



Business Council *of*  
British Columbia

**2010 BIENNIAL SKILLS  
AND ATTRIBUTES  
SURVEY REPORT**

**What Are BC Employers  
Looking For?**

**December 2010  
Vancouver, BC**

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## **1. Introduction**

The labour demands of the marketplace are continually changing with the general economic environment and the introduction of new technologies. Reflecting these pressures, British Columbia employers are seeking different combinations of skills and attributes in new hires in order to maintain their competitive edge. Job seekers in turn must keep pace with the necessary skill sets sought by employers in today's dynamic work environment. The Business Council of BC's 2010 Biennial Survey has been designed to help entrants to the workforce do just that: identify the most important skills and attributes BC employers are seeking in new job applicants. Identifying these skills and attributes in turn helps job seekers better prepare for careers in a range of sectors and occupations.

Every two years, the Business Council of BC surveys its members (senior human resources representatives) and asks a range of questions concerning their organisation's anticipated employment needs by occupational grouping, their labour market outlook, and the key Attributes and Skills they are looking for from new hires. They are also asked for their opinions on their overall impression of recent applicants, the characteristics they commonly find lacking, and what advice they would give to job seekers.

Members of the Business Council of BC are active in all major sectors of the provincial economy, including forest products, mining, manufacturing, transportation, agri-food, telecommunications, information technology, financial services, energy, tourism, retail, construction, healthcare, education and the professions. Taken together, the corporate members and the associations affiliated with the Business Council account for approximately one quarter of all jobs in British Columbia.

## **2. Background**

Against the backdrop of a recovering economy and forecasted labour shortages, understanding employers' hiring priorities can place job market entrants in a competitive position. Some recent labour market statistics for British Columbia help paint the picture. In 2009, B.C.'s total unemployment increased by 66.6 per cent (74,300) compared to 2008. In December 2009, BC's unemployment rate reached a seven year high of 8.4 percent (seasonally adjusted), compared to 4.5 percent, a record low in July 2008. The unemployment rate is highest among those aged 15 to 24, at 15.8 percent (seasonally adjusted), more than double that of adults aged 25 and over (6.9 percent).

However, recent employment gains have put downward pressure on the province's jobless rate. In fact, the BC economy is projected to continue to grow. Between 2009 and 2019, BC is projected to generate roughly 1,126,000 jobs, approximately 60 percent of these to replace retiring workers, and 40 percent due to job creation. The provincial average employment growth rate is expected to be 1.8 percent per year. The sectors anticipating the most significant increases are Health Occupations (2.6%), Trades, Transport and Equipment Operators and Related Occupations (2.3%), and Natural and Applied Sciences and Related Occupations (2.1%).

## **3. Method and Respondent Characteristics**

The 2010 Survey was administered via the Internet over a one month period between October and early November 2010. The questionnaire follows the same format and identifies the same range of Attributes and Skills as our 2004, 2006 and 2008 Surveys, allowing for comparison of data between the survey periods.

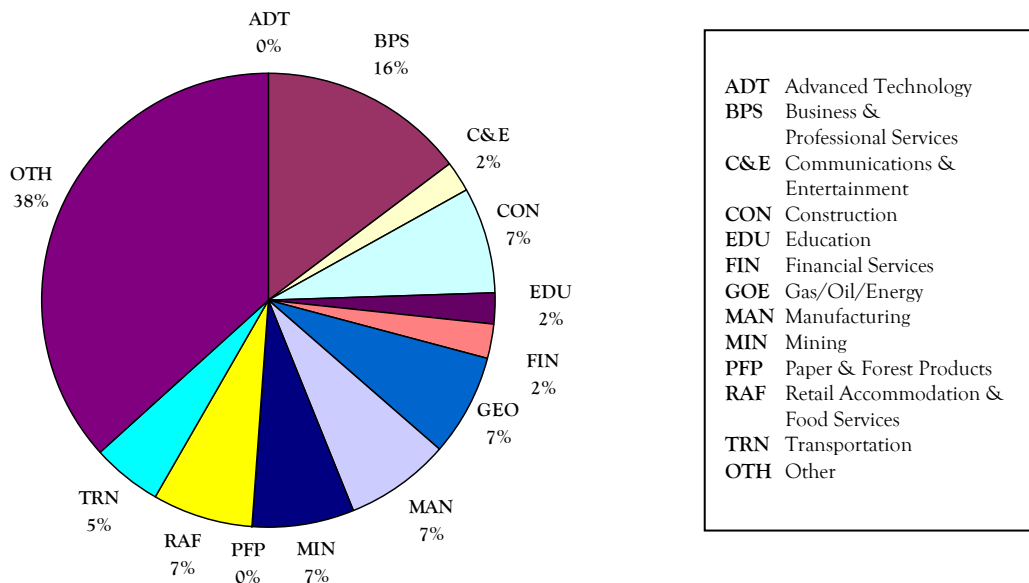
The 2010 Survey was divided into five sections covering the following areas:

- Respondent Characteristics
- Labour Demand Outlook
- Attributes
- Skills
- Job Applicant Perceptions and Advice

Quantitative and qualitative data were obtained, and where applicable, representative open-ended comments are included in the report.

Senior human resources personnel from 41 core member organizations of the Business Council participated in our 2010 Biennial Survey. They represent the views of both large and medium sized companies across the province. The breakdown by industry is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Respondent Profile



In terms of respondent organization size, about one third of respondents (30%) represent organizations staffing less than 100 full time equivalent employees (FTEs). Another 30% represent organizations with between 100 and 500 FTEs, whereas only 5% of respondents represent organizing staffing between 501 and 1000 FTEs. In regards to large organizations, approximately 27.5% of respondents represent organizations staffing between 1001 and 5000 FTEs and 7.5% represent organizations with 5001 to 13,000 FTEs. These results demonstrate a broad range of perspectives from medium to large size companies and organizations.

#### 4. Labour Demand Outlook

The Survey asked employers to identify their requirements for hiring new personnel over the next 12 months and the key Skills and Attributes they are seeking in these new applicants, classified by five broad occupational categories. The categories are:

1. Management
2. Professional
3. Technical, Paraprofessional & Skilled
4. Intermediate
5. Elemental

With the exception of Management, these categories are based on the National Occupational Classification (NOC) skills levels, which roughly divide all occupations on the basis of commonality of education and training requirements. The Management category, defined by skill type, was added as it seemed most logical for the purposes of the Survey. Definitions and sample occupations for each category are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Occupational Categories

OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORY	DEFINITION	SAMPLE OCCUPATIONS
Management	Occupations that may require anywhere from some high school courses to a university degree. Those who plan; organize; direct; and control, the activities of a branch or department.	Office executive, plant manager, administrative manager
Professional	Occupations that typically require a university degree, or in some instances a college diploma.	Accountant, engineer, lawyer, researcher, systems analyst, computer programmer
Technical, Paraprofessional & Skilled	Occupations that typically require two or more years of community college, post-secondary, or on-the job training; occupations that require apprenticeship completion or involve supervisory responsibilities.	Chef/cook, medical technologist/technician, clerical supervisor, secretary, paralegal, graphic artist, qualified tradesperson, supervisor
Intermediate	Occupations that typically require high-school completion or some secondary schooling and <u>up to</u> two years of on-the-job training	Office clerk, receptionist, transit driver, letter carrier, longshore worker
Elemental	Those occupations that typically require less than two years of post-secondary schooling and on-the-job training.	Cashier, trades helper, primary production labourer

In terms of overall hiring expectations, 55 percent of respondents expect to hire between 1 and 25 people in the next year. Approximately 18 percent plan to hire between 50 and 100 employees, and another 18 percent plan to hire between 101 and 500. Just over 9 percent of respondents do not plan on hiring employees at all, up from 3 percent in 2008. Significantly, 57 percent of respondents anticipate a skills shortage in the foreseeable future, 18 percent less than the response in the previous Survey.

