

A Qualitative Pilot Study of New Zealand Employers' Views on the Importance and Measurement of Business Graduate Competencies

Dave Hodges
Undergraduate Division, Unitec New Zealand

Abstract

Recent research undertaken in New Zealand has identified the type of competencies that employers view as being important for new undergraduates (Coll, Zegwaard & Hodges, 2002; Hodges & Burchell, 2003). These prior studies indicated that employers are looking for well-rounded graduates who possess a broad range of cognitive competencies (hard skills) and behavioral competencies (soft skills). While these prior studies examined what competencies employers viewed as being important, they did not focus on why employers held these views nor how they viewed and measured employee performance in relation to these competencies. This paper will report on a follow-up pilot investigation that sought insights into why employers believe certain competencies to be more important than others and the ways in which they consider performance against these competencies. A similar survey instrument to that used in the prior 2003 business study was distributed to a small number of employers in the Auckland region who agreed to participate in this pilot study. Individual survey results were then used to guide follow-up, semi-structured interviews with each of the 10 survey respondents. Common themes, drawn from an analysis of the interviews, are discussed and reported on in the findings. The discussion also gives consideration to the sociocultural factors that may influence employers' views. Implications for learning goals and assessment practices within a cooperative education program will also be highlighted.

Introduction

In the past few years there has been extensive discourse, both in the literature and the media, concerning the apparent skills shortages in many OECD countries. This discourse has tended to occur at a macro level, focusing on the difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified and experienced people in certain professions or industries, such as engineering, health, IT, finance and the sciences. Often missing from this dialogue is the potential micro level or personal skills-gap, that is, whether new recruits have the right mix of competencies for today's workplace.

Some recent studies in New Zealand have indicated that employers want graduates to have a broad range of competencies - both cognitive and behavioral (BERL, 2004; Coll, Zegwaard & Hodges, 2002; Hodges & Burchell, 2003). These particular studies considered employers' views in the tourism, science and technology, and business sectors respectively. This paper reports on a follow-up to the study of business employers, undertaken by Hodges and Burchell. This current study sought to gain a better understanding of employers' views on business graduates' competencies. By conducting in-depth interviews with 12 employers, the study aimed to gain insights as to why some competencies were more important than others and how employers view these competencies in relation to graduate performance.

A sociocultural framework will be used when discussing the findings from this study. Particular attention will be given to the differences in workplace and educational settings for competency, learning and assessment. The implications this may have for higher education in general and cooperative education in particular also is considered.

Competency and Context

Workplace competency is related to the manner in which individual attributes, such as prior knowledge, skills and attitudes, are drawn on in performing tasks in specific work contexts and which results in overall job performance (Birkett, 1993). These individual attributes are referred to as competencies, the combination of which leads to the demonstration of competence (Bowden &

Masters, 1993; Gonczi & Hager, 1992; Hager & Beckett, 1995). These competencies involve a combination and interconnection of cognitive and behavioral components - sometimes referred to 'hard' and 'soft' skills (Ashton, 1994; Caudron, 1999; Georges, 1996; Strebler, 1997).

The social and cultural context of work is increasingly being recognized as a key influence on workplace learning and competency. Nonaka and Konno (1998) consider knowledge to be intangible, as well as being intrinsically linked to and inseparable from its context (shared space of meaning). Separation from its context turn it into information and therefore of less relevance. According to Bandura (1997) success in a workplace context depends on the self-efficacy of the individual in dealing with the social realities of work situations. It is also argued that all learning is socially-situated, and that the activity being undertaken is influenced by the context and culture in which it occurs (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Rogoff, 1990). Furthermore, Billet (1994) considers that "for situated learning to be effective, it needs to be embedded in the authentic activities and social relations which comprise cultural practice" (p. 128).

Birkett (1993) and Rudman (1995) identified that competency is a relative term, with performance being related to an individual's experience. This experience is gained within a social setting or community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), in which individual learning is mediated by the tools, signs or language of the particular practice (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). These sociocultural views of learning suggest that if students have not been exposed to the workplace before they commence employment, there is likely to be a gap in their knowledge and understanding of workplace norms and expectations.

From a graduate's perspective, their view of the workplace, the competencies that they believe to be important, and their perception of their own competency levels (self-efficacy), will be influenced by their own sociocultural experiences and background, particularly from the formative cues and influences derived from their higher education experience. It is therefore likely, in the context of employers' work practices, that one might expect employers to identify gaps in graduates' understanding of and performance in those competencies considered to be important.

