

# WORKPLACE EXCELLENCE INVENTORY



Identify Essential Skill Areas for Workplace and Career Success

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St. Paul

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# ***Workplace Excellence Inventory (WEI)***

## **Administrator's Guide**

**John J. Liptak, EdD**

The U.S. Department of Labor has long regarded academic knowledge and technical expertise as being key indicators for career success. However, in its 2012 publication *Skills to Pay the Bills: Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success*, the federal agency recognized a third factor needed to achieve success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace: employability skills. Employability skills are known by many names—*soft skills*, *foundational skills*, *workforce-readiness skills*, *career-readiness skills*, and *job-readiness skills*— but they all speak to the same set of core competencies that employers want in their employees. Individuals who develop employability skills and apply these skills in workplace relationships and job responsibilities have a greater opportunity to achieve workplace excellence than those individuals who solely have subject knowledge and expertise.

With that in mind, the *Workplace Excellence Inventory (WEI)* was created to encourage individuals to recognize and develop their own set of employability skills. The acquisition of these skills will help them successfully transition to the workplace and demonstrate excellence in their job performance. The *WEI* is designed to be self-scored and self-interpreted with the use of additional materials, thus providing immediate results to the participants and/or counselors. Norms for the *WEI* have been developed for a variety of populations including high school students, college students, and unemployed blue-collar and white-collar adults.

This brief administrator's guide was written to provide additional information for professionals using the *WEI*. The guide describes employability skills, offers research findings to support the importance of employability skills to career readiness, addresses the connection between workplace excellence and career success, and discusses the creation of the *WEI* as an assessment tool for workplace excellence.

# Importance of Employability Skills to Career Readiness

Prior to the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, business and industry leaders recognized the need for a workforce equipped with skills beyond academic and technical skills. They wanted employees who could work well with others, apply knowledge to solve problems, communicate clearly, and adapt to different work environments. They also wanted schools to better prepare students with these specialized skills so that they could easily transition to a workplace environment and be successful in their new positions. To that end, these business and industry leaders worked with several professional organizations over the next decade to define this set of employability skills, determine their relevance in a workplace, and discuss their impact on workplace excellence and career success. The results of their collaborative efforts offered several insights into the needs of the workforce and the global economy. These insights, coupled with the findings of career and professional development experts, provide a profile of a desired 21<sup>st</sup> century job candidate.

Beginning in 1991, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, established by the U.S. Department of Labor, produced the report *What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000*. This report offered a forecast of the skills needed in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century workplace. In addition, it identified several changes that schools needed to implement to better prepare students for the workforce. The commission's findings established the following goals:

- Students must understand the academic competencies that they need to master so that colleges and employers honor their record of school performance.
- Students must develop a new set of competencies and foundation skills if they are to enjoy productive, full, and satisfying lives. The competencies students should acquire are the effective use of resources, the development of interpersonal skills, the acquisition and evaluation of data, the understanding and monitoring of corporate systems, and the use of technology. The foundation skills students should acquire are effective communication and literacy (reading and writing) skills; creative and critical thinking skills; and personal qualities such as responsibility, self-esteem, and self-management.

- Students must possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

*What Work Requires of Schools* was one of the first research studies to identify the employability skills that students need to assimilate to the demands of a workplace and to achieve success in their career path.

In 2006, the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills—a coalition of business, education, and government leaders—published a report titled *Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century U.S. Workforce*. In the report, written by Jill Casner-Lotto and Linda Barrington, the coalition predicted that soft skills such as critical thinking, work ethic, professionalism, communication, collaboration, teamwork, leadership, and creativity would become even more important to organizations in the future. The study revealed the agreement among employers as to the need for high school and college graduates to have employability skills *before* entering the workforce. In fact, the employers cited in this study predicted that employability skills would overshadow the importance of basic knowledge and applied skills in the workplace over the next five years. These employers also identified the top five employability skills needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace:

- critical thinking/problem solving
- information technology application
- teamwork/collaboration
- creativity/innovation
- diversity

In addition, the study provided a snapshot of employability skills in high school graduates, two-year college/technical school graduates, and four-year college graduates. The coalition's collected data, shown in Table 1, indicated several deficient areas in employability skills for these student populations.

<b>Table 1: Deficiencies in Employability Skills</b>			
<b>Employability Skill</b>	<b>High School Graduate</b>	<b>2-Year College/Technical School Graduate</b>	<b>4-Year College Graduate</b>
Written Communications	X	X	X
Writing in English		X	X
Professionalism/ Work Ethic	X		
Critical Thinking/ Problem Solving	X	X	
Oral Communications	X	X	
Ethics/ Social Responsibility	X	X	
Reading Comprehension	X		
Teamwork/Collaboration	X		
Diversity	X		
Information Technology Application	X		
English Language	X		
Lifelong Learning/ Self-Direction		X	
Creativity/Innovation		X	
Leadership			X

The report from the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills concluded that students must be provided opportunities to learn employability skills and apply them to life and work situations. The group also agreed that many of these employability skills were also necessary for academic success in college, thus creating some additional overlap between academic and workplace demands. In addition, the coalition warned that the nation faced a growing skills deficit that jeopardized the growth, recovery, and competitiveness of the economy, particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). This skills shortage endangered unemployment

rates and the number of individuals who are successful in the workplace, as shown in the following excerpt from the report:

How can the United States continue to compete in a global economy if the entering workforce is made up of high school graduates who lack the skills they need, and of college graduates who are mostly “adequate” rather than “excellent”? The quandary is particularly problematic because it comes just as the workforce is entering a period of realignment. As the baby-boomers retire—taking their skills and knowledge with them—America faces a shortage of available workers. This report indicates that the pool of talented workers available is even smaller. (p. 7)

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)—the largest human resources professional association dedicated to research, publications, and legislative input—confirmed the importance of a workforce who demonstrated employability skills in its 2008 report *Critical Skills Needs and Resources for the Changing Workforce*. The SHRM’s report stated that the workplace of today is changing and that workers’ skill sets must keep pace with employers’ expectations. According to the report’s findings, employers placed the greatest weight on employability skills such as adaptability/flexibility and critical thinking/problem solving. The report also indicated that many prospective employees still lacked the necessary employability skills to make a significant impact in the workplace today and suggested that “a solution with an immediate benefit to today’s workplace and the economy is a focus on building capabilities and the development of skills and competencies within the current workforce.” (p. 4)

The Association for Career & Technical Education (ACTE), a national educational association that focuses on career preparation for youth and adults, confirmed the findings of these business and industry leaders in its 2010 publication *Up to the Challenge: The Role of Career and Technical Education and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills in College and Career Readiness*. The organization stated that it is important to expand the conversation to include career readiness and increase the recognition of the broad range of skills—including employability skills—that students need for success in the global economy. In fact, ACTE cited that, despite the economic downturn, 31% of employers

worldwide struggled to fill available positions because of a “talent mismatch” between the qualifications of potential employees and the skills sets that employers wanted:

[The problem] is all too evident in numerous and varied indicators, including increasing international competitiveness (both economic and educational); a lack of qualified workers and a skills imperative from employers; mediocre student performance, an achievement gap, and a dropout crisis in K–12 schools; and a proliferation of remediation in higher education. The focus for student readiness . . . is primarily on academic knowledge—and not yet on the academic skills or the employability and technical knowledge and skills that are equally valued in a creative, innovative society. (p. 6)

The report concluded that career readiness, like college readiness, should be the responsibility of high school *and* college educators.

John J. Liptak, a leading expert of career assessments and counseling, underscored the importance of employability skills to workplace success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy in his 2010 publication *Professional Manual for the Employability Skills Inventory*. Liptak stated that business and industry representatives have expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the general level of preparedness of prospective entry-level employees. He said that as society and the workplace continue to change and evolve, the general skills required of employees must also change and evolve. He concluded that “researchers and employers alike have called for educational reform and enhanced job-training programs to address concerns over the gap between the skill requirements for entry-level employment and the skills possessed by entry-level job applicants.” (p. 3)

Data collected from individuals completing ACT (2016) WorkKeys assessments from 2006–2011 corroborated Liptak’s observations. The evidence revealed significant gaps between the foundational skills of employees with a low level of education and the foundational skills needed for jobs requiring a low level of education. ACT’s Policy Platform *Workforce Development* report suggested that education and training in employability skills are critical to ensure workplace excellence. The organization recommended the integration of these skills to improve workforce skills among adults and youth. In addition, ACT concluded that these new training and education efforts not only increase the benefits that employees acquire from subsequent occupational training

but also empower them to move successfully and efficiently along chosen career paths. Specifically, the report recommended the following strategies:

- implementation of college-readiness and career-readiness standards and high-quality assessments in K–12 education
- integration of noncognitive, foundational skills into career and technical education
- expansion of successful programs in which participants learn literacy and numeracy skills in the context of an occupation while earning college-level professional/technical credits (p. 4)

Research has also shown that additional education does not guarantee that workers will have required basic employability skills. Liptak’s *Planning Your School-to-Career Transition* (2012) revealed that gaps in employability skills do not only apply to students transitioning into the workplace from high school or vocational schools. His research found that many individuals finish college and enter the workforce, only to find that they are ill-prepared for managing employability issues in the workplace. Liptak concluded that many college students need additional employability skills training to achieve success.

In light of this decades-long, solid research by notable institutions and career development professionals, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education created the *Employability Skills Framework* to categorize the various types of skills used in the workplace. The 2017 report revealed that employability skills are necessary skills for success in the labor market at all employment levels and in all sectors. The agency also stated in its report that the framework of employability skills could be taught through the educational system as well as through the workforce development system.

In addition, the report indicated that there are many types of employability skills that contribute to success in the workplace. These employability skills generally fell into three broad areas:

- *Applied Knowledge:* This employability skill area is defined as the thoughtful integration of academic knowledge and critical thinking skills and their application to the workplace. Applied knowledge encompasses the skills needed to accomplish job responsibilities effectively and efficiently.

- *Effective Relationships*: This employability skill area is defined as the interpersonal skills and personal qualities that enable individuals to interact effectively with supervisors, colleagues, and clients. Effective relationships are critical for successful teamwork, strong leadership, and clear communication.
- *Workplace Skills*: This employability skill area is defined as the analytical and organizational skills and understandings that employees need to successfully perform work tasks. Workplace skills include managing resources such as money and time, locating and using information, communicating effectively in verbal and written forms, monitoring and improving systems, and understanding and utilizing technology.

Although administrators in higher education and employers recognized the need for increased employability skills, they were not always in agreement as to whether training individuals in these competencies belonged in the purview of educators, employers, or both. According to “Competencies: The Not-So-Uncharted Frontier and a Call to Learn from Employers” (2017)—written by Clemson University career and development experts Troy Nunamaker, Kristin Walker, and Neil Burton—many colleges and universities were incorporating these employability competencies into their career development services, but other institutions were designing programs around these skill areas to meet employers’ cultures and needs.

