

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.

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 Winchester/Hagerstown 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

- Getting people to have a base level of skills, such as acting and dressing professionally, the ability to send an email, open documents in Word or Excel – we are not getting these basic things in people coming out of high school.
- We're a bank and can be a little stodgy sometimes, but coming to interviews in flip-flops and other inappropriate apparel? There is a lot of this in the applicants for the entry-level positions.
- Basic math and reading skills – it's frightening that the high schools are letting people graduate without these...
- Lack of a driver's license – and they need a job to pay the fines so they can have a driver's license.
- Completing the application in full – if they can't take the time to complete the application how are we to think they will do their jobs to completion?
- Ability to read and write and fill out the applications in full
- We're getting the underachievers – not the people who go to college and who have a lot of choices. They weren't motivated in school, and aren't motivated in the workplace.
- English speaking among Hispanic work force (but they have a much better work ethic) – plus, there is always the fear they are illegal.
- It's something about the kids coming in to the workforce now – they want to come in as VP's making \$75,000 a year. Our starting wages are very high for banking, but they are always so disappointed to be making \$11 or \$12 an hour. It's disappointing to see that.
- We draw from a wide geographic area in this tri-state area, and the high gas prices are causing a lot of hardships among entry-level workers.

Problems in every market

This was the only market in which this fear of illegal aliens was raised.

What are the biggest problems you have with entry-level workers?

All of the groups said that entry-level workers can't – or won't – think critically to solve problems. Is it a matter of ability or experience?

- Problem solving and critical thinking – they resist having to use critical thinking skills in order to solve problems; they don't want to make decisions and take ownership of a situation or problem. (They don't really have the experience or the confidence to feel comfortable solving the problem.
- Communication and problem solving in a customer service situation – ability to communicate with people without using “text-speak” and using proper punctuation and grammar.
- Critical thinking – again leading to problem solving.
- Following direction – a lot of the younger workers don't take direction easily, and this irritates their boomer bosses, who don't have the patience to have to explain everything. We have to train our supervisors to understand the psyche of this newer generation.
- Our managers need to understand that leadership is not getting ABCD done; it's leading people to get those things done.
- Motivation – the way we are structured leads to reduced motivation in the workforce – long hours to someone who is used to not doing more than 30 minutes of work at a time. WE have to find better ways to motivate people.
- Motivation and following direction – mixture of inability and lack of concentration
- Flexibility – they get used to certain shifts or duties and want that never to change.

This manager was accepting some of the responsibility for his workforce not being as motivated as they need to be.

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

- Basic knowledge in math, spelling, writing and reading
- Job readiness skills: interviewing and application. resumes
- Basic communication skills – grammar for written and verbal communication; eye contact with others
- Teamwork – how to get along with others
- Problem solving
- Basic mechanical skills
- Accepting feedback (about performance)
- Credit worthiness – maintaining good credit
- Basic etiquette – manners in the workplace, non-use of profanity
- Time management and scheduling
- How to manage money
- Diversity, harassment issues, etc.

Soft Skills – Coachable

- Work ethic – showing up every day – on time
- Respecting authority and following directions and following rules
- Accountability
- Sharing – getting along with others
- Goal setting
- Setting priorities
- Self-worth and pride in performance
- Respect for self, others and leaders
- Values and morality
- Helping to understand develop strengths
- Comfort with rules and structure

What makes Winchester/Hagerstown different and unique from other areas of Virginia with respect to the needs of employers and employees? How have things changed over the past few years, and how do you expect them to change in the future?

- I'm thinking that a lot of the things and problems we have talked about are all going to get worse. If you just look at the numbers along (supply and demand or workers) we are going to be hurting.
- We are very much into technology and that is only going to increase. A lot of employees are not comfortable with computers and technology.
- The schools need to change and provide the vocational training they are not providing now – they need to adapt to the needs of the marketplace now and train the kids who are not going to college to work. Right now, they are a little behind in this training.
- It's getting harder to find certain types of workers, and the opportunities for training those is shrinking: bricklayers, nurses, carpenters, and other trades.
- I know that (my) industry has been pretty reluctant to change itself – and if we are going to be able to attract younger, entry-levels workers in the future, we are going to have to change the way we structure ourselves – things such as a more flexible work schedule.

Goodwill can pick up the slack where the schools are not getting it done.

Many companies agreed that they needed to take a look at themselves in trying to find ways to attract and keep entry-level workers.

Recommendations to Goodwill for Training

- I'm always impressed with people who come to interviews, even though they don't have to, with a coat and tie. It's at least showing you have the dedication and the ambition to dress to impress somebody. To me, you can't overdress for an interview – especially when you have no experience to offer.
- Being prepared, dressing appropriately, are so important.
- Teach job candidates to: arrive on time, answer questions directly, sit up straight in the interview, not to divulge too much information in the interview (I sued my last employer) not to answer cell phone calls or even check it if the phone is on "vibrate", not to chew gum, or look around the room in a distracted way, display a positive outlook and a good personality, something that is going to make a good impression on our customers, to complete the application in full, and be honest.
- Do some homework - know something about the industry.

There are many opportunities for teamwork and synergy between the employers and Goodwill.

- The employers were not familiar with Goodwill training programs, although they were familiar with the organization. Goodwill can come to speak at some local HR and SHRM meetings, and call on the organizations individually.
- Work with trainees on the soft and hard skills mentioned on the previous page.
- Although they did not mention it in this section, many of the employers also thought Goodwill could work with employers to help them develop strategies for keeping employees, for making them feel a welcome part of the team so they will be less inclined to leave.