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**THE JOB SEARCH DURING THE PANDEMIC:**

**A PERSPECTIVE FROM RECRUITERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

With all the changes that have occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of looking for a new job has adapted as well. For many companies, the focus has changed from reviewing an applicant's job titles and degrees to looking for candidates with transferable skills and the ability to interview and work remotely. A qualitative survey of recruiters revealed an increased need for more technical skills to adapt to remote work and having the ability to be adaptable in dynamic working environments.

**Keywords**: Pandemic, soft skills, recruiting

**INTRODUCTION**

With the many changes that have occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of looking for a new job has transformed. For many companies, the focus has changed from reviewing an applicant's job titles and degrees to looking for candidates with transferable skills and the ability to interview and work remotely. Geisler (2020) posited flexible working arrangements as an issue of concern for modern managers, and Garden (2020) believes such arrangements are a potential new normal.

Non-technical attributes, such as soft skills, have increased in importance among hiring managers in today's job climate, impacting job seekers' approach to the process. Brown (2019) suggested the need for flexibility in job seekers, as well, the need for innovative approaches to searching for jobs. Lok (2020) recommended that job seekers use LinkedIn and personal networks to seek open positions and find ways to stand out from other applicants. Moran (2020) described a Jobvite study that found a change in priorities for new hires, including, “diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as the quality of the candidate” (para. 1).

Stuart (2021) summed up the situation well during a discussion of top jobs in 2021 and what graduates need to expect: soft skills are integral, including teamwork skills, resilience (the ability to learn and keep up with trends), and adaptability. As many students are approaching graduation and will be beginning the job search process, it is important to understand the changes that are occurring in the process. The purpose of this qualitative study is to learn how the job market has changed from the perspective of hiring managers and to use this information to better prepare students for the job market.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study was framed by three main research questions.

* How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed hiring practices?
* What long-term effects do hiring managers foresee as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
* What strengths and weaknesses do hiring managers encounter in recent new hires?

The data collection process was designed to address each of these questions, as well as provide additional context for college teaching and career preparation efforts. The Institutional Review Board of the researchers' university approved this study.

**Review of the Literature**

A review of the current literature focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workplace and job skills sought by hiring managers. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about two important results according to the relevant literature: (1) a focus on flexibility and remote working arrangements and (2) a renewed focus on the importance of soft skills in the workplace.

**A Changing Workplace: Focus on Flexibility and Remote Working Arrangements.**

Baradello and Dibble (2020) accurately described a situation in which “a massive global reset [is occurring in the workplace], during which many social behaviors and norms are changing” (p. 1). While the pandemic has caused adjustments in the structure of work environments, the change is not necessarily negative. Geisler (2020) highlighted four challenges for workplace leadership to address: (1) designing a workplace with rigid safety rules, (2) creating an environment in which these rules are known and enforced, (3) adopting “a flexible approach to what gets done where, how, and by whom” (p. 61), and (4) integrating empathy into the decision-making process. These challenges were supported by McFarland, Reeves, Porr, and Ployhart's (2020) study on job search behavior in which an increase in applications for work-from-home jobs was identified during and as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Garden (2020) promoted these work-from-home arrangements as a safety measure to stop the spread of disease and suggested that a redefinition of acceptable working arrangements merited reasonable consideration. Yuan, Ye, and Zhong (2021) also touted safety considerations, along with dedicated job reattachment endeavors to drive engagement, as important measures in successfully returning to the physical workplace.

One issue that has become apparent is the blending of home and work lives. One recruiter commented that online interviews tended to show more of a candidate's personal life because of the physical environment, which can lead to more personal conversations in an interview (Bous, 2021). Katsabian (2020) suggested a dichotomy regarding the regulation of remote working time: those who wished to return to the restricted (i.e. 8 am – 5 pm) work schedule and those who embraced the “anywhere, anytime” flexibility that technology allows. Irimias (2021) followed with remote workas not a question of “if” but of “how” it should be structured, citing positive work outcomes as the reward for an “adequate telework environment” (p. 159). Richards (2021) furthered that working from home may require a “need to learn how to engage clients in new, more creative ways” (with regard to the financial services field) (p. 35) and discussed working from home as not a possibility but rather a reality.

