

## **P**urpose

The purpose of this research effort was to obtain the experiences, opinions and recommendations of some of the leading HR professionals in the state of Virginia regarding the hiring of workers in (blue-collar) entry-level jobs. Goodwill will use this information to help develop its training program, so its trainees will be better prepared to advance successfully through the application, interview and hiring process.

## **R**esearch Plan and Methodology

Martin Research recruited and conducted a total of eighteen small focus groups throughout the state of Virginia. The groups were distributed as follows:

- September 8 Blacksburg, VA – 1 group
- September 8 Roanoke, VA – 2 groups
- September 9 Danville, VA – 1 group
- September 9 Lynchburg, VA – 1 group
- September 10 Fredericksburg, VA – 2 groups
- September 11 Richmond, VA – 2 groups
- September 15 Winchester, VA – 1 group
- September 15 Staunton, VA – 1 group
- September 16 Charlottesville, VA – 2 groups
- September 22 Abingdon, VA – 1 group
- September 24 Alexandria, VA – 2 groups
- September 25 Hampton Roads, VA – 2 groups

All of the focus groups were with Managers of HR or Personnel for their respective organizations. To recruit the groups, Martin Research utilized the opt-in response of members in a recent SHRM survey, and supplemented the list with names provided by the Goodwill organizations in each of the above locations.

We recruited a total of five participants for each of the focus groups, and there were five participants in most of the groups. Show rates were excellent. Participants were paid \$100 for their participation.

To ensure continuity from the beginning of the process to the end, Frank Martin, CEO of Martin Research, moderated all eighteen of the focus groups and is the author of this summary.

# R eport Format and Video/Audio Tapes

This report will provide a summary of the findings from each of the individual markets, as well as a general summary of the learning and major conclusions from **all the groups** across the Commonwealth.

The groups in Roanoke, Richmond, Alexandria and Tidewater were videotaped, and copies of the DVDs are available now. Groups in the other areas were audiotaped and the tapes will be available to those markets following preparation of this report.

## Greater Charlottesville/Albemarle County Area

*What are the situations and challenges in the finding, interviewing, hiring and retention of your **entry-level employees** that give you the most headaches as HR Managers for your organizations?*

### **Challenges in recruiting and maintaining entry-level employees**

This was consistent across the state, along with complaints about the attire applicants wore to interviews.

They are planning for the certainty that their students will not be appropriately dressed – a problem mentioned in ALL of the focus groups.

Some of the participants blamed the school system for these problems – said the schools would not let the students bear responsibility for their failures.

- Most of the applicants have never had the training of “how to apply for work” – they have a lack of “application ability”. And we also have to determine whether they **really** want to work. Problem also with no-shows, no call – and their excuse would be something like “I forgot”. There is just a lot missing with this group when you think about what you need as an employer. Our challenge has always been getting (entry-level employees) to understand the importance of being there when they were scheduled to be.
- “The hard skills are the easy part to teach – but the **soft skills**, the part where you as a person are coming across as a professional I might want to hire (are the difficult part). I work in a placement office, and we keep clothes in the office for our students to wear in interviews if they are not dressed appropriately.” I tell them – it’s not just what you can do – you have to look like you would be a good employee. The students don’t understand that their culture, their way of communication, is not going to transition into business environments easily.
- The applicants don’t understand **boundaries** of appropriate discussion in interviews. Participants talked of hearing about divorces, their psychiatrist, their financial predicaments and other personal problems that had no place being discussed in job interviews.
- Other employees, such as home nurses, are too relaxed and conversational about personal issues with patients. Then, to make matters worse, they start treating the relationships as a friendly one rather than a professional one. (I’m going to leave early, but can you sign off that I stayed the whole shift?)”
- Interviewees will answer their cell phones all the time; we have to tell them to turn off the cell phones.
- People coming in who lack the **basic communication skills** – soft skills like customer service, basic decision-making skills – lacking a professional attitude. The sense is that they are just going to put in the time, and then go home. In interviews, they complain about previous employers treating them badly, which is inappropriate.

- When I call potential employees on the phone and I hear music or funny things on the voicemail message, I hang up because it says to me they are not a serious person.
- When employees call out “for no reason” or for a weak reason, it really throws us into a bind, because our patients won’t be getting the care they need.
- Credit checks are eliminating some potential employees from consideration.
- When employees start being presumptuous, and decide it’s OK if they are 10 – 15 minutes late, or it’s OK if I take extra time at lunch. They need to think beyond this job and set some goals.
- Misrepresentation of abilities in interviews – overstatement of abilities. They will claim to be a carpenter when they are not even close.
- After they get the job, employees at our retail store have to get used to the down time. They don’t want to spend it productively, but want to talk on the cell phone and wander around. “They think that when there is down time, they get to do nothing!”
- A lot of the younger people seem to lack the professionalism that the older employees have; I had to tell one of my employees a couple of years ago that she couldn’t wear slippers to work.
- The applicants don’t **get** that it’s not their right to get the job. (Sense of entitlement again)
- At our company, transportation and childcare and personal problems are huge obstacles and prevent people from getting to work. “Real life” gets in the way.
- Employees need to understand this is not an entitlement; it’s an opportunity. And they need to treat it as such.

At some point, the employee gets lax – but is this because of what he is noticing the other employees do? It should be addressed in training.

A presumed sense of entitlement on the part of employees was a problem in all markets.

