

# Management Education Programs Reviewed for In-Demand Job Skills Content

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## Abstract

*This paper describes the process used in an organizational behavior course to have students identify those business topics, courses and academic programs needed to take advantage of contingent work as a viable employment option. The study findings were presented to the School of Business faculty for incorporation in the curriculum review process.*

**Key Words:** *Generation Y, Netters, Contingent Workforce, Free Agent, Skill-Sets*

**Disciplines:** *All Business Disciplines*

## 1.0 Introduction

According to a recent Department of Labor report, contingent workers are the wave of the future. As a significant segment of the labor force, they are highly recruited by business and industry. Companies feel that employing contingent workers will help them to be domestically and globally competitive. This paper examines potential alternatives that can be used in business schools to prepare students to take advantage of contingent work as an employment niche in their future career choices. This topic deserves attention on the undergraduate level for assisting students in the development of skill sets that will prepare them for contingent work as "free agents".

In response to the university's ten-year strategic planning effort the business management curriculum was reviewed for relevant in-demand job skills. It was determined that a structured inquiry was needed to obtain feedback from students, human resource professionals, and business and industry on those skill sets considered most useful for

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success in a business career. The initial study focused on undergraduate students from the major disciplines of management, marketing, accounting, entrepreneurship, and banking and finance.

## 2.0 Contingent Work and Generation Y

Contingent work has become increasingly prevalent. From 1982 to 1992 US employment in the contingent sector has increased 250%, compared to a 20% increase in overall employment (Morrow, 1993). Polivka and Nardone (1998) in the *Monthly Labor Review* defined contingent workers as individuals who "do not have an explicit or implicit contract for long-term employment or have one in which the minimum hours of work can vary in a nonsystematic way". Contingent workers, therefore, can be unskilled, semi-skilled or even highly skilled (such as adjunct faculty, faculty working under annual contracts, and managers serving as temporary consultants for a company).

The need to seriously regard the Generation X contingent worker is not limited to the business field. Increasingly, professors in other disciplines are making students aware of the realities of the new workplace, the full scope of the American economy, and the need for increased flexibility with marketable skills. E.J. Morgan, a recruiter with Manpower Professional in Tucson, Arizona, states that the trend toward more flexible staffing is heading upward and predicts "in the engineering field 50% could be contract employees in the next ten years (Cohen, 2000).

"Generation Y", "net generation" or "netters", "echo generation", and other terms have been used to describe the younger generation entering America's workforce. The numbers are impressive. They are the 81 million children born between 1977 and 1997. "This is the first generation to be raised with the Internet, says Don Tapscott, author of *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*. "These kids are a part of a big revolution that is changing everything. When they enter the workforce, they bring a very different culture with them and a very different view of authority, of work, and of innovation" (Tapscott, 1997).

Being a contingent worker has definite advantages. One of the biggest benefits is the flexibility that this type of work contract can provide (Crittenden, 1994; Thomson, 1995). Van Dyne and Soan (1998)

supported this assertion by stating that "contingent work allows individuals to balance personal and nonwork objectives such as educational goals, family and household responsibilities, freedom to travel, and a preference for seasonal hours". In addition, those with higher levels of education and are employed in contingent positions requiring high skill levels can earn more money than those holding traditional jobs (Hipple et al., 1996). Harrington (1999) reports that many of the "free agents" earn over \$100 per hour and prefer the lifestyle of contingent work, gaining new skills as they progress and eventually becoming employed in regular jobs or opening up a consulting company. Many of the students in this study aspire to the lifestyle of a free agent.

### 2.1 Teaching In-Demand Workplace Skills

The need to incorporate marketplace skills into the business curriculum is not a novel idea. What is novel is the approach to examine what the recipient population actually considers relevant. Failure to include in-demand job skills in the instructional program is often attributed to educators not knowing which factors to stress or how to instill the needed personal qualities in students. Bartholome (1991) stressed that if business educators are to prepare students for and about business, then what businesses want should be a major influence on what students are taught. Business educators must work with businesses in identifying workplace skill curricula. Anderson-Yates, Coffman, and Baker (1991) found that a majority of instructors felt very prepared to teach "work behavior/work ethics" and "maintain working relationships" competencies. They were not prepared or were uncomfortable teaching such competencies as "identify leadership style required for effective teamwork" and "be creative to meet changing needs. Business instructors reported using their personal experiences to teach workplace skill sets with little reliance on their formal college training". The skill content that comes from personal experience was reportedly more difficult to teach.

### 2.2 Traditional Management Norms Challenged

Teenage entrepreneurs are securing millions of dollars in venture capital, developing record-breaking startup companies, and are in effect redefining the workplace environment. Challenges are being made to the more traditional organization theories on productivity, team work and

company loyalty. In *Rebuilding America's Workforce*, Kolberg and Smith (1991) observed "Frederick Taylor's system called for very specific divisions of work, with laborers doing nothing more than repetitive physical assembly. It was the right system for standardized, mass production needs of its time, but it is the wrong system for today".

