



OLMP: Soft Skills in the Manufacturing Sector

Employer Engagement Summary Report



November 2020

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Introduction

Literacy Link South Central (LLSC) is leading an Ontario Labour Market Partnership project to explore soft skills and develop an assessment tool for these skills to support the manufacturing sector. As part of this project, employers were interviewed. This report is a summary of the key highlights from these interviews.

A narrative approach was used to collect information by conducting individual interviews with 11 employers in the London Economic Region (LER). The use of qualitative methods allowed the researcher to study issues in depth, with data collection often occurring through open-ended questions, permitting one to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view. The results of this method include a wealth of detailed information about the employers; therefore, leading to an increase in the depth of understanding of these employers.

As noted above, 11 employer interviews were conducted via telephone and Zoom between August 13 and October 6, 2020. The employers who were interviewed include:

NAICS Codes

- Three from NAICS 336 (Transportation Equipment Manufacturing)
- Three from NAICS 311 and 312 (Food and Beverage Manufacturing)
- Five from NAICS 331, 332 and 333 (Metal, Metal Product, and Machinery Manufacturing)

Geographic Area

- Four from Oxford County
- One from Elgin County
- Two from Middlesex County
- Four from London

Size of Employer

- The total number of employees at each company ranged from 5 to 1,000, with an average of 233 employees

For the most part, individuals who participated in the interviews worked in the Human Resources (HR) area of the company. In some instances, frontline supervisors/managers joined the HR staff in the interview, and some interviews were conducted with the owner/CEO/General Manager of the company.

The Interviews

Employers were asked a series of questions designed to elicit their thoughts and opinions about their workplace and the soft skills required for frontline, entry-level positions. These positions were called a variety of terms, including: Production Associates, Production Team Members, Production Team, Packaging Team Members, Customer Service Representatives, Machinists, Labourer, Manufacturing Technician, and Production Employees.

The questions asked during the interviews included:

1. We're going to start by talking about the recruitment of entry-level workers at your company (Production Worker, Production Team Member, General Labourer)
 - a) What level of education do you require for this level of position? Is there any flexibility in this?
 - b) What type of skills do you require for this level of position?
 - c) Are there other qualifications you look for in these positions?
 - d) What type of assessments do you conduct prior to hiring an individual for an entry-level position?
 - e) How many positions do you have at this level?
 - f) How often do these positions turnover? What is the turnover challenge? Why do people leave the company? (location, wage, shift availability, fit, etc.) Where are you seeing people in these positions having less success?
 - g) Where do you source talent from for entry-level positions?
2. We did a review of literature and research studies and have identified a list of soft skills that are that were rated as the top skills in the manufacturing sector. Those skills are communication, teamwork / working with others / collaboration, analytical skills (problem solving), organizational skills and attention to detail.

Other top rated soft skills are: Accountability/responsibility, attitude, and professionalism.

- a) Are these the soft skills you are looking for in your entry-level positions? (review list, confirm or not)
- b) Are there other soft skills that are important for your entry-level positions?
- c) Which are the most important soft skills for entry-level positions? (rate final list)
- d) What are you seeing in terms of the soft skills of people you are hiring for entry-level positions? How do you check for soft skills? Are you finding people have these soft skills?
- e) Would you be interested in an assessment tool to help you assess potential workers' soft skills?
- f) If yes, what would make an assessment tool easy for you to use?

3. We are interviewing a number of companies in the manufacturing sector and are then going to develop a draft assessment tool for the top rated soft skills
 - a) We are thinking part of the assessment tool will be based on providing real-life work scenarios to people. Would you be interested in providing content to help write scenarios for part of the assessment tool?
 - b) Would you be willing to test/pilot the assessment tool and provide us with feedback on it?

4. Is there anything else you would like to add that I haven't asked you about?

This report provides a summary of the key findings that emerged from the employer interviews in three areas:

- A. Recruitment of entry-level workers
- B. Soft skills of entry-level workers
- C. Soft skills assessment tool

Details about the findings in each of these areas are provided on the following pages.

A. Recruitment of Entry-level Workers

Level of Education Required

For the most part, employers that were interviewed do not have a minimum requirement for the level of education of their entry-level workers. The findings about level of education requirements for entry-level workers include:

- 36.4% of employers have no minimum requirement, though most of their entry-level workers do have a high school diploma/have completed grade 12
- 18.2% of employers prefer grade 12, but do not require it
- 18.2% say they require high school/grade 12, but that it is not a “hard and fast rule”
- 18.2% of employers require grade 12
- 9.1% require grade 10, but will hire individuals who do not meet this requirement

Type of Skills Required

Many employers do not have a set of requirements for entry-level positions. The employers interviewed are looking for a variety of skills for the entry-level positions. This variety highlights the range of work being conducted in the three manufacturing sub-sectors involved in this project. Findings about types of skills required include:

- 27.3% of employers require the following types of skills for entry-level workers:
 - Overall handiness – knowledge of and ability to use power and hand tools, cutting tools, woodworking tools, etc.
 - Basic English skills/Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) Level 4
 - Ability to read and write/general communication skills
 - Physical dexterity, good hand eye coordination
- 18.2% of employers require the following types of skills for entry-level workers:
 - Ability to measure/weigh/math skills
 - Problem solving skills, some cognitive skills
- 9.1% of employers require the following types of skills for entry-level workers:
 - Not colour blind
 - Be able to use a computer/spreadsheets
 - Ability to lift 50 pounds
 - Promote a positive team experience
 - Reliable, show up to work
 - Have a valid driver’s license
 - Have transferable skills from other settings

Other Qualifications

Other qualifications employers are looking for in their entry-level positions include:

- Accurate
- Problem solving, trouble shooting
- Proactive
- Love learning
- Can work in a fast paced environment
- Adaptability
- Customer service
- Willing to re-locate
- Individual looking for a long-term, stable career
- Willingness to work shifts
- Can work in a hot/cold environment
- Stable work history
- 25 years of age or older
- Food background
- Working with others

Assets that are preferred, but not required for entry-level workers are:

- Hands on experience or experience in the manufacturing sector (63.6% of employers)
- Some technical education. For example, a manufacturing course at Fanshawe College (18.2% of employers)
- Some chemistry knowledge/interest (9.1% of employers)
- Ability to read blueprints, drawings (9.1% of employers)
- Licensed to operate a fork truck/overhead crane (9.1% of employers)

Assessments Conducted Prior to Hiring

Almost half of employers (45.5%) do not conduct an assessment prior to hiring an individual for an entry-level position. Employers that are conducting assessments are doing them in the following areas:

- Level of English (18.2% of employers)
- Fit with the employer's culture. For example, utilizing a three-month probation with another company to assess long-term suitability for employment, or interview questions (18.2% of employers)
- Online behavioural analysis/profile. For example: The Culture Index, or Caliper Profile Assessment. (18.2% of employers)
- Math skills (18.2% of employers)
- Attention to detail (for example: identify differences in two pictures, transfer your resume onto an application form, providing different instructions on the application form – write your answer, print your answer) (18.2% of employers)
- Fine and gross motor dexterity and coordination (for example: the Purdue Pegboard) (9.1% of employers)
- Colour blindness (9.1% of employers)
- Sample of work – practical application of skills (9.1% of employers)

Turnover Challenges

The turnover rate of entry-level workers varies across the employers interviewed for the project, with:

- About one third reporting some or low turnover rates
- Another third reporting 24% to 35% per year as a turnover rate
- The final third report fairly high or 60% per year as a turnover rate

Reported turnover challenges include a mix of voluntary and involuntary reasons, with the most frequently mentioned reason being wages (too low). 45.5% of employers cited this as a turnover challenge. Other frequently mentioned challenges include:

- Lack of detailed training (27.3% of employers)
- Rotating shifts/shift work (18.2% of employers)
- Can't grasp skills required (18.2% of employers)
- Environment (too hot, too cold) (18.2% of employers)
- Not a fit (18.2% of employers)

Other turnover challenges mentioned by individual employers include:

- | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| • COVID | • Personal hygiene | • Going back to school |
| • Location | • Personal issues | • Retiring |
| • Mandatory overtime | • Too busy | • First job/getting experience |
| • Cultural issues | • Repetitive work | • Position is a stepping stone |

Sources of Talent

Employers reported that they have a high level of success with recruiting for entry-level positions using internal referrals, and that most hiring is done this way. The top places from which talent is being sourced for entry-level positions include:

- Indeed (<https://ca.indeed.com/>) (81.8% of employers)
- Internal referral program (incentive program for employees) (63.6% of employers)
- Word of mouth (36.4% of employers)
- Local employment agencies (27.3% of employers)
- Facebook (27.3% of employers)

Other mentioned places for sourcing talent for entry-level positions include:

- Job fairs
- Canada Employment Services/Canada Job Bank
- Ziprecruiter (<https://www.ziprecruiter.com/post-a-job>)
- Knighthunter (<https://www.knighthunter.com/jobs.aspx>)
- Work in Oxford
- Preview
- LinkedIn
- Temp agency
- Ads in the newspaper
- Colleges, universities, technical programs

B. Soft Skills of Entry-level Workers

Confirmation of Soft Skills Identified in the Literature Review

As part of this project a review of evidence-informed literature and research studies was conducted to identify the soft skills that are rated as the top soft skills in the manufacturing sector. The top-rated soft skills identified through this review are:

1. Communication
2. Teamwork, working with others, collaboration
3. Analytical skills (problem solving)
4. Organizational skills
5. Detail oriented

Other soft skills that were highly rated included accountability/responsibility, attitude, and professionalism.