However, these flexible working conditions do have adverse aspects. Iqbal, Faheem, and Aslam (2020) studied a negative factor of work-from-home arrangements associated with technology usage resulting in both cognitive fatigue and diminished creative activities. Similarly, Mirela (2020) found decreased productivity in work-at-home settings, but this was due to a lack of training or infrastructure in moving quickly from completing tasks at the office to at-home. Takahasi (2021) evaluated work-from-home arrangements in Japan and noted work-family conflict due to lack of privacy during the workday; Takahasi suggested that work-from-home arrangements "will always be merely stopgap measure[s]" (p. 117).

Benlian (2020) addressed a related topic in his study of technology-driven stressors and the spillover between work and home, a line that may be blurred further with work-from-home arrangements. To alleviate technology-driven stressors, Benlian suggested a top-down approach with the manager acknowledging work-home boundaries and specific training of workers to segment work-life and home-life meaningfully. Concerning female workers specifically, Barhate and Hirudayaraj (2021) identified a need and subsequent benefit of redefining work and family borders to support women in the workforce, identifying the at-home working arrangements created during the COVID-19 pandemic as largely successful trial-runs.

Similarly, White (2021) cautioned against worker burnout due to work-from-home arrangements. Mental distance from the job, feelings of negativism, and reduced efficacy due to a sudden shift in working arrangements may cause burnout, along with uncertainty and physical pain from non-ergonomic office setups. Employers may avoid some or much of this burnout by being cognizant of their employees' wellbeing and looking for warning signs such as an increase in mistakes or irritability.

A well-equipped and trained at-home working arrangement could provide companies with benefits, as Latheef's (2021) study indicated that additional focus on employee leave and work-life balance, post-pandemic, would enhance “an organization's ability to recruit and retain high-quality employees," (p. 191). Flexible work arrangements could be instrumental in achieving this goal. An appropriately structured at-home working arrangement could also benefit employees with work-life balance and provide greater mental health benefits (Sharma, 2021).

**Job Skills Sought by Hiring Managers: A Renewed Focus on Soft Skills**

Skills should adapt as the business environment changes, so educators and workers should stay current in these skills to maintain their marketability. Many educational institutions focus on the technical skills needed, but education should not be limited to these. Brown (2019) believed that students should be prepared to be flexible and innovative, which are traits needed once they enter the working world. These soft skills are harder to measure and often include topics of emotional intelligence and ethics.

A study by LinkedIn reviewed the skills listed on profiles of members who were hired in large cities. The top five soft skills listed included creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability, and emotional intelligence (Anderson, 2020). When hiring for mid-level management positions, soft skills are essential to set a candidate apart. In 2017, recruiters ranked the top skills as oral communication, listening, adaptability, written communication, and presentation skills (GMAC). In 2021, recruiters still ranked communication skills highly, but included other top skills as interpersonal communication, learning/motivation/leadership, managing decision making, strategic skills, and managing strategy (GMAC, 2021). These studies showed that soft skills are important to recruiters. Understanding emotional intelligence can help students develop these soft skills. According to Goleman (2004), emotional intelligence is a blend of psychological abilities that fuse self-awareness, emotions, empathy, and instinct. Goleman stated, "emotional intelligence proved to be twice as important as the others for jobs at all levels" (p. 83).

Majid, Eapen, Aung, and Oo (2019) studied the perspectives of soft skills needs in employment from both the 'students' and the 'employers' perspectives. The students were graduate students in a technical university in Singapore. They largely viewed soft skills as important for their career prospects, focusing mainly on positive attitude, oral communication, self-motivation, and self-direction. Employers in the study also valued soft skills and stated that they would hire applicants with limited technical skills so long as the soft skills were strong. They identified a positive attitude, teamwork, and good ethics as the most desired soft skills. This focus on soft skills over technical skills was echoed by Showry and Manasa's (2016) study that posited that soft skills, such as interpersonal skills, were integral to job success and retention, especially among new hires in information technology positions. Similarly, Livingston (2016) highlighted the importance of critical thinking and group discussion skills and created assignments to directly address these soft skills to aid graduates in getting future technical jobs.

