

Lesson Learned: The Need for Stakeholders' Collaborations

Chynette Nealy, University of Houston Downtown

Abstract

Skills Gap, defined as prospective employees without knowledge and skills required by employers or available in the labor pool. Simply put, a fundamental skills mismatch between employers and employees driven by the changing global business environments. The talent shortage of supply and demand is a difficult dilemma. Although difficult, it remains the central theme of discussion spanning decades between key stakeholders, e.g., employers across industries, academic business programs, current and future employees, numerous other agencies, and organizations. Much research has been done focusing on the skills gap that provide implications for further studies to address workplace challenges. In this article, selected extant business literature is used to illustrate how defining the “ideal” set of employability principles should not be taken lightly. A practical suggestion, collaborating with stakeholders, provides insight about an ignored synergy in academic business programs. Pedagogical approaches are shared focusing on writing skills gap using cross-disciplinary faculty like industry cross-sector collaborations. The “missing link” of collaborations generate ideas embedded with systematic interventions to help with addressing the skills gap. The lesson learned is stakeholders' collaborations should facilitate agile responses to challenges linked to global business environments. The author hopes this article will contribute to business literature related to bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Introduction

Employers across industries are constantly managing workplace changes, such as the effects of evolving technologies, workforce generations and talent shortages. A noticeable outcome of these effects, include but are not limited to, smaller hiring pools with candidates lacking industry experience or education in specific fields (Business Roundtable, n.d.; Fuller, Raman, Sage-Gavin & Hines, 2021; Mann Levesque, 2019). Thus, contributing to the skills gap, i.e., prospective employees without knowledge and skills required by employers or available in the labor pool (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2018; Waltower, 2023).

The skills gap creates complications across industries, such as forecasting human resource needs, developing pools of qualified candidates, and determining qualifications of these candidates (Clark, 2020; Society for Human Resource Management, n.d.). It is understandable employers from industry have various reasons or perceptions about skills gap. However, given their shared workforce challenges, as suggested by Fuller et al., (2021), “Employers can contribute to closing those skills gaps by creating the right cross-sector collaborations with educators, especially for hard-to-find skills” (Hidden Worker Untapped Talent, p.17). Paraphrasing, they proposed assessing the option of

cross-sector collaborations, i.e., sharing best practices and resources to address various workplace changes. Examples include but were not limited to collaborations (academia, not-for-profit stakeholders, technology providers, etc.) to provide (credential, professional certificates, or development, etc.) or sharing specialized pools of applicants common to specific categories (Hidden Worker Untapped Talent- Remediate lingering employment challenge, pp. 42- 46).

Regarding cross-sector collaborations, exploring this option seems reasonable given that global business environments are already heavily interconnected. Understanding the connections between this complex set of causes and effects that affect economic, demographic, and other factors can be problematic. However, in learning contexts, typically industry and academia concur skills gap ensue when learners lack knowledge of core or discipline- specific skills that meets the needs of potential employers (Chamorro-Premuzi & Frankiewicz, 2019; Marcus, 2017; McDonough, 2020; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019 & 2020; National Business Education Association, 2020). Take business programs, for example, Tipi & Killian (2023) suggested, “Because defining the “ideal” set of employability principles is not a task to be taken lightly, administrators might want to seek the input of industry advisory boards or other interested stakeholders” (Ensuring Every Graduate Is Ready to Work).

This article discusses practical considerations about collaborating among stakeholders to develop strategies for addressing the skills gap. In the following sections, suggestions embed in prior business literature related to employability skills and academic business programs highlights developing writing skills. A key takeaway focuses on collaborations among cross-disciplinary business faculty.

Literature Review

Drawing from selected extant business literature, several studies have reported how collaborating with internal and external stakeholders, e.g., professors, practitioners, business alumni, local or regional organizations, can be beneficial in bridging the skills gap (Abston & Soter, 2020; Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, 2018; Fuller & Raman, 2022; Lester & Smith, 2012; Moore & Morton, 2017; Novellis, 2019). Given limited space, this selected, but not exhaustive related literature, sheds light on the need to continue exploring strategies to address skills gap. Such research is timely given that findings can benchmark, as *italicized in the following excerpts*, information for discussing and aligning stakeholders’ concerns.

Lester & Smith (2012) College graduates enter the workforce armed with discipline knowledge and skill sets germane to their chosen occupation. However, many have *failed to accumulate professional business level acuity prior to graduation*. This void often results in criticisms from corporate directors. Business executives complain of time being wasted while newly hired graduates adjust to the unique culture and protocol of the commercial world. HR and business managers concur that because of this missing ingredient most new employee’s lack the professional competencies required to commence immediate productivity (page 3).

