

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.

Alexandria/Greater DC Metro 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?

Prior to the Interview

**A problem only
in Tidewater
and DC**

- Finding entry level people **with security clearance** (the process can take up to two years)
- There are not many applicants who will apply for the jobs, because the pay is less than they want, or think they can get elsewhere.
- Having a basic skill level to operate equipment or computers.
- All employees have to submit an application online, and many cannot perform this simple task.
- Poor spelling or incomplete applications
- Applicants do not take the process seriously, since they can get an entry-level position anywhere. The jobs are not well differentiated.

During the Interview

**Interview ended
for many HR
managers –
seen as blatant
show of
disrespect**

- No call – no shows
- Dressing inappropriately for a job interview; flip-flops and jeans; not well-groomed or clean
- Chewing gum
- Taking a cell phone call during the interview, or even interrupting an interview to check a vibrating phone
- Surly, uninvolved or uncommunicative
- No eye contact
- Unhappy – not looking as though they want to be there
- Uninterested in the company and what it does, other than how much they will be paid – no homework done beforehand
- Not completing the application, or not answering truthfully
- Not being forthcoming concerning issues that will be found on the background check
- Promising availability for all shifts, then changing their minds when they are hired for something other than 9-5
- Look and act as though they want the job, but then no call-no show, or treat it as a chore
- Don't come prepared with a resume

Following the Interview

- Short term employees; they quit or no-show very shortly after they are hired, usually because of the pay scale being lower than employees can get elsewhere.
- Don't make the job their priority – personal issues are the priority
- Attendance and retention – because of factors like (low) pay
- Employees view the job as short term – don't act as if they have a future there
- Late to work – don't account for traffic
- Lack of professionalism in behavior or dress

Challenges in recruiting and maintaining entry-level employees

- “A lot of them struggle with the **reliability and dependability** issues.” – Getting to work on time, not reporting to work if there are any (major or minor) issues, and understanding the employer needs for them to be on the job. Sometimes, it's just that they don't feel like coming.
- A lot of the younger candidates are missing some of the basic “**presentation skills**” (not dressing appropriately and cannot adequately express themselves or communicate). They are missing the training for basic interviewing skills, or basic on-the-job behavior.
- They come from homes where there are problems or job-hopping behavior is modeled.
- The job is typically hard physically, and the pay is typically low. The jobs, if lost, are easily replaced.
- Entry-level workers are very money focused and will leave for another \$.25 per hour, even if they lose benefits.
- People don't want to accept entry-level positions because they believe they deserve more (even if they don't). They balk at the pay, the hours, or the type of job.
- Negative attitudes: “What can you do for me?” A sense of “Entitlement” to job or more money; Cycle of despair or negativity; Selfishness or refusal to see any other point of view other than one's own, “Me vs. the World”; “Everything's a joke”; Doing minimum necessary
- Some applicants do not speak English, or do not speak good English.

This “education” is needed the most, but also is the hardest thing to turn around in adults. There are two issues here: 1) employees don’t know and 2) they don’t care. MUCH training and attitudinal adjustment is needed. Two keys to making the turnaround? 1) Connecting with a company and 2) establishment of a mentor at the new job, a father figure.

- The “work ethic” is very low or non-existent. This encompasses characteristics such as the following:
 - Showing up, showing up on time (or a few minutes early), and showing up ready to work; dependable and punctual
 - Making the job a priority
 - Not handling personal problems or issues at work
 - Getting along with others, cooperating with co-workers and supervisors; team skills and developing a team mindset
 - Responsibility to keep the flow of work happening smoothly
 - Repressing personal opinion; not personalizing work issues and responding emotionally
 - Willingness to work beyond “job description”
 - Responsible – accountable; don’t require constant supervision
 - Following directions or instructions; not insisting on doing things “your way”
 - Willingness to learn – to do new things
 - Attitude of service: customer comes first, company comes first; consciousness you are there to help people
 - Doing what they are supposed to do when they are supposed to do it.
 - Initiative
 - Understanding the boundaries of polite or appropriate “work” environment conversation
 - Attitude of commitment to job and not just “there to get a paycheck”
 - Separation of work and “personal” life (calls at work, privacy issues, etc.)
 - Respect: for the company, its culture, your supervisors and co-workers
 - Proactive – thinking about what needs to be done and doing it
 - Happy to have the job and committed to doing it well; hard-working; above and beyond when necessary
 - Motivated to do a good job; dedicated to company
 - See jobs through to completion; resourceful; doing the job that needs to be done until it gets done
 - Understanding importance of job, and how it fits into the company
 - Organized
 - Trustworthy and honest
 - Well-groomed; personal hygiene
- Communication: Most of the time, the HR Manager and the company and the potential entry-level employee communicate on very different levels. Sometimes they just cannot come to a mutual understanding.