Those who feel there will be a shortage were asked to comment more specifically. Occupations that were identified are listed below:

Accounting	Information Technology
Administration	Management
Culinary and Food & Beverage	Supervisory
Business & Finance Analysts	Technologist/Technician
Engineering	Trades
Environmental	Transportation and Logistics
HR & LR	

In terms of occupational categories of hiring, respondents were asked to indicate what percentage of new hires will be in each of the five occupational categories identified above. Findings are reproduced in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Hiring Intentions by Occupational Group

Occupational Group	2006	2008	2010
Management	10%	9%	9%
Professional	28%	21%	25%
Technical/Para-professional/Skilled	21%	18%	17%
Intermediate	17%	25%	23%
Elemental	24%	21%	30%

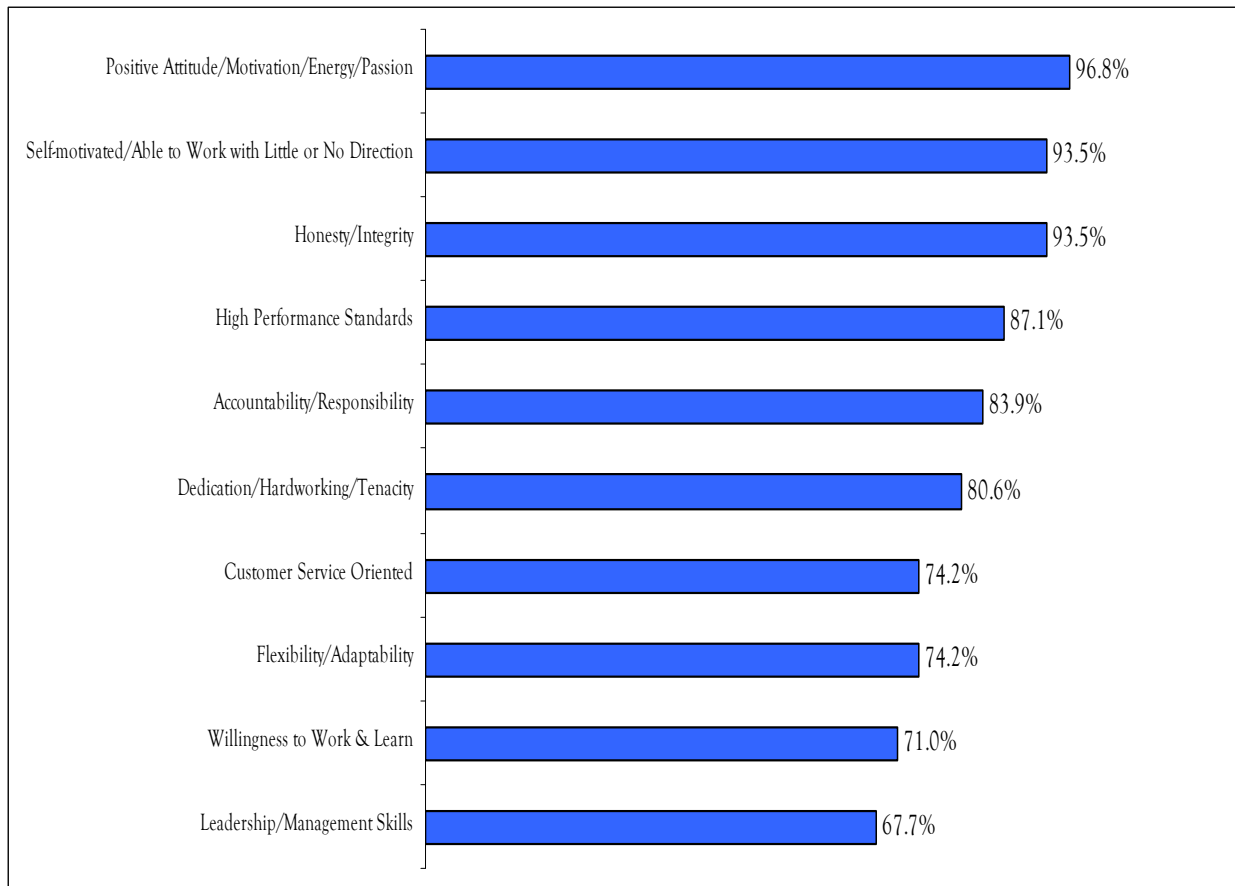
Clearly, the composition of employment needs has changed over the past years. As a proportion of total hiring, the Elemental and Professional occupational groups have increased between 2008 and 2010, while the growth of other occupations is less significant. The 2010 results are likely a reflection of the decline and movement towards economic recovery, combined with the pressures from retirement-driven skills shortages.

