Developing successful employees: perceptions of industry leaders and academicians

Amanda Nicholson and Linda Cushman

The authors
Amanda Nicholson is a Program Co-ordinator and Linda Cushman is an Assistant Professor, both at Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, USA.

Keywords
Leadership, Retail trade, Education

Abstract
This study was designed to discover what is believed to be important for a student to be successful in the retailing field, graduating from a four-year college program. The research design was Q-methodology, utilizing 47 statements on a Likert scale sorted by 23 representatives of both the academy and retailing industry. The study found a distinct gap in the perceptions of industry respondents versus the academics included in the study. While industry believes that strong affective skills, such as "leadership" and "decision making" were the most desirable characteristics for future executives, the academy favors more interpersonal affective competencies and overall ranked cognitive skills higher than the other group. Further, the study found academicians believed that their opinions would mirror those of the industry. However, this was clearly not supported.

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Introduction
Universities and colleges in the USA are the recruiting grounds for numerous industries in search of the future managers and leaders of tomorrow. Employers often develop long-term relationships with those particular educational establishments where they have had consistent success at recruiting young executives with the right combination of personal attributes and skills to contribute to their organizations. It is important for institutions of higher learning to be aware of what such factors might be for any given industry. With such knowledge, educators can develop their students, improving their likelihood of securing desirable positions in industry.

The purpose of this study is to determine what is believed to be important for success in the retailing field for students graduating from a four-year university or college. The legendary career path from stock clerk to CEO is no longer viable and the vast majority of senior executives in the field are college educated. However, unlike professions where entry is controlled by certifying bodies, such as accounting or education, the educational backgrounds of retailing executives are usually quite diverse (Peterson's Job Opportunities for Business and Liberal Arts Graduates, 1991).

In June 1997, the giant national department store chain, Sears Roebuck & Co., along with members of the Center for Retailing Research at Indiana University, gathered 21 members of the academy and 32 representatives from major US retail firms. This annual forum entitled “Together for Retail” addresses the necessity for academy and industry leaders to work together to provide optimal preparation for tomorrow’s retail leaders. Its purpose was to define common goals for the education, training and recruitment of these future executives. The forum resulted in the identification of two major goals.

1) improve the attraction of graduating students into retailing; and
2) improve the preparedness of the students for industry by examining the core curriculum of students and determining what courses are the most appropriate and desirable to the industry (Williams, 1997).

This study is intended as a first step in addressing these goals.
Background

There is a history of literature that has identified skills and competencies that retailers and educators have deemed important for potential retail executives to develop at the post-secondary level: leadership (Coates, 1971), decision making (Kelley, 1979), human relations (Retail Training, 1985) and communications skills (Bohlinger, 1983) have been mentioned. However, most of this literature is dated, making it somewhat suspect, due to the changing nature of the retail industry.

More recently, Donnellan (1996) surveyed more than 130 vice-presidents of human resources from the top 100 department stores and top 100 specialty stores (by volume) and discovered that respondents were most likely to rank leadership skills first, then management skills and third, oral communication skills. The respondents cited the retail degree (89 percent) as being the most valuable to the industry. Although these new findings agree with earlier findings, there is little direction on if and how the academy can integrate such competencies into the curriculum.

It is generally accepted that emotions impede or encourage the intellect. Goleman (1995) describes the work of C.R. Synder, a psychologist at the University of Kansas who studied the academic achievement of freshman students high and low on hope and discovered that “hope was a better predictor of their first-semester grades than were their scores on the SAT . . .” (p. 86). His explanation was that students who have high hopes set higher goals for themselves and know how to work hard to attain them.

