DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 226 136 CE 034 921

AUTHOR	Chatham, Karen M.
TITLE	Employment Practices with Entry-Level Workers. Research Brief.
INSTITUTION	Far West Lab. for Educational Research and Development, San Francisco, Calif.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Dec 82
NOTE	7p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Administrator Attitudes; Career Education; *Decision Making; Employer Attitudes; Employment; *Employment Potential; *Employment Practices; Employment Qualifications; *Entry Workers; Interviews; Job Application; *Job Skills; Job Training; Office Occupations; Personnel Policy; Sales Occupations; Service Occupations; Supervisors; *Young Adults
IDENTIFIERS	*California (San Francisco Bay Area)

ABSTRACT

Personnel officers and first-line supervisors in eight Bay Area corporations were interviewed in fall and winter 1981 to study the range and diversity of employer experience in dealing with young workers. Respondents indicated various primary sources of applicants for entry-level jobs. Approximately two applicants out of every three were eliminated from consideration on the basis of their written job applications, sometimes accompanied by very brief interviews with personnel specialists. A final selection was made based upon separate, lengthier interviews by personnel officers and the first-line supervisors. The first-line supervisors made the final decisions. Respondents identified as characteristics that affected employee selection or performance (1) the ability to communicate, (2) appearance/presentability, (3) stable work experience, (4) self confidence, (5) interviewing skills, (6) desire to learn, (7) completion of an accurate application, (8) grammar, and (9) the desire to advance. The preferred source of entry-level applicants were community-based organizations (CBOs) operating general work-readiness and specific vocational training programs, such as Comprehensive Employment and Training Act programs. Some corporations invested considerable staff time in developing and maintaining relationships with CBOs. Specific behaviors identified as needed for advancement were the proper work attitude, organizational skills, initiative, interpersonal skills, and flexibility. (YLB)

ED226136

EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTI
PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION
EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTI
PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION
EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • RESEARCH BRIEF TY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTI
PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WOF /ORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION
EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • TY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTI
PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION
EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTI
PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION
EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTIVITY • EDUCATION WORK PRODUCTI

RESEARCH BRIEF

December 1982

EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES WITH ENTRY-LEVEL WORKERS

CE

Karen M. Chatham

> We need to ask ourselves to what extent our educational system helps young people *learn how to learn outside the context of the classroom:* (1) to develop skills in planning and managing work; (2) to work cooperatively with others; and (3) to cope effectively with planned and unforeseen change. To the extent that some youths do not acquire these skills, they are likely to remain permanently on the lowest rung of the economic ladder.

This report stems from exploratory interviews conducted with personnel officers and first-line supervisors in several Bay Area corporations in the Fall and Winter of 1981. The primary purpose of these interviews was to uncover the range and diversity of employer experience in dealing with young workers as a preliminary step in designing a survey questionnaire that will be used to collect information from a broader, more representative sample. The results of the survey, to be completed early in 1983, will provide a knowledge base for the improvement of both school curriculum and employment and training practices in the private sector. The data from the exploratory interviews, however, provide a richness of detail that cannot be obtained through a pencil and paper questionnaire, a richness that aids understanding and thus deserves to be captured and shared. Yet a word of caution is in order. While this report is spattered liberally with quotes, the views of any single respondent are clearly shaped by his or her own past experience and current working environment. Only where patterns are evident among several respondents should generalizations be attempted.

Whether as parents, educators, or taxpayers, we all must be concerned with what employers are saying about the employability of our young people. To the extent deficiencies are evident, our aim must not be to place blame, but to seek feasible remedies so that every youngster leaves school with the knowledge and skills needed to participate effectively in our economic system.

RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

Asked to identify their primary sources of applicants for entry-level jobs, our respondents indicated a wide variety. Some of these sources and the frequency with which they were mentioned are indicated in Table 1.

In 1981, because of a decline in the number of entry-level job openings, the companies in our sample reported an average of approximately 15 applicants for each job vacancy. Most of these applicants are screened out based on a review of their job application form. Some are further eliminated by preliminary screening interviews or entry tests.

