

What Christian CEOs look for in Hiring Recent College Graduates

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The Study

In preparation for meeting with CBFA I surveyed some fifty Christian CEOs, all of whom head large public and private businesses and institutions. They were asked to identify the three most important qualities they look for in hiring recent college graduates.

Analysis

The CEOs identified over 40 qualities. Some could be combined with others without losing the intent, resulting in 12 categories, each of which had at least five responses. Terms often used by respondents are included in a listing of all 12 categories, shown in Appendix A.

In addition to the data, several made further comments, providing an explanation or rationale for their particular choice of an important quality. Several of these comments are included in Appendix B.

Results

The quality identified most consistently was Character, accounting for nearly 30% of the total responses. This was more than double the second highest quality, Intellect, with 13%. The next most prominent were Work Ethic (9%), Initiative (8%) and Communication Skills (8%).

The full results on the 12 most prominent are shown graphically in Appendix C.

Observations – The Top Five

The emphasis on Character carries a loud message. It suggests character qualities are lacking among recent hires, and that other qualities, while very important, cannot stand alone without strong character. It suggests a company might be willing to build specific skill sets, but that building these skills in a person of weak character may ultimately be in vain. This was summed up by a former Commandant of The U.S. Marine Corp: “I can take a bright and willing candidate and teach him/her the fundamentals of my business. It is much more difficult to educate someone to have character!”

CEOs refer to the values in their organizations, and want there to be alignment with those values in new hires. They want to see Integrity, a quality that I included in Character, but which was mentioned specifically a full 21 times. Humility was mentioned by several. The president of a prominent west coast university points out that a person can be both confident and humble – that these are not mutually exclusive.

Following Character are these qualities: Intellect, Work Ethic, Initiative and Communication Skills. Combined, these five account for two-thirds of the total responses.

These employers want bright students, often mentioning GPA as the best indicator. The former head of a large major oil company said he looks for “brain power.” There is a premium on new hires that are curious, grasp things quickly and know how to solve problems.

Employers also want people who know how to work, and how to persevere through difficulties. They mention the value of competitive skills developed through participation in athletics. They want people who are punctual and “fully present” during meetings.

Execs want college hires that are willing to take Initiative, the fourth quality in ranking. They mention the importance of a can-do attitude and a willingness to take risks and, when faced with failure, the ability to get up and try again. They want self-starters, in the words of one: “those who have the ability to see work and get it done without being told to do it.”

Communication Skills round out the top five and it’s important to note this includes speaking, writing and listening. One said, “These kids do not know how to interview!!”

Observations – Other Qualities

The fact that other qualities were not mentioned as frequently as the top five does not lessen their importance, especially for the person interviewing with an employer who really values these other qualities. For example, the founder of a large advertising firm calls Passion the number one quality he looks for – passion for the job and for life.

Other execs want to find Teachability – is a person coachable? – do they desire feedback? – are they willing to be challenged? They want to see some indication of Demonstrated Leadership. A former P&G exec likes to look for peer recognition – were they president of their class, or their fraternity?

Several mentioned the importance of a “positive attitude” as an indicator of Emotional Intelligence. Others put a premium on Common Sense, and will look at a candidates previous work experience for clues to their discernment and good judgment. Still others cite the value of Interpersonal Skills – can they work with others? Have they participated in team sports or team activities?

Implications for Higher Education

Some of the qualities sought by CEOs are at the heart of higher education, especially those focused on developing knowledge that is practical and relevant. But many of the sought-after qualities are not learned in the classroom. Some are probably formed well before college – in families, church, and social networks.

Because Character is so highly valued, those in higher education need to think much more intentionally about how they can influence the development of good character. A starting place might be to identify what influences shape character. I suggest three primary influences:

- The company a person keeps
- The choices a person makes
- The challenges a person overcomes

These three are ongoing, not just based on one-time events.

The company a person keeps includes teachers, role models, coaches, etc., not only peers. The personal interest a professor takes in his/her students can have a huge influence on the student's self-confidence and growth trajectories. Nearly every success story involves someone, often behind the scenes, who helped encourage and direct that person's life (and this can include prayer!).

We are products of the choices we make. These are not only the "big" choices – marriage, vocation, place of employment, etc. – but a plethora of "small" everyday choices: How do I respond to an offense? Can I say "no" when I'm under a lot of pressure to comply? Am I thinking of others, or only of myself? Am I giving proper priority to my spiritual development, or only to academics, social life or sports? Have I thought through how I'll respond, ahead of time, to a potentially compromising moral situation?

We are shaped by the challenges we overcome. One exec in the survey puts a heavy emphasis on understanding how prospective employees have handled difficulties, and the lessons learned. Young people in our colleges and universities are facing enormous challenges, yet properly viewed these are often God's "ways and means committee" to help mold solid, reliable character. These institutions should be thinking about how they help students work through challenges in a redemptive and instructive way. It's not enough for faculty to "outsource" students' problems to campus ministries, chapels, or even the codes of conduct. Often the most strategic help comes from direct interest and involvement.