## Attracting and Keeping Employees – What is important?

Employees don't have the confidence in their ability to tackle issues proactively. They need practice and training to develop this confidence.

- **Follows Directions** – it's infuriating when you tell someone how you want them to do something, and they 1) do it the way they want to anyway, 2) complain about having to do it that way, or 3) do nothing because they aren't sure about what to do.
- **Communication and critical thinking** – some employers have a problem with employees who do only what they are specifically instructed to do – nothing more. There is no proactive thinking.
- **Problem solving and critical thinking** – not taking any time to figure out what the issues or problems are and how to solve them.
- “I have two groups of employees: one is over 35 or 40, and the other is around 22 – and I find they really do act differently, particularly in the areas of **critical thinking, problem solving and attitude**. My older ones will brainstorm solutions, and the younger ones will ask, “What do you want me to do?”
- **Communication** – to and from the employees. And sometimes there is too much information from employees – pregnancy, divorces, and other personal matters that co-workers just do not need to hear. This is destructive to morale.
- **Positive attitude** – if you don't have a positive attitude, your productivity will decline. And the attitude affects motivation, and the ability to think critically and be proactive.
- Employees need to be **flexible** with regard to hours, job duties etc.
- Part of it is developing the culture where the employee feels really valued as a part of the organization, regardless of their position.
- **Motivation** – especially when times are slow. “It's like they don't want to think for themselves; they want all the answers given to them.”
- **Productivity** – “we are under tight deadlines to get construction work done by certain timeframes; we have to pay attention to productivity.” Employees get on the cell phones, and stop working whenever it rings.
- **Communication** – with Hispanic employees
- **Character, or work ethic**, matters more than anything.

**What are the *basic skills and training* that you would like for all entry-level applicants to have had to provide them with the best opportunity for success?**

The best way to approach this question seemed to be to break out the skills into “hard” and “soft” skills. Hard skills would include teachable skills such as basic math, operating a cash register, etc., while soft skills might focus upon “coaching” in some of the work ethic issues covered earlier.

**Hard Skills - Teachable**

- Telephone etiquette
- Personal appearance
- Technology – computer, typing skills, calculator
- Basic math/English; grammar
- Written and verbal communication skills; articulation
- Financial management
- Time management
- Interviewing skills – how to answer questions
- Problem solving and critical thinking (And willingness to do these)
- Following directions

**Soft Skills – Coachable**

- Interacting with a variety of people; diversity training
- Respect for self and others
- Work ethic: timeliness, responsibility, commitment, personal integrity (about self), honesty, dedication, trustworthiness
- Discipline
- Self management
- Investment vs. immediate gratification
- Employees need to learn to leave their personal problems at the door when they come to work.
- Have to be open to learning new things; open-minded
- Common courtesy; friendliness
- Presentation of self as professional (not wearing ratty clothes or looking unkempt); their dress is a reflection on the company.
- Customer focused
- Dental work needed – this is a tough conversation to have, but these are personal barriers that need to be addressed

- Most of the hard and soft skills mentioned were the same in all of the focus groups – and all of the participants agreed that the hard part of this training would be the soft skills – the bad habits and attitudes that have been deeply engrained for years.

***How have your needs changed over the past five years, and how do you see your needs changing in the future?***

- “The market was so different five years ago. There were a gazillion jobs and a smaller number of people to fill those jobs. So it was an ‘employees’ market”. And you had to have somebody to fill the position, so you were looking for warm bodies. Now, we need people who are skilled in certain areas, and can do what you want them to do. In the next five years, I would expect it to return to some sort of parity.”
- The need for people who are computer literate has increased and will continue to increase. And it is increasingly difficult to have a job that is going to pay a living wage without additional skills and training in the professional area. The at-risk people are the ones who did not graduate from high school, or who finished high school but did not go any further than that. It will be very difficult for people without advanced training to make a decent living.
- There will be a lot more usage of the computer and communication via computer.

***What makes Charlottesville different and unique from other areas of Virginia with respect to the needs of employers and employees?***

- Strong service economy – not much happening in the way of manufacturing
- So much of Charlottesville is connected to the University and health care

## Recommendations to Goodwill for Training

- As you develop a relationship with the trainees, it becomes easier to have the tough conversations in which you criticize constructively their dress or attitude. Goodwill will develop relationships with the trainees and therefore have a good opportunity to build trust and make a significant difference.
- Focus on the development of the soft skills – they are the ones that are most painful in their lacking.
- Work on the support system for people who typically do not do well at school or on the job, so that they will be able to handle childcare issues or transportation issues. Entry-level people are lacking the support systems and will **quit** rather than ask for help. People who tend to be successful find ways around roadblocks – teach them how to do this rather than STOP. They have to learn that they are not going to be keeping their jobs if they don't have the commitment and don't show up on time.
- Develop a follow-up program for the trainee once they have a job, where they maintain a mentor at Goodwill for a period of time. A person to talk to and have training and mentoring conversations designed to continue to build the employees confidence while they are working.
- Would like to see some tailoring of applicants to specific jobs – a more targeted approach. This will also facilitate the happiness of the employees in the new jobs, as well as make it a better fit for the employers. Train employees for construction (and other jobs).
- “I don't know enough about Goodwill to know what their capabilities are”

The most work – and the biggest payoff

Ongoing mentoring program was recommended in other markets too.

There was little awareness of this part of Goodwill's mission – much communication and marketing will be needed to get out the word.