Novellis (2019). Business schools should be encouraged by the clear demand for talent. But what kind of talent employers are looking for is constantly shifting.

More than talent alone, *the need to innovate, build close ties, and extend collaborations with employers should be ingrained in the strategy of every business school.*

Abston & Soter (2020) Explored how two colleges of business at public, teaching-focused universities in the southeast addressed a *professionalism conundrum* – the lack of key skills that employers expect business students to have upon graduation in addition to the discipline-specific or technical knowledge and skills they have developed (page 266). ...*Collaborating with local businesses and bringing these business leaders to the campus can also be a strategy for encouraging students to be more professional* (page 269).

Although stakeholders support the basic premise that collaborating is helpful, at the same time, they recognize embedded challenges suggested by Tipi & Killian (2023) ... “No approach to employability can guarantee graduate success. However, if a school adopts a structured pathway that builds employability initiatives into the curriculum, all students will have the opportunity to enhance their skills” (Ensuring Every Graduate Is Ready to Work). The author, a business professor, concurs there is no single approach to ensuring successful employability. The goal should be to analyze strategic issues related to employability from the perspective of all stakeholders. Such collaborations promote ongoing dialogue in terms of recognizing and identifying possibilities for understanding the skills gap. Responding to these issues require systematic interventions with suitable timelines, longitudinal and/or immediate, for addressing continually evolving workplaces.

For example, MacDermott & Ortiz (2017) longitudinal review of literature about employability, aptly noted the following about soft skills.

“Historical wisdom in job readiness research suggests that this need for the ‘ready’ employee has always existed, and *despite many efforts to shrink the skills gap, it persists*. Increasingly, however, both employers and new graduates are aware of these necessary readiness skills and seem to agree on their importance. This creates a *perfect opportunity for business schools to foster curricular environments that support soft skills* achievement and provide both graduates and employers that important link to complete the chain of successful employability” (Conclusion section pages, 13-14).

Soft skills have been ranked as vital for the workplace by employers for decades. MacDermott & Ortiz explained the complexity of these soft skills, e.g., communication, problem-solving, teamwork, etc., spanning decades with underlying causes and effects. Although this longitudinal study noted limitations, it provided strategies for responding to Tipi & Killian (2023) suggestion about collaborating with stakeholders.

To emphasize one of these complex soft skills, communication, given its various definitions and forms, the following discussion focuses on written communication. The first line of the excerpt below illustrates this line of reasoning. Within the context of skills gap, Kleckner & Butz (2020) discussed research that captured continuous concerns about underperformances in communication skills. They provided implications useful for developing a timeline for collaborations. The last line stresses the importance of internal collaborations.

“Employer perceptions about undergraduate *communication skill* deficiency have been well-documented; however, *an effective strategy for filling those gaps has been elusive*. Years of research spanning both national and global survey populations have effectively established how substantial and widespread the problem is, yet the viable solutions they have provided are limited. The approach to analyzing the curriculum and its effects discussed in this article yield several conclusions. *First, when faculty and program administrators evaluate the curriculum, they must include the perspectives of the major stakeholders (i.e., students and employers)*” (p. 9).

For instance, like industry, academic business programs have a range of departments with multiple cross-disciplinary units (e.g., general business and marketing, accounting/finance and information systems). College -wide meetings would easily facilitate internal collaborations designed to identify strategies for improving written communication. According to Hynes & Stretcher (2008) research properly titled, *A Missing Link In Business Schools*, “... a much -ignored synergy across disciplines, particularly, between business communication and analytical subjects, would be beneficial to students as they prepare for professional life” (p. 207). They described an expected learning outcome of these collaborations, “...it is an attempt to encourage students to recall and apply the principles learned in one course to assignments in another course, in another discipline. It is hoped that more studies of this nature, which call for collaboration among professors in different departments within a college of business, will result in improved transfer of learning and a more integrated program of study” (pp.210- 211).

Pedagogically speaking, selected extant business literature above illustrates the need to apply collaborative changes to business programs. The “much-ignored synergy across disciplines,” noted above is a timely – Teachable Moment- embedded in the revised Bloom’s Taxonomy to generate new ideas from existing information (for a friendly reminder, read Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The following are examples for collaborations among faculty in different departments and program directors before meeting with other stakeholders.

