

USU Extension Releases Results of Study on Workforce Needs and Labor Market Trends in Utah

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Utah's economy is expanding rapidly, driven by strong growth in advanced manufacturing, information technology, health care, and agriculture. Yet employers throughout the state report difficulty finding candidates with the technical expertise, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills needed to succeed in today's workplaces.

At the same time, many students are pursuing higher education but enter the workforce without the skills employers expect. The resulting gap between academic preparation and workforce readiness has significant implications for Utah's economic growth.

To explain these discrepancies, Utah State University Extension recently conducted a study to examine the skills Utah employers view as most critical for workforce success. A report was compiled from the survey data to analyze how educational programs can better prepare graduates to meet state industry needs.

Using data collected from 226 employers across multiple industries, the study assessed Utah employers' perceptions of workforce preparedness, hiring challenges, and emerging skill needs.

According to researchers Lendel Narine, Paul Hill, and Andree Walker-Bravo, results showed that Utah employers perceive the largest skill gaps in time management,

critical thinking, conflict resolution, and ethical judgment, skills essential for effective leadership and collaboration. Employers also placed the highest value on experiential learning opportunities, particularly work-based projects, internships, and mentorships, as the most effective academic experiences for preparing graduates.

"Employers identified communication, teamwork, and analytical problem-solving as the most critical skills for the next five to 10 years, along with digital and AI literacy and lifelong learning," Narine said. "Over half (58%) of the employers indicated that demonstrated skills are more important than degrees in hiring decisions, while industry-specific certifications and soft-skill micro-credentials were viewed as the most valuable credentials."

The report showed that hiring challenges were most often linked to a lack of experience, unrealistic salary expectations, and limited critical thinking ability. Employers additionally cited artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and digital transformation as emerging factors likely to alter workforce needs in the coming decade.

"Employers still value technical skills, but it's not where their most significant concerns show up. As such, Utah's workforce development strategies should strengthen applied learning, communication, and problem-solving across all levels of education," said Hill. "By integrating experiential, skill-based, and technology-informed learning opportunities, the state's higher education and training systems can better prepare graduates to meet the demands of Utah's rapidly evolving economy."

Walker-Bravo said the findings will provide valuable insights for USU's workforce development programs.

"The study supports USU's goal of preparing graduates and Extension clients who are not only employable, but capable of driving innovation, resilience, and economic growth throughout Utah's diverse industries," she said.

Click to [review the full report](#).

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