## 5. Attributes

### *The Most Frequently Selected Attributes*

From the list of Attributes, employers were first asked to choose ten key Attributes they sought in all new job hires. Based on the frequency of selection, the 10 most frequently sought Attributes in new job applicants are shown in Chart 1 below:

**Chart 1: Top Attributes BC Employers Are Looking For...**





To understand the consistency or change of demands of the workplace, the ten most frequently sought Attributes reported in each of 2006 and 2008 are placed below the 2010 responses in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Top 10 Attributes Over Time

Top 10 Ranking Comparison			
1	<b>Positive Attitude/Motivation/Energy/Passion (97%)</b> (Ranked 2, 2008; Ranked 2, 2006)	6	<b>Dedication/Hardworking/Tenacity (81%)</b> (Ranked 6, 2008; Ranked 8, 2006)
3	<b>Honesty/Integrity (94%)</b> (Ranked 3, 2008; Ranked 3, 2006)	7	<b>Flexibility/Adaptability (74%)</b> (Ranked 7, 2008; Ranked 6, 2006)
3	<b>Self-motivated/Able to Work with Little or No Supervision (94%)</b> (Ranked 5, 2008; Ranked 5, 2006)	8	<b>Customer Service Oriented (74%)</b> (Ranked 10, 2008; Ranked 7, 2006)
4	<b>High Performance Standards (87%)</b> (Ranked 4, 2008; Ranked 4, 2006)	9	<b>Willingness to Work &amp; Learn (71%)</b> (Ranked 8, 2010; N/A, 2006)
5	<b>Accountability/Responsibility (84%)</b> (Ranked 1, 2008; Ranked 1, 2006)	10	<b>Leadership/Management Skills (67%)</b> (Ranked 11, 2008; N/A, 2006)

Employers generally maintain similar preference regarding the top ten Attributes chosen over time. Gains in attribute preference from the 2008 Survey were made in *Positive Attitude/Motivation/Energy/Passion*, *Honesty/Integrity*, and *Self-motivated/Able to Work with Little or No Supervision*. These attributes were respectively ranked as the first, second, and third most important attributes according to employers. The next most frequently mentioned Attribute in 2010 is *High Performance Standards*, maintaining the fourth place rating it held in the 2008 Survey.

Lower in frequency, but still consistently within the top ten are Attributes such as *Accountability & Responsibility*, *Dedication/Hardworking/Tenacity* and *Flexibility/Adaptability*. It is interesting to note those Attributes that did not make it into the top ten in 2010: *Self-esteem/Confidence*, *Creativity*, and *Presentable in Appearance*.

### ***The Top 3 Most Important Attributes***

Once respondents had selected their top ten Attributes, they were then asked to rank the top three in order of importance against each of the five occupational categories. From the key Attributes ranked in terms of importance by the respondents, a simple weighting procedure was used to

determine their relative importance and arrive at the three most important Attributes that employers are looking for. Each time an Attribute was ranked number 1, it was assigned a weight of 5 points, rank number 2 was assigned 4 points and rank number 3 was assigned 3 points.