Methodology

This pilot study set out to explore employers' views of why some business graduate competencies are important and how they are (typically) demonstrated in the context of their workplace. Participants were selected from a database of employers who had previously hosted students as part of a business degree cooperative education course (industry-based learning). Employers who did not have experience of business graduates were asked to use their knowledge of the cooperative education (industry-based learning) students who would have been in their final semester of study when undertaking their placement. Care was taken to have a broad range of employer participants, in terms of gender, organization type, organization size, and business disciplines. A questionnaire survey, based on that used in the prior study of Hodges and Burchell (2003), was distributed to each participating employer prior to undertaking individual interviews at employer's work-sites. Employers were asked to rate the level of *importance* they attributed to 25 competencies for bachelor-level graduates in business roles in their first year of work. They were also asked to rate the typical level of *performance* that such graduates demonstrated for each competency. Definitions were provided for each of the 25 competencies (see appendix). The ratings were based on responses to two seven-point Likert scales. For the *importance* scale, seven indicated the competency was very important, and for the *performance* scale seven indicated excellent performance.

An analysis of each participant's response to the questionnaire formed the basis of the questions used for each participant's interview. These questions revolved around three broad themes: factors underpinning the relative importance attributed to some competencies; reasons why some competencies had a sizeable gap between the ratings for importance and performance (generally two or more points on the Likert scale); and the factors that are considered when measuring and evaluating performance of these competencies. These broad themes provided direction for the types of questions used in the semi-structured interview process. In recognizing the limited time available for interviews by employers, the questions focused on those competencies rated as being the most important to each employer. In two interviews there were two employers present. Therefore in total, the views of 12 employers were obtained.

All interviews, except one, were audio-taped and transcribed. General themes that emerged from employer responses were examined using a phenomenographic approach. Such an approach recognizes that the way we understand the behavior of others is to consider them against 'ideal types' based on our knowledge of everyday life (Schutz, 1962), which is socially ordered (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Thus the contextual aspects of the workplace helped to provide a framework for understanding employers' views of graduate competencies. Portions of transcripts have been used in the findings to illustrate particular points drawn from the analysis. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Findings

When employers' questionnaire responses were aggregated, nine of the top 10 competencies were also in the top 10 of the previous study (with only slight differences in order). As with the earlier study, the most important competencies for these employers were largely behavioral in nature (see appendix). In addition, most of the competencies were considered important (score of 4 or above) by most of the employers. Nearly all employers scored higher on the importance scale than they did on the performance scale for most competencies.

When analyzing the individual employer responses, themes that emerged are viewed within two broad areas; those relating to employers' experiences and expectations of graduate competencies and; those relating to ways in which employers evaluated performance of those competencies.

Competencies: Employer Experiences and Expectations

The competency *ability & willingness to learn* was considered to be the most important competency by a number of employers, which is mirrored in the highest overall mean score of 6.4 on the seven point scale. To a large extent this reflected many employers' views that what is learned in their degree studies is only the starting point for students, summed up by Harry as "now your education begins." Of interest to the high importance placed on this competency was the relatively low importance placed on *technical expertise* by most employers. In a number of cases, the view was that technical expertise was a 'given' and, as Ian observed, "you employ them for their ability to learn and to draw upon the [knowledge] resources they already have..."

Most employers also viewed graduates' *flexibility* to be of high importance. Two main reasons were given for this. Firstly, the variability in work demands (both in terms of work peaks and in the different types of work tasks) required staff to be flexible in their approach. Secondly, the critical importance of the customer to the organization's business, required staff to be flexible in meeting their needs. Analysis of responses to the survey questionnaire showed that this competency had the largest gap between importance and performance of any competency. During the interviews, it became apparent that most employers were not satisfied with graduate performance in this area. There were various explanations offered for this: "There may be three different ways of doing things, some of them would just go down and do it one particular way straightaway (Andrea)." According to Harry, "they'll take a very text book approach." Others related this more to an attitudinal problem, "often they don't realize that the mundane tasks are sometimes more important to do than other work. For example [in order to meet a critical deadline], 50 lots of photocopying may be more important. (Cathy)."

The cognitive competencies *problem solving*, *analytical thinking* and *conceptual thinking* were grouped together by many employers during interviews. Prior survey responses had shown that all three competencies were of high importance to most of these employers, with a much lower rating (two points or more) given to performance. During interviews, many expressed a concern with this gap: "I need people to think conceptually...they can't [just] sort things into pigeon holes (Brenda)." "Some aren't so good at [problem solving]...they get defeated quite easily...they haven't the resilience (Fred)." "They want to be told everything. They don't use their own analysis of the situation (John)."

