

Collegiate Employment Research Institute

Moving Up or Moving Out of the Company? Factors that Influence the Promoting or Firing of New College Hires

By Phil Gardner

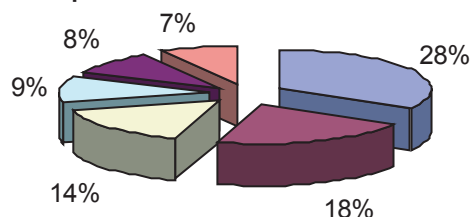
In the early 1990's faculty at Johnson and Wales University performed a quick study on the behaviors or shortcomings that were likely to get a new college hire fired. Their top five reasons which included failure to take the initiative, failure to follow instructions, being late to work or with assignments, poor communication abilities, and ineffectiveness in a team, were widely cited and are frequently still used in talks to students. During the past decade the world of work has certainly changed. Technology, in the form of email, blogs, text messages, cell phones, and websites, has transformed the work place. The internet presents a world of opportunities to explore various sites that can contain information relevant to one's work or can be a pleasant, unproductive diversion. Spurred by technological advances, the exuberance of the dot.com era gave way to risky, questionable practices that stretched ethical boundaries. Acting with integrity is now an essential competency that employers seek during the recruiting process.

What you will learn!

- Employers frequently have to reprimand new hires for a variety of behaviors with the most unethical behavior being the most problematic.
- The top 5 reasons for a new college hire being fired has changed, reflecting the influence of technology in the workplace and the focus on ethics.
- Willingness to take initiative is the key factor that identifies a new hire for potential promotion.

Our question was whether the original five reasons for firing a recent college hire still rang true; or, are there new reasons. On the flip side, we wanted to know what factors singled out the future stars among recent hires. These questions were posed to employers who responded to our annual college hiring survey. We found little of the old as well as some new reasons to let a new employee go. Two characteristics set future stars ahead of their peers for promotion.

Top Six Reasons New Hires are Fired



- Unethical behavior 28%
- Lack of motivation/work ethic 18%
- Inappropriate use of technology 14%
- Failure to follow instructions 9%
- Late for work 8%
- Missing assignment deadlines 7%

New hires can quickly get into trouble by displaying a lack of commitment to the organization (a bad attitude or poor work ethic) or engaging in unethical behaviors. These two behaviors topped the list based on employer's ratings of the frequency at which they had to reprimand new hires on ten behavioral and attitudinal mistakes in this year's Recruiting Trends survey. The following table lists the ten reasons, ranked in order by mean score. Also provided is the percentage for disciplinary occurrences at the high end of the scale (fairly often to very often).

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Reasons for discipline	Occurrence: Fairly –Very Often (%)	Mean
Lack of work ethic/commitment	52	3.46
Unethical behavior	46	3.22
Failure to follow instructions	41	3.21
Ineffective in teams	41	3.19
Failure to take initiative	26	3.10
Missing assignments/deadlines	33	2.98
Unable to communicate effectively -- verbally	32	2.97
Inappropriate use of technology	34	2.90
Being late for work	28	2.83
Unable to communicate effectively -- writing	28	2.81