Stanton and Stanton's (2020) study on skills of business students entering the analytics field found that soft skills were critical to successfully landing and retaining a job. Specifically, analytical (i.e. critical thinking) skills, written communication skills, and teamwork skills were highlighted. Likewise, Cickeli (2016) found that in the field of banking, soft skills were mentioned by more than half of hiring managers with communication, interpersonal relationship skills, and teamwork skills explicitly mentioned. The pandemic forced many changes that will likely have repercussions for years to come.

**Research Design and Methodology**

The research design was qualitative in nature, framed by a case study that focused on hirng 'managers' experiences with the hiring process and attributes of new hires during and after the COVID-19 global pandemic. A case study can be defined as the study of a phenomenon (or "case") in its real-world context (Yin, 2011).

**Conceptual Framework**

This research explored the idea that the process of recruiting for positions has adapted to the many changes brought about by the pandemic. Subsequent business transformations, including the proliferation of remote work, have revolutionized business processes. These changes cause one to question if the characteristics of new hires would also be changed.

**Sampling**

Participants in the study were actively recruited via emails and social media messaging via LinkedIn and Facebook (see Appendix A). The researchers used purposive sampling to identify potential participants based upon their self-identified roles in their LinkedIn profiles. Purposive sampling targets participants or sites that ”will best help the researcher[s] understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2014, p. 189). The researchers targeted potential participants who were directly involved in recruiting and hiring within their companies. To verify these roles, the researchers also asked participants to identify their official job title, along with how long they have been involved in recruiting and hiring.

The researchers used snowballing as a secondary recruitment tool. According to Trochim and Donnelly (2008), snowballing is sampling methodology in which study participants recommend additional participants who meet the criteria for inclusion. After participants answered the other survey questions, they were asked, ”Finally, can you provide the name of another person in a similar position who may be willing to answer these questions, too” This method yielded three of the study's nineteen partcipants.

**DATA COLLECTION**

Data were collected using a focused interview protocol, comprised of a set of predetermined, mostly open-ended questions (see Appendix B) that were distributed to all participants. Using recent online publications, questions were developed to focus on the changes that recruiters noticed in the past year. Participants were given the option of answering the questions via email, phone, or Zoom meeting. Seventeen participants chose to answer the questions via email, one chose to answer the questions via phone, and one chose to answer the questions via Zoom meeting. Responses given via phone or Zoom meeting were recorded and transcribed.

The researchers did not discriminate amongst industries, as undergraduate business graduates typically populate job roles in a variety of fields. Table 1 displays the diverse industries from which the participants came.

**Table 1.** Industries of Study Participants.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Industry | Number of Participants | % of Sample |
| Financial Services | 4 | 21.1% |
| Food Services | 1 | 5.3% |
| Health and Human Services | 4 | 21.1% |
| Higher Education | 3 | 15.8% |
| Manufacturing | 1 | 5.3% |
| Professional Recruitment | 1 | 5.3% |
| Public Sector | 1 | 5.3% |
| Religious Sector | 1 | 5.3% |
| Technology & Utility Services | 3 | 15.8% |

The participants were also diverse in their functions within their organizations. Six of the nineteen participants were employed in roles directly related to talent acquisition in title, such as recruitment coordinators or talent selection specialists. Five of the participants were employed in human resources management positions that worked directly with hiring, and another five of the participants were employed in senior leadership roles, such as those of president, manager, or executive director. Table 2 details the breakdown of the participants’ generalized roles, which were derived from the answers provided by the participants and consolidated for clarity.

**Table 2.** Generalized Roles of Study Participants.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Generalized Role | Number of Participants | % of Sample |
| Human Resources Management | 5 | 26.3% |
| Risk Management | 1 | 5.3% |
| Senior Leadership | 5 | 26.3% |
| Talent Acquisition | 6 | 31.6% |
| Training and Development | 2 | 10.5% |

The years of experience in recruiting and hiring functions were varied, as well, indicating that the sample comprised indviduals who were representative of both new and seasoned professionals. Thirty-two percent of participants held one to five years of recruiting and hirng experience, while 21% of participants held 6 to 10 years experience, 21% held 11 to 15 years of experience, and 26% held greater than 16 years of experience. Table 3 details the participantsyears of experience in recruiting and hiring roles.