Another key theme that emerged from the interviews was the critical importance employers place on competencies that relate to the customer or client interface. This was evident in the way employers contextualized many behavioral competencies in relation to client issues, and also the fact

that as a group, in the survey, these employers rated *customer service orientation* as the second most important competency. Of particular note, was that all employers had rated importance higher than performance. Most employers saw this gap as a problem. John didn't believe this to be simply a competency deficiency, "students and new grads try hard, but they have a gap in understanding... they intuitively need to know how to respond to customers. It is also about attitude." Brenda considered that "they don't understand how [business] works at all. You know they don't have any concept of what it means to get business...I think it's an experience thing. But having said that they have less idea than I think they need to have. We tend to keep them away from the customer altogether." Ian related this gap in graduates' competency to a lack of pragmatism: "In the real world you're often dealing with peoples' agendas...we don't even think about academic research or the right way of doing something. We just do something that works."

A further aspect of the interrelationship between competencies was in employers' comments on graduates' attitudes. These included graduates' over-estimation of their competency, their desire to advance in their career ahead of their (competency) level, and their focus on immediate salary levels ahead of the potential for career advancement. Andrea's comment that "they want the money without doing the work," reflected similar comments made by other employers.

Competency: Evaluating Performance

Most employers when asked how employees demonstrate an *ability & willingness to learn* focused on performance goals and expectations, the achievement of which they considered presumed both an ability to learn and a willingness to learn. For Harry, who is a manager in a medium-sized audit firm in which most of the work is organized through audit teams, this was fairly straightforward, "it becomes obvious very quickly for us...we get first hand exposure to what a person is producing through the work papers and it comes across very quickly how much aptitude they've got..." Donna, who works in a small, busy office in the hospitality industry, was also interested in how quickly new staff learn, "you measure [performance] through the speed they pick things up." Similarly, George, a manager in a small logistics company, also related learning to performance which he saw as being part of a feedback loop, "you give them feedback, [and] they listen, take on board what is said and modify, hopefully, their behavior accordingly."

The competencies *interpersonal communication, teamwork & cooperation* and *relationship building* were linked together by many employers in their responses to graduate performance. A possible explanation for this is the emphasis most employers gave, often in response to different questions, to the importance of staff working as a team (or in different teams) within their business. Many employers struggled to articulate how they measure individual performance in this area. Brenda considered that performance was related to effective communication of the employer's expectations and standards. She acknowledged that "we probably don't do that all that well." Like Donna and George, Harry tended to only consider performance issues if there was a problem. When asked how he would know whether a graduate was performing well, Harry responded by saying "probably if we don't hear anything to the contrary."

Ian saw attitude as a key aspect of demonstrating *flexibility*, "it might show itself in an ability to take on a variety of tasks that intellectually are possibly not over taxing, but are important to undertake. It's also about...[having an] holistic approach and attitude to life." Fred saw coping with uncertainty not only demonstrated graduates' *flexibility*, but also their *initiative*, "if they come up against something [difficult, they will] have a little bit of a go of it, [and] then come and ask...and if they're asking relatively intelligent questions you know they are on the right path."

The context for many employers, when considering performance, was how the competencies collectively contributed to meeting client and customer expectations. Andrea, who is senior manager in a small chartered accountancy firm, made the point that they may only see their clients once a year when they undertake the audit. Therefore they have a limited opportunity in which to develop and maintain a relationship: "All they see is a set of accounts at the end of the year – [which we may] charge them three grand for. They don't know all the work that's gone into it, so any sort of communication we have with them is vitally important."

In measuring and evaluating performance a few employers indicated that they did have formalized systems for staff development and performance. For example, in Ellen's organization

much of their work is team related and 'projectized'. Essentially, feedback is constantly provided on performance either from team members and/or at the more formal monthly 'catch-up' meetings. Providing on-going feedback to staff on their performance was mentioned by most other employers at some point during interviews. However, the issue of what 'standards' were used to gauge performance was more complex and appeared to be something that tended not to be written down, but understood through on-going dialogue and development. For example, Fred, who is an owner-manager of a small accountancy firm, stated that "I've got trained staff here who know what the standards are, so they soon bring up to speed the ones that have just come in." While these standards were not written down they were discussed with staff in an informal way in the context of daily work tasks and activities. In other words, standards seemed to be communicated to staff 'in situ' on an on-going basis and in a formative way.