The employers interviewed agreed that the top five soft skills listed above are skills they are looking for in their entry-level positions. 54.5% of employers added attitude as a top soft skill they are looking for, and 36.4% employers added accountability/responsibility to the top rated soft skills.

Other soft skills that were mentioned by employers as important for their entry-level positions include:

- Reliability, dependability (36.4% of employers)
- Flexibility, adaptability (27.3% of employers)
- Empathy (18.2% of employers)
- Work ethic (18.2% of employers)
- Aptitude to learn new things (9.1% of employers)
- Leadership skills (9.1% of employers)
- Drive (9.1% of employers)
- Openness (9.1% of employers)
- Customer service (9.1% of employers)
- Resiliency (9.1% of employers)

Most Important Soft Skills for Entry-level Positions

When asked which of the soft skills are the most important for their entry-level positions, the following eight soft skills emerged in the following order of priority:

1. Communication
2. Teamwork, working with others, collaboration
3. Problem solving (analytical skills)
4. Detail oriented
5. Organizational skills
6. Attitude
7. Dependability
8. Adaptability

Other, less frequently mentioned, skills named as being most important include:

- Work ethic
- Drive
- Customer service

Current Testing for Soft Skills

The employers that were interviewed for the project report the following about what they are seeing regarding the soft skills of people they are hiring for entry-level positions:

- 45.5% report that most potential hires or 60 to 70% of potential hires have the soft skills required for the position
- 18.2% report that it is “hit and miss” in terms of potential hires having the soft skills required for the position
- 18.2% report that potential hires do not have the soft skills required for the position
- 9.1% report that 20% do not have the soft skills, 10% do, and 70% have some of the soft skills required for the position
- 9.1% report that they are seeing teamwork skills, but that attitude and communication are a challenge

Employers are mainly checking for soft skills through the interview process. Many noted that they ask questions through individual interviews that are behavioural- and situational-based, getting potential hires to talk about real life situations and examples. Some employers also use a conversation approach as part of the interview process, getting potential hires to feel comfortable and talk about their life.

Some examples of questions asked during the interview process to assess soft skills include:

- What are your hobbies?
- How do you handle conflict?
- What would a co-worker tell us about you?
- How has it been working in a team?
- Tell me about a time when...
- What kind of a thought process would you go through to solve this problem?
- What did you enjoy about your last job? What was your least favourite part of your last job?
- Have you had any altercations with employees? How did you deal with that?
- Have you worked on a team? What was your experience?
- How have you improved the workplace?

In addition to the questions asked through the interview process, some employers are also looking at the employment history of the individual (i.e. gaps in the resume, moving quickly from job to job), and others are taking individuals on a tour of the shop floor and observing their level of engagement (i.e. are they interested?, do they ask questions?).

One of the main challenges noted by employers of basing an assessment of soft skills on the interview process is that some people can interview well and then not behave the same way once hired.

C. Soft Skills Assessment Tool

More than 90% of the employers who were interviewed stated that they would definitely be interested in using an assessment tool to help them assess potential workers' soft skills. One employer was unsure. Employers reported that the following would make the assessment tool easy to use:

- Be able to add it to the current assessment/interview process or be able to use it as part of the pre-assessment (potentially on the phone or online)
- Know how much time it takes to complete the assessment tool
- Have the assessment be short in length/concise/not too lengthy, with the amount of time required to complete the assessment ranging from five minutes to 30 minutes. The most frequently mentioned length was 10 to 15 minutes
- Do not have too much text/not too wordy, make it easy to understand, and easy for the employee to complete
- Use case studies/scenarios in the tool to assess soft skills. Many employers preferred the use of video scenarios, though some preferred the use of written scenarios and some preferred the use of both written and video scenarios
- Make it activity related (i.e. for detail oriented have them identify a shape)
- Make it simple, easy to manage, user friendly
- Make interpretation of the assessment tool results easy
 - Have the assessment mark itself
 - Make it intuitive
 - Have it automatically score and then be able to access data and graphs
 - Help with interpretation of the results
 - Provide visual aids
 - Provide clear guidelines
 - Provide KPI indicators, with graphs of where individuals sit based on results
- Supply a kit with the assessment tool – tools/resources to help individuals based on the results
- Have both a paper based tool and an electronic/online tool
- Make the tool free or minimal cost



For more information about this report, or Literacy Link South Central, please contact us at literacylink@llsc.on.ca or 519-681-7307.

The views expressed in this report are those of Literacy Link South Central, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Province. The Government of Ontario and its agencies are in no way bound by any recommendations contained in this document.



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