Technology and teams are the characteristic partners for business success and valued by Generation X who are roughly 15% of today's workforce (Tulgan and Martin, 2002). Students currently in business programs will face the challenges of managing generational employees and their varying expectations. Douglas McGregor's Theory Y under girds the management strategy that will maximize a productive environment for the Generation Y employee with the basic premise that employees will contribute more to the organization if they are treated responsibly and valued (McGregor, 1960).

Different management systems will need to be implemented to fit the culture of the new breed workforce. Technology has supported a new paradigm in the world of work. It is not only spawning a quicker more efficient way of manipulating data but has spawned a revolution in knowledge management. Flexibility, just-in-time initiatives, interpersonal skills, ethical business conduct, social responsibility, and differing loyalties characterize the skill sets needed for contingent work. Universities will need to examine curriculum offerings for workplace relevancy. Students will need a kaleidoscope of skills to navigate the new millennium business environment. Don Tapscott (1997) postulates that the net generation will offer particular challenges for the traditional organization and the traditional manager. That faced with resistance the "N-Genres" will abandon the more status quo business enterprises in favor of creating their own companies. This attitude gives rise to the "net generation contingent worker" (Jackson, 2001). Employees who negotiate new generation workforce cultural changes.

### 3.0 Data Collection and Analysis

In Section I, survey respondents identified *communication and computer related skills* as the most important factors for success in the contingent workforce. *Networking, familiarity with advanced computer software, public speaking and articulation skills* received top ratings from respondents. *Leadership skills* also received top ratings. The lowest

rating was the personal knowledge component, particularly the areas of foreign languages, international culture and investment planning. This seems to reflect a general perception that such skills have only modest effects on the preparation for a professional career in the contingent workforce.

In Section II of the survey *on-the-job training and higher specialization within a major* received the highest ratings, while foreign exchange programs fell significantly below the others. In terms of program categories, the survey revealed that *practical training* and programs involving *direct access to business resources* are valued the most. Findings were shared with the School of Business faculty for consideration in the curriculum and course revision process. Students evidenced a very high degree of enthusiasm studying a topic relevant to their constituent group.

#### SECTION I – Figure 1 – Survey Items

This survey focuses on your perception of methods that could be used to close the gaps between what you are currently taught in higher education and your need for training and education that would enable you to be successful in the future as a contingent worker.

#### Section I

Please indicate the extent to which each topic or class listed below would be beneficial in preparing you for the contingent workforce. Circle one response per statement to indicate your perception of benefits. The following rating scale will be used:

- (5) To a very great extent
- (4) To a great extent
- (3) To a moderate extent
- (2) To a small extent
- (1) To no extent

1. Foreign language training
2. Investment planning
3. Advanced computer software
4. Money management
5. Networking skills (interpersonal)
6. Retirement planning
8. Business etiquette
7. Training on how to research companies
9. Technical training on computers
10. Analysis of life insurance/ medical insurance policies
12. Leadership skills
11. Family management
13. Articulation skills
14. Entrepreneurship skills
15. Management of meetings
16. Internet Training
17. Contracting skills
18. International cultural awareness
19. Public speaking
20. Project management
21. Small group management
22. Course on rights of temporary workers
23. Interviewing skills training
24. Transformation training: - going from college to being on your own
25. Taxation class
26. Web page development
27. Computer course on e-commerce
28. Computer programming
29. Course on self-promotion
30. Corporate survival
31. Time management
32. Course on investment planning
33. Negotiating skills

## Section II. Figure 2

Please indicate the extent to which each academic program or program alteration below would be beneficial in preparing you for the contingent workforce. Circle one response per statement to indicate your perception of benefits. The following rating scale will be used:

(5) To a very great extent (4) To a great extent (3) To a moderate extent (2) To a small extent (1) To no extent

1. Mandatory internship
2. Cooperative education program
3. Certificate programs (i.e. Microsoft Certification)
4. Seminars on business related topics
5. Foreign exchange program
6. Experiential/hand-on workshops
7. Participate in a student-led business venture
8. Field trips (i.e. to Wall Street)
9. More practical rather than theoretical courses
10. Courses that involve business case analyses
11. Access to a business resource center
12. Simulation laboratory
13. Class that operates like a business, with mock jobs and time sheets, and jobs changing weekly
14. Hands-on workshops
15. School of Business partnership with employment agencies
16. More specialization within major
17. More business electives
18. More visits by companies (with younger visitors that serve as role models)
19. Role plays
20. Debates
21. Student teaching
22. Company representatives to teach a course
23. Use on-the-job training
24. More student use of laptop computers
25. Five year MBA program