Conclusions and Implications

It is recognized that there are limitations to what may be taken from the findings of a pilot study of this nature. Given the small number of employers interviewed, the interpretative approach utilized, and the limitations of time to explore issues in sufficient depth,¹ caution is clearly needed when attempting to draw conclusions. It would also be inappropriate to generalize these findings to other business employers or to other discipline settings. Noting these limitations, the findings from this analysis of 12 employers' views on business graduates' competencies has elicited some useful insights as to why certain competencies may be considered more important than others, where competency deficiencies may exist, and how some employers view and evaluate these competencies through performance.

Competency Considerations

Two key concerns expressed by employers during interviews were graduates' lack of business contextual understanding and appreciation, and their poor 'attitudes'. This may be linked to the different environments in which the world of academia and the world of work operate in. Business work practices are heavily influenced by client-driven considerations which often result in pragmatic approaches and solutions. This contrasts sharply with the more structured and formal approaches that characterize academia. What it means to be competent in these different contextual settings, suggest that many business graduates have a steep learning curve when they enter the workplace and may develop what Piaget (1950, 1985) refers to as 'cognitive conflict' - that is prior ways of thinking about things are in conflict with or do not fit easily with their experience of a new situation. This can lead to a state of 'disequilibrium', which may result in an individual being reluctant to change their way of thinking (or theories of learning) even when there is significant evidence to suggest this is required (Kamiloff-Smith & Inhelder, 1975). Employers' comments regarding graduates' 'poor attitudes' suggest that graduates may in fact experience a level of 'disequilibrium' when beginning their working careers.

The contextual differences between work and education also challenge the rather simplistic notion that the acquisition of knowledge and competencies in one setting is transferable to another setting. While the more generic competencies such as *interpersonal communication, teamwork and relationship building* might be more easily transferred, their use-in-practice will be affected by the myriad of sociocultural factors inherent in these different 'communities of practice'. Essentially, the notion of competency transfer ignores the influence of context on learning and makes an (incorrect) assumption that graduates have developed 'polycontextual skills' (i.e., the ability to make sense of and move between different forms of expertise) when engaging in 'boundary crossing' (Reder, 1993; Engeström et al., 1995).

When viewing competency from a sociocultural perspective, not only must consideration be given to how graduates are acculturated into new 'communities of practice', but also how they gain expertise through 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Cognitive expertise, according to Glaser (1990), goes beyond the traditional subject/content knowledge associated with educational curricula, and includes how students construct knowledge or meaning for themselves as well as the strategies they may employ for tackling the novel problems they will encounter in new

situations. This resonates with the way some employers in this study linked the competency *technical expertise* with the competency *ability & willingness to learn*. Glaser's view of cognitive expertise can also be linked to the concept of *metacognitive awareness* - the importance of individuals acquiring knowledge about their thinking processes and the strategies they employ to learn from their experiences (Biggs, 2003; Bruning, Shraw & Ronning, 1995).

Exposing students to work practices before they graduate, can help students' metacognitive development, as well as enabling them to gain a broader understanding of work practices. However, according to a major EU research project, work experience per se is likely to be of limited value unless students are supported through the development of learning goals and strategies to achieve them (EU Fourth Framework Targeted Socio-Economic Research, 2001).

Assessment Considerations

Employers' views have suggested that workplace performance standards for professional business graduates reside within the collective experiences of their staff, and are implicit rather than explicit. Employers' key focus appeared to be on outcomes at an activity level, for example, completing a successful client audit. Staff tended to work in teams and be supported in these activities by their peers or more 'experienced others' when required. Interview responses also indicated that employers focus not only on staff competencies that meet immediate practice imperatives, but also on ensuring staff develop competencies to meet *future* practice requirements, that is, staff learn and grow from their experiences.

It was apparent that *formative* and *summative* employer evaluation methods of new employees was much more integrated than is typically found in assessment practices of students in higher education. The employers' approach in fact has a much closer link to what Boud (2000) refers to as 'sustainable assessment', the purpose of which is to 'identify whether they have met whatever standards are appropriate for the task in hand and seek forms of feedback from their environment (from peers, other practitioners, from written and other sources) to enable them to undertake related learning more effectively' (p. 152). Given the influence of assessment on learning, this suggests that assessment practices used in cooperative education programs should ensure that they contribute to students' metacognitive development. An important component of metacognitive development is engaging students in effective self monitoring of their learning. It has been argued that competent learners are those who self-monitor their work (Boud, 1995; Falchikov, 2005; Gipps, 1994). Self-monitoring will involve learners in setting their own goals (Gipps, 1994) that are clear (Brookhart, 2001).