Implications for College Students

The data may come as a real wake-up call to many students. What gives job applicants great value to employers are qualities that aren't revealed in resumes and transcripts. They're anecdotal. They come up in conversation. They are forged through discipline, hard work, continuous learning, adherence to personal core values, a genuine appreciation for others and as they overcome trials and temptations. Caution: What you post on Facebook may mean more than what courses you take!

Implications for Employers

This data suggests some innovative approaches to interviewing, such as questions designed to ferret out how well equipped applicants are in the intangibles that their prospective employers feel are so important. What would have you done in this (fill in the blank) situation? What did you do during your summers? Describe a difficult interpersonal situation, and what approach you took to working through it? Who do you look up to in your life? What are you currently reading? Why? What do you feel you would uniquely bring this company?

By the way, the qualities that are sought out in applicants might also apply to existing employees. How may these desired qualities be considered in performance reviews or as a grid for promotions? How do they help distinguish between those who are merely meeting requirements and those who are excelling and can form the nucleus of your company's future?

Conclusion

The views of the CEOs surveyed remind us—again—that “character counts,” in fact, more than any other quality, and by a wide margin.

The execs know that in the current “post-Enron” era, business gets a bad rap—perceived by many as corrupt, greedy, and self-absorbed. This is hardly fertile soil for newly-minted grads. Yet they also know the future of business requires employees of the highest caliber and commitment. They need good skills, need to know how to work hard, take initiative and communicate well. They need passion and common sense. They need to be able to work in teams. But above all they need solid character. “Bring character to work,” they say, “and we will turn you into great employees.”

What do CEOs want to see in possible hires from college?

1. (42) **Character:** Integrity (21), humility—“balanced ego yet confident”(4), honesty, moral and intellectual integrity, alignment of values (cultural fit), trustworthiness, reputation, ethics, courage of conviction, genuineness
2. (18) **Intellect:** Critical thinking skills, strong GPA, smart, curious, creative, capacity to anticipate, mental capacity, quick to grasp, problem solvers
3. (13) **Work ethic:** Perseverance, disciplined, commitment, dependability, competitiveness (esp. in sports), go the extra mile
4. (12) **Initiative:** Self-motivated, entrepreneurial, take measured risks, drive, can-do attitude, self-starter, goal-oriented, fail and get up
5. (11) **Communication skills:** Verbal, writing, listening – internally, with customers, suppliers
6. (9) **Teachability:** Ability to learn, intellectual curiosity, good listener, coachable, desire feedback, willing to be challenged
7. (8) **Demonstrated leadership:** Leadership skills (sports, fraternities, community activities)
8. (7) **Passion:** Emotional intensity, energy, enthusiasm for the opportunity, sincere desire
9. (7) **Evidence of success:** Summer work, internships, formative experiences, overcoming difficulties, specific experience and achievements
10. (6) **Emotional intelligence:** Positive attitude, maturity, presence, inspire confidence
11. (5) **Common sense:** Wisdom, discernment, good judgment
12. (5) **Interpersonal skills:** respect for others, team player

Other:

Faith (good Christian foundation), preparation (especially for interview), earned money for college, service to others (e.g. missions), relevant extra-curricular with intensive involvement

Quotes

Character:

- I believe the qualifications listed for pastors, deacons, etc., given in the scripture are a model for all hiring, both in the church and in the secular world. Note that eight of the eleven qualities listed pertain to character. Competence is necessary and can be developed, but character trumps competence in the long run—every time. WC
- Are they both confident and humble? Those are not mutually exclusive characteristics. AB
- Character, character, character. JD
- Strength of character – a value system based on a sense of selflessness, integrity and moral courage. CK

Intellect:

- I want to look in their eyes when I suggest an idea and see that they get it and that they have the ability to come up with creative and honorable solutions. TS

Work ethic:

- I look for a great work ethic and no feeling of entitlement, willing to work harder than anyone and start wherever it takes to get on board and then find their seat later. RC
- Dependability is showing up on time all of the time, and being present and fully present in meetings. PC

Communication Skills:

- ...includes a positive attitude – a quality a person either has or doesn't have, and can't be taught. SV

Passion:

- The number one quality I look for is passion. I need to feel and see the passion for the job and a passion for life. AM

Evidence of success:

- I give significant consideration to young men and women who have overcome significant disadvantages/hardships to achieve what they have accomplished. CM

Common sense:

- Judgment – does the person have an ability to understand concepts and apply appropriate importance or action? Can the person defend and discuss decisions? HS

General

- The grid I use in hiring comes from Aristotle's great book *Rhetoric*. HD
 - Ethos – trust, ethics, virtue – this is most important to me
 - Pathos – passion, emotional intensity
 - Logos – truth or intellect – what is the brain power/talent of this person – are they passionate for the truth?
- P&G found that one of the best indicators for success was the recognition of peers. Peers are much tougher to fool than bosses or subordinates. TS