Collaborative Sandbox

The ideas are limitless given the multiple cross-disciplinary units and content that may be discussed for addressing written communication. The author suggests using and making applicable changes to Hynes & Stretcher’ (2008) described model. The model provides a measurable learning objective – conduct an audience analysis and develop a written document suitable to that audience. Preliminary internal discussions are useful before collaborating with external stakeholders. Discussing a range of topics, e.g., core business knowledge, business issues/skills gap, and disciplined based competencies, should facilitate informed collaborations with stakeholders that produce a model document for assessing written communication. Examples are shared below.

Core Business Knowledge – The first example provides a writing assignment that can be used across disciplines in the College of Business. The assignment provides opportunities for students to think – conduct an audience analysis/based on their declared major, and – write about career choices. Faculty

should be able to assess if students are applying core knowledge linked to their declared major (for example, see Lawrence, 2013).

The second example provides a basis for collaborations, for example, faculty members from General Business and Business Law. The assignment can be useful for helping business majors understand legal topics. "Writing in education allows a meaningful opportunity for assessment of individual knowledge" (Sapkota & Stolarz, 2021, p. 15). According to Cooley (2009), effective "communication skills should be cultivated in as many courses and outlets that their curricula allow" (p. 432).

Business Issues/Skills Gap – Given the skills gap, faculty can use industry data to identify talent shortages, form cross-disciplinary teams to discuss, and design writing assignments focusing on challenges and opportunities related to the skills gap and lifelong learning (for example, see AACSB Industry Brief: Lifelong Learning and Talent Management, 2018).

The second example could be faculty from Economic and Marketing collaborations about the skills gap regional effects. "Marketing is listed among the 10 industries affected by the skills gap" (Waltower, 2023, Industries facing the skills gap). The assignment could study and write about (regional economic growth or unemployment) effect on hiring processes.

Disciplined Based Competencies - Faculty in Accounting/Finance and Information System, given academic and industry differences between technologies should discuss accounting software (for example, see Bryant, Hinson, & Osterheld, 2020, Conclusion).

The second example could have (all) cross-disciplinary units collaborate about how new technologies provide new ways for writing thereby affecting audience analysis. Students could be asked to write a reflective paper on ethical business communications.

These multiple cross-disciplinary faculty discussions will mirror industry cross-sector collaborations designed to address the skills gap. Such discussions generate ideas embedded with

systematic interventions with suitable timelines. For instance, during the first meeting faculty should discuss when to invite students and which issues to share. This will guide a more integrated undertaking before inviting representatives from industry. Similar to industry practice of cross-sector collaborations, the process should identify and invite specific representatives/ categories. Several reciprocal factors for all stakeholders should guide the decision. Such as: local or regional talent shortages, opportunities for internships, guest speakers, and representatives serving on advisory boards (discipline-specific or cross-disciplinary). These inclusive collaborations, for assessment purposes, provide useful data for designing, tracking, and benchmarking specific measurable learning outcomes, i.e., in this discussion, elements of written communication. And thus, as suggested above, help with the *persist skills* gap linked to writing expressed by stakeholders across industries.

Discussion

Previous related business literature spanning decades have provided theoretical and practical guidance to business programs about employability skills. Given persistent challenges influencing the skills gap in global business environments, Tipi & Killian (2023), suggested rethinking business programs/curriculums using collaborations with stakeholders. From a learning perspective, these suggestions highlight Bloom's Taxonomy, in that there is a need to generate new ideas from existing information. To illustrate use of existing information, Hynes & Stretcher' (2008) project about collaborations among business faculty in different departments provided rationale for making timely changes in attitudes and business programs/curriculums.

In essence, although the following suggestion was made within the scope of an accounting audience, this author proposes it encapsulates synergy across business disciplines.

“We must ask our faculty to do as we ask our students: always have a growth mindset, be agile, and know your career will include life-long learning. The ability to change our curriculum and then use that for a longer period of time is a thing of the past. While we may never “get there” as it relates to having a perfect curriculum due to the fast pace of change in our profession, continuous improvement of our curriculum is a must to ensure our students are ready for their career” (Bryant, Hinson, & Osterheld, 2020, Conclusion).

