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When a College Degree May Not Be Enough

By Elizabeth LaScala



Elizabeth LaScala Ph.D. guides families through the sometimes complex world of college admission. She helps students identify college majors and career paths, develops good fit college lists, and provides essay coaching and application support to help students tackle each step of the admission process with confidence and success. Elizabeth also helps families maximize opportunities for scholarships and financial aid awards. Visit www.doingcollege.com; Call (925) 891-4491 or email at elizabeth@doingcollege.com.

occupations. For example, in customer service and in sales positions, the profits are significantly larger when companies hire college-educated individuals. The results of these studies show simple correlations, which do not prove causality. However, human resource managers who were surveyed seem to provide further information that supports the correlations. Of managers who hire more workers with college degrees for jobs traditionally held by high school educated workers, 64 percent cite higher work quality and 45 percent cite higher productivity. These are some of the factors that may account for the relationship found between a better educated workforce and increased company revenues.

Interestingly, this relationship did not hold when the researchers examined information technology workforces; it appears that persons with strong technical capacity (if skills are kept current by training) contribute to a company's success regardless of level of education. Thus, hiring for degrees alone does not seem to ensure a successful workforce in all companies and under all conditions. People of all ages and backgrounds can and do learn valuable skills through on the job experiences as well as through self-education in courses taken outside of a formal degree program. Some employers also argue why pay more for a college grad when an applicant can demonstrate knowledge and reasoning skills needed to do the job well. What difference does where or if they went to school make? This trend is further fueled by a backlash against mounting student debt coupled with the high cost of a four-year college degree, which can cost families easily \$100,000 to upwards of \$250,000. Many young people are opting for a condensed, tailored education, such as vocational training or an associate degree path from a community college, while others who have taken the four-year route to a degree work for a few years and then choose to complete a certification or two in order to further qualify them for the job they want rather than paying for a pricey graduate diploma.

It would seem that graduating from a good college with solid grades is no longer sufficient to be competitive in today's job market. This is the conclusion drawn by the Editor in Chief of Kiplinger Magazine, Knight Kiplinger, who recently told a story about his college-educated daughter, who was asked to take two skill tests at a job interview for a position she was seeking ("Kiplinger's Personal Finance" December 2013). Although these skills are typically associated with more technical aptitude (his daughter was seeking a graphic arts and web design position), Kiplinger did some digging around and found that skill testing is a growing trend among employers seeking to hire the most talented and skilled from among the growing numbers of college graduates entering the market.

While talk of skills may first bring to mind a vision of technical capacity like the ability to build a website or manage an information system, the research seems to indicate the trend is far broader. Just as graduate school programs have long used the GRE along with its Subject Tests in Science, Math and Literature to rank students' potential for graduate study, employers are beginning to use those scores to assess job applicants. The implication is that job seekers can take the GRE and brandish top scores on their resume to entice employers with their mental aptitude.

The trend toward employer testing appears to be running parallel with the bent toward rising minimum education requirements for employment in the United States. A survey of over 2,700 employers published by Lorin-Hitt (Professor, Wharton School, UPenn) and Prasanna Tambe (Stern School, NYU) showed that 18 percent of private sector employers increased educational requirements over the last five years and nearly one-third state they require a college education for jobs previously filled by high school graduates. But the important question for a business's bottom line is whether a more educated work force results in greater revenues. According to researchers who analyzed 20 million resumes and connected them to the company performance of thousands of employers, the answer is 'yes' but not necessarily in all

A traditional college education may be a great foundation, but the lesson here is to develop skillsets as you earn your degree so that your classroom knowledge is supplemented by practical applications. Internships and summer jobs are critical components for all college students. And for students in liberal arts as well as more technical fields, it pays to remember that critical reading and writing are valuable skillsets too. This very point is made clear by Kiplinger, who notes that his magazine has long assigned freelance stories (for pay) to individuals applying for writing positions at the company in an effort to assess determination, writing ability and creativity.

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