



UNIVERSITY of  
**SOUTH FLORIDA**  
ST. PETERSBURG

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# UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA ST. PETERSBURG

**EMPLOYER FOCUS GROUPS - FINDINGS**

# EMPLOYER FOCUS GROUPS

## INTRODUCTION

In 2023, University of South Florida (USF) St. Petersburg conducted a series of focus groups with area employers in industries correlated to six of the campus' most popular majors. This initiative aimed to assess if students attaining degrees at USF St. Petersburg are meeting the needs of local employers. More specifically, the focus groups aimed to:

- ▶ Confirm skills and competencies employers need by sector from recent graduates entering the local workforce;
- ▶ Assess experiences of local employers who hire USF students in terms of their level of preparedness to meet employer needs; and
- ▶ Determine gaps and what would be needed to address them.

USF St. Petersburg conducted six focus groups from March to July 2023, and included 44 leaders of area employers in the following sectors:

- ▶ Journalism, Digital Media, and Communication (March 9);
- ▶ Criminal Justice and Law Enforcement (April 6);
- ▶ Marine Biology and Environmental Science (June 6);
- ▶ Graphic Design (June 15);
- ▶ Health Sciences (June 29); and
- ▶ Financial Services (July 11).

Caryn Nesmith, Director of Community Relations, organized the focus group sessions and Dr. Phil Trocchia, Professor of Marketing, conducted the interviews in the Customer Experience Lab in Lynn Pippenger Hall in the Muma College of Business. The lab is a state-of-the-art facility which is available for community partners with the resources to conduct live focus groups for consumer research as well as other uses. During each two-hour session Dr. Trocchia asked



questions to prompt discussion on the topics of: needed technical skills; interpersonal basic competencies; work ethic; technology needs; hiring experiences; recent graduate preparedness; and recent graduates' ability to meet organizational expectations.

This report provides an overview of those findings, both overarching themes evidence during the sessions, and key themes in each individual sector focus group. Overall, the findings indicate a need for a balance of technical skills, soft skills, and adaptability in various industries. The gap between student skills and employer needs varies across sectors. While areas of improvement exist, employers conveyed positive feedback regarding USF students' preparedness and potential.

For each sector, Dr. Trocchia provided individualized reports which provide more comprehensive insights. The university and employers share a commitment to bridging these gaps and enhancing the success of graduates in the workforce. Recommendations include incorporating simulations, emphasizing soft skills, and fostering more collaborative partnerships between academia and industry.

## OVERARCHING THEMES

Overall, the focus group findings indicate a need for a balance of technical skills, soft skills, and adaptability in various industries. The gap between student skills and employer needs varies across sectors. While areas of improvement exist, positive feedback regarding USF students' preparedness and potential was also prominent. Additional overarching themes noted by employers from across the various sectors included the need for improved verbal and written communication skills, adaptability, critical



thinking, and a professional work demeanor and ethic among recent graduates.

For each sector, individualized reports provide more comprehensive insights. The University and employers share a commitment to bridging these gaps and enhancing the success of graduates in the workforce. Recommendations include incorporating simulations, emphasizing soft skills, and fostering more collaborative partnerships between academia and industry.

- Lack of soft skills. As is the case in national level data, a lack of soft skills came up across the various employer sectors. Soft skills like effective communication, active listening, relationship-building, and professional behavior are highly valued. Employers consistently highlighted the need for graduates to possess strong interpersonal skills, which are crucial for client interactions, teamwork, and overall career success. Industries, from financial services to law enforcement, stress the significance of a client- and human-centric approach.
- Need for adaptability. Each group of employers discussed specific software or platforms needed within each sector, but also more generally discussed that dynamic nature of technology, which requires graduates to be adaptable and open to continuous learning. Employers appreciate candidates who show motivation to learn new skills, adapt to changes, and keep up with industry trends. The integration of technology, including AI and data analytics, is changing various industries.

Graduates who embrace technology and stay updated with relevant tools have a competitive edge.