The top three Attributes ranked in order of relative importance are listed below (all occupational categories):

1. Accountable/Responsible (#2 in 2008)
2. Positive Attitude/Motivation/Energy/Passion (#1 in 2008)
3. High Performance Standards (not in top 3 in 2008)

Overall, *Accountability/Responsibility* is ranked as the most important Attribute in the 2010 Survey. The least important Attribute is *Presentable Appearance*, suggesting that employers feel this attribute is a given for becoming employed in any occupational category. The Top Three Attributes ranked by occupational category are listed in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Ranking of Attributes by Occupational Category

THREE MOST IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTES BY OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORY	
<b>MANAGEMENT</b> (e.g. CEOs, executive directors, store or plant managers)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Leadership/Management Skills</li> <li>2. Accountable/Responsible</li> <li>3. High Performance Standards</li> </ol>
<b>PROFESSIONAL</b> (e.g. Accountants, engineers, lawyers, researchers, computer programmers)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Accountable/Responsible</li> <li>2. High Performance Standards</li> <li>3. Positive Attitude/Motivation/Energy/Passion</li> </ol>
<b>TECHNICAL, PARAPROFESSIONAL &amp; SKILLED</b> (e.g. Secretaries, paralegals, qualified trades people, medical technicians)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Accountable/Responsible</li> <li>2. Self-motivated/Able to Work with Little or No Supervision</li> <li>3. High Performance Standards</li> </ol>
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b> (e.g. Office clerks, receptionists, transit drivers, letter carriers, longshore workers)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Positive Attitude/Motivation/Energy/Passion</li> <li>2. Dedication/Hardworking/Tenacity</li> <li>3. Customer Service Oriented</li> </ol>
<b>ELEMENTAL</b> (e.g. Cashiers, trades helpers, primary production labourers)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Positive Attitude/Motivation/Energy/Passion</li> <li>2. Dedication/Hardworking/Tenacity</li> <li>3. Customer Service Oriented</li> </ol>

As presented in the table, several Attributes repeatedly appear as priorities for respondents. For example, *Accountable/Responsible* and *Positive Attitude/Motivation/Energy/Passion* are common priorities for employers, regardless of occupational category; however, depending on the occupational category, the levels of importance will vary.

Therefore we also present in Table 5 the results of the three top-ranked Attributes across occupational categories. The ranking number of a given Attribute is shown in its occupational category, illustrating commonalities and differences among priorities for employers.

**Table 5: Top Ranked Attributes across Occupational Categories**

Top Attributes	Management	Professional	Technical, Para-professional & Skilled	Intermediate	Elemental
Accountable/Responsible	2	1	1		
High Performance Standards	3	2	3		
Self Motivated			2		
Positive Attitude/Motivation/Energy/Passion		3		1	1
Customer Service Oriented				3	3
Leadership/Management Skills	1				
Dedication/Hardworking/Tenacity				2	2

Similar to previous years, *Accountability/Responsibility* and *High Performance Standards* were listed as among the top three attributes for Management, Professional, and Technical employees. Skills of premium importance to Intermediate and Elemental employees were *Positive Attitude*, *Dedication/Hard work*, and *Customer Service Orientation*.

Unlike the last survey, *Positive Attitude/Motivation/Energy/Passion* was not selected predominantly as one of the top three attributes for respondents regardless of position. While it was selected as among the top three Skills for Professionals, Intermediate, and Elemental employees, it was given lower priority for Technical employees. Employers ranked Technical employees ranked

*Accountability/Responsibility* and *Self Motivation* highly for Technical employees. These results suggest a growing trend for Technical employees who are highly proficient and self sufficient.

