Necessary Skills: Being Marketable for Federal Positions

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Knowing what skill sets federal agencies look for in a new employee can help position students and jobseekers for securing their dream job or internship in government. The Pathways Programs, which offer federal jobs and internships for students and recent graduates, and the Presidential Management Fellowship program, present opportunities for working in government. These programs are competitive, and those hoping to get a position in one of them will need to demonstrate why they should be the top choice.

While technical competencies are always important, many agencies also look for what some call soft skills, such as good teamwork and strategic thinking. College and university students, as well as recent graduates who hope to land a federal job or internship, will benefit from developing and demonstrating a range of these necessary skills.

The additional skills we hear about most often from federal hiring managers and HR specialists are:

**Communication**: Managing relationships in federal agencies often requires an ability to communicate with all levels of employees and with outside organizations. It is valuable to be able to share and receive feedback, propose ideas and contribute to discussions. People who are capable of communicating with diverse audiences and in a variety of settings will stand out.

**Teamwork and collaboration**: Effective team members don’t focus solely on whether the work gets done, but how it gets done. Many activities in government are team-based and involve more than one office or department. Employees who work well with others may find themselves taking lead or support roles. They may end up managing conflict, either with another team member or between team members. They should understand how the organization gets its work done and navigate accordingly.

**Problem-solving**: Many people are good at finding obstacles, but agencies need people who then can overcome them. Too often, people know that something isn’t working well but leave it at that. Someone who can identify the root of the problem, come up with recommendations and communicate them effectively to bring about change will demonstrate that he or she is a problem-solver rather than part of the problem.

**Adaptability**: The federal landscape is affected by everything from budget matters to the comings and goings of political appointees. Having the ability to function in an ever-changing environment will help employees to excel.
Professionalism: It is important to be professional both in attire and behavior, and it is critical to demonstrate that professionalism even before the job begins. Job applicants need to lay that groundwork with the first interaction they have, whether it’s with an on-site recruiter, in an email or during a call to a department receptionist.

Time management: One of the biggest challenges for many people is figuring out how to use their time efficiently. When multiple deadlines loom, it’s crucial to know which assignment should take precedence. Understanding priorities and expectations makes a significant difference in determining the effort needed for any given project and drives the ability to manage time appropriately.

Strategic thinking: Being able to think strategically about how to complete a task and how that task plays into the bigger picture is a valuable skill. Strategic thinking in all aspects of one’s work contributes to better alignment with vision and goals, produces a better work product and generates better team results.

Situational awareness: Rarely does a one-size-fits-all response effectively address issues in the workplace. The ability to read a room or know when to take a certain approach in a conversation, for instance, is helpful in a variety of workplace situations. Critical observation skills and self-awareness are important for responding appropriately to situations.

Best Practices

Encourage students to bolster these necessary skills through a variety of experiences such as volunteering, getting involved with co-curricular activities, and course-related projects, or seeking out mentors. They also could explore resources such as “SkillstoPaytheBills: MasteringSoftSkillsforWorkplaceSuccess,” which was recently released by the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the Department of Labor.

Students and jobseekers applying for a job or internship should think about ways they can integrate these skills into their application materials, in cover letters and résumés, and during interviews. The federal government needs great talent, and people who have these necessary skills, along with technical competencies, will be well-positioned to compete for federal positions.