**Table 3.** Years in Recruiting and Hiring Roles of Study Participants.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Years | Number of Participants | % of Sample |
| 1 to 5 years | 6 | 31.6% |
| 6 to 10 years | 4 | 21.1% |
| 11 to 15 years | 4 | 21.1% |
| 16 to 20 years | 1 | 5.3% |
| More than 20 years | 4 | 21.1% |

**RESULTS**

Data analysis was completed in three levels using Microsoft Office's Excel software and QSR International's NVivo Plus. The first level involved reviewing participants survey responses for key words and phrases. The second level involved two levels of coding the data to identify and group commonalities. Descriptions of the data analysis processes follow with resulting codes organized by survey question to follow them.

**Coding: Level 1**

In the first level of coding the responses to questions 4 through 10, initial codes were derived utilizing *in vivo* codes. In vivo codes are those that are derived from the participants’words directly, sometimes even using those exact words (Yin, 2011). These codes were used to categorize responses in preparation for deeper coding of categories in Level 2.

**Coding: Level 2**

In the second level of coding, the responses to questions 4 through 10 were consolidated and categorized based on meaning in order to arrive at the resulting codes in the tables that follow.

**Resulting Codes by Question**

***What are the three most important skills or abilities you look for in a new hire?***

Seventeen of the nineteen participants gave detailed responses to this question; a few of the seventeen participants only offered one or two skills or abilities. Two of the participants' responses (following in paraphrase) were generic and not broken into three specific skills or abilities: 1) knowledge and skills to perform the job, and 2) be able to demonstrate in the interview anything that is included on the resume; these responses were not included in the analysis. Table 4 details the responses related to the three most important skills or abilities that a new hire should have. Respondents identified more than one skill; therefore the total percentage exceeds 100%.

**Table 4.** Coded Responses to Question 4: What are the three most important skills or abilities you look for in a new hire?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Skills or Ability | Mentions by Participants | % of Sample |
| Communication Skills | 9 | 47.4% |
| Ability to Work on the Team | 8 | 42.1% |
| Willingness to Learn | 7 | 36.8% |
| Job-Specific Skills (Experience) | 7 | 36.8% |
| Critical Thinking Skills | 6 | 31.6% |
| Work Ethic | 3 | 15.8% |
| Other Soft Skills  Attention to Detail  Ethics  Hospitalitiy  Sincerity/Integrity  Time Management | 1  1  1  1  1 | 5.3% each |

The most commonly mentioned skills or abilities were predominantly soft skills in nature, which echoes the importance of soft skills as noted in the previous research (Anderson, 2020; Brown, 2019; Cickeli, 2016; GMAC, 2021; Livingston, 2016; Showry & Mansa, 2016; Stanton & Stanton, 2020). Nine of the participants mentioned communication skills, eight of the participants mentioned skills related to the ability to work on a team (including teamwork and collaboration skills, a personality and attitude that works well with a team, and a good culture fit), and seven of the participants mentioned a willingness to learn. Seven of the participants also mentioned that job-specific skills, such as experience in the field, certifications or trainings, and job-specific technical skills were very important.

***What are the three skills or abilities you see most new hires lack?***

According to the study's participants, there are a variety of skills that new hires lack, but many of them are also soft skills. The top three areas, according to mentions by the study participants were communication skills, which were cited as the top skills in the GMAC reports in 2017 and 2021, (9 mentions), confidence and self-reflection (7 mentions), and critical thinking/problem-solving skills (6 mentions). Table 5 details the top skills and abilities that most new hires lack. Respondents identified more than one skill; therefore the total percentage exceeds 100%. Communication skills encompassed writing, speaking, and articulation; four of the participants specifically mentioned writing skills, two specifically mentioned speaking skills, and two specifically mentioned clearly articulating messages.

