What Psychology Students Learn:

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SKILLS

THAT ANY EMPLOYER WILL APPRECIATE

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Most employers recognize psychology as a strong undergraduate major for people entering the human services or mental health fields, and many students go into psychology expecting to find employment in these areas. However, a psychology degree isn't only appropriate for the mental health field. The skills psychology students learn can be transferred to many fields (e.g., management, human resources, healthcare, sales, and law), and these skills won't lose their relevance with time, or cultural and technological changes.

A recent survey commissioned by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (Hart Research Associates, 2013) found that most employers want to hire people who have interpersonal and intellectual skills that will allow them to innovate in their workplace. They want employees whose knowledge and skills are both broad and deep, and applicable to a wide range of positions (Hart Research Associates, 2010). Employers value people with a demonstrated ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and apply academic knowledge and skills to real-world settings (Hart Research Associates, 2010, 2013). They appreciate employees with experience in developing research questions, analyzing evidence, and conducting scientific research. Employers also want to hire people who display integrity and behave ethically, who can work well with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, and who can communicate clearly both verbally and in writing (Hart Research Associates, 2010, 2013). Finally, employers want people who have the ability to grow professionally and want to give back to their communities (Hart Research Associates, 2013).

If you are a psychology major, you probably recognize that these skills closely match your studies. However, many employers, especially those without a background in psychology, may not recognize that the skills developed through a psychology major are a natural match for their organization. Therefore, it is vital that students be able to effectively educate potential employers, supervisors, and coworkers about their psychology-based skills in order to be more successful both in job interviews and in the workforce. The following list outlines skills that we expect strong psychology majors to develop and identifies how these skills are connected to the qualities sought by employers.

1 Have interpersonal skills.

Potential employers see communication, teamwork, and leadership skills as important attributes in potential hires (Lowden, Hall, Elliott, & Lewin, 2011). In fact, Williams (2014) argued that these interpersonal skills, as well as students' work ethic and sense of commitment, distinguish between highly and less employable students. Psychology majors learn many skills relevant to effectively working with others and creating a workplace that is responsive to change. For example, Landrum and Nelson (2002) reported that students gained practice in many career-relevant interpersonal skills including teamwork, leadership, and communication from working as psychology research assistants.

As a psychology major, you know how to motivate others and help them learn. Psychology students spend much of their undergraduate careers studying the psychology of learning and motivation. These skills include recognizing and introducing reinforcers and punishers, identifying barriers to a desired behavior, and understanding how the environment and intrapersonal factors contribute to motivation and learning. All of these skills are invaluable for employers wanting innovation in the workplace because a lack of motivation and desire to learn are impediments to change.

In addition, psychology students do considerable work in groups. Colbeck, Campbell, and Bjorklund (2000) reported that group work helps students develop communication, problem-solving, and conflict management skills. When groups are set up well, students learn to work together, listen to and respect diverse opinions, delegate responsibilities, and motivate others to meet the group's goals. Because you have done group work, you know how to give and take, listen to others, and resolve disagreements as they occur, which are all skills of vital importance in the workplace.

Finally, over the course of their college career, psychology students have learned to think beyond their own narrow perspectives to recognize contextual, developmental, and cultural influences on behavior, and to take other viewpoints into account. This occurs both through course material, and through discussion and small group work, which are common in psychology classes. The hours that psychology students spend, both inside and outside of the classroom, listening to other students' viewpoints and opinions helps them learn how to recognize and respond to disparate perspectives, skills appreciated in almost every work environment (Hart Research Associates, 2010, 2013). These kinds of interactions have also been shown to help students develop socially responsible leadership skills, possibly because they offer students the opportunity to improve listening skills, clarify values, and take other people's points of view (Dugan & Komives, 2010). As a psychology student, your empathy makes you useful and appreciated in a wide variety of work settings that value your abilities to manage employees well, relate to customers, and anticipate and resolve problems.

2 Engage in critical thinking.

Psychology students develop critical thinking skills throughout their careers. They learn that there are other ways of looking at problems and that problems don't always have simple answers. They look beyond facile explanations of phenomena to consider the contributions of contextual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors. They are comfortable with uncertainty, and ask for and examine the evidence for assertions. They know that correlations may not indicate causal relationships and consider other explanations of research findings. They skeptically examine a study's methodology and the limitations imposed by the nature of its sample.

Why are critical thinking skills so valuable in the workplace? These types of skills help you make better decisions. For example, Butler (2012) found that people who had higher scores on a measure of critical thinking reported fewer negative life events resulting from bad decision-making.