Typically, about five applicants are formally interviewed for each job opening. Although one employer reports a time-saving

CE 034921

FAR WEST LABORATORY FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT
1855 FOLSOM STREET · SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 94103 · (415) 565-3000

Table 1

Sources of Entry-Level Applicants

Source	Companies Citing This Source (N=8)
Walk-In Applicants	7
Community-Based Organization Referrals	6
Advertising in Newspapers	3
High Schools/Regional Occupational Program Referrals	3
Listing With State Employment Service	2
Referrals by Current Employees	2
Listings With Unions	1
Listings With Private Employment Agencies	1

policy of simply hiring the first suitable applicant, most try to assure that the immediate supervisor has the opportunity to interview and select from four or five applicants. In other words, approximately two applicants out of every three are eliminated from consideration on the basis of their written job application, sometimes accompanied by a very brief interview with a personnel specialist. From the remainder, a final selection is made based upon lengthier interviews, typically 15 to 20 minutes, by a personnel officer and the first-line supervisor, separately. In all cases we found the final selection decision is made by the first-line supervisor, with the personnel officer in an advise and consent role.

WHO GETS HIRED?

Given the need of personnel officers to rapidly screen relatively large numbers of applicants for limited job openings, it is readily apparent that the young person who cannot produce an acceptable job application has little chance of gaining a job interview, much less a job. The job application provides a preliminary indication of the applicant's:

> Basic Skills: "Some of these kids can't even spell the name of their own high school."
>
> Ability to Read and Follow Directions: "I get really concerned when an applicant is asked to list any foreign languages spoken and he puts 'English' --especially when he was born in this country."
>
> Job Stability: "We'd rather have someone with no experience than someone who has jumped from job to job, never staying long enough to learn to do anything well."

The ability to complete a paper application, however, only helps the young job applicant get in to talk with the right people. It is the ability to talk, to converse with those who must make the hiring decisions, that generally makes the critical difference between those who are hired and those who are not. According to one personnel officer:

> These kids can't talk. Well, they can <u>talk</u>, but they can't express themselves. They can't communicate. They don't have the vocabulary. It's important to know a lot of words and what they mean so you can choose the word that conveys what you want to say. It's really a problem. Even if they're just going to be sorting mail, we have to worry about how they're going to learn, how they're going to ask their supervisor a question and understand the answer.

Of course, being able to express oneself clearly isn't enough if you don't have any thing to say. "The hardest people I've found to interview," said one personnel officer, "are the entry-level applicants. You have to stick with open-ended questions because otherwise you get an awful lot of 'yeses,' 'noes,' or nods. You can't learn anything about the applicant or their interests that way."

Table 2

Characteristics Making A Critical Difference in Hiring

Characteristic	Respondents Citing This Characteristic (N=16)
Able to converse, speaks English well	9
Appearance/presentability	7
Stable work experience, not a job hopper	7
Self confidence/presentation of self	6
Interviewing skills	5
Desire to learn	5
Complete an accurate application	4
Grammar	4
Desire to advance	4

Each of our 16 respondents (11 personnel officers and 5 supervisors) were asked to think back over recent hiring decisions and to identify the critical differences between those hired and those not hired. Later in the interview they were asked to identify the critical differences between those who are promoted in the organization and those who are not. These two open-ended questions resulted in the identification of over 90 characteristics or qualities affecting employee selection or performance. These ranged from such things as having a driver's license or realistic salary expectations, to having the ability to select role models within the organization and understanding the nature of business as a profit-making enterprise.

Table 2 lists those characteristics mentioned by at least four or more respondents as making a critical difference in hiring decisions. It should be remembered that these are factors that come into play in making selections between the finalists interviewed for a particular job. Other criteria may be employed in the initial screening of applicants.

Clearly the ability to communicate with those who make the hiring decisions is of paramount importance to young people seeking entry to the labor market. Educators concerned with the employability of their graduates should examine whether the curriculum of the public schools provides adequate opportunity for young people to develop skill and confidence in speaking standard English. If conversational skills are developed and practiced largely on the playground or in the streets, young people from educationally disadvantaged neighborhoods will remain ill-prepared to compete in the labor market.