A recent symposium hosted by Clemson University and the University of Tampa highlighted the need for college campuses to institute competency-development programs to teach their students employability skills. Kevin Gray, from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), summarized a type of employability skills program presented at the symposium. In his 2017 article “Starting a Campus-Wide Competency Development Program: Different Approaches, Common Ground,” Gray stated that a competency development program needed a common starting point and a strategic plan for teaching, demonstrating, and implementing career-readiness skills.

The following four-pillar approach was outlined as a possible strategic plan:

- *Pillar 1*: Competency learning, development, and articulation are integrated into the curriculum of all educational programs to provide opportunities for students to actively demonstrate competency and career readiness.

- *Pillar 2:* Competency development and career readiness are integrated into the life and culture of the institution.
- *Pillar 3:* Workplace excellence skills are integrated institution-wide, and students and prospective employees are encouraged to demonstrate these skills through institutional programs such as volunteering and internships.
- *Pillar 4:* Competency development is implemented before students graduate, and the results are assessed, measured, and tracked for effectiveness in the workplace.

## Demonstration of Career Readiness in the Workplace

Recent reports, such as Manpower Group’s *Supply/Demand: 2010 Talent Shortage Survey Results*, confirmed that new hires need to demonstrate career readiness in the workplace by possessing employability skills as well as academic knowledge and technical expertise. The report by the Manpower Group—a multinational corporation that focuses on staffing and recruitment for corporations, career management, and corporate workforce consulting—revealed that demand is increasing throughout the U.S. economy and around the world for knowledge technologists, or employees that have excellent workplace knowledge, skills, and competencies. The group’s report underscored employers’ concerns that new workers lacked the employability skills that were needed for workplace excellence, which is a key driver for companies to meet their business objectives and the needs of their clients.

Many employers noted the struggle that new hires had when making the transition from an academic setting to a workplace environment. In his 2012 report *Planning Your School-to-Career Transition*, Liptak cited employers who continued to complain that their new employees brought many technical skills to the workplace but that they often lacked the skills to manage their careers and be effective employees. Liptak suggested that prospective employees let go of their student-oriented behaviors and attitudes and begin to develop more professional behaviors and attitudes. He referred to the first year at a new job as the “honeymoon period” and suggested that new employees be judged not

only for the quality of their work but also for their adaptability to the workplace, their management of stress, and their effectiveness in navigating workplace relationships.

Adam Peck, a student affairs administrator in higher education, agreed with Liptak's assertion that younger workers do not demonstrate the same standards in the workplace as experienced workers, according to his 2017 publication *Engagement & Employability: Integrating Career Learning through Cocurricular Experiences in Postsecondary Education*. Peck attributed the deficiency of standards to a lack of career-readiness preparation in the academic environment.

## **Connection Between Workplace Excellence and Career Success**

The application of employability skills in the work environment is essential to the achievement of workplace excellence and overall career success. *Workplace excellence* refers to the attainment and demonstration of knowledge, skills, and abilities that broadly prepare individuals to successfully transition into the workplace and to perform a job with excellence. New employees need to demonstrate that they have the subject matter expertise, the technical training, and the employability skills in their routine job responsibilities to put them on the pathway to career success.

As mentioned previously, the 2006 study from the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills—*Are They Really Ready for Work?*—reported that applied competencies had quickly outpaced the need for basic skills and content knowledge as success factors for employees in a new workplace. Brian Stecher and Laura Hamilton agreed in their 2014 study *Measuring Hard-to-Measure Student Competencies: A Research and Development Plan*. As scientists at the RAND Corporation, an organization that develops solutions to public policy changes, Stecher and Hamilton reported that there is a growing body of research suggesting that applied workplace excellence skill competencies are the most important predictors of career success for recent graduates in the workplace. These competencies also resulted in increased productivity for employers. Consequently, employers are increasingly choosing prospective employees who possess workplace excellence skills.

Workplace excellence skills are important for fulfilling job tasks and advancing in work responsibilities, but the attainment of these skills can have an additional impact on the overall career development of individuals. In the 2016 publication *The Co-curricular Connection: The Impact of Experiences Beyond the Classroom on Soft Skills*, Peck and his colleagues explored the effect that academic and work experiences had on the development of employability skills such as communication skills, teamwork, problem solving, and critical thinking. They found that these workplace excellence skills can be taught as well as practiced in real-world environments outside of the classroom. Their study cited students who indicated that their workplace excellence skills were developed from experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Peck and his colleagues concluded that “co-curricular experiences can provide a place for transformative educational experiences to grow in a variety of educational structures because experiential learning focuses on the development of the whole student.” (p. 2)

Similarly, two business school experts, Denise Jackson and Nicholas Wilton, looked at the links between career-readiness competencies and career choice, career success, and career management. Their 2015 study, *Career Choice Status Among Undergraduates and the Influence of Career Management Competencies and Perceived Employability*, concluded that a correlation exists between the development and application of career-readiness competencies and the employability and developmental success over an individual’s career.

In 2017, NACE agreed with the fieldwork of the notable professionals cited previously. The NACE report, *Career Readiness Defined*, summarized the association’s research into a variety of career-readiness topics and concluded that job candidates who can demonstrate and articulate their career-readiness skills enjoy a competitive advantage over their less-prepared counterparts in securing a job after college graduation. In addition, the report stated that new employees who apply these skills in their job responsibilities have a better opportunity to achieve workplace excellence and advance within their organization than their less-prepared colleagues.