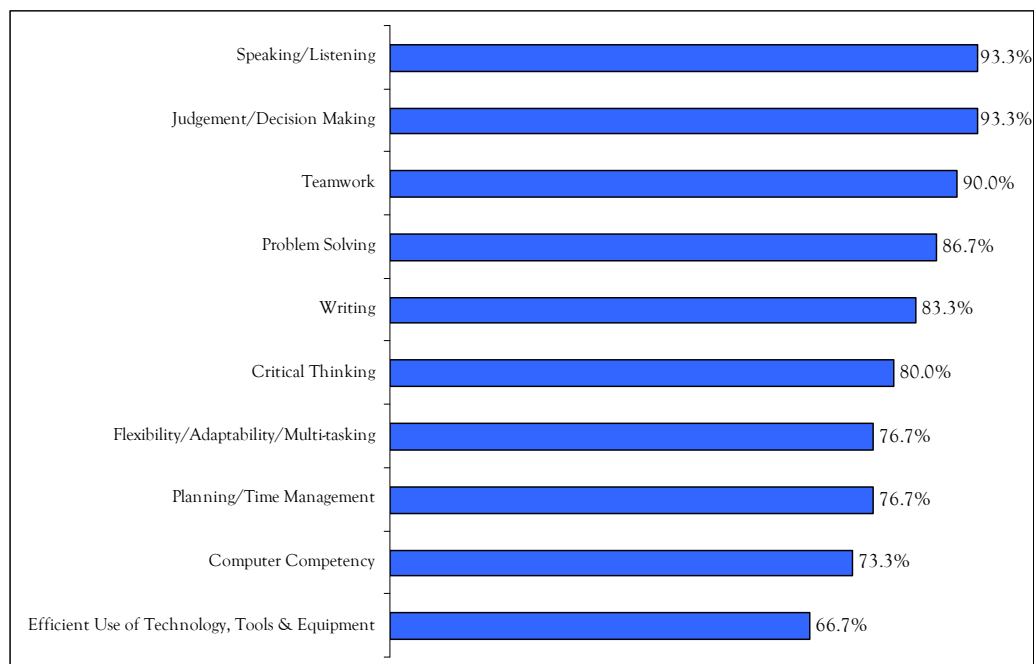
Another notable deviation from past trends is the preference for Management to display *High Performance Standards*, over-taking the *Honest/Ethical* attribute in priority. As the economy was in turmoil, it is not altogether surprising that *High Performance Standards* are given more emphasis for Management, Professional, and Technical employees.

## 6. Skills

### *The Ten Most Frequently Selected Skills*

Similar to the Attributes section, employers were asked to choose ten key Skills they sought in all new job hires. Based on the frequency of selection, of the 14 listed Skills, the ten most frequently sought skills in new job applicants are as follows in Chart 2 below:

Chart 2: Top Skills BC Employers Are Looking For...



By way of comparison, the ten most frequently sought Skills reported in each of the 2006 and 2008 surveys are listed below the 2010 results in Table 6.

**Table 6: Top 10 Skills Over Time**

Top 10 Ranking Comparison	
2. <b>Speaking/Listening (93%)</b> (Ranked 2, 2008; Ranked 4, 2006)	6. <b>Critical Thinking (80%)</b> (Ranked 8, 2008; Ranked 5, 2006)
2. <b>Judgement/Decision Making (93%)</b> (Ranked 5, 2008; N/A, 2006)	8. <b>Flexibility/Adaptability/Multi-tasking (77%)</b> (Ranked 1, 2008; N/A, 2006)
3. <b>Teamwork (90%)</b> (Ranked 4, 2008; Ranked 2, 2006)	8. <b>Planning/Time Management (77%)</b> (Ranked 6, 2008; Ranked 7, 2006)
4. <b>Problem Solving (87%)</b> (Ranked 3, 2008; Ranked 3, 2006)	9. <b>Computer Competency (73%)</b> (Ranked 7, 2008, N/A, 2006)
5. <b>Writing (83%)</b> (Ranked 9, 2008; Ranked 6, 2006)	10. <b>Efficient Use of Technology, Tools &amp; Equipment (67%)</b> (Ranked 10, 2008, N/A, 2006)

*Speaking/Listening* and *Judgement/Decision Making* are the most frequently mentioned Skills that are important to employers in the 2010 survey, followed closely by *Teamwork* and *Problem Solving*. Unlike the previous survey period, *Flexibility/Adaptability/Multitasking* was not selected by the majority of respondents as a top skill favoured by employers.

Skills that were mentioned too infrequently to make the top ten were *Research Skills*, *Public Speaking/Presentation*, and *Numeracy*.