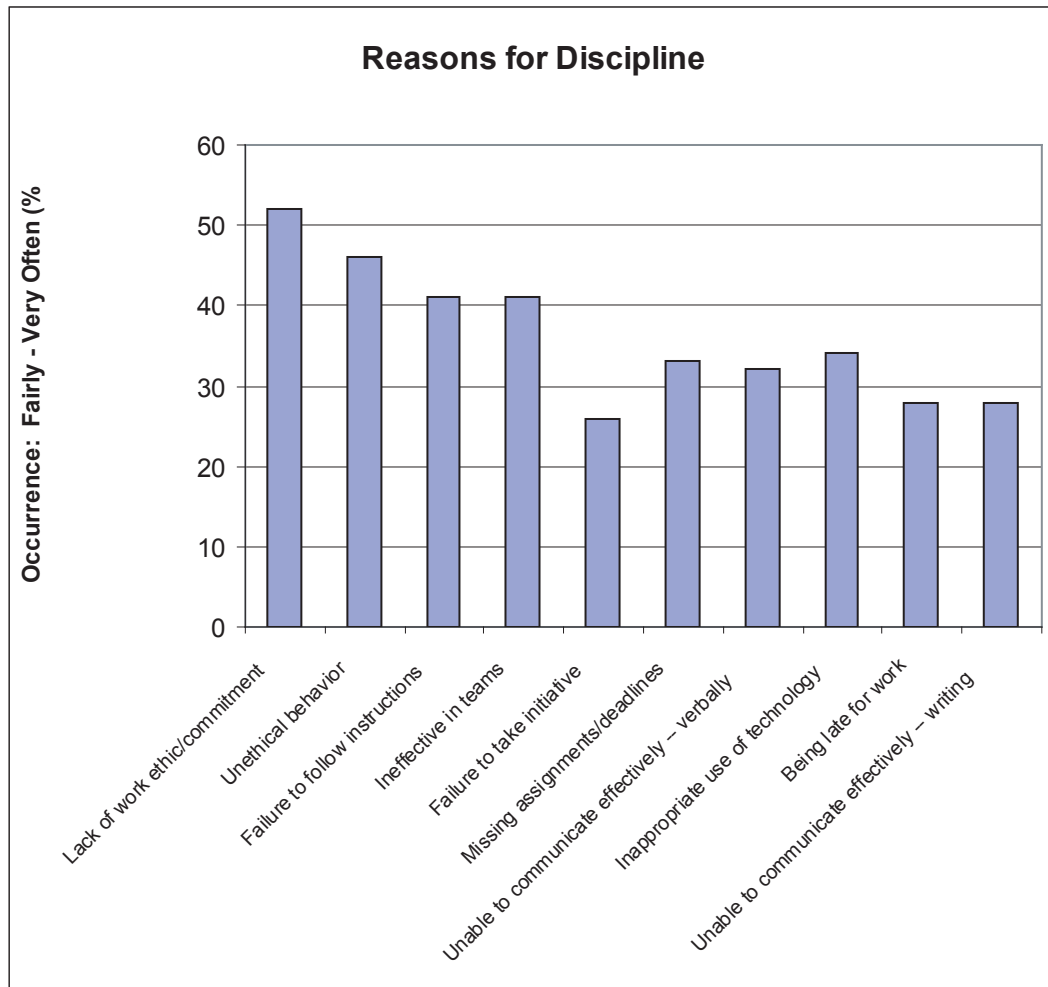
The need to correct behaviors in the workplace is common, especially in attitude toward work, ethics, following instructions and working in teams. We looked at employer characteristics that might shed light on differences in disciplining new hires.

Size did not seem to matter – all employers were disciplining at the same frequency. Only for **unethical behavior** did variation by size approach significance, with larger firms more frequent disciplining than smaller companies.

Region of the country provided no significant differences.

Economic sector did make a difference. Employers from construction, utilities, retail, financial services and business services consistently reported higher frequencies in disciplining new hires.

The company's **recruiting strategy** proved to provide the most significant differences. Companies heavily involved with on-campus recruiting and attending college job fairs reported higher occurrences of disciplinary activity for motivation, unethical behavior, inappropriate computer use, and missing deadlines than companies that less frequently visit campuses. However, for companies that rely on employee referrals, disciplinary action for failure to follow instructions and ineffective teamwork tended to be higher.



What actions may result in firing?

Not every disciplinary action will result in termination. So we asked respondents to list only those behaviors that will lead to someone being fired. Approximately 1100 behaviors were listed. The results were sorted and aggregated to generate a list featuring the top six reasons. This table lists the reasons and how frequently the behavior was cited. This list captures 84% of the responses.

Reason for firing	Frequency as listed by employer
Unethical behavior	28%
Lack of motivation/work ethic	18%
Inappropriate use of technology	14%
Failure to follow instructions	9%
Late for work	8%
Missing assignment deadlines	7%

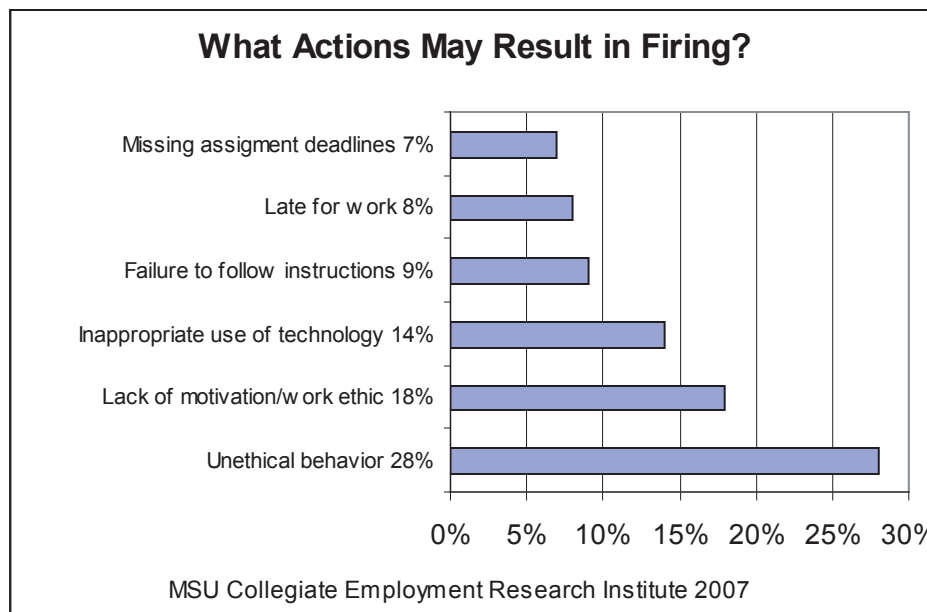
Clearly an unethical behavior will lead to a swift dismissal from most companies. Unethical behavior and inappropriate use of technology are highly correlated, suggesting that some uses of technology are deemed unethical. One employer articulated a problem that several respondents mentioned: the hacking activities of new employees. “They are not hacking into systems external to the company: rather, they are hacking into areas of the company’s computer system that they are not authorized to enter. It’s a big problem and it’s unethical.”