CETA PROGRAMS FAVORED

Walk-in applicants provide a continuous source of potential entry-level workers for all of the companies contacted, but this source also yields the largest proportion of idle inquiries, applicant withdrawals, and applicant disqualification for failure to meet minimal job entry criteria. Talking with and screening drop-in applicants requires a heavy investment of time that appears to be viewed by several of our respondents more as a community service than an effective use of staff.

By far the preferred source of entry-level job applicants among the personnel officers interviewed were community-based organizations operating general work-readiness and specific vocational training programs. Six of the eight companies listed community-based organizations--most of them operating with CETA funding--as a major source to which they turn when they have a job vacancy.

Some of the organizations invest a considerable amount of staff time in developing and maintaining productive relationships with the community-based organizations (CBOs) in their recruitment areas. One company has a full-time liaison to establish communications and work with these community sources to obtain qualified job applicants. A personnel officer in another company spends a significant portion of her time preparing and updating a directory of these agencies and programs for distribution to the company's branches in the region. Another employer holds a community agency day, bringing in representatives from all of the CBOs it works with to exchange information on job opportunities and training programs.

While several of the companies clearly try to maintain current information about the host of community agencies operating programs in the Bay Area--one personnel specialist is liaison to 130 agencies--most establish close working ties with a small number of programs. Recruiters will generally turn first to those programs that have been successful in serving the company's applicant needs in the past and that have demonstrated a willingness to "stay in touch, to revamp programs, and to keep up to speed with developments in the field, be it banking, computer systems, or word processing." As one personnel officer puts it:

> We've had a lot of good luck with CETA programs. But you've got to go out and call a lot of agencies and test the waters. If they work with us, we continue to work with them, and we sell them on our company as an employer for their graduates.

Cultivating relationships with CETA program staffs does require an investment of time, but all of the respondents felt the time to be well spent in terms of producing better candidates for their entry-level vacancies. According to one personnel director, most of the recruiters prefer applicants from these programs because:

> First of all, the kids learn some technical skills. Instead of just coming in and saying they want a job, they have some objective in mind, they have a definite idea where they want to take their lives. They know how to interview --some of them.

A further advantage is the availability of a third party--the CETA staff person--who can vouch for the applicant's motivation and skills.

> These young people have somebody holding their hand and helping them. A lot of them need that. An applicant will come across in an interview so shy and you think, wow, they don't seem capable of anything. But if you have someone on the other side telling you that this person is dynamite, just initially shy, you have more information to go on. That someone is a broker for these young people. That's needed.

For much the same reasons, three of the companies in our sample actively work with public school vocational programs to elicit applicant referrals. Personnel officers in each company had succeeded in establishing productive relationships with individual teachers in high school business subjects and/or with the staff of particular Regional Occupational Programs (ROPs). In general, however, respondents expressed frustration in trying to work with the schools, and concern that cutbacks in CETA funds will result in the closing of some highly-valued pre-employment training programs, thus forcing them to rely on other more time-consuming and less reliable methods of recruiting qualified entry-level workers.

WHO GETS AHEAD?

Educators and parents concerned with enhancing the employability of young people need to consider not only what minimal attributes are needed to enter the workforce but what qualities are needed to advance beyond the typical entry-level job. While basic skills, especially the ability to converse in the language of the workplace, loom large in hiring decisions, advancement depends on specific behavior associated with contributing to the smooth functioning of the work group, accomplishing work tasks, acquiring additional knowledge and skills valued by the firm, and making sure that your accomplishments are recognized by your superiors. All too frequently such behavior is referred to by employers as "having the right attitude," a practice that makes it difficult to devise educational solutions for deficiencies. As one personnel officer said:

> It's the attitude that makes the biggest difference. They've got to be able to do the job, whatever it is, but there can be a lot of people that can do it. The right attitude makes the difference. People might

> be willing to give them the training, then. Or would encourage them to get the training.

Such a response was quite common to our questions about critical differences between employees who are promoted and those who are not. Further probing, however, uncovered a variety of specific actions that serve as indicators of "having the right attitude." For example:

> The one that gets ahead is the one who is willing to do the extra bit of work, who says, "I don't mind staying ten minutes late," or "Can I help you with something?" when they are finished with what they are doing.