### ***The Top Three Most Important Skills***

As with the Attributes section, once respondents had selected their ten most important Skills, they were then asked to rank the top three in order of importance against each of the five occupational categories. From the key Skills ranked in terms of importance by the respondents, a simple weighting procedure was used to determine their relative importance and arrive at the five most important Skills that employers are looking for. Each time a Skill was ranked number 1, it was

assigned a weight of 5 points, rank number 2 was assigned 4 points and rank number 3 was assigned 3 points.

The top three Skills ranked in order of relative importance are listed below (all occupational categories):

1. Teamwork (#1 in 2008)
2. Judgement/Decision Making (not in top 3 in 2006)
3. Problem Solving (#2 in 2008)

The top three most important Skills by occupational category are shown in Table 7 below:

Table 7: Ranking of Skills by Occupational Category

THREE MOST IMPORTANT SKILLS BY OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORY	
<b>MANAGEMENT</b> (e.g. CEOs, executive directors, store or plant managers)	1. Judgment/Decision Making 2. Critical Thinking 3. Speaking/Listening
<b>PROFESSIONAL</b> (e.g. Accountants, engineers, lawyers, researchers, computer programmers)	1. Critical Thinking 2. Judgment/Decision Making 3. Teamwork
<b>TECHNICAL, PARAPROFESSIONAL &amp; SKILLED</b> (e.g. Secretaries, paralegals, qualified trades people, medical technicians)	2. Teamwork 2. Problem Solving 3. Technological Competence
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b> (e.g. Office clerks, receptionists, transit drivers, letter carriers, longshore workers)	1. Teamwork 2. Flexibility-Multitasking 3. Speaking/Listening
<b>ELEMENTAL</b> (e.g. Cashiers, trades helpers, primary production labourers)	1. Teamwork 2. Speaking/Listening 3. Planning/Time Management

*Teamwork* is consistently ranked by employers as a top three skill of importance for almost all occupational groups, suggesting that the ability to work in groups is important to develop regardless of the type of employment sought. However, other Skills appear to be more important for some occupational groups than others.

Therefore, we also present in Table 8 the results of the three top-ranked Skills across occupational categories. The ranking number of a given Skill is shown in its occupational category, illustrating commonalities and differences among priorities for employers.

**Table 8: Top Ranked Skills across Occupational Categories**

Top Skills	Management	Professional	Technical, Para-professional & Skilled	Intermediate	Elemental
Judgment/Decision Making	1	2			
Technology Competency			3		
Problem Solving			2		
Teamwork		3	2	1	1
Critical Thinking	2	1			
Flexibility-Multitasking				2	
Speaking/Listening	3			3	2
Planning/Time Management					3

Certain Skills appear to be relevant for certain occupational categories. Skills important primarily to Management and Professional occupations include *Judgment/Decision Making* and *Critical Thinking*. At the other end of the spectrum, in Intermediate and Elemental occupations, respondents tend to emphasise *Teamwork* and *Speaking/Listening*.

The skills valued in the Technical, Paraprofessional and Skilled occupations appear to be quite unique unto itself. With the exception of *Teamwork*, employers place emphasis on skills such as *Technological Competency* and *Problem Solving* which are not rated within the top three of any other category.

Overall, when comparing the 2010 and 2008 surveys it appears there are declining trends in employer emphasis on *Flexibility-Multitasking* and *Problem Solving*, paired with a growth of emphasis on *Teamwork* and *Speaking/Listening*.

## 7. Employer Perceptions and Advice

When asked for their overall impression of current job applicants, employers reported that candidates are generally well-prepared, with some knowledge of the company, similar to observations in the 2008 and 2006 Surveys.