**Table 5.** Coded Responses to Question 5: What are the three skills or abilities you see most new hires lack?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Skills or Ability | Mentions by Participants | % of Sample |
| Communication Skills | 9 | 47.4% |
| Confidence/Self-Reflection | 7 | 36.8% |
| Critical Thinking/Problem-Solving | 6 | 31.6% |
| Time Management Skills | 5 | 26.3% |
| Technical Skills | 4 | 21.1% |
| Adaptability | 4 | 21.1% |
| Knowledge About Company | 2 | 10.5% |
| Listening Skills | 2 | 10.5% |
| Accepting Feedback | 2 | 10.5% |
| Other Soft Skills  “Adulting”  Focus on current position  Professional demeanor  Limited work experience | 1  1  1  1 | 5.3% each |

Confidence and self-reflection comprised an unexpected area of weakness, though one that may not be difficult to accept but are related to emotional intelligence. Specific topics included in this category were comfort in job role, negative self-talk, ability to influence/lead, mindfulness, the tendency to compare oneself to others, and direct mentions of ”confidence” One participant mentioned an overabundance of confidence, related to having a negative attitude about entry-level positions in spite of being employed in one.

Critical thinking and problem-solving formed a combined category, as responses generally fit both topics. These skills were identifed by both GMAC (2017, 2021) studies, as well as by Livingston (2016) and Stanton and Stanton (2020); however, critical thinking and problem-solving were not ranked in the top five as identified by these participants. Three participants from this study noted a lack of critical thinking skills directly, and three others alluded to this issue (and lack of problem-solving ability also) by noting weaknesses in the ability of new hires to find answers on their own first and ask questions while information-seeking, only after first attempting to resolve problems on their own.

Technical skills (4 mentions) and knowledge about the company (2) as weaknesses suggest a of lack hard skills and preparation for the role, respectively. Direct comments related to technical skills as a weakness include the following: ”advanced computer skills, such as Excel proficiency” and ”functional use,” which specified ”not recreational use.” Knowledge about the company as a weakness alludes to the interviewing/onboarding process of the new hires, but it could illustrate a lack of engagement or enthusiasm for the role, as well. Research into a company's characteristics and attributes may also illustrate sincerity.

Time management skills (5 mentions), adaptability (4 mentions), listening skills (2 mentions), and accepting feedback (2 mentions) comparised additional common soft skills in which new hires lack. Related to time management skills, study participants noted that new hires lack punctuality and management of priorities. Related to adaptability, study participants noted that new hires need both the ability and willingness to adapt to change (flexibility). Related to listening skills, ”active listening.” was mentioned in both incidences, describing situations in which new hires were not gleaning the relevant information from messages. Related to accepting feedback, deference to senior colleagues and coachability were the focus.

Finally, additional needed soft skills were mentioned in singularity but remain relevant. “Adulting,” a necessary skill captured *in vivo* was mentioned as a weakness; its meaning could be interpreted in either (or both) a professional or personal manner but would be best assessed via follow-up discussion. A lack of focus on the current position was a weakness that related to wanting to advance more quickly than appropriate and not focusing on ”the here and now.” Professional demeanor may be closely related to ”adulting,“ as it implies elements such as business maturity and courtesy. Limited work experience illustrated somewhat of an anomaly, as one might assume that a hire would not be brought into a company without the requisite amount of experience; this weakness could allude to an issue with a minimized, potentially less qualified applicant pool.

***How have you seen the recruiting or hiring process change since COVID-19 pandemic begin?***

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, changes to recruiting and hiring practices have been common according to the eighteen of the nineteen study participants (95%) who responded to this question. Overwhelmingly, interviews were done remotely, with sixteen of the participants mentioning this as a change; the two participants who did not mention this did not mention how interviews were conducted, so it is possible that they held remote interviews, as well. Two participants, (not the same two who did not mention remote interviews) described “not much” or no change in the recruiting and hiring process. Four of the participants described positive changes to the onboarding process, which included faster onboarding, remote onboarding, and more efficient onboarding. Four participants described changes in the number of applicants, which included one describing having more applicants and three describing having fewer applicants. Other changes included more remote working arrangements for new hires (mentioned by three participants) and a reduction in the starting salary ranges for new hires (mentioned by one participant). Respondents identified more than one skill, therefore the total percentage exceeds 100%. Table 6 details the changes noted in the recruiting and hiring processes.

