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Fix Joblessness by Focusing on Smiles

By Carlos Gazitua

A new Congressional Budget Office report finds that nearly one in six males between the ages of 18 and 34 is jobless or incarcerated, a significant jump from previous generations. The figure jumps to one in five for those with only a high-school education. The report suggests longer-run changes in the economy are partially to blame for this increased joblessness. But it also cites the lack of hard and soft skills among men entering adulthood as another reason.

Students graduating from high school or college without the skills necessary to succeed in the job market has been well covered. Mike Rowe, best known as the host of the former television show *Dirty Jobs*, has long highlighted the country's "skills gap": There are 5.6 million job openings that U.S. employers cannot fill, yet there are also 3.3 million long-term unemployed workers across the country. If these unemployed people had the right skills, such as welding, air conditioning maintenance, or plumbing, this gap could shrink significantly.

But the lack of hard skills among recent grads is just the half of it. My experiences hiring new entrants to the workforce as the president of Sergio's, a restaurant chain in South Florida, have indicated that recent grads not only don't have technical skills but also don't have the neces-

sary soft skills to succeed in today's service industry.

Soft skills are the baseline of what it takes to succeed at any job. They include time management, leadership, customer service, critical thinking, and a sense of urgency. They allow entry-level employees to gain a toehold on the career ladder, and subsequently learn the technical skills that allow them to grow as a professional and quickly get promoted.

Employers don't expect entry-level employees to come in with the hard skills to flourish in the industry. They are happy to train them, but they do expect them to know how to smile at the customer, communicate with their colleagues, and execute on basic decisions. Too often, these expectations are not met. People skills and professional etiquette among recent graduates seem to have been replaced by unbridled individualism and a sense of entitlement. Professional feedback is treated as personal effrontery.

The problem is not just anecdotal or generational complaining. According to the CLA+ test taken by nearly 32,000 students at 169 colleges and universities in the U.S., only one-third of college freshmen have at least proficient critical thinking skills. And only six in 10 college graduates have the complex reasoning skills necessary to succeed at work. According to one survey, nine

out of 10 employers say that recent college graduates are poorly prepared for the workforce in areas like critical thinking, communication, and problem solving.

Given how quickly technical skills fall out of fashion in today's economy, it's these soft skills that should form a big part of today's high school and college educations. We need to teach students how to deal with a difficult customer, take pride in their appearance, and offering to help when you see a coworker in need--skills that will never go out of fashion.

While many may consider the importance of soft skills common knowledge, employers will confirm that it certainly is not. When hired you become the company's brand representative. If you don't have the basic soft skills, it's impossible to communicate the company's standards, culture and philosophy, and the brand integrity will suffer.

A renewed focus on these timeless soft skills can reverse the increased trend of young male joblessness, fill job vacancies, and make for a better citizenry. The new Congressional Budget Office report is a wake-up call that this focus should begin now.

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