An individual’s positive/negative attitude or outlook may well be partly inborn temperament. However, temperament can be changed by experience and optimism and hope can be learned. Goleman (1995) refers to the outlook that psychologists call “self-efficacy” (the belief that one has mastery over the events of one’s life and can meet challenges as they come up). He quotes Albert Bandura, the Stanford psychologist who has done much of the research on self-efficacy:

People’s beliefs about their abilities have a profound effect on those abilities. Ability is not a fixed property; there is a huge variability in how you perform. People who have a sense of self-efficacy bounce back from failures; they approach things in terms of how to handle them rather than worrying about what can go wrong (p. 90).

dealing with the less-discussed domains, particularly the affective domain. Goleman (1995) redefined what it means to be smart in his popular book Emotional Intelligence. His concern is with those characteristics that standardized tests such as the IQ or SAT tests cannot measure and that may contribute greatly to success in life. He calls these other characteristics “emotional intelligence” and describes them as:

- Abilities such as being able to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratification; to regulate one’s moods and keep distress from swamping the ability to think . . .
- No one can yet say exactly how much of the variability from person to person in life’s course it [emotional intelligence] accounts for. But what data exists suggest it can be as powerful, and at times more powerful, than IQ (p. 34).

Goleman’s book describes the impact of schooling the emotions through emotional literacy programs in the elementary grades of public schools. It also includes descriptions of published data which show how these programs have had a positive effect on children’s academic achievement scores, overall school performance and success.

In today’s technologically sophisticated world, there are many corporations whose core business is the evaluation of possible employees for clients, using proprietary testing methods. These corporations design customized software for individual corporations and categories of business that can, in conjunction with the face-to-face interview process, more accurately measure the likelihood of a candidate’s success in a given field.

One such corporation is the Workforce Development Group (WDG), a division of National Computer Systems, which developed the Retail Management Assessment Inventory in the early 1990s. This widely-used pre-hiring test was designed to measure the potential for success of retail management trainees with some retail experience. However, it is only administered after an initial face-to-face interview has taken place to assess whether a candidate has “the right attitude to fit in with the corporate culture of the employer”.

One of the senior account executives of WDG described the components of the test
during a recent telephone interview (22 April 1999). The assessment includes the following:

- background/work experience;
- management and leadership interest;
- management responsibility;
- customer service;
- basic managerial mathematical ability;
- energy level and workspace;
- management orientation;
- job stability; and
- business ethics.

Once the test is completed, a potential candidate will be recalled for a second interview, where particular areas of strength and deficiency can be discussed further. This particular instrument is validated in different ways to judge its effectiveness. One method is by comparing the test results of newly-hired personnel to supervisory reports after a given time on the job and/or by comparing their progress to those who did not take the test and were hired on more traditional interview only techniques.

**Methodology**

This study is designed without theory to prove and without researcher bias on the outcome. Its purpose is first to discover how general attributes and characteristics are ranked in importance by two different groups of respondents – retailers and the academy. Second, to analyze the data and determine if the perceptions of the two groups are in accord. In this way, recommendations can be made which can positively affect the educational preparation of students for success in the retail industry.

Q-methodology, first introduced by William Stephenson in 1935 (Stephenson, 1935), was chosen for this study as it is a research technique which provides a systematic and quantitative method of examining human subjectivity, utilizing psychometric principles combined with the statistical applications of correlational and factor-analysis. Analyzing respondents’ opinions in this manner is a significant strength of the method and what sets it apart from more traditional R analysis. The latter concentrates on finding correlations and factors representing respondents’ behavioral traits where Q-methodology researches individually determined impressions drawn from personal experience.

To address the degree to which the two groups’ opinions converge, the study was designed to be co-orientational so as to calculate the three co-orientational variables illustrated in Figure 1 – accuracy, agreement and perceived agreement. Accuracy indicates how similar the extent of one side’s estimate is to the other side’s actual views. Agreement represents to what extent both sides share similar views on an issue and perceived agreement illustrates the extent to which one side’s opinions are similar to their estimate of the other’s opinions (Broom and Dozier, 1990, pp. 37-8).

If the two sides hold accurate views of each other’s point of view on an issue, then two possible relationships are possible:

1. *true consensus*, when both the organization and the public agree and accurately perceive that agreement; and
2. *dissensus*, when there is actual disagreement which is also accurately perceived by both sides.