Lack of commitment or enthusiasm for one’s job frustrates employers. Several commented that there has been an increase among recent hires who believe their current position is just temporary until something better comes along. Young adults appear focused on themselves and approach jobs as temporary assignments. Many employers wish college students would understand that having a good work ethic and that working for the benefit of the company is actually a winning situation for their future career with the company.

Our list updates the earlier list prepared by Johnson and Wales University. The new list better reflects the current climate within the workplace where more attention is being placed on ethical behavior, appropriate use of technology, and employee attitude. A final comparison illustrates the differences.

Johnson and Wales; circa 1992	Michigan State University; 2006-07
Failure to take the initiative	Unethical behavior
Failure to follow instructions	Lack of motivation/work ethic
Late to work and late assignments	Inappropriate use of technology
Poor communication abilities	Failure to follow instructions
Ineffective in team	Late for work and late assignment

Wondering what happened to initiative, communication, and teamwork? The first two may not get someone fired but without them a new hire certainly won’t be singled out for promotion. Working effectively in teams has been the focus of attention on campuses for much of the past decade. The Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) has been a primary motivator by including teamwork as critical component of engineering education.



What leads to promotions and new assignments?

Respondents were presented an open-ended question asking them to list the qualities or characteristics they seek when identifying recent hires for an assignment, specifically for assignments with more responsibility or potential promotion. A variety of skills, personal attributes, and traits were noted. To provide a structure for sorting the responses, we used the work strategies (competencies and actions) that Robert Kelly identified in star performers (Kelly, "Star Performers," Harvard Business Review, 1993, p. 131). In his study, he found nine attributes and two essential characteristics that consistently appear in star performers. We have included in his definitions similar words and phrases as used by the respondents.

Taking Initiative: accepting responsibility above and beyond the stated job, volunteering for additional activities, promoting new ideas, being self-motivated, a self-starter

Networking: getting direct and immediate access to co-workers with technical expertise, sharing your own knowledge with others who need it, accepting criticism and input from others

Self-Management: regulating your own work commitments (setting priorities), time management, performance levels (completing work on time, understanding quality indicators of work), handling stress, customer service orientation, ability to handle change, accountability

Team Effectiveness: assuming joint responsibility for work activities, coordinating efforts, accomplishing shared goals

Leadership: formulating, stating and building consensus on common goals, working to accomplish them, developing management skills, recognizing the need to develop people

Followership: helping leaders accomplish organizational goals, thinking for one's self rather than relying solely on managerial directions, working autonomously

Perspective: seeing one's job in its larger context, understanding position in company and company within industry, taking on other viewpoints, thinking independently, possessing a global outlook

Show and Tell: presenting one's ideas persuasively in written and oral forms

Organizational Savvy: navigating the competing interests in an organization, promoting corporation, addressing conflicts and working well with others (interpersonal skills), fitting with the organization, getting things done

Technical Competence: possessing core knowledge in area of study, demonstrating technical acumen appropriate for position, obtaining mastery of current position, displaying high level of competence

Cognitive Abilities: thinking critically and analytical, evaluating data, being innovative, creative, and open-minded

After sorting on these categories, we identified several additional groups. These groups may in some fashion overlap with the previous category listed before but also seem to stand easily on their own.

