

Purpose

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.

Research 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.

Report 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 Fredericksburg/Spotsylvania 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

- We only work through temp agencies, which do a lot of the weeding-out ahead of time. This makes it much easier for us.
- Many of the entry-level employees coming in “are not in command of their life issues.” They are unable to manage that AND work. We find them very concerned with the immediate, rather than the future.
- Another problem is they are “not skilled, interpersonally”. “We find that in our lower-paying jobs there are one or two issues that come up involving gossip or other high-school stuff. You are trying to maintain a professional standard, and it becomes difficult.” They can’t manage the conflict that comes up, whether it’s business or personal. There is also some cross-cultural interpersonal conflict.
- With entry-level low paying, the crowd tends to be younger, and there is a general sense of a lack of respect and lack of understanding. “They have not been trained how to DO an interview.”
- Language is also a problem (vernacular, slang). “Our employees are challenged with how to understand each other.” And this leads to cross-cultural conflict sometimes.
- Reasons for conflict at work could be generational – “Gen X’ers being supervised by baby-boomers”, or cultural.
- “They don’t get that it’s so important to BE here, on time, on the days you are supposed to work. They are expected to be here a few minutes early to begin work on time!” Young kids coming out of school should know that! It’s attitude.
- Employees that say they will have no problem getting to work on time every day are the ones who will NOT arrive on time every day! There could be a number of reasons for this: motivation, transportation, child care – but I think the real thing is a lot of them just look for reasons NOT to come to work (which is motivation).
- Work ethic – is “terrible”. We go through all this grueling time to get them hired and trained, and they don’t show up.

A problem statewide: lower level employees have a hard time managing life.

Accountability, or running from it, was a recurring theme across the state in these focus groups. It’s a major disconnect between employers and entry-level employees.

A recurring theme

- There's no common courtesy! "Basic courtesy seems to have just gone out the window with the younger generation."
- These employees do not seem to understand there are consequences with all of their actions. There is no accountability. This may even go back to school, when they would say, "my teacher gave me a "D", rather than I earned a "D"."
- They need to be prepared to manage their lives, and have resources in place so they can meet those expectations.
- "I think the biggest problem is that these (employees) just don't know how to manage money. There are garnishments, or they are in hock out the wazoo – as soon as they get a paycheck, it's spent." And if they can't make ends meet at home, they think it's your fault because you're not paying them enough.
- A lot of the lower-paid employees want to do well, but they are not seeing a way out of the quagmire of debt and low wages. They might be a single parent, or have other problems, and they just can't see a way out.
- These people are not feeling as though they have much control over their lives – life is controlling them. But what they CAN control is where they are, and/or how they work. So they fall prey to a self-indulgent lifestyle, which only makes it worse.
- A lot of today's applicants are self-centered, and "somewhat entitled" – or not always accepting full responsibility for the part they need to play in what they want to achieve. I'm concerned about their ability to come in and be a part of a team.
- Younger workers are much more confident with technology, and older workers are more intimidated by it.
- Many applicants do not know how to dress for interviews – to look like they want the job. They look lackadaisical – like they are going out with their friends. Dressing well lets the interviewer know they take the job and the opportunity seriously.

Several of the employers acknowledged that these employees are not paid much at all – which makes managing life and budget more challenging.

It's about control – people want to control their own lives, and are reaching for the wrong kinds of control.

A sense of entitlement was mentioned in ALL of the focus groups as a problem with the new entry-level employees

All of the groups stressed the importance of a neat appearance

Problems with Entry-Level Employees

- Problem solving – goes back to the whole piece about managing life issues – not expecting the job to accommodate more than it can. Also, many of these workers don't start working on problems until it reaches crisis level – such as their home is being foreclosed upon.
- Childcare is a huge problem and keeps people away from work – workers need reliable and dependable resources to deal with these issues.
- Communication – as discussed previously
- Critical thinking – People waiting for specific instructions – they don't want to think and decide for themselves. Obstacles bring them to a stop, or almost to paralysis.
- If the drive to succeed, the basic drive is not there. There's nothing we can do!
- Adhering to the schedule – “if they don't show up somebody else doesn't get to go home”.
- Problem with people “working the system” with an intermittent FMLA. There's nothing we can do.
- Getting along with others: I spent the first year there trying to keep the women from hurting each other. Gossip, talking, office romances, etc.
- The attitudes that “it's all about me”, “sense of entitlement” and “immediate gratification” are big problems for these employers.