If one or both of the parties hold inaccurate views of the other’s point of view on the issue, two false states are possible:

1. *false consensus*, when there is disagreement that is inaccurately perceived as agreement; and
2. *false conflict*, when there is actual agreement that is falsely perceived as disagreement (Broom and Dozier, 1990).

**Sampling**

The two groups selected to represent the academy and the industry were both purposive samples. The 11 representatives from the university included members of the
faculty in the retailing program and members of the staff who interact with students on a daily basis. These members of the staff included the director of recruitment, the director of student services, the director and assistant director of career development and the dean of the college. In addition, the director of career services and the assistant director for the university were also respondents.

The 12 industry respondents were deliberately chosen from a variety of different types of retailers to include a wide representation of the industry. Executive representatives from an apparel fashion department store, two national department store chains, a national and regional specialty store, an upscale privately owned apparel boutique, a regional food supermarket plus a national discount retailer participated in the study. All the participants had experience in hiring young executives into the field. With the exception of the regional food supermarket, all the other organizations represented recruit candidates for their executive trainee programs exclusively from four-year universities or colleges.

**Data collection procedures**
The process involved the researcher designing a Q-sample of a sufficient number of statements or opinions about a subject (in this case, 47) to ensure that the design reflected the relevant issues under study. This was done through the use of face-to-face interviews with members of both groups, resulting in a concourse of statements which were then edited to represent all the factors mentioned.

Each participant was first given a brief overview of Q-methodology and then handed an envelope with the Q-sample statements printed onto 3in. × 1in. strips of paper and a Likert scale from −5 through +5 printed onto similar strips, plus two Q-Score Sheets. A brief explanation was provided giving the recommended sorting process and sorting instructions were distributed. Each participant was then asked to rank-order the statements by sorting them, based solely on his/her internal frame of reference. When the group had completed this task, a second sort was completed from the perspective of how each thought the “other” group would sort the statements.

**Data analysis techniques**
At the completion of the data collection process, the rankings were correlated and factor analyzed to discover the groupings of opinions. As McKeown and Thomas (1988) describe: “Data analysis in Q methodology typically involves the sequential application of three sets of statistical procedures: correlation, factor analysis, and the computation of factor scores”. However, as indicated earlier, the psychometrics of Q methodology correlate and factor the actual respondents, as opposed to traits or behaviors dealt with in traditional R-method analysis.

The data were entered, as per the Q-sorts, into the PCQ3 (Stricklin, 1987-1996) statistical software program. The program computed intercorrelations among the Q-sorts and then factor-analyzed the data. The program utilized the eigenvalue criterion, whereby factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.00 were considered significant and those with lesser values were considered too weak to deserve serious attention. The resulting factors were rotated analytically and a report was issued with details on factor loadings, the varimax rotation detailing statement factor scores, distinguishing items for each, in addition to consensus statements.

**Results**
Three distinct and significant factors A, B and C, with eigenvalues of 5.28, 7.13 and 5.41 respectively. Thirty-two of the 46 sorts were accounted for in these three factors, explaining 39 percent of the variance. Eight sorts were confounded and six were not significant. Interestingly, two of the factors were weighted heavily with participants from the industry group (factors A and C) while the third (factor B) represented the majority of the members of the university.

Factor B (academy) included two cognitive skills in the highest categories of +5 and +4. They were “product knowledge” and “understanding the company’s business environment”. By contrast, the highest categories ranked by the industry factors (A and C) were all strong affective competencies, such as “leadership” and “ability to deal with conflict”. Interestingly, the two industry factors, A and C, appear to differ on the basis of internal versus external affective characteristics. Where group A clearly places
more significance on people’s ability to deal with their external environment, the C group concentrates on more intrinsic attitudes. On the other hand the educators (Group B) ranked interpersonal affective competencies highly, such as “ability to work as a team” and did not rank as highly the individually assertive affective competencies that the industry groups chose (see Table I).