## Measurement of Workplace Excellence Skills

It can be difficult for employers to judge the effectiveness of their employees' competencies or workplace excellence skills. One of the problems is that competencies can be difficult to define. However, a commonly used definition for the term *competency* is from *The Definition of Competencies and Their Application at NU*, an online publication from the University of Nebraska: Business and Finance Human Resources: "the combination of observable and measurable knowledge, skills, abilities and personal attributes that contribute to enhanced employee performance and ultimately result in organizational success."

Peck's 2017 report, *Engagement and Employability*, suggested that employers should begin moving away from performance evaluations and subjective, soft-focused definitions and measurements such as rating scales and 360-degree qualitative peer reports. Instead, Peck recommended that employers move toward more objective, competency-focused evaluations. These competencies should be measured through the development of additional workplace excellence assessments. He suggested that this evaluative process is best accomplished through the exploration, identification, and measurement of performance level indicators for many of the skills needed to be effective in the 21st century workplace.

Similar to Peck, Troy Nunamaker and his colleagues, in their "Competencies" article, saw a definite need for a well-researched assessment tool that measures an individual's strengths and weaknesses related to basic workplace excellence skills. They concluded that "the more pertinent challenge has been how to move the conversation from subjective competency measures to objective competency measures." (p. 31)

## Creation of an Assessment Tool for Workplace Excellence

The aforementioned research clearly indicates that individuals arrive at a workplace armed with subject matter and technical expertise but are woefully lacking a set of employability skills. These skills are needed to demonstrate workplace excellence, be successful in a career path, and build an effective global workforce. For that reason,

both educational institutions and employers put out the call for relevant education and training programs for youth and adults to improve these skills, increase the benefits of subsequent occupational training, and empower individuals to succeed in various occupations.

Although these workplace excellence skills have been identified in the literature as important skills for employees to possess, a reliable measurement tool to gauge these competencies has been elusive—until the development of the *Workplace Excellence Inventory (WEI)*.

## **Development of the *WEI***

The *Workplace Excellence Inventory (WEI)* is a brief self-assessment developed to help individuals evaluate their current workplace excellence competencies. As such, the *WEI* was designed to:

- measure a wide range of workplace excellence areas
- contain items that were not gender-specific and that were applicable to individuals ages 18 to 62
- be user-friendly in its implementation, scoring, and interpretation.

## **Establishment of the Workplace Excellence Skill Areas**

The *WEI* consists of 48 statements that have been grouped into six essential workplace excellence skill areas: Critical Thinking, Work Ethic, Career Management, Soft Skills, Leadership, and Teamwork. These sections were chosen based on the cited research related to career readiness, necessary workplace skills as identified by employers, and employee success skills. Tables 2–4 below reveal how the workplace excellence skills noted by key educational groups have shaped the six essential skill areas of the *WEI*.

**Table 2: Comparison of NACE and *WEI*  
Workplace Excellence Skills**

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2017) asserts that the career readiness of students is an important issue in higher education, the labor market, and the public arena. The association believes that career readiness is the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace. This table shows the correlation between six of the cited NACE competencies and the competencies on the *WEI*.

<b>NACE Workplace Excellence Skills</b>	<b><i>WEI</i> Workplace Excellence Skills</b>
Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking
Professionalism/Work Ethic	Work Ethic
Career Management	Career Management
Oral/Written Communication	Soft Skills
Leadership	Leadership
Teamwork	Teamwork

**Table 3: Comparison of ACTE and *WEI*  
Workplace Excellence Skills**

The Association for Career & Technical Education (ACTE, 2010) suggests that career readiness is the new direction for K–12 education. Preparing students to directly transition to careers that pay a living wage is the end goal of federal and state education policies, initiatives, and funding. This table shows the correlation between six of the cited ACTE competencies and the competences of the *WEI*.

<b>ACTE Workplace Excellence Skills</b>	<b><i>WEI</i> Workplace Excellence Skills</b>
Critical Thinking & Problem Solving	Critical Thinking
Work Ethic	Work Ethic
Job Advancement	Career Management
Communication Skills	Soft Skills
Customer Service	Leadership
Teamwork	Teamwork

**Table 4: Comparison of ACT and *WEI*  
Workplace Excellence Skills**

According to ACT (2013), solid foundational skills are critical to an individual’s success in training and succeeding in the workplace. These workplace excellence skills are fundamental in that they serve as the foundation for supporting more advanced skill development, and they are portable because they are important and can be used in a wide variety of occupations. Unfortunately, many workers lack the level of foundational skills expertise needed for current and projected jobs. This table shows the correlation between six of the cited ACT competencies and the competencies of the *WEI*.

<b>ACT Workplace Excellence Skills</b>	<b><i>WEI</i> Workplace Excellence Skills</b>
Problem Solving & Critical Thinking	Critical Thinking
Work Habits	Work Ethic
Career Management	Career Management
Customer Service	Soft Skills
Leadership	Leadership
Interpersonal & Business Communication	Teamwork

The sample crosswalks shown in Tables 2–4 demonstrate the close alignment between career-readiness research and the *WEI*. Table 5 provides specific ways that employees can demonstrate these skills.

