

Firms seek grads who can think fast, work in teams

By [PAUL WISEMAN](#)

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WASHINGTON (AP) — They can get good grades, earn a diploma and breeze through that campus rite of spring, the job interview. But college graduates still might not land a decent job.

The world's top employers are pickier than ever. And they want to see more than high marks and the right degree.

They want graduates with so-called soft skills — those who can work well in teams, write and speak with clarity, adapt quickly to changes in technology and business conditions and interact with colleagues from different countries and cultures.

"Soft skills tend to differentiate good college graduates from exceptional college graduates," says Joseph Krok, university research liaison at Britain's Rolls-Royce.

To find out what employers are seeking from university graduates around the world, The Associated Press talked to dozens of corporate recruiters, university career counselors, economists and students. What's clear is that companies increasingly want skills that don't show up in a college transcript or a sit-down interview.

"What the employers want is a well-rounded student," says Jean Manning-Clark, director of the Colorado School of Mines' career center. "The ones that get 10 to 12 job offers are the ones who have strong soft skills."

And companies are going to ever-greater lengths to identify the students who have the right mix of skills by observing them in role-playing exercises to see how they handle pressure and get along with others, relying more on applicants who have already proved themselves in internships and co-op jobs in which students work while attending school, and organizing contests that reveal how students solve problems and handle deadline pressure.

"It used to be that the interview itself was where you made or broke your chances with a company," says Dan Black, head of campus recruiting in the Americas for the accounting and consulting firm Ernst & Young. "Now the assessment is a much longer and broader process."

—LOOKING FOR MORE THAN A MAJOR

The hiring process is more intense because employers the world over are more demanding.

They've always needed people with specific technical skills. Those remain important, but employers want something more — the soft skills that determine whether recruits can get along

with co-workers, articulate ideas, engage in critical thinking and solve problems on the fly. In short, whether employees can make the transition from classroom to workplace.

Globally, employers say it's hard to find that right combination of hard and soft skills. Just 43 percent of the 2,832 employers McKinsey surveyed in nine countries in Europe, Asia, the Middle East and the Americas said they could find enough skilled entry-level workers.

Mona Mourshed, leader of the education practice at the global consultancy McKinsey & Co., remembers one employer saying: "I have never fired an engineer for bad engineering, but I have fired an engineer for lack of teamwork' ... People have to work together. They have to collaborate."

A survey of employers released in April by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that 93 percent of the respondents reported that a capacity to think critically, communicate clearly and solve complex problems was more important than an undergraduate major.

"Many technical programs around the world have historically focused more on technical depth," says Paul McIntyre, vice president in charge of global recruiting at oil giant BP. "We've been communicating to universities the importance of soft skills."

—MIXING IT UP

Knowing that college transcripts don't tell the whole story, companies are looking for creative ways to identify the talent they need. "The old approach doesn't find them," says John Sullivan, a management professor at San Francisco State University.

British pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline likes to see first-hand how students mix with others, think on their feet and handle pressure. After it narrows its job applicants, Glaxo brings in groups of 10 to 12 for a full day's assessment. Glaxo managers observe as recruits interact with each other, solve problems and give presentations. Usually, half get hired.

Having a successful internship with Glaxo increases the odds; interns have shown whether they fit in. "We love our internship and co-op programs," says John Sweney, who heads Glaxo's talent program. "We want to fast-track those people."

Indeed, companies are becoming more reliant on internships. Rolls-Royce's Krok calls them "three-month interviews." Manning-Clark, of the Colorado School of Mines, says former interns used to account for about half the recruits companies wanted to hire; now, it's about 75 percent.

Tata Technologies, the Singapore-based engineering arm of India's Tata Group conglomerate, hires 500 graduates every year in India and another 15 to 20 in North America. "We always look for the ones that have co-op experience or internship experience," says Giulio Desando, a human resources manager at Tata. "They have the soft skills."

At Denmark's Maersk Oil, global recruiter Lee Paul Milligan advises students to let employers know if they've spent a lot of time abroad. "An international mindset is important to us," he says. "You go to any office in the world, and you'll find a huge variety of nationalities. I think I've got 10 in my own office ... Some students forget to put down that they've traveled to 10 countries."

Milligan is especially impressed with foreign exchange students, saying it takes courage to uproot yourself and study abroad, perhaps learning in a language that is not your own.

One of Maersk's recent hires is Luzana Costa, who left her native Angola at age 13 to attend school in Philadelphia. She wound up with a master's in applied geosciences from the University of Pennsylvania and joined Maersk last July as a geologist, working first in the Angolan capital Luanda and later at Maersk headquarters in Copenhagen.

—KILLING ZOMBIES

Maersk also finds talent by sponsoring competitions.

Last year, it challenged students at Danish Technical University to help solve a problem that had been plaguing one of its North Sea oil rigs for months. Seeing the students compete helped Maersk Oil "get to know them on a more personal level," Milligan says. "We're benefiting; they're benefiting."

BP challenges students from universities in the United Kingdom, Azerbaijan, the United States and Trinidad and Tobago to offer innovative solutions to technical problems. The winning team from each country gets to go on what BP calls "the Ultimate Field Trip" — a two-week paid internship with BP operations in London, Scotland's Shetland Islands and Stavanger, Norway. BP has offered jobs to several of the contestants.

Google sponsors an annual competition that requires programmers from outside the company to solve algorithmic problems. Called Code Jam, the contest has been around since 2003 and last year drew nearly 21,000 contestants. Google has hired 1,000 Code Jam participants since 2009.

The contest "allows us to see how creatively people can solve problems, their ability to think creatively and solve tough, algorithmically difficult problems," says Lysandra Donigian, Google's student outreach manager. "Googlers get a chance to interact with the coders, so they get a chance to see if they would fit in."

The contest is meant to be fun. Last year's finals required competitors to design programs to kill zombies as they clambered out of the grave, among other challenges. The allure of the contest almost backfired with one recruit, though. Donigian says it took several years for Google to convince a two-time winner to accept a job. Joining Google, he complained, would leave him ineligible for Code Jam.

AP Education Writer Justin Pope contributed from Michigan