If graduates are to be equipped to self monitor their performance in the workplace, they will also need to understand the criteria and standards that will be employed (Brookhart, 2001; Gipps, 1994; Sadler, 1989, 1998). Sadler (1989) considers that such understanding will enable the individual to close the gap between the actual level of performance and the reference level (identified by the standards), which in turn will enable them "to judge the quality of what they are producing and be able to regulate what they are doing during the doing of it" (p. 121). In the work setting, it is suggested here that these standards may be diversely spread among the workplace community, are likely to be implicit rather than explicit, and are embedded in everyday activities. This contrasts with traditional assessments practices in educational settings in which standards and criteria are usually pre-specified and linked to expected learning outcomes. Essentially, if cooperative education is to adequately prepare students to become self-monitoring professionals in the workplace, then a different form of assessment is required, one that equips students to handle learning beyond their program of study (Boud & Falchikov, 2005).

References

- Ashton, F. (1994). The other managers' competencies. *Training Officer*, 30(1), 15-16.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.
- BERL. (2004). Report to the funding partners: tourism workforce and skill projections. Retrieved 20 September 2005 from, <http://www.tourism.govt.nz/policy/pol-reports/pol-workforce-skills/WorkforceAndSkillsOct2004.pdf>

- Billett, S. (1994). Situated learning: A workplace experience. *Australian Journal of Adult and Community Education*, 34(2), 112-130.
- Birkett, W.P. (1993). Competency based standards for professional accountants in Australia and New Zealand. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Society of Certified Practising Accountants.
- Biggs, J.B. (2003). *Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does*. Buckingham, UK: The Society for Research into Higher Education/Open University Press.
- Boud, D. (1995). *Enhancing learning through self assessment*. London: Kogan Page.
- Boud, D. (2000). Sustainable assessment: Rethinking assessment for the learning society. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22(2), 151-167.
- Boud, D., & Falchikov, N. (2005). Redesigning assessment for learning beyond higher education. In A. Brew & C. Asma (Eds.). *Research and development in higher education* (pp. 34-41). Sydney: HERDSA.
- Bowden, J., & Masters, G. (1993). *Implications for higher education of a competency-based approach to education and training*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Services.
- Brookhart, S.M. (2001). Successful students' formative and summative uses of assessment information. *Assessment in Education*, 8(2), xx-YU.
- Brown, J.S., Collins, A. & Duguid, P. (1989). Social cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher*, 18, 32-42.
- Bruning, R. Schraw, G., & Ronning, R. (1995). *Cognitive psychology and instruction*. (2nd ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Burrell, G., & Morgan, G. (1979). *Sociological paradigms and organisational analysis*. London: Heinemann.
- Caudron, S. (1999). The hard case for soft skills. *Workforce*, 78(7), 60-64.
- Coll, R.K., Zegwaard, K., & Hodges, D. (2002). Science and technology stakeholders' ranking of graduate competencies Part 1: Employers' perspective. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 3(2), 19-28.
- Engeström, Y., Engeström, R., & Karkkaninen, M. (1995). Polycontextuality and boundary crossing in expert cognition: Learning and problem solving in complex work activities. *Learning and Instruction*, 5(1), 319-366.
- Falchikov, N. (2005). *Improving assessment through student involvement*. London: Routledge-Falmer.
- Georges, J.C. (1996). The myth of soft skills training. *Training*, 33(1), 48.
- Gipps, C.V. (1994). *Beyond testing: Towards a theory of educational assessment*. London: Falmer.
- Glaser, R. (1990). The re-emergence of learning theory within instructional research. *American Psychologist*, 45(1), 29-39.
- Gonczi, A., & Hager, P. (1991). Competency-based standards: A boon for continuing professional education. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 13(1), 24-40.
- Hager, P., & Beckett, D. (1995). Philosophical underpinning of the integrated concept of competence. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 27(1), 1-24.
- Hodges, D., & Burchell, N. (2003). Business graduate competencies: employers' views on importance and performance. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education*, 4(2), 16-22
- Karmiloff-Smith, A., & Inhelder, B. (1975). If you want to get ahead, get a theory. *Cognition*, 3(3), 195-212.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Nonaka, I., & Konno, N. (1998). The concept of 'ba': building a foundation for knowledge creation. *California Management Review*, 40(3), 40-54.
- Piaget, J. (1950). *The psychology of intelligence*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Piaget, J. (1985). *Equilibration of cognitive structures*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rudman, R. (1995, July). Competencies and capabilities for effective human resource management. Paper presented at the 22nd annual conference of the Asian Regional Training and Development Organization. Melbourne, Australia.
- Reder, S. (1993). Watching the flowers grow: Polycontextuality and heterochronicity at work. *The Quarterly Newsletter of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition*, 15, 116-125.
- Sadler, D.R. (1989). Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems. *Instructional Science*, 18, 119-144.
- Sadler, D.R. (1998). Formative assessment: Revisiting the territory. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy and Practice*, 5, 77-84.
- Schutz, A. (1962). The problem of social reality. In M. Natanson (Ed.), *Collected Papers* (vol 1). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Spencer, L., & Spencer, S. (1993). *Competence at work*. New York: Wiley & Sons.
- Streblor, M. (1997). Soft skills and hard questions. *People Management*, 3(11), 20-24.