Learning: showing an eagerness to learn and to pursue new ideas, willing to obtain additional knowledge for next position

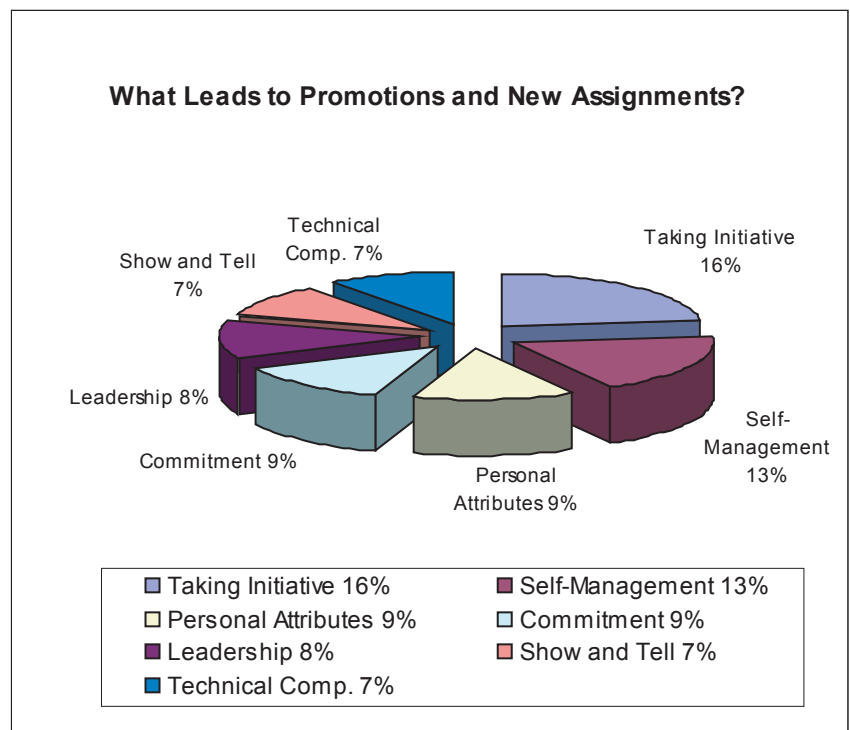
Commitment and Passion: working with a positive attitude, demonstrating work ethic, enthusiasm, and dedication

Personal Attributes: being friendly, dependable, patient, flexible, reliable, and respecting diversity

Prior Assignments: demonstrating development from prior assignments, internships and co-op

After sorting the approximate 1500 characteristics provided by the respondents (most respondents listed multiple characteristics), seven characteristics appeared more frequently than others. The most frequently mentioned characteristic (16%) was **taking initiative**. The remaining six are contained in this list:

Taking Initiative	16%
Self-Management	13%
Personal Attributes	9%
Commitment	9%
Leadership	8%
Show and Tell	7%
Technical Comp.	7%



Three characteristics were mentioned at around 5%, including organizational savvy, learning, and critical thinking. Willingness to follow, perspective, and prior assignments were mentioned 3% of the time.

In the Johnson and Wales study, **failure to take the initiative** was the top reason that led to a recent college hire being fired. Today, it's opposite – **willingness to take the initiative** -- singled out recent hires for promotion. Initiative failed to appear on our firing list though occasionally new hires may receive feedback from supervisors on their failure to take initiative. Except for technical competencies, the key factors that contribute to promotions and more responsible assignments are **transferable or personal skills**. Having a positive attitude, showing a commitment to the company, managing time and work priorities, demonstrating leadership, and being persuasive are all precursors to career growth.

About Us:

Established in 1985 by an act of the Michigan legislature, the Institute was charged with collecting and analyzing information on the initial employment (upon graduation) for the college educated workforce from all four-year institutions within the state. Later two-year graduates from the State's community college system were included in this responsibility. The Institute's charge rose from concerns of a "brain drain" during and following the economic recession of the early 1980's. Until the legislature rolled the Institute's funding into the University's overall budget in 1990, the destination of graduating seniors was the primary research focus. Without the legislative mandate, statewide reporting collapsed as several institutions no longer felt compelled to provide their information.

In line with this work on graduate destinations, research was started on: the socialization experience of new college graduates in the workplace; learning strategies used to enhance workplace performance; impact of co-op and internships on transition outcomes; and recruiter practices, such as use of resumes and behavioral interviewing. A major project which has stimulated discussions and program initiatives is on the acquisition/development of complementary skills and competencies that are required in the work, in addition to disciplinary mastery. This work has evolved into examination of co-curricular activities that support social learning/community of practice.

The research readily identifiable with the Institute is "Recruiting Trends." Michigan State University, for 30 years, conducts an annual survey of national employers seeking their intentions for hiring new college graduates. This study provides a snapshot of factors influencing the college labor market, as well as in-depth examination of key issues in college recruiting.

In the mid 1990's the Institute was asked to coordinate a segment of the University's assessment program, focused on outcome measures. The University's senior exit survey was redesigned to capture program and service assessments for colleges and units. This continues to be a key initiative for the University.

The Institute continues to provide leadership in the support of career development programs, student learning initiatives, and strategic planning around student outcomes.

Part of the Michigan State Career Services Network



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