**SECTION I: FIGURE 3**  
**How Beneficial are "Skills/Topics" in the Preparation of a Contingent Worker**

Ques.	Skill/Topic	CAT	Score					N	Mean	SD	95% (*t36)
			(5)	(4)	(3)	(2)	(1)				
1	Foreign language training	E	59	77	79	30	5	250	3.62	1.04	0.11
2	Advanced computer software	A	153	63	34	7	2	259	4.38	0.87	0.09
3	Networking skills (interpersonal)	A	171	56	15	7	3	253	4.51	0.84	0.09
4	Business etiquette	B	132	80	29	6	2	249	4.34	0.84	0.09
5	Technical training on computers	A	109	86	43	11	3	252	4.14	0.95	0.1
6	Leadership skills	C	157	65	21	6	0	252	4.99	0.75	0.08
7	Articulation skills	B	141	75	31	6	2	255	4.36	0.84	0.09
8	Entrepreneurship skills	C	75	91	74	14	5	259	3.84	0.97	0.1
9	Internet training	A	118	72	49	12	5	256	4.12	1	0.11
10	Contracting skill	D	46	99	89	23	10	258	3.54	1.01	0.11
11	International cultural awareness	E	68	94	61	27	4	254	3.77	1.01	0.11
12	Public speaking	B	138	89	28	6	1	262	4.36	0.79	0.08
13	Project management	D	102	99	47	6	3	257	4.13	0.87	0.09
14	Small group management	C	80	99	56	9	7	251	3.94	0.97	0.1
15	Course on temporary workers' rights	E	36	56	102	44	21	259	3.16	1.12	0.12
16	Interviewing skills training	D	115	68	50	15	4	252	4.09	1.02	0.11
17	Transformation training	E	87	76	63	20	8	254	3.84	1.08	0.11
18	Corporate survival	C	112	86	40	14	4	256	4.13	0.97	0.1
19	Time management	D	137	61	41	6	2	250	4.29	0.92	0.1
20	Course on investment planning	F	95	93	48	14	7	257	3.99	1.01	0.11
21	Negotiating skills	B	100	94	44	13	3	254	4.08	0.94	0.1



SECTION II:

Figure 4: How Beneficial are "Programs" in the Preparation of a  
Contingent Worker

Ques.	Skill/Topic	CAT	Scores					N	Mean	SD	95% (P&S)
			(9)	(4)	(0)	(2)	(1)				
1	Mandatory internship	X	115	64	53	17	4	253	4.06	1	0.11
2	Cooperative education program	W	73	93	62	19	4	251	3.84	1	0.11
3	Certificate program (s.g. Microsoft Certification)	W	90	80	59	21	4	254	3.91	1	0.11
4	Seminars on business related topics	Y	75	93	67	12	1	248	3.92	0.9	0.1
5	Foreign exchange program	W	36	85	89	37	12	259	3.37	1	0.11
6	Experiential/hand s-on workshops	X	114	75	49	13	5	256	4.09	1	0.11
7	More practical rather than theoretical courses	X	103	66	48	19	2	238	4.05	1	0.11
8	Courses that involve business case analyses	Y	77	97	63	11	3	251	3.93	0.9	0.1
9	Access to a business resource center	Z	110	76	54	9	2	251	4.13	0.9	0.1
10	Simulation laboratory	Y	54	89	73	24	8	248	3.63	1	0.11
11	School of Business to create partnerships with employment agencies	Z	116	55	36	9	9	225	4.16	1.1	0.12

Figure 4 continued

12	More specialization within a major	W	140	62	31	11	3	247	4.32	0.9	0.1
13	More business electives	Y	91	81	59	14	4	249	3.97	1	0.11
14	On-the-job training	X	139	68	32	4	2	245	4.38	0.8	0.09

#### 4.0 Conclusions

In order for college students to enhance their potential to become successful contingent workers for the future, they need to learn how to create a market niche for themselves. Colleges and universities are excellent resources. Those who are free agents need to stay current with the latest technology and software applications, states Barbara Viola, president of a consulting and staffing firm (Harrington, 1999). College students need to learn how to operate in a business world "that has become more project-oriented," asserts Barhold of IBM's Global Services Unit (Harrington, 1999), where employees complete a project and move on to a new job. A survey conducted by Pricewaterhouse-Coopers revealed that two major priorities of graduating business students around the globe are career development and personal growth (Whitaker, 1999). This should be of no surprise considering the growth of the contingent workforce and the lack of job security provided by companies today. Students have to take charge of their own careers and they need preparation and guidance for this through academia.

The study provides implications for curriculum enhancements, particularly in the area of increased international content in the business curriculum and planned interactions with businesses. Incorporation of content specific issues relative to preparation for contingent work adds a future oriented feature to the business program. Emphasis on curriculum issues, courses, topics and content will assist students in being better prepared to function successfully in contingent work situations in domestic and global markets.

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