1 in 5 surveyed business leaders told a [2021 Wiley survey](#) they do not currently have any anti-bias hiring practices in place, of those that do, the vast majority (79%) have noticed an improvement in their hiring practices.

At FCAN, we believe that Florida’s diversity is our strength, and want to ensure all groups have access to education and employment outcomes where they can thrive. This may mean hiring managers and interviewers should consider if their hiring systems are set up to select candidates that fit the status quo, and take steps to make the hiring process welcoming to all candidates.

No one group is responsible for the future of our state and its residents. In order to ensure employers can connect with qualified, skilled talent, communities must come together to think about a young person’s options from early on. When education and workforce partners collaborate toward a shared vision, they can help remove barriers, build a robust workforce, and improve the quality of life for their regions.

FCAN has already laid the groundwork for communities to support students’ college or career plans in high school with our [Plan It Florida](#) initiative that provides resources to help students Expose, Explore, Experiment, and Execute their postsecondary goals. By working together, we can ensure every Floridian achieves an education beyond high school and a rewarding career.

Florida College Access Network (FCAN) is Florida's first collaborative network committed to ensuring all Floridians have the opportunity to achieve an education beyond high school and a rewarding career. We envision a Florida working together where education is the pathway to economic mobility for all. As a nonpartisan organization, FCAN strives to expand knowledge of research, data, policies and practices that impact postsecondary access and attainment in Florida. This report is intended as an educational resource.


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For more research and data from FCAN, visit www.floridacollegeaccess.org/research-and-data/.


This forum and brief were made possible by the generous support of [UF Online](#).

FCAN thanks the forum attendees for their contribution to this project.



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