Participants thought the root causes of these problems were centered in the employees' upbringing. There was too much concern with building their self-esteem and not enough with teaching teamwork and delayed gratification.

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

- Time management – expected to be at job for a certain number of hours a day
- Filling out application
- Basic workplace protocols and rules
- Interviewing skills: what to say and what NOT to say
- Communication skills and techniques – ESL also
- Reading comprehension
- Basic writing skills
- Basic English grammar
- Computer skills and usage
- Penmanship and handwriting
- Financial management – personal budgeting, goals
- Email etiquette
- Housekeeping
- Meal preparation

Soft Skills – Coachable

- Dressing for interviews – have been pleasantly surprised by applicants wearing khakis, a shirt and a tie – makes such an impression upon people
- Problem solving
- Cross cultural competency
- Professional demeanor
- Communication skills
- Resolving workplace issues
- Personal presentation and attitude
- Listening skills
- Taking the job seriously
- Getting along/working well with others
- Work ethic
- Team work – how what you do affects the team or co-workers; team building
- They have to learn to “feel” – to feel what you say as well as hear it intellectually.
- They have to learn that by treating the employer well, it will cause the employer to treat them well.
- Long term goals – goal setting
- Project management
- Contingency Planning – so that employee can get to work every day
- Respecting others
- Managing change
- Managing conflict
- Customer service
- Pride in work
- Positive attitude

Looking into the past, what changes have you seen over the past few years? And looking into the future, what scares you?

- Communication is a problem. As wired as we are, I don't think today's children are being taught how to communicate effectively (without using their phones).
- Communication skills are declining, both written and verbal.

What makes Fredericksburg/Spotsylvania different and unique from other areas of Virginia with respect to the needs of employers and employees?

- I really think there is a growing number of non-English speaking people, and I'm not sure how we can deal with it.
- Cost of living is higher – forces us to increase our bottom salaries and wages. This will make them so attractive we might begin to attract skilled workers from other places. And then we would not be hiring ANY unskilled workers!
- We have no real public transportation (that covers the area). Transportation is a major, major problem.
- We lose a lot of our educated employees to other (adjacent) markets, because they will get paid more. (Caroline County)

Recommendations to Goodwill for Training

- Trainees must learn to manage their lives, and have resources in place so they can meet those expectations. Anything Goodwill can do to facilitate this process will go a long way toward improving the situation of the trainees/employees.
- Goodwill could help trainees understand that employers are looking for them to learn to manage themselves and all of their personal issues, and to be responsible for their own actions – and give trainees tools to help them succeed.
- Help train them to deal with the biggest problem, which is how to manage money. Most of the lower-paid employees are overcome with debt, garnishments, and their paychecks are spent before they receive them.
- Most people inherently want to succeed and do well. Help them chart a plan for growth so they can see beyond this next paycheck. This is a tremendous motivator.

- Help them see beyond where they ARE – and maybe map that out with them a little bit. Show them a plan CAN work. Start with the end in mind, to borrow from Stephen Covey. Sometimes it's easier to make tough decisions when you know you're going to end up someplace you want to be.
- Goodwill needs to go beyond telling a trainee to tuck in his shirt and pull his pants up. They need to teach him to think of it himself because he wants to put his best foot forward.
- Find a company for the applicant that will be a good fit – don't just send them anywhere.
- "I think Goodwill needs to deal with some of the "life issues" – now that assumes the trainees will come prepared to face them, but I think this is the training that can be most productive...not all placement agencies could take on the life issues, but I think Goodwill probably could, because they have so many programs."
- "I would encourage Goodwill to collaborate with other agencies that could help with various aspects of the training."
- If candidates get the coaching we talked about, they will be much more prepared to enter the workforce. And we would be much more likely to deal with an agency that provided that kind of training (successfully). And they need to make us aware they are providing this coaching and training.
- Offer training not just for people who are out of work, but also for people who are struggling with these sorts of workplace issues. This could be a tremendous service for employers.
- Goodwill needs to understand what the employers in the area are going to need – and what the trends are. They need to have relationships with employers. Focus on meeting the needs of employers.
- Help them know how to dress for the interview.