- Concerns around work ethic, professionalism and a sense of entitlement. Work ethic, punctuality, and a professional demeanor are fundamental expectations in the workplace. Graduates should dress appropriate to their work environments and conduct themselves professionally both in-person and in virtual settings. Employers mentioned new employers having outsized expectations, including quick promotions and pay raises. Employers mentioned instances of students being unwilling to work on tasks outside their job descriptions, and an inability to receive constructive criticism. Notably, this was not an issue noted within Marine Biology and Environmental Sciences due to high job satisfaction in this sector.
- Preference for demonstrated experience. Practical experience through practicums, group projects, field work, internships, volunteering, or exposure to real-world scenarios puts graduates at an advantage. Working in teams on group projects also prepares students for future work scenarios.

These themes collectively reflect the experiences of employers when working with interns and recent graduates and highlight the multidimensional skill set required for success in the modern workforce. From technical proficiency to interpersonal effectiveness, these themes provide insights for university administrators and faculty to incorporate when meeting the demands of various industries.

# EMPLOYER FOCUS GROUPS

## KEY THEMES BY SECTOR

### JOURNALISM, DIGITAL MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

The first focus group on March 9, 2023 included employers in the fields of journalism, digital media, and communication. Specifically, representatives participated from Duke Energy, City of St. Petersburg; I Love the Burg; Raymond James; St. Pete Catalyst; and the Tampa Bay Rays, as well as faculty chairs from the graduate and undergraduate programs in Journalism and Digital Communication at the USF St. Petersburg campus.

Regarding technology, employers expressed that knowledge of social media and analytics programs (e.g. Google Analytics, Facebook Insights) are useful. Employees should be able to use social media in a variety of contexts (e.g. storytelling, press releases) and tailor content for each platform.

### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Strong social media and analytics knowledge, adaptability to ever changing technologies, and an understanding of project management and a business model are essential.
- ▶ Soft skills like good interpersonal communication and adaptability are valued.
- ▶ Challenges include student overconfidence, deficient writing skills, and a lack of attention to detail.

Employee understanding for how their activities fit into the firm's overall business model are in high demand. As such, analytics tools are important to assess effectiveness of media campaigns through metrics and measurement of the firm's key success variables (or key performance indicators, KPIs). The ability to learn and adapt to new technologies were seen as particularly important in this age of rapidly changing technology.

In terms of work ethic, deficiencies, or red flags, often surfaced during job interviews. Participants produced examples, such as when student job candidates don't research the employer prior to an interview, and when they set boundaries (e.g. work hour flexibility, remote work, vacation) at the beginning of the interview. New



hires were seen as less willing to work outside of normal business hours in emergency situations as previous generations. It was also noted that if an individual has a passion for their work and good interpersonal skills, other flaws may be less problematic.

Regarding future competencies, utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) software to handle mundane writing tasks and foster creativity was expected to be an important skill for writers. In terms of software, familiarity with project management tools was seen as helpful. Asana was specifically mentioned.

When discussing skills to help advance careers, employers cited building good working relationships with co-workers and leadership skills. The importance of possessing social skills and the ability to hold good conversations with others outside the organization was also cited.

Positive mentions of USF students included interns, who were praised for generating creative ideas for the firms and satisfaction with a recent USF graduate, who was praised as “fantastic, polished, and professional.”

Regarding areas of improvement, student overconfidence was expressed. It was noted that, if a worker doesn't know something, employers preferred for them to admit ignorance and ask for guidance. And, although students majored in communication, writing skills were viewed as deficient. A lack of attention to detail in written communications was a frequently cited concern. Referring back to overconfidence, the employers said that new hires minimized the severity of their writing mistakes.

It was also seen as a challenge to find people who take initiative. Strong critical thinking skills and stress tolerance were seen as potential deficiencies well.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

This focus group on April 6 included employers within criminal justice and law enforcement including professionals from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement – Homeland Security Investigations; the Florida Department of Law Enforcement’s Tampa Bay Regional Operations Center; Florida Department of Corrections; the St. Petersburg Police Department; the Federal Bureau of Investigation; Pinellas County Government Juvenile Justice System; and the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice – Probation (Circuit 6 – Pasco & Pinellas), as well as USF Criminology faculty.

### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Social skills, empathy, and communication are crucial, while writing skills are deficient.
- ▶ Physical fitness and respectful intergenerational communication are noted areas of concern.
- ▶ A sense of entitlement among young employees is observed.

In terms of basic skills necessary in the work force, there was near-unanimous agreement that social skills were both necessary and lacking in recent college graduates. These social skills are necessary to do their jobs, in terms of feeling empathy with victims, de-escalating tensions under adversarial conditions, establishing cooperation during information gathering, and achieving promotion to supervisory positions. Recent graduates were noted to be deficient in terms of maintaining eye contact, ability to hold a conversation, rapport-building, showing respect, and relating to those individuals who are different from themselves.

On the other hand, younger employees were seen to be adept at using and learning new technologies.

Writing skills were deemed deficient. Texting was seen as a primary contributor to this deficiency. Lack of attention to detail was specifically mentioned, in terms of younger employees not proofreading their work.

For job requiring physical exertion, it was also noted that physical fitness levels of applicants has declined over the past several years. It’s recommended that applicants find out physical test and standards ahead of time, and work toward achieving those goals.

A sense of entitlement present among younger employees permeated the focus group discussion. This manifested itself in a variety of ways, such as greater demands for starting salary and working remotely, quickly using up vacation and sick days, and leaving work for the when things still needed to be done.

The focus group panel also recommended that recent graduates should work to make decisions for themselves by using their own critical thinking skills, rather than deferring responsibility, and owning their mistakes.

Unrealistic expectations were cited by some law enforcement personnel. They cited glamorization of the profession in the media. More training in college was advised in order to bridge the gap between job expectations and reality, in the form of law enforcement guest speakers and panelist in the classroom.

Focus group participants stated that they need to uphold standards of ethical conduct, involving consumption of drugs and alcohol, or other improprieties. However, while denying such activities, job candidate and employees would be caught through observation of their social media histories or in polygraph tests.



USF faculty suggested ways they could implement initiatives to address these areas for improvement, including holding panels with recruiters to discuss career survival and skills or a series of employer spotlight events. A course on professionalism in the criminology field is offered on the Tampa campus and it was suggested to offer this on the USF St. Petersburg campus as well. Individual classes could also incorporate ways to develop professionalism skills, such as dressing up for presentations, stressing importance of timeliness, writing and verbal skills, and relating these things to job requirements (e.g., testifying in court, or problem solving when out to a call).

# EMPLOYER FOCUS GROUPS

## MARINE BIOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

This focus group, held on June 6, included representatives from: Fish and Wildlife Research Institute - Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission; Florida Institute of Oceanography (FIO); NOAA; Pinellas County Government; US Geological Survey; WRA Engineering; USF Department of Integrative Biology; and Clearwater Marine Aquarium, as well as a Marine Biology faculty and the Director of Internships for the USF College of Arts and Sciences.

### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- More than other sectors, marine biology and environmental science recent graduates demonstrated a strong work ethic and satisfaction in their first roles in these sectors.
- Field experience, teamwork, and written communication skills are highly valued.
- Technical skills with 'R,' 'Excel,' and project management software are necessary.
- Lack of interpersonal skills, especially in relation to social media, is a concern.
- A need for diversity in the field is noted.

In terms of basic competencies necessary in the work force, employers were in unanimous agreement that field experience was essential. Internships and volunteer work were the primary mechanisms mentioned to gain real-world experience in the field. Relatedly, participants want to see experience working in teams. The panel appreciated capstone university courses where students work in teams, toward a common goal.

Written communication skills were deemed important, as some organizations need to communicate with the public, and others need to communicate with the scientific community. Inappropriate use of email was an issue, as electronic communication may sometimes come across as hostile. Further, it was agreed that phone calls can often resolve issues much more efficiently. Appropriate verbal communications were deemed essential as well.



Poor intergenerational communication, workplace harassment, and bullying were all mentioned as manifestations of inappropriate verbal messaging in the workplace. Harassment and bullying were seen as particularly problematic because they present legal challenges for the organization. Cellphones were blamed (at least partially) for a decline in interpersonal skills. Verbal skills were seen as lacking during job interviews as well.