**Table 6.** Coded Responses to Question 7: How have you seen the recruiting or hiring process change since COVID-19 pandemic begin?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Changes in Recruiting or Hiring Processes | Mentions by Participants | % of Sample |
| More remote interviews | 16 | 84.2% |
| Positive changes in onboarding process | 4 | 21.1% |
| Changes in number of applicants | 4 | 21.1% |
| More remote working arrangements | 3 | 15.8% |
| Not much change | 2 | 10.5% |
| Reduction in salary ranges for new hires | 1 | 5.3% |

***What long-term effects do you expect this pandemic to have on the hiring process?***

Participants' responses related to long-term effects on the hiring process were primarily related to remote processes and process improvements involving technology. Eleven of the nineteen participants (58%) mentioned hiring processes increasingly or fully being remote in the future, and four of the participants mentioned process improvements involved increased technology usage, such as interviewing candidates via Zoom.

Participants also mentioned cost savings in the hiring process related to using remote technologies, downsizing employee teams, and increased competition (since relocation may not be a hindrance to hiring in some industries). One participant was concerned that a 'company's culture could suffer due to lack of face-to-face interactions. Three participants did not expect much change from past hiring processes. Respondents identified more than one skill, therefore the total percentage exceeds 100%. Table 7 details these long-term effects.

**Table 7.** Coded Responses to Question 8: What long-term effects do you expect this pandemic to have on the hiring process?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Long-Term Effects | Mentions by Participants | % of Sample |
| Increased Usage of Remote Processes | 11 | 57.9% |
| Improvements to Processes, Involving Technology | 4 | 21.1% |
| Cost Savings | 3 | 15.8% |
| Not Much Change | 3 | 15.8% |
| Increased Competition for Jobs | 2 | 10.5% |
| Downsizing of Workforce | 2 | 10.5% |
| Work Culture Issues | 1 | 5.3% |

***What is one skill new graduates should have in this changing workforce?***

Each of the nineteen survey respondents offered a response to this question, with two respondents offering two skills in their responses, which were also included in the analysis. Table 8 details these skills, which have been summarized and coded for clarity. These skills reflect the repsonses to Questions 4 and 5, especially with regards to adaptability, critical thinking/problem-solving skills, and communication skills. The importance of critical thinking and communication skills was supported by Stanton and Stanton's (2020) study on skills that new graduates will need to be successful.

**Table 8.** Coded Responses to Question 9: What is one skill new graduates should have in this changing workforce?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Summarized Skills | Mentions by Participants | % of Sample |
| Adaptability/Flexibility | 9 | 47.4% |
| Critical Thinking/Problem-Solving Skills | 4 | 21.1% |
| Communication Skills | 2 | 10.5% |
| Computer Skills | 2 | 10.5% |
| Confidence | 1 | 5.3% |
| Emotional Intelligence | 1 | 5.3% |
| Self-Reflection | 1 | 5.3% |
| Time Management Skills | 1 | 5.3% |

***What is one piece of advice you would give new graduates?***

Each of the nineteen survey participants offered advice for new graduates. Respondents identified more than one skill, therefore the total percentage exceeds 100%. Table 9 details this advice, which has been summarized and coded for clarity.

**Table 9.** Coded Responses to Question 10: What is one piece of advice you would give new graduates?

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Summarized Advice | Mentions by Participants |
| Be open-minded (with relation to feedback and opportunities). | 4 |
| Don't give up. | 3 |
| Don’t neglect the importance of relationships. | 3 |
| Research companies that you are interested in. | 3 |
| Take the initiative (at work and with internships). | 3 |
| Do something you are passionate about and that makes you happy. | 1 |
| Keep your LinkedIn profile updated. | 1 |
| Soft skills are more valuable than ‘hard skills.’ | 1 |

The most often suggested advice (by four of the participants) was to keep an open mind regarding opportunities at work and for work, which seemed relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic and unanticipated changes to the job market and work place. “Don't give up“ (offered by three participants) constituted a related phrase of encouragement during turbulent times.”“Don't neglect the importance of relationships,” “Take the initiative (at work and with internships),” and” Soft skills are more valuable than hard skills,” were advice that could apply to either new hires or job seekers. "Research the companies you are interested in," “Do something that you are passionate about and that makes you happy,” and “Keep your LinkedIn profile updated” were advice aimed at job seekers specifically.