- EU Fourth Framework Targeted Socio-Economic Research. (2001). Work experience as an education and training strategy: New approaches for the 21st century. Retrieved April 7, 2006, from <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/calt/tser/ecrep-r1.doc>
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Wenger, J. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wertsch, J.V. (1991). *Voices of the mind. A sociocultural approach to mediated action*. London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf

Appendix

Competency Descriptors (based on Spencer & Spencer 1993)

Teamwork & cooperation (fosters group facilitation and management, conflict resolution, motivation of others, creating a good workplace climate)
Flexibility (adaptability, perceptual objectivity, staying objective, resilience, behaviour is contingent on the situation)
Relationship building (networking, establish rapport, use of contacts, concern for stakeholders e.g. clients)
Computer literacy (able to operate a number of packages; has information management awareness)
Conceptual thinking (creative thinking, insight, pattern recognition, critical thinking, problem recognition and definition, can generate hypotheses, linking ideas)
Technical expertise (job related technical knowledge and skills, depth and breadth, acquires expertise, donates expertise)
Organisational awareness (understands organisation, knows constraints, power and political astuteness, cultural knowledge, ethical understanding)
Interpersonal communication (effective speaking and listening, utilises and is responsive to non-verbal communication)
Concern for order, quality & accuracy (monitoring, concern for clarity, reduce uncertainty, keeping track of events and issues)
Impact & influence on others (impression management, strategic influence, presentation skills, showmanship, persuasion, collaborative influence)
Initiative (seizes opportunities, bias for action, proactive, self motivation, persistence, decisiveness, strategic orientation, diagnostic focus, looking deeper, contextual sensitivity)
Customer service orientation (helping and service orientation, focus on client needs, commercial awareness, actively solves client problems)
Developing others (coaching, mentoring, providing support, training, developing others, positive regard)
Leadership (vision, taking charge, concern for subordinates, builds a sense of group purpose, assertiveness, decisiveness, firmness of standards)
Energy & passion (a positive 'can-do' attitude, high energy levels, enthusiasm, pro-active, strong drive)
Analytical thinking (thinking for self, reasoning, practical intelligence, planning skills, problem analysing, systematic)
Self control (resistance to stress, staying calm, high emotional intelligence (EQ), resists temptation, stamina, not impulsive, can calm others)
Organisational commitment (align self and others to organisational needs, business-mindedness, self sacrifice)
Ability and willingness to learn (desire and aptitude for learning, learning as a basis for action)
Interpersonal understanding (empathy, sensitivity to others, diagnostic understanding, awareness of others' feelings)
Self confidence (strong self concept, internal locus of control, independence, positive ego strength, decisive, accepts responsibility)
Personal planning and organisational skills (ability to organise self and others, effective time management, organises and completes tasks effectively and efficiently)
Written communication (relevant skills / appropriate use of: emails, internal memos, internal and external reports, letters to clients)
Achievement orientation (task accomplishment – a completer, seeks results, employs innovation, has competitiveness, seeks impact, aims for standards and efficiency)
Problem solving (actively solves identified problems, carries through to completion)

NB. Highlighted competencies were rated the 10 most important by respondents in this study

ⁱ With employers' permission, most interviews went beyond the 30 minutes anticipated and allocated. Not wanting to stretch employers' generosity with their time, interviews were kept (as far as possible) to a maximum of 45 minutes.