**Table 5: Guidelines for the Demonstration of  
Workplace Excellence Skills**

<b>WEI Workplace Excellence Skills</b>	<b>Employee Demonstration of Skills</b>
Critical Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thinks critically about work responsibilities and interactions with others</li> <li>• Conceptualizes, applies, analyzes, synthesizes, and evaluates information to solve problems</li> <li>• Reaches answers or conclusions by utilizing disciplined thinking</li> <li>• Uses logic to identify patterns and find meaning from seemingly unrelated pieces of information</li> </ul>
Work Ethic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Embodies high principles that guide workplace behavior</li> <li>• Adopts high professional standards that result in consistently high-quality work and that satisfy individual goals and objectives</li> </ul>
Career Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manages professional career effectively</li> <li>• Identifies ways to achieve recognition from others for work accomplishments</li> <li>• Strives to attain new skills, capabilities, and experiences</li> <li>• Takes calculated risks to improve workplace standing</li> </ul>
Soft Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Possesses great interpersonal skills (manners, punctuality, appearance, respect, empathy)</li> <li>• Has effective written and verbal communication skills</li> <li>• Works effectively as a team member</li> <li>• Possesses great relationship-building skills</li> </ul>

Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can direct a group by encouraging and supporting teamwork, organization, and goal-setting</li> <li>• Recognizes the talents of individuals when building an effective team and setting team goals</li> <li>• Possesses confidence and a clear vision that can be used to influence others</li> <li>• Fosters an environment that allows individuals to pursue team or organizational goals</li> <li>• Possesses the energy, determination, and initiative to overcome obstacles and bring competitive drive to a team</li> </ul>
Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works well with a group of people to meet a common goal</li> <li>• Supports other team members to use their individual strengths to enhance team performance and output</li> <li>• Embraces and celebrates individual differences</li> <li>• Shows commitment to achieving team goals</li> </ul>

### **Item Selection for the *WEI***

A large pool of items representing the six essential workplace excellence competencies was created and later revised during the development of the *WEI*. This process eliminated any items that did not correlate well with the workplace excellence skill areas. The wording of the items reflects the language that is currently being used in the career and job-search literature and research as well as in job training and counseling programs.

After the items were developed, they were reviewed and edited for clarity, style, and meaning. This process ensured that participants could understand the item, respond appropriately, and gain insight into the current status of their workplace excellence skills. Items were additionally screened to eliminate any reference to gender, race, religion, culture, or ethnic origin.

### **Item Standardization for the *WEI***

Experts in the field of career counseling were asked to sort the items into workplace excellence skill areas to ensure item standardization. The result of their efforts was a final pool of 10 items for each skill area on the *WEI*.

The author identified high school, college, and adult populations to complete drafts of the *WEI* for statistical validation. This initial research yielded information about the appropriateness of items for each workplace excellence skill area; the reactions of participants concerning the inventory format and content; and the reactions of participants concerning the ease of administration, scoring, and profiling of the *WEI*.

The collected data was then subjected to Cronbach's alpha correlation reliability coefficients to identify the items that best represented the six workplace excellence skill areas on the *WEI*. Based on this analysis, eight items were selected for the final self-assessment and were again reviewed for content, clarity, and style.

### **Reliability of the *WEI***

Reliability is often defined as the consistency with which an assessment measures what it purports to measure. Evidence of the reliability of an assessment may be presented in terms of reliability coefficients, test-retest correlations, and interscale correlations.

Tables 6–8 present these reliability factors.

Table 6 reveals a strong internal consistency of the *WEI* when measured using Cronbach's alpha correlation reliability coefficients. The correlations range from .89 to .92. All six of these correlations are significant at the 0.01 level.

<b>Table 6: Internal Consistency of the <i>WEI</i> (Cronbach's Alpha Correlation Reliability Coefficients)*</b>	
<b>Workplace Excellence Skill Areas</b>	<b>Correlation Coefficients</b>
Critical Thinking	.91 <sup>†</sup>
Work Ethic	.89 <sup>†</sup>
Career Management	.90 <sup>†</sup>
Soft Skills	.90 <sup>†</sup>
Leadership	.92 <sup>†</sup>
Teamwork	.91 <sup>†</sup>
* Data was culled from 205 high school students, college students, and unemployed adults. † Correlations were significant at the 0.01 level.	

To establish test-retest reliability, 75 individuals from the original sample population were reassessed using the *WEI* two weeks after the original testing. The results are shown in Table 7. Test-retest correlations for the *WEI* range from .898 to .915, and all correlations are significant at the 0.01 level. The data indicates the reliability of the *WEI* over time.

<b>Table 7: Stability of the <i>WEI</i> (Test-Retest Reliability)*†</b>	
<b>Workplace Excellence Skill Areas</b>	<b>Correlations</b>
Critical Thinking	.903 <sup>††</sup>
Work Ethic	.915 <sup>††</sup>
Career Management	.902 <sup>††</sup>
Soft Skills	.911 <sup>††</sup>
Leadership	.898 <sup>††</sup>
Teamwork	.913 <sup>††</sup>
* N = 75 † Data was culled two weeks after original testing. †† Correlations were significant at the 0.01 level.	

Table 8 shows the interscale correlations among the workplace excellence skills of the *WEI*. Understandably, the *WEI* shows the largest correlations among the Leadership and Work Ethic skill areas (.214) and the Teamwork and Work Ethic skill areas (.153). The relationship between these two sets of skill areas seems to be a natural fit, and the correlations are still quite small. The other correlations between skill areas are even smaller, reinforcing the independence of the workplace excellence skill areas of the *WEI*. In fact, several of these skill areas have negative correlations.

<b>Table 8: The <i>WEI</i> Interscale Correlations*</b>						
<b>Skill Areas</b>	<b>Critical Thinking</b>	<b>Work Ethic</b>	<b>Career Management</b>	<b>Soft Skills</b>	<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Teamwork</b>
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	1					
<b>Work Ethic</b>	.143	1				
<b>Career Management</b>	-.132	-.257	1			
<b>Soft Skills</b>	-.165	-.164	-.122	1		
<b>Leadership</b>	-.271	.214	.142	-.113	1	
<b>Teamwork</b>	-.154	.153	-.144	-.129	.145	1
* N = 123						

### **Validity of the *WEI***

Validity is often defined as the extent to which a test measures what it purports to measure. Evidence of validity for the *WEI* is presented in the form of means (Ms) and standard deviations (SDs) from different populations.

#### ***College Students***

Table 9 shows the means and SDs for college students who completed the *WEI*.

Overall, college students completing the self-assessment scored highest in the Teamwork skill area (M = 21.05) and lowest in the Career Management skill area (M = 18.63). These results suggest that college students are learning the process of becoming a great team player, but they need assistance in developing a career management program for when they enter the workforce.

Male college students scored highest in the Teamwork skill area (M = 20.77), followed by the Work Ethic skill area (M = 20.54). This population scored lowest in the Career Management skill area (M = 18.64), followed by the Leadership skill area (M = 19.08). These results suggest that male college students tend to be great at working as part of a team with others and that they possess an effective work ethic. The results also indicate

that this student population needs career coaching to help them be better managers of their own career as well as help them develop leadership qualities.

Similar to the results for male college students, female college students scored highest in the Teamwork skill area (M = 21.33), followed by the Work Ethic skill area (M = 21.22). However, their scores in these skill areas were higher than the scores for male college students. These results suggest that female college students tend to be great team players and that they have a good work ethic. On the other hand, female college students scored lowest in the Career Management skill area (M = 18.61) and the Critical Thinking skill area (M = 19.39). Consequently, this student population needs to develop these skills to be more effective in the workplace.

**TABLE 9: WEI Means and Standard Deviations  
for College Students**

SKILL AREAS	TOTAL POPULATION*		MALE COLLEGE STUDENTS <sup>†</sup>		FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS <sup>††</sup>	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	19.27	5.8	19.15	5.9	19.39	5.7
<b>Work Ethic</b>	20.88	6.5	20.54	6.4	21.22	6.5
<b>Career Management</b>	18.63	6.0	18.64	5.8	18.61	6.1
<b>Soft Skills</b>	19.91	6.0	19.85	6.3	19.96	5.8
<b>Leadership</b>	19.61	7.0	19.08	7.2	20.14	6.9
<b>Teamwork</b>	21.05	6.0	20.77	6.1	21.33	5.9

\* Total (N = 324)  
<sup>†</sup> Male (N = 145)  
<sup>††</sup> Female (N = 179)

### *High School Students*

Table 10 shows the means and SDs for high school students who completed the WEI.

Overall, high school students scored highest in the Teamwork skill area (M = 19.83) and

lowest in the Critical Thinking skill area (M = 16.71). These results suggest that high school students are learning the process of becoming great team players, but they need assistance in developing more effective critical thinking skills.

Male high school students scored highest in the Teamwork skill area (M = 19.44), followed by the Leadership skill area (M = 17.97). These results suggest that male high school students are being taught to work as part of a team and that they tend to be effective leaders of others. This student population also scored lowest in the Critical Thinking skill area (M = 16.09), followed by the Work Ethic skill area (M = 17.24). Male high school students need the most help with developing critical thinking/problem-solving skills and with developing a work ethic that will allow them to be productive employees. These skill areas are critical for achieving workplace excellence.

Female high school students scored highest in the Teamwork skill area (M = 20.21), followed by the Soft Skills skill area (M = 18.41). These results suggest that female high school students tend to be great team players and that they have social and emotional intelligence skills when working with other people. On the other hand, this student population scored lowest in the Career Management skill area (M = 17.06) and the Critical Thinking skill area (M = 17.33). For that reason, female high school students need to develop career management strategies and analytical skills to achieve workplace excellence.

<b>TABLE 10: WEI Means and Standard Deviations for High School Students</b>						
<b>SKILL AREAS</b>	<b>TOTAL POPULATION*</b>		<b>MALE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS†</b>		<b>FEMALE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS††</b>	
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	16.71	5.7	16.09	5.6	17.33	5.8
<b>Work Ethic</b>	17.63	6.4	17.24	6.6	18.01	6.2
<b>Career Management</b>	17.00	5.9	17.89	5.3	17.06	6.4

<b>Soft Skills</b>	18.17	5.6	17.93	5.9	18.41	5.3
<b>Leadership</b>	17.76	6.4	17.97	6.7	17.55	6.1
<b>Teamwork</b>	19.83	6.1	19.44	6.5	20.21	5.7
* Total (N = 297)						
† Male (N = 142)						
†† Female (N = 155)						

### *Unemployed Adults*

Tables 11 and 12 show the means and SDs for unemployed adults who completed the *WEI*. Table 11 reveals that unemployed blue-collar workers scored highest in the Work Ethic skill area (M = 19.32) and lowest in the Critical Thinking skill area (M = 15.38). These findings suggest that these workers have developed a strong work ethic but that they still need some assistance in critical thinking and logical problem solving. Table 12 shows that unemployed white-collar workers scored highest in the Teamwork skill area (M = 21.35) and lowest in the Critical Thinking skill area (M = 17.78). These results suggest that they have developed strong skills in working with others to achieve a goal but, like unemployed blue-collar workers, they need help in developing critical thinking skills in the workplace.

Unemployed, male blue-collar workers scored highest in the Work Ethic skill area (M = 19.41). They apparently understand the workplace and the requirements for developing and maintaining an effective work ethic. These workers scored lowest in the Career Management skill area (M = 15.67), suggesting that they have a difficult time in managing their careers and identifying ways to advance on the job. In contrast, unemployed, male white-collar workers scored highest in the Teamwork skill area (M = 21.53). They scored lowest in the Critical Thinking skill area (M = 17.53) and Leadership skill area (M = 18.67). Thus, unemployed, male white-collar workers have developed the skills necessary to work with others on projects, but they need additional training in thinking critically about problems in the workplace and in leading others to complete projects and tasks effectively.

Unemployed, female blue-collar workers scored highest in the Teamwork skill area (M = 19.45), followed by the Work Ethic skill area (M = 19.23). These findings suggest that

they work well with others and demonstrate a great work ethic (dependability, timeliness, diligence) in the workplace. On the other hand, unemployed, female blue-collar workers scored lowest in the Critical Thinking skill area (M = 15.27) and the Leadership skill area (M = 15.97). These results suggest that they do not possess the required skills to be able to think logically and solve problems systematically. In addition, they may lack the necessary skills to be an effective leader in the workplace. In contrast, unemployed, female white-collar workers scored highest in the Teamwork skill area (M = 21.16) and Soft Skills skill area (M = 20.76). Thus, they possess skills in working with others as part of a team and have excellent communication and listening skills. They scored lowest in the Critical Thinking skill area (M = 18.01) and, consequently, may need help in developing the ability to process information in a logical manner.

**TABLE 11: WEI Means and Standard Deviations  
for Unemployed Blue-Collar Workers**

SKILL AREAS	TOTAL POPULATION*		MALE BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS <sup>†</sup>		FEMALE BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS <sup>††</sup>	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	15.38	7.1	16.49	7.7	15.27	6.5
<b>Work Ethic</b>	19.32	7.0	19.41	6.8	19.23	7.1
<b>Career Management</b>	15.93	6.3	15.67	6.3	16.18	6.2
<b>Soft Skills</b>	17.73	6.8	17.11	6.6	18.34	6.9
<b>Leadership</b>	16.09	7.4	16.21	7.6	15.97	7.1
<b>Teamwork</b>	19.06	6.5	18.67	6.1	19.45	6.9

\* Total (N = 361)

<sup>†</sup> Male (N = 169)

<sup>††</sup> Female (N = 192)

**TABLE 12: *WEI* Means and Standard Deviations  
for Unemployed White-Collar Workers**

SKILL AREAS	TOTAL POPULATION*		MALE WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS <sup>†</sup>		FEMALE WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS <sup>††</sup>	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Critical Thinking</b>	17.78	6.5	17.53	6.7	18.01	6.3
<b>Work Ethic</b>	20.41	6.4	20.45	6.2	20.37	6.6
<b>Career Management</b>	18.90	6.3	18.72	6.1	19.07	6.5
<b>Soft Skills</b>	20.01	6.5	19.43	6.8	20.76	6.2
<b>Leadership</b>	18.55	6.7	18.67	6.7	18.43	6.6
<b>Teamwork</b>	21.35	6.5	21.53	6.1	21.16	6.9

\* Total (N = 303)  
<sup>†</sup> Male (N = 157)  
<sup>††</sup> Female (N = 146)

## Components of the *WEI*

The culmination of the research, development, and testing of the *WEI* has led to a final self-assessment consisting of 48 statements that have been grouped into six essential workplace excellence skill areas: Critical Thinking, Work Ethic, Career Management, Soft Skills, Leadership, and Teamwork. Participants read each statement and use a modified Likert scale to rate the applicability of the statement to their current workplace performance.

The *WEI* also includes scoring directions, a scoring profile, descriptions of the six essential workplace excellence skill areas, and an interpretive guide that offers strategies for individuals to become more effective and efficient employees. Finally, the self-assessment provides a success plan to identify and address deficient areas in career readiness and to set goals for personal and professional development.

## **Target Audience for the *WEI***

The *WEI* is appropriate for distribution to individuals or groups and is intended for use in programs that provide career counseling, job search assistance, or vocational guidance including:

- comprehensive career guidance programs
- employment counseling programs
- rehabilitation counseling programs
- college counseling centers
- college career and placement offices
- high school guidance programs
- outplacement programs
- prisons and parole-oriented programs
- military transition programs
- school-to-work programs
- welfare-to-work programs
- employee development programs

The *WEI* is written for individuals at or above the 9<sup>th</sup> grade reading level, according to the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. Because none of the items are gender-specific, the self-assessment is appropriate for a variety of practitioners and client and student populations.

## **Administration of the *WEI***

The *WEI* requires a pen or a pencil and takes approximately 15–20 minutes to complete. The first page of the self-assessment contains spaces for data including name, date, phone, and email. Administrators of the *WEI* should ask participants to fill in the required information. Then they should ask them to follow along as they read aloud the description of the *WEI* and the directions on the first page. Next, administrators should ensure that participants clearly understand the instructions and the response format. Finally, they should encourage participants to read all 48 statements and to mark their responses directly on the inventory booklet.

The *WEI* uses a series of steps to guide participants through the self-assessment:

- *Step 1:* As mentioned earlier, the *WEI* contains 48 statements, with 8 statements in each of the 6 workplace excellence skill areas. In this step, participants are provided directions in taking the self-assessment. They are instructed to read the opening phrase that appears in boldfaced type before reading the statement that completes the phrase. Then participants are asked to circle the response that describes them based on the following modified Likert scale:

**3 = Very Descriptive   2 = Somewhat Descriptive   1 = Not Descriptive**

Examples are provided to clarify the instructions for participants.

- *Step 2:* Participants are asked to add up the scores that they circled for each workplace excellence skill area in Step 1. Then they are instructed to place the total score for each skill area in the designated space on the right-side of the self-assessment.
- *Step 3:* For this step, participants are directed to transfer their total scores from Step 2 to the first column of the table. Then they are asked to use the designated score levels to determine if their total scores are high, average, or low and to record these score levels in the second column of the table. Finally, they are instructed to read a description of each of the score levels to evaluate their current status in each of the six workplace excellence skill areas.
- *Step 4:* To interpret their profiles, participants are asked to locate the workplace excellence skill areas in which their score level was low, read the profile descriptions of these skill areas, and place check marks in front of the boldfaced statements that they believe they are already doing. Participants are directed to repeat this task for the sections in which their scores levels were average or high. Participants can also be instructed to reflect on the conversation starters/journal prompts that follow the boldfaced statements or to complete these activities and submit their written responses to administrators.
- *Step 5:* For this step, participants are instructed to create a success plan. This plan helps them to identify the workplace excellence skills that need to be developed and to set achievable goals toward acquiring these skills.

## Scoring of the *WEI*

The *WEI* yields content-referenced scores in the form of raw scores. For this self-assessment, the raw scores are the point totals for each of the six essential workplace excellence skill areas. The performance of individual participants or groups of participants can only be evaluated in terms of the mean scores for the skill areas:

- *Low Scores (8–13)*: Participants who receive this score level for a specific workplace excellence skill area need to find ways to develop essential competencies in that area and could benefit from coaching or mentoring. Having an awareness of weak employability skills in a particular area and planning and implementing strategies to improve these skills help individuals achieve workplace and career success.
- *Average Scores (14–18)*: Participants who receive this score level for a specific workplace excellence skill area have developed some employability skills in that area. However, these individuals could benefit from additional coaching or mentoring to become more effective employees.
- *High Scores (19–24)*: Participants who receive this score level for a specific workplace excellence skill area have developed strong employability skills in that area by demonstrating professionalism and excellence in their job responsibilities.

Administrators should relay to participants that it is not necessary to achieve high scores in all workplace excellence skill areas of the *WEI*. This self-assessment is designed to help individuals explore their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Some participants may have average or low scores in one essential skills area and may need to concentrate on that area to improve their workplace excellence. Others may score in the average or low ranges for most or all of the six essential skill areas. Still others may score in the high or high-average range in one or two skill areas. To illustrate this point, administrators should refer to the case study below.

### **Case Study Using the WEI**

Justin is about to graduate and enter the workplace in his first professional job. He is concerned that he will not be able to understand or navigate the corporate environment. After all, his work experience has been limited to fast-food restaurants and summer jobs as a landscape laborer. He feels as if he is a talented web designer and is well-qualified to satisfy the demands of the position. However, he is unsure about professional conduct standards in the workplace and wants to be recognized as an effective employee. To help him assess his current workplace professionalism skills and target areas for growth, Justin completed the WEI. His scores for the six essential workplace skill areas are shown below:

*Critical Thinking: 18*

*Soft Skills: 12*

*Work Ethic: 14*

*Leadership: 23*

*Career Management: 17*

*Teamwork: 22*

The scoring ranges of the WEI include low (8–13), average (14–18), and high (19–24). Therefore, Justin has two scores that are in the high range: Leadership and Teamwork. To a prospective employer, these scores suggest that Justin has developed workplace excellence in these two areas and will probably be a good leader within the organization. He likely can develop a clear vision and can organize and motivate others to achieve that goal. In addition, Justin is a great team member, even when he is not the leader of the team. He is likely responsible for his own contributions toward a common goal, supportive of other team members and their individual tasks, and driven to ensure overall team success.

On the other hand, Justin has one score in the low range: Soft Skills. To a prospective employer, this score is a red flag that Justin lacks workplace excellence in his interpersonal interactions with others. His soft skill deficits might include difficulty in building and maintaining relationships; working with supervisors, coworkers, or clients; or resolving conflicts when they occur. Another potential red flag for prospective employers might be Justin's work ethic. Although his score of 14 is officially in the average range, it is still in the low-average part of this range. A career counselor who is working with Justin may want to suggest using the conversation starters/journal prompts in Step 4 to build and/or enhance the skills in deficit areas.

## Use of the *WEI* Results

Administrators should encourage participants to examine their *WEI* results to find their workplace excellence strengths and weaknesses. The low scores indicate the area(s) in which participants are likely to face the most barriers and need the most assistance and career counseling. Administrators can assist participants in improving these weak skill areas by engaging them in two activities: the use of conversation starters/journal prompts and the creation of a success plan.

## Conversation Starters/Journal Prompts

Step 4 of the *WEI* presents conversation starters/journal prompts under each boldfaced statement. Administrators should direct participants to the boldfaced statements that they checked and ask them to respond to the conversation starters/journal prompts that accompany the boldfaced statements. Participants' responses can be verbal responses, written journal entries, or, simply, catalysts for reflection.

## Success Plan

The creation of a success plan helps participants to recognize the workplace excellence skill areas they need to improve and to devise an action plan for improvement. Administrators should encourage participants to identify achievable goals for these weak skill areas and the actions or strategies they need to perform to meet the established goals.

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