However, employers also made the following observations:

1. Many employers surveyed over the past three periods have found that worker expectations have significantly increased. More specifically, many employees (especially new market entrants) are insistent in their demand for increased responsibility and compensation despite their lack of experience:
  - “Recent grads (undergrad and graduate levels) tend to be overly ambitious in terms of entry points into first career – overly focused on what the company can do for them.” (2010)
  - “They are “bolder” than they’ve been in the past in asking early on the “what’s in it for me” questions (i.e. wage increases, benefits, time off...)” (2008)
  - “[Applicants] have extensive education, [but] poor range of experience. Some are not prepared to work hard and have unrealistic expectations. [Applicants] dislike the ‘foot in the door’ positions.” (2006)
2. Over the 3 survey period, employers have expressed concern with lack of experience and skill shortages.
  - “Often superficially prepared but fundamentally not job-ready.” (2010)
  - “More senior applicants are better prepared than entry level employees.” (2010)
  - “A very limited pool to select from. Most have a very junior level of experience.” (2008)



- “Highly technically skilled but lack depth of experience and maturity... Applicants have not had the opportunity to gain the depth of experience to take over the more responsible positions.” (2006)
3. A lack of professionalism and interview preparedness has been noted across surveys by employers:
- “[Applicants are] reasonably well prepared, but may not always be in sync with our grooming requirements and professionalism in verbiage.” (2010)
  - “Though many seem anxious to find employment or change their current employment situation, not many seem to have done the appropriate research into the position they are attempting to get.” (2010)
  - “Most are not presentable and project a lack of preparedness for their interview.” (2008)
  - “[Applicants are] not as prepared as they should be about company knowledge. Presentation (appearance) is surprisingly too casual or sloppy and inappropriate slang is used.” (2006)

Employers were then asked to state the Attributes, Skills or Knowledge they commonly find lacking in job applicants. They made the following observations:

1. Lack of experience, both within the industry or occupation and in terms of maturity:
  - “For entry positions, a lot of candidates lack maturity and life experience.” (2010)
  - “Experience in complex work environments. Most have generally far less experience in their fields vs. 5 years ago.” (2008)
  - “Related experience – candidates are just not as seasoned as they used to be.” (2006)
2. Lack of communication and writing skills, and other interpersonal skills:
  - “Spelling and grammar skills are often lacking.” (2010)
  - “At the entry level positions, we often attract recent arrivals to Canada and as a result, English language skills (spoken and comprehension) are often weak. In addition, we assume that candidates who self-identify as computer literate are, when in reality many do not have the rudimentary skills to function in MS Outlook or Excel for example. I predict a need to re-

implement computer skills testing in the future, or at least internal training programs to address this potential productivity issue.” (2008)

- “Find interpersonal skills and manners lacking fairly often...” (2006)

When asked what advice they might give to job applicants in order to develop the necessary Attributes, Skills and Knowledge, employers made the following comments:

1. Employers consistently recommended that applicants strive to gain experience through traditional means (i.e., staying in a position for a minimum of three years) or more creative means (ex., volunteering, CO-OP programs, etc.):

- “Experience counts in all areas – we look for those who have taken risks, failed, and learned far more than those who ‘stay the course’.” (2010)
- “Get work experience early, learn from observation and your mistakes. Take cues from experienced workers.” (2010)
- “Co-op work experience, volunteer experience, participating in extra-curricular activities to become a well-rounded individual.” (2008)

2. Employers advise to practise continual self growth and desire to learn:

- “Keep learning – any courses are great. Seek coaching from supervisors.” (2010)
- “Beyond whatever specific education they receive that is necessary for their chosen career, I encourage young applicants to read. Reading will develop their communication skills at every level, including written and spoken and those skills can set them apart from many other candidates who have not developed those skills.” (2010)
- “Apply learning through whatever means possible and be prepared to share your learning.” (2010)

3. Employers consistently bemoan the improper use of language and recommend the development of oral and written English skills:

- “Candidates still need to develop good English speaking and customer relations skills.” (2010)

- “Gain proficiency in English, both oral and written. Develop presentation and team work skills.” (2010)
4. Employers recommend doing thorough company research prior to application:
- “Research the company you are applying to. Do your homework. Ask recruiters what specifically you can do to prepare for a position within the organization.” (2010)

\* \* \*

**Acknowledgements:**

The Business Council of British Columbia would like to thank the 41 individuals from member companies who took the time to participate in the 2010 Survey. To our readers, we welcome any comments or advice you may have.

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