When analyzing the rankings of statements indicating cognitive skills, the academy consistently ranked such skills higher than the two industry-dominated groups. This may not be considered surprising. However, what is unusual is that even though the educators ranked cognitive skills higher than the industry groups, they did not attach the highest levels of significance to them (see Table II).

As stated earlier, this study was designed to be co-orientational. The results showed that the two sides do not, in the main, hold accurate views of each other’s point of view. Therefore, there is no overall consensus. There is no dissensus either as the actual disagreement is not accurately perceived by both sides. The academy group, which dominated factor B, inaccurately perceived the industry group to be like them, resulting in false consensus.

Overall there is perceived agreement only between the academy’s views and their estimate of the industry’s views, but no general agreement and low accuracy overall (see Figure 2).

Table I Most significant statement by factor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lickert rating</th>
<th>Factory A (industry weighted)</th>
<th>Factor C (industry weighted)</th>
<th>Factor B (academy weighted)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+ 5</td>
<td>Ability to deal with conflict</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Customer service focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ 5</td>
<td>Customer service focus</td>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>Understanding company’s business environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ 4</td>
<td>Decision-making ability</td>
<td>Decision-making ability</td>
<td>Ability to work as a team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ 4</td>
<td>Ability to motivate and develop others</td>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>Product knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+ 4</td>
<td>Passion/energy for retailing</td>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>Passion/energy for retailing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II Rankings of selected cognitive skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Industry (A and C)</th>
<th>Academy (B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of basic accounting principles</td>
<td>– 5 – 3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of basic finance principles</td>
<td>– 4 – 2</td>
<td>– 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics skills</td>
<td>– 2 – 2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer literacy</td>
<td>– 4 – 1</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to communicate well in writing</td>
<td>– 3 – 0</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to express ideas well orally</td>
<td>– 1 + 1</td>
<td>+ 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions and recommendations

This study was designed to discover what employers in the retail industry and members of a university feel are important factors for the success of retailing students graduating from a four-year degree program. A secondary interest was in finding out whether the opinions of the two groups were similar or different, and if those similarities or differences could be analyzed and defined also existed.

It appears that there is little evidence of agreement between the groups regarding which attributes or characteristics are most important for success. Overall, retail industry respondents may be described as rating very highly strong affective characteristics, such as
“ability to deal with conflict”, “leadership” and “decision making”. The academy respondents, on the other hand, rated two cognitive skills very highly, “understanding of company’s business environment” and “product knowledge” plus more interpersonal affective attributes such as “customer service focus” and “ability to work as a team”. Very little co-orientation was measured overall, apart from the academy’s general, and inaccurate, perception that the industry would sort the statements in a similar manner to themselves.

There are some possible implications of this study which bear further discussion and research. First, it would seem that industry is looking for leaders and go-getters with strong competencies which belong to the affective domain, whereas the academy, in general, values the development of skills in the cognitive domain more highly, plus interpersonal affective competencies. On reflection, this is perhaps not surprising. Educators have always struggled with attempts to classify objectives under the affective domain because it is a difficult task to even state affective objectives clearly.

There would appear now to be a need to conduct a larger confirmatory study utilizing a wider range of retailers and academicians so that findings could be more specific to store type, degree type or position sought. With this information, colleges and universities might then look to develop their curricula to include more affective behavior development, such as increased experiential learning, leadership and/or assertiveness, and to measure any impact such additional development has on students’ levels of success.

It should be remembered that this study asked respondents to rank order 47 different qualities, all of which are admirable. This research in no way should be thought to imply that either the industry or the academy responses were “right” and the other “wrong”. What the research does, on the other hand, is indicate the possibility that there is a significant communication gap between industry and the academy as to what is important for success in the retailing field.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will be a first step in a continuing dialogue aimed at bringing the two groups closer together with the unified goal of improving student preparation for their role as the retailing executives of tomorrow.

References


Further reading