While admitting the importance of luck--being in the right place at the right time--and patience to wait a few extra months, if necessary, for an advancement opportunity to occur, one respondent detailed the competencies her firm looks for, including:

- Organizational Skills: the ability to analyze what needs to be done, set priorities, sequence and schedule tasks so that you accomplish your work on time.
- Initiative: seeking to learn new things and taking on new responsibilities after learning those that are specifically your own; looking for additional work when yours is done; actively seeking ways to improve operations or solve problems.
- Interpersonal Skills: helping others, perhaps new employees or slower employees who have questions regarding their particular jobs; helping to resolve personal conflicts with or between co-workers.
- Flexibility: able to be interrupted from a job to do another job if priorities dictate; able to cope with changes in plans, tasks or work-schedules.

Other respondents indicated the same kinds of behavior are sought and rewarded in candidates for advancement within their firms. We need to ask ourselves to what extent our educational system helps young people learn how to learn outside the context of the classroom, develop skills in planning and managing work and in working cooperatively with others, and learn to cope effectively with planned and unforeseen change. To the extent that some youths do not acquire these skills, they are likely to remain permanently on the lowest rung of the economic ladder.

More is needed, however, for most workers. According to one personnel officer, the ability to identify and select successful role models and analyze and emulate their behavior makes a critical difference to their own success in the workplace. Many young people, she feels:

> ...don't have the role models out there. And, a lot of them aren't perceptive enough to analyze what the role model is in the firm and what's the right thing to do if you want to get ahead. It doesn't mean you have to be a clone of somebody, but you have to understand what behaviors the particular social group expects, recognizes and rewards. Different firms have different expectations. If you want to get ahead in any particular organization, you've got to be able to figure out what image you need to portray, how to package yourself, and how to sell yourself.

As advice to Peace Corps volunteers embarking on a mission to a rural village in India, these words would somehow have a more noble ring. Yet, perhaps, we should consider whether entering the workforce isn't, for some of our youth, analogous to travel in unfamiliar lands. We should ask ourselves whether we are equipping these young people with the powers of observation, deference, and problem-solving that would enable them to adapt reasonably well to different environments and cultural dictates.

ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

In selecting the sample for the exploratory interviews, we sought both a diverse set of employers and speedy access to personnel specialists and supervisors directly involved in the hiring, training, and supervision of entry-level workers. We were especially interested in employers' experience with younger workers--in the 17 to 24 year old range--in jobs not requiring a four-year college degree. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Ron McCune, Executive Director of the Federated Bay Area Employers, for helping us identify and contact prospective interview candidates in a variety of firms. We sought firms likely to employ relatively large numbers of entry-level workers in diverse kinds of jobs and we needed individuals in those firms who were sufficiently interested in the issues to rearrange their busy schedules to enable interviews to take place quickly. Thus, the interview sample was not randomly drawn, but handpicked with time imposing a major constraint on both the size and diversity of the respondent group.

Interviews were conducted with eleven personnel officers and five supervisors within eight corporations in the San Francisco area. The organizations in the interview sample represented two banks, two clothing manufacturers, a manufacturer of security devices, a major hotel, a large department store, and a public utility. Together, these organizations filled an estimated 700-800 entry-level jobs in 1981 in such classifications as sales clerk, busperson, waiter, courier, file clerk, mail clerk, clerk typist or stenographer, fabric inspector, and accounts clerk. Few of the entry-level jobs available in the organizations surveyed in 1981 were in traditionally blue collar areas. Manufacturers reported that any vacancies occuring in plant operations were being filled, not with new hires, but with rehires from lengthy layoff lists.

Among the eleven personnel specialists interviewed, there were seven Caucasians, three Blacks, and one Asian. Six were female, five were male. The five first-line supervisors of entry-level workers included four Caucasians and one Black. Three were male, two were female. Most Of the respondents were judged to be in their thirties or forties. Only one was known to be under thirty, and only two were noted to be over fifty.

This is a product of the Work Orientation Project, which was supported with federal funds from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Office of Education. The opinions expressed here are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of any government agency.