***Do you have any additional comments you would like to add that were not addressed here?***

All study participants did not provide additional comments, but the ones that were gained provide insight into what hiring managers believe candidates need to consider as they apply for positions, as well as what companies may need to consider in order to be successful in the future.

A few of the comments provided encouragement to job candidates and suggested taking an introspective approach.

“Ask yourself, ‘what do I really want?’”

“Be sincere, open, and honest” [with both yourself and the company.]

“Be willing to do the grunt work.”

“Keep your LinkedIn up-to-date.”

“Realize the value of connections” [and networking.]

“Recognize generational differences when it comes to communication and receptiveness to that communication.”

Build a successful network “deliberately.”

The remaining comments outlined considerations for companies. Each of these is paraphrased.

Balance competitive advantage and values in how you approach changes to the business model.

There is reason for concern about a "productivity gap" and longer onboarding process due to the advent of COVID-19 and its impact on hiring.

**LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study is limited based upon its sample size and methodology. Even though the sample size of 19 appears to have generally reached saturation, a larger sample size could yield a greater richness of data. Additionally, using social media (LinkedIn and Facebook) as sampling sources may have left out important informants to the topic area who do not use social media; therefore, sampling from additional sources may provide a more representative set of results. Likewise, the snowballing technique, while an effective recruitment method, may introduce sampling bias due to its potential for low external validity, also limiting the representativeness of the participants (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008).

While the study effectively addresses the general subject area of hiring during the COVID-19 pandemic, future researchers may consider modifications and/or expansions to provide more comprehensive results. A focus on specific industries, such as marketing or sales, could assist educators in those subject areas to close knowledge gaps and meet specific hiring needs. At the same time, further exploration of needs identified by this study, such as emotional intelligence, would provide actionable curricular change.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on the research reported by GMAC (2017, 2021), recruiters seem to be focusing less on an applicant’s mastery of hard skills, but are looking that potential new hires have the soft skills of emotional intelligence to adapt to today’s rapidly changing work environment. Responses from survey participants seem to support this study as many mentioned the need for adaptability and resiliency, which are components of emotional intelligence.

It is likely that the changes in the hiring process brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic will continue as businesses have realized the benefits of remote interviewing, onboarding, and working. Therefore, educators should find ways to further bolster these skills in business students. Although universities are focusing on opportunities to meet these hard-skills requirements (Brown, 2019), finding ways to provide students with soft skills will help them to be more attractive when entering the job market.

Soft skills can be difficult to assess in education because of their subjective nature. Ways to build these skills include providing extensive positive and negative feedback, requiring more collaborative activities, providing more practical experiences, and encouraging reflection.

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**APPENDIX A: MESSAGE TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS**

Hi \_\_\_,

Would you share your expertise about recruiting/hiring for a research project? I am interested in learning how the hiring process may have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. I will use this information to better prepare students for the job market.

This will only take about 15 minutes of your time, and the questions can be answered via email, phone, or Zoom interview according to your preference. Thank you so much for your interest in participating. Your insight is valuable. You will find important information regarding this study below.

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The Job Search During the Pandemic

AUTHORS NAMES

Informed Consent Statement: You are being asked to participate in a research study that involves your opinions of the skills needed of new college graduates. This questionnaire should take approximately 15 minutes of your time. This study is being conducted by AUTHORS NAMES AND INSTITUTIONS.

Your responses are confidential and will not be traced back to you. Please answer honestly. You do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. There are no direct benefits to you for completing this survey. Any questions or concerns with this research may be directed to ORSP at AUTHOR CONTACT INFORMATION.

Participation in this survey will serve as your consent.

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Again, thank you very much for your insight,

AUTHORS NAMES

**APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS**

1. What is your official title?
2. What industry do you work?
3. How long have you been involved in recruiting and hiring?
4. What are the three most important skills or abilities you look for in a new hire?
5. What are the three skills or abilities you see most new hires lack?
6. How have you seen the recruiting or hiring process change since COVID-19 pandemic begin?
7. What long-term effects do you expect this pandemic to have on the hiring process?
8. What is one skill new graduates should have in this changing workforce?
9. What is one piece of advice you would give new graduates?
10. Do you have any additional comments you would like to add that were not addressed here?
11. Do you have any other individuals that you would recommend we reach out to as additional participants in this study?

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