References

- Abston, K. & Soter, H. (2020). A Professionalism Conundrum: Development of Business Students' Career Readiness. *Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 47, 266- 271.
- Anderson, L. & Krathwohl, D. (2001). *A taxonomy of learning, teaching and assessing: A revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). AACSB Industry Brief: Lifelong Learning and Talent Management. (2018). Retrieved from http://www.aacsb.edu/paper/2018/Lifelong_learning_paper_final.pdf
- Bryant, S., Hinson, Y., & Osterheld, K. (2020). Key Skills Accountancy Students are Lacking When They Enter the Profession: Results of a Series of Focus Groups with Employers. Retrieved from <https://aaahq.org/>
- Business Roundtable. The Skills Gap, Explained. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.businessroundtable.org/policy-perspectives/building-americas-tomorrow-ready-workforce/closing-the-skills-gap/the-skills-gap-explained>
- Chamorro-Premuzi, T. & Frankiewicz, B. (2019, January 7). Does Higher Education Still Prepare People for Jobs? *Harvard Business Review, Education*. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2019/01/does-higher-education-still-prepare-people-for-jobs>
- Clark, S. (2020, March 14) Closing the Skills Gap. Retrieved from <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/education/closing-the-skills-gap>

- Cooley, A. (2009). "Piggybacking" on business communication through interdisciplinarity: Developing student communication skills in legal environment of business courses. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 72 (4), 432-438.
- Fuller, J., Raman, M., Sage-Gavin, E., Hines, K. (2021 September). *Hidden Workers: Untapped Talent*. Published by Harvard Business School Project on Managing the Future of Work and Accenture.
- Fuller, J. & Raman, M. (2022). "The Partnership Imperative: Community Colleges, Employers, & America's Chronic Skills Gap." White Paper, Harvard Business School Project on Managing the Future of Work, December 2022. (In partnership with the American Association of Community Colleges.)
- Hynes, G. & Stretcher, R. (2008). A Missing Link In Business School. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 71 (2), 207-211.
- Kleckner, M. & Butz, N. (2020). Addressing undergraduate skill gaps in higher education: Revisiting communication in the major course outcomes. *Journal of Education for Business*, 96(7), 411-423.
- Kleckner, M. & Butz, N. (2022). Developing Entry-Level Communication Skills: A Comparison of Student and Employer Perceptions. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 85 (2), 199-221.
- Lawrence, H. (2013). Personal, Reflective Writing: A Pedagogical Strategy for Teaching Business Students to Write. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 76 (2), 192-206.
- Lester, D. & Smith, S. (2012). Boardroom in the Classroom: Experiential Learning of Corporate Culture, *Journal of Business Administration Online* – Spring 2012.
- MacDermott, C. & Ortiz, L. (2017). Beyond the Business Communication Course: A Historical Perspective of the Where, Why, and How of Soft Skills Development and Job Readiness for Business Graduates. *The IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, XI (2), 1-18.
- Mann Levesque, E. (2019, December 6). Understanding the skills gap—and what employers can do about it. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/understanding-the-skills-gap-and-what-employers-can-do-about-it/>
- Marcus, J. (2017 December 18). "Impatient with Colleges, Employers Design their own Courses," *Wired*, Retrieved from <https://www.wired.com/story/impatient-with-colleges-employers-design-their-own-courses/>
- McDonough, T. (2020, February 25). The Case Against Education as Usual. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2020/02/26/colleges-should-much-more-deliberately-emphasize-soft-skills-they-say-they-provide>
- Moore, T. & Morton, J. (2017) The myth of job readiness? Written communication, employability, and the 'skills gap' in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 42:3, 591-609.
- National Association of Colleges and Employers, "What Is Career Readiness?" Revised 2020, www.nacweb.org/

- National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) (2019). NACE Staff: The four career competencies employers value most.
<https://www.naceweb.org/careerreadiness/competencies/the-four-career-competencies-employers-value-most/>
- National Business Education Association (NBEA). (2020). National standards for business education: What students should know and be able to do in business, 2020 edition. <https://nbea.org/store/viewproduct.aspx?id=16950978>
- Novellis, M. (2019). What Do Employers Want From B-Schools? | AACSB. Retrieved from <https://www.aacsb.edu/insights/articles/2019/01/what-do-employers-want-from-business-schools>
- Sapkota, K. & Stolarz, C. (2021). A New Curricular Angle: Approaching the Legal Environment of Business Curriculum Using a Communications-Based Lens. Texas Business & Technology Educators Association, 21 (1), 12-21.
- Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). How to Address the Skills Gap. (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/how-to-guides/pages/how-to-address-the-skills-gap.aspx>
- Tipi, L. & Killian, G. (2023, March 7). Ensuring Every Graduate Is Ready to Work. Retrieved from <https://www.aacsb.edu/insights/articles/2023/03/ensuring-every-graduate-is-ready-to-work>
- Waltower, S. (2023, February 21) The Skills Gap Is Costing Businesses Dearly. Retrieved from <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/6038-skills-gaps-cost-companies-thousands.html>