



Shifting paradigms: Competencies for 21<sup>st</sup> century retail/merchandising graduates

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Keywords: competencies, curriculum

The ITAA Meta-goals (MGs) prescribe a framework of discipline-specific, discipline-general and professional skills supporting the development of competent professionals. The MGs were developed in 1994-95 by the ITAA Curriculum Development and Review Committee (CDR), using input from membership at a town hall meeting at the 1994 annual conference. A revised version was developed by the CDR committee with feedback from ITAA members and industry professionals and adopted by the ITAA Council (ITAA Meta-goals, 2008).

*Purpose.* A goal of the CDR committee is to determine how industry professionals view the importance of the MGs for entry level apparel and textile merchandising and design graduates. This paper reports the results of a survey of retail professionals regarding the salience of knowledge, skills and behaviors identified in the MGs for entry level merchandising graduates. We also identify additional competencies important to retail professionals but not addressed in the current MGs. Results may be useful for curriculum development and improvement and to foster a continuing conversation about the content of the goals.

*Methods.* Data were collected via web survey from retail professionals in nine states. A chain referral method (Brace-Goven 2004) identified 231 mid-level retail professionals with two or more years' experience. A letter explaining the study was sent to participants followed by email invitation with a link to the survey. Survey items based on the 2008 MG competency statements were developed by researchers and an expert panel. The survey included 16 demographic questions and 47 competency statements.

*Results:* One hundred nine individuals responded to the survey (47.2% response rate). Sixty percent were under age 40; 31% were 40 or older. About one half had less than ten years' experience, and one half had more than 10 years' experience. Ninety three percent had a college degree; 61% percent worked in apparel/fashion department/discount stores; the rest were employed in specialty, online or catalog businesses or were self-employed.

Respondents were asked to rank importance (1 equaling not at all important to 5 equaling extremely important) of each competency for entry level professional positions in the company where they worked. Team work, leadership, professional behaviors, communication skills, critical analysis, creative thinking, and the ability to function in diverse environments were ranked among the most important skills (above 3.0/5-point scale). Discipline-related knowledge about topics such as history and socio-psychological aspects of dress, appearance, aesthetics, political, economic and educational issues were ranked as less important (3.0 or less).

Participants were also given an opportunity to provide additional input by responding to two open-ended questions on competencies, skills, and experience not included in the 47 competency items. Fifty-one participants (46.8%) responded. A content analysis using NVivo 9 was conducted on the volunteered responses to determine underlying themes. Of particular interest were the themes not reflected in the existing competencies. Themes included Personal Attributes and Skills (PAS), Academic Preparation (AP), and Previous Experience (PE). PAS statements yielded the most comments and related to innate personal characteristics rather than skills developed in academic programs. PAS responses included outgoing personality, self-motivation, time management, ability to inspire and relate well to others, work ethic, listening, flexibility, willingness to relocate, common sense, competitiveness, and passion. Frequently mentioned AP comments were specific technologies, visual merchandising, and negotiation skills. PE comments related to importance of having previous retail experience.

*Discussion.* Mid-level retail managers who hire entry level retail professionals with college degrees affirmed the importance of the MGs, particularly non-discipline specific competencies. It should be noted that topics such as sustainability and social responsibility received somewhat lower ratings by respondents than might be expected, considering the emphasis given in many apparel and textile programs. A possible explanation is that retail employers hire college graduates from diverse fields and do not always understand how discipline-related competencies fit into a graduate's preparation for the position. Another explanation is that respondents may not have understood the discipline-specific terminology used in some of the lower rated competency statements.

An interesting picture emerged from respondents' open-ended responses about attributes, attitudes, and skills not included in the MGs. The Personal Attributes and Skills (PAS) cluster aligned with findings in a recent study of professionalism in the workplace (Polk-Lepson Research Group, 2012). The workplace study identified critical professional qualities including interpersonal skills, appearance, communication skills, time management, confidence, ethics and work ethic. In conclusion, research results support that the paradigm may be shifting from discipline-specific competencies to development of job skills and personal attributes emphasis. The findings have implications for future curriculum development.

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*Qualitative Research Journal*, 4 (1), 52-60.

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