3 Apply theory and research in other settings.

Psychology students don't simply memorize research studies; they also learn to apply these findings to the real world. For example, what can we do so that bystanders are more likely to offer someone help? As a psychology student, you have book smarts you can apply in the real world in ways that employers appreciate (Hart Research Associates, 2013).

4 Respect and appreciate research.

In the workplace, where employers increasingly demand that decision-making be based on evidence, psychology majors have an advantage in their appreciation of the value of research. Employers value potential hires who can develop research questions, analyze evidence, and conduct scientific research (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Psychology students learn to gather, summarize, and interpret data, and recognize potential confounds. Their research skills transcend the lab, allowing them to find, analyze, and use articles from a variety of sources, identifying both their strengths and limitations.

You can also use your experience with research to enlarge the questions your employers ask and look more broadly for answers. While reading about research, psychology students learn that people do not always respond the way we think they will. Having more people around makes us *less* likely to receive help than if we're alone. Most of us will administer what we believe are lethal shocks when told to do so. As a result of reading such research, psychology students learn to appreciate empirical evidence and to ask questions rather than assume they know the answers. You are less likely to accept assertions with no evidence. For example, Stark (2012) found that students who learned how to identify pseudoscience in their research methods classes were less likely to accept paranormal beliefs. Psychology students know how to find answers and evaluate the source of those answers. You know that not all answers are equally good and consider the quality of the source as you draw conclusions.

5 Consider ethics when making decisions.

More than 90% of employers want employees with strong ethical judgment and integrity (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Psychology students discuss ethical behavior in most if not all of their courses. They consider the consequences of behaving ethically or unethically on clients, research participants, the community, and the profession. They recognize factors leading to unethical behavior and can identify strategies for promoting ethical behavior. More than simply avoiding negative consequences, you learn how to behave in positive and ethical ways despite pressures to do otherwise.

6 Understand and appreciate diversity.

Psychology students learn to recognize patterns in behaviors, and also to recognize and appreciate individual and group differences. Not all women value emotional disclosure in relationships nor are all Asians collectivists. As a psychology graduate, you can use this knowledge to help your employers make more well-informed decisions in marketing, developing services, and recognizing when services would be inappropriate for a population. Further, there is evidence that diversity experiences in college increase your cognitive abilities, especially the willingness to think complexly and accept complex attributions (Bowman, 2010).

7 Write well.

Psychology students write frequently and in many contexts. They write literature reviews, article summaries, reflection papers, and research proposals. Experiences with data collection and reporting helps students develop their writing and presentation skills (Kazura & Tuttle, 2010), and these skills enable them to write clear and logical prose and give effective presentations in the workplace. Because psychology majors write frequently as undergraduates, you know how to write rapidly and well, an asset in the workplace.

8 Show capacity for professional development.

As Confucius said, "Give a bowl of rice to a man, and you will feed him for a day. Teach him how to grow his own rice, and you will save his life." Our graduates can learn and will continue growing and contributing to their workplace. Psychology students are asked to reflect frequently: to identify what they learned and where they are still confused, to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their projects and papers, to recognize their personal strengths and weaknesses, and to apply theory to their lives. In the course of these exercises, they develop confidence, and realistic self-reflection and self-evaluation skills. These skills serve you well both personally and at the workplace, as they contribute to your willingness to continue to learn and grow.

9 Are civic-minded.

It isn't just that psychology students can make the world a better place; they genuinely *want* to. They enter the field knowing that an undergraduate degree alone will not earn them big bucks—yet they persist! Many have put in hundreds of volunteer hours before entering the workforce because they want to and believe doing so is right. Further, this experience with civic engagement and community service is increasingly an intentional goal of psychology programs and faculty (American Psychological Association, 2013).

10 Attention to detail and time management.

One of the things that students learn while writing papers using APA style is that attention to detail is important. This attention to detail is appreciated in many work environments where appearance and consistency are important, and where dotting the Is and crossing the Ts matters.

Because psychology students have frequent papers and projects, you learn to respect deadlines. You learn accountability and to pull your own weight as a member of a team. For example, Landrum and Nelson (2002) found that working as an undergraduate research assistant helped students improve their time management and teamwork skills. Missed deadlines hurt everyone throughout the workplace. Employees who hold themselves accountable can motivate themselves, respect deadlines, and get things done in a timely manner are great members of any team.

D o all psychology graduates possess these skills to equal degrees? Probably not. Nonetheless, when faculty and programs pay attention to the goals outlined by the American Psychological Association (2013)—and when students are motivated to develop and meet the skills inherent in those goals—psychology students can become invaluable employees. Your abilities to think, write and speak, work well by yourself and as a member of a team, understand and apply research and theory, and learn from experience give you tools that are effective in the human services, and also in many other diverse workplaces.

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