Young employees' use of social media was seen as a double-edged sword. On the positive side, familiarity with social media assists organizations in terms of communicating with the public. On the other hand, individuals' use of social media in an inappropriate or controversial fashion has negatively impacted hiring decisions and evaluations of current employees.

Problem-solving skills and possessing an internal motivation to perform tasks were deemed important, as employees with these skills and tendencies are better able to contribute value to the organization without relying on others to solve problems and engage in tasks for them.

In terms of technical/software skills, 'R,' 'Excel,' and 'Matlab' were mentioned, as well as 'Monday' for project management. It should be noted that, as long as a student has a mastery of similar programs, new ones are usually learned easily.

Managing people and building relationships were seen as essential in terms of career-building skills.

Boating and swimming skills were deemed important in this field. However, it was noted that such skills place minority candidates at a disadvantage, and panelists stated that this matter needs to

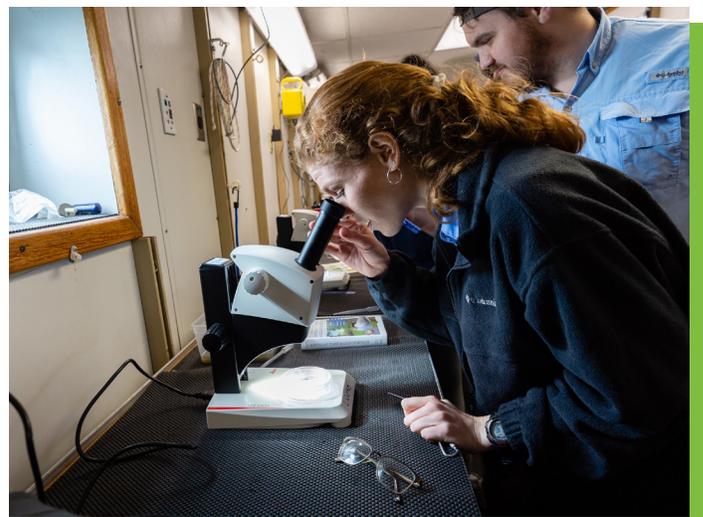


be addressed. Related to this issue, it was noted that the field of marine biology is dominated by white women, and that steps are being taken to increase workplace diversity.

Skills and technologies that will gain popularity and importance in the future include project management software, operating drones, remote sensing, and satellites. Artificial Intelligence was mentioned as a technology that needs to be addressed as well.

Reliability was seen as the most essential aspect of work ethic, “show up and be ready for work.” Interestingly, work ethic was viewed as a relatively lesser problem among marine science and environmental science employers because so many individuals appear to love and are dedicated to their work.

USF interns and hires received accolades. Some quotes: “I have had a couple of interns from USF St. Pete and it’s been wonderful.” “USF students are usually better at responding and doing the things required to get started.”



Several panelists cited the high cost of living in St. Petersburg as a challenge. Several hires were lost because of high apartment rental costs.

# EMPLOYER FOCUS GROUPS

## GRAPHIC DESIGN

This focus group, held on June 15, included representatives from Raymond James; Hype Group; Pyper, Inc; B Frank Studio; Philip Gary Design; Tricky Jennus and BNK Creative, as well as the chair of the USF Graphic Arts Program.

Of note is that several of the employers were graduates of the program at USF, and that two of the panelists stated that most of their interns came from the USF Graphic Design program.

In terms of technical basic competencies necessary in the work force, there was unanimous agreement that the experience with Adobe Suite was essential. Other notable software included Photoshop, InDesign, Illustrator, and Webflow, and PowerPoint. AutoCAD and Revit were mentioned as well.

Regarding more general skills, file management, organization, and labeling were discussed frequently as practical, useful, and necessary skills. Possessing a familiarity of brand standards, as well as content basics as such as knowledge of headings and subheadings, body copy, font, kerning, and copyright protections were deemed significant areas of knowledge for success in the field.

Time management was discussed as essential, since hours are billable to clients. It was deemed important to understand deadlines, possess a sense of urgency, understand how long it takes to perform tasks, and not overthinking creative ideas.

### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Students graduating in graphic design from USF were overwhelmingly considered as well-prepared for their first roles in these sectors.
- ▶ Proficiency with Adobe Suite and other design software is essential.
- ▶ Time management, organizational skills, and an ability to drive one's personal creative process are vital.
- ▶ Soft skills like active listening and empathy are lacking in some cases.
- ▶ A hybrid work environment is becoming common.



Other personal characteristics deemed helpful in the field are asking for help when needed, being open about issues that may affect meeting deadlines, presentation skills, defending your work without being defensive, relatedly, and ability to receive and welcome criticism.

It was also deemed vital to establish some personal creative process. Some ways of expediting creativity included scanning platforms like Pinterest and Instagram, as well as possessing cultural literacy in terms of myths, theories, travel, math, science, and language arts.

A soft skill some participants found to be lacking involves students' lack of ability to demonstrate active listening and empathy in the workplace.

Most employers noted that their workplace featured a hybrid work environment, utilizing a mix of office work and home work. Nearly all participants noted a need to for employees to take some time to work at the office. This was deemed important to feel a part of the organization, build rapport, collaborate, and share work-related information. Slack and Zoom were mentioned as excellent mechanism to foster remote collaboration.

It was noted that young employees' valued work-life balance, recognition, flexibility, and freedom.

The panel revealed excellent experiences with USF and USF St. Petersburg interns and graduates. It was noted that USF St. Petersburg students are more immersed in the St. Petersburg community than other schools because it is an urban campus.

Finally, participants noted some challenges among recent college graduates. These included the influence of helicopter parents, who take a too-active role in their children's lives, a lack of prioritization on getting work done, and a sense of entitlement regarding salary and promotion expectations and work quality, flexible hours and work location.

## HEALTH SCIENCES

This focus group, held on June 29, included representatives from Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital; Veterans Health Administration; BayCare Healthcare System; Bayfront Health;

Florida Department of Health; Neighborly - Meals on Wheels; HCA Florida Northside Hospital, and Westminster Palms, as well as the Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Studies of USF Health.

### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Strong communication skills, holistic thinking, and problem-solving abilities are crucial.
- ▶ Understanding of hierarchical structures and respect for intergenerational differences are important.
- ▶ Skills in Microsoft Office Suite and specific software are needed.
- ▶ Internships are important to student understanding and employability.
- ▶ Students will benefit from more simulation activities with 'what if' scenarios in order to develop appropriate responses unclear decision-making conditions.

In terms of basic competencies that the panel found to be necessary in the healthcare field, respondents expressed a need for strong communication skills (both verbal and written), compassion in servicing unique populations (such as disabled and elderly clients), and the need for such holistic skills such as teamwork, creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking. Students were also advised to properly manage their social media presence. Specifically, young workers are expected to communicate through email, phone, and in-person (rather than just text messages and social media), and to understand the concerns and express compassion for clients with unique needs. New graduates are expected to think about their responsibilities more in terms of end-goals for the patient and for the mission of the organization, rather than simply completing their individual tasks with no further concern for the patient or organizational mission. Such a holistic orientation involves elements of problem-solving, creativity, and flexibility. Some newer employees were found lacking in critical thinking skills pertaining to blindly accepting information, without further thought or



investigation. Such individuals are encouraged to ask more questions in the workplace.

It was expressed that younger employees should possess a respect for the hierarchical nature of the healthcare field and be aware of intergenerational differences existing in the workplace. A sense of entitlement was also mentioned in terms of young workers wanting to advance quickly, stick strictly to their job description, and place their own needs above the needs of their patients.

Specific skills mentioned were proficiency in the Microsoft Office Suite, including Excel and PowerPoint. Others mentioned include Sequel Business Intelligence software, Tableau, and Power BI.

Participants spoke of their experiences with USF students and interns, and responses to this question were uniformly positive. University internships were regarded as extremely helpful in assisting young workers to understand the healthcare work environment, as well to help students and employers assess fit with the organization and job responsibilities.

Panelists discussed the importance of treating younger employees as valuable members of the organization. Recognizing younger employees for the contributions and making the workplace enjoyable were described as ways to promote