- Applicants are usually not educated – many have not even finished high school. So higher-level thinking for problem solving and critical assessment is less prevalent with this group. Also, their confidence in their ability to do these things is very low.
- Applicants arrive with issues: crime, past or current drug problems, unstable household situations

How have your needs as an employer changed over the past five years, and looking ahead, how do you expect them to change in the future?

- **Technology** is big and getting bigger. Employees are going to need to be comfortable using computers, and *learning new software programs* – this means they are not going to be able to resist change!
- **Skill using and searching on the Internet** – will only continue to grow
- People are going to need **good communication skills** more than ever
- **Basic math skills** will become more important
- Education used to be the main thing we looked for – now we are finding ourselves looking more for experience
- We’re finding that people don’t have the experience we need, so we’re having to *hire on attitude and train*.
- Immigration is a bigger issue and will continue to get bigger
- We’re finding that people are not willing to take entry-level positions because they think they deserve more.

What should the applicants do – or communicate – during the interview to give them the best shot at being hired?

The Managers are looking to evaluate the work ethic and attitude of the applicants; they can train for the skills, but find attitudes much harder to bring into line.

- Be happy. Smile and act as though you are excited about having the interview and the opportunity
- Act as though you want to impress the interviewer
- Do the homework about the company. Know what their business is and how you will be able to help them.
- Be honest about past problems (but not overly so) – let the potential employer know these problems are behind you and you are moving forward in a positive way.
- Communicate a “service orientation” – What can I do for the company, or how can I make your job easier? Let the interviewer know you will do whatever you can to succeed in that position.

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

- **Basic math skills** – making change, adding, subtracting
- **Business etiquette:** letter writing, how to talk with people on the phone; cube etiquette; silence personal cell phones
- **Basic computer skills**
- **Customer service skills** – dealing with difficult customers; overcoming obstacles
- Proper **oral and written communication;** use of grammatically correct language
- **English** as a second language
- **Research skills** – on the Internet or in books
- **Appearance, hygiene**
- **Critical thinking and problem solving**

Soft Skills

- **Attitude of service** – to customers and to the organization; a “service orientation” – what can I do for you and this company
- **Work ethic** as defined earlier
- **Teamwork**
- **Professionalism** – can do attitude, appropriate dress
- **Reliability**
- **Honesty**
- Ability to take **instruction**
- **Listening skills**
- **Life skills**
- **Respecting others**

What makes DC Metro and Northern Virginia different from other markets in Virginia?

- Diversity of population
- Size and scope of market
- Military and government employees – strong government orientation
- Larger companies and more diverse types of companies
- Service economy – we don’t manufacture anything
- Traffic
- Expense of housing forces people to live far away from jobs

Recommendations to Goodwill for Training

- Focus upon developing **confidence and a positive attitude**. Most organizations believe they can train employees to do specific tasks. The hardest thing for them to deal with is a negative attitude and no work ethic.
- Focus upon developing a **work ethic** in trainees – help them understand what it is and how they can live it.
- Develop programs and training **jointly** with employers. Partner with them for training entry-level employees; bring back the hospitality program!
- Develop **success stories** of Goodwill trainees who have succeeded at other companies; this will help trainees believe they can do it too.
- Teach trainees to think long-term, rather than the next \$.25 per hour
- Work on training for the trades that are getting increasingly difficult to find: plumbing, brick masonry, electrical, cooking, etc.
- Role play typical scenarios for various businesses
- Partnerships with organizations like the Chamber of Commerce – promote jointly
- Classroom as well as on the job scenarios – focus on people skills

Recommendations for Informing Employers of Goodwill's Training Programs

- Call them – set up meetings and establish partnerships. Employers will be receptive because these types of employees are difficult and expensive to find and keep.