

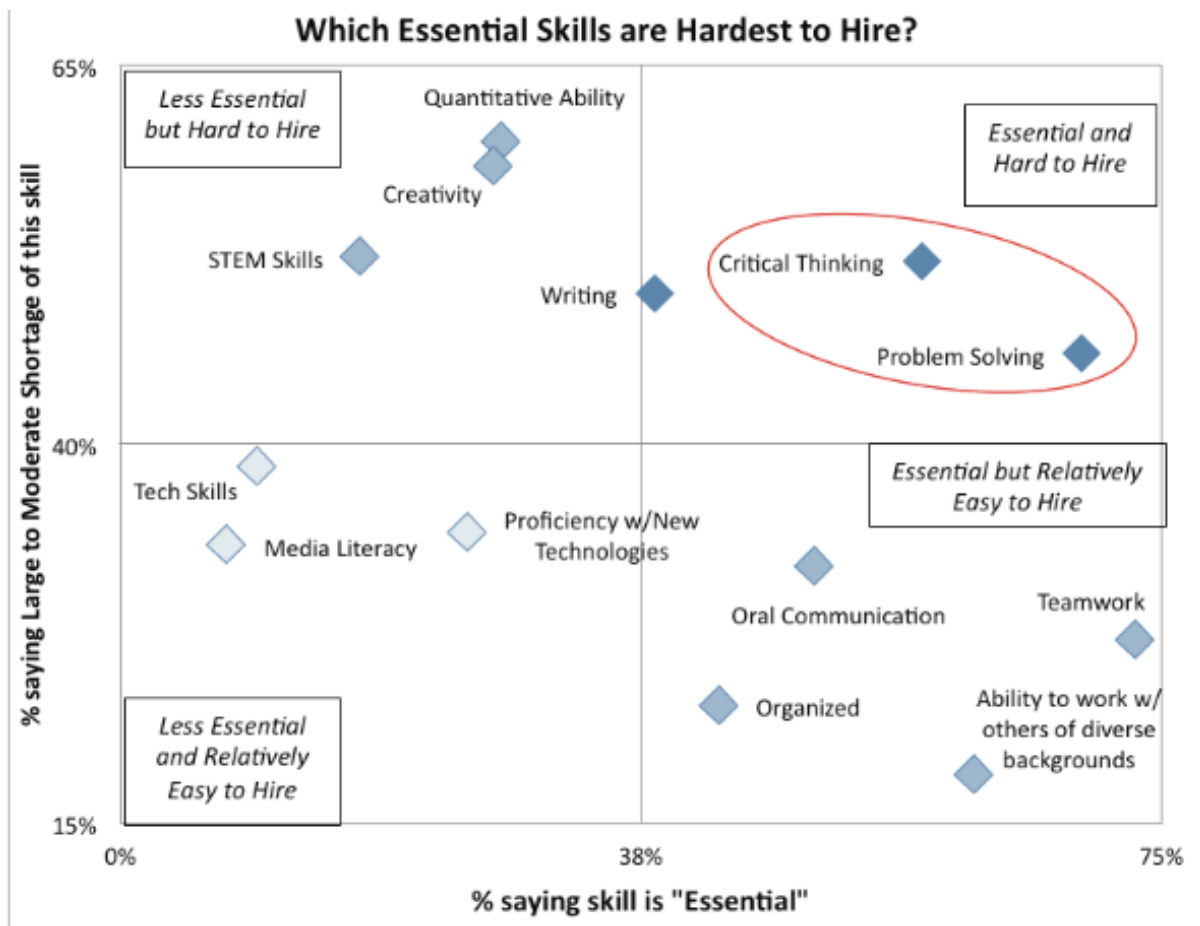
Marketplace K-12

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Competency-Based Education Gets Employers' Attention

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Washington, D.C.

As U.S. businesses continue to express concerns about the ability to hire people with adequate job preparation, a group of executives met here this week to discuss how competency-based education could fill the gaps to meet workforce needs.

The Committee for Economic Development, a nonpartisan public policy group of business and education leaders committed to improving the growth and productivity of the economy, convened the panel Wednesday, after a survey identified the skills most needed and most difficult to find in the workplace. The conclusions of the 52 survey respondents—captured in the quadrant chart above—was that critical thinking and problem solving in job applicants are the most essential, but hardest to find.

“The ability to learn, analyze, ask good questions, and do good problem solving is really critical,” said Teresa Carlson, the vice president of the worldwide public sector at Amazon Web Services. Graduates with today’s computer science skills, for instance, can find that their knowledge is outdated within two to three years. “How do you teach students and adults to continually update their skills?”

Jack Lynch, CEO of Renaissance Learning, a K-12 assessment and learning analytics company, agreed that an ongoing issue is how quickly skills are outdated. “I hire a lot of engineers, and [people with] computer science degrees,” he said. Within about 48 months, their skills are obsolete. He identified “learning how to learn” as one of the chief skills for students in higher education.

Lynch—the only K-12 representative on a panel focused primarily on higher education—questioned whether universities should be seen as vocational schools, or have a higher purpose. “As we rush to certification, skills and competencies, one of the things we need to keep in mind is that one of the chief values of a higher education is to enlighten, to actually help college students become good citizens, become good thinkers.”

Among the top competencies being sought are “the ability to work with others of diverse backgrounds,” and “teamwork/collaboration.”



Earl Graves Jr., president and CEO of Black Enterprise, a multimedia company, cautioned the audience that “the biggest gap in this country, which disproportionately affects black and brown kids is, with educational opportunities.” Gaining certification for competency-based skills should not come at the expense of making sure students get a strong foundational education. “I don’t think anyone would suggest we stop educating people in 8th grade, and onramping them for jobs,” he said. A high school diploma should come first, he said.

Changing Workforce

About one-third of people in the United States don’t work in jobs, said Carl Camden, president and CEO of Kelly Services, which provides staffing services to companies, deploying about 1 million workers from Ph.D. scientists to warehouse workers. “We talk a lot about preparing people for jobs in a world where jobs are declining,” he said. Camden said the advice his grandparents used to hear—“get a good trade, get a good skill, be competent”—is more likely to be the future admonishment of parents, compared to the “get a good job” advice he heard growing up.

Camden urged the group to think about policy that allows “multiple exits out” of education, so people can “pursue their life goals, vs. what we think [they should pursue] as life goals.”

Competency-based education is a “real opportunity” to match what employers need with people who already have what they need “As people progress through their lives, they learn...[but] if you go to many universities, they don’t care what you’ve learned,” said Betty Vandenbosch, president of Kaplan University, where the average student is 34 years old.

Credit: The chart and graph are provided by the Committee for Economic Development.

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Michele Molnar is associate editor of *EdWeek Market Brief*. She began working as a contributing writer for *Education Week* in 2012, blogging about parents' influence on education. Michele joined the staff in 2013 to cover the intersection of education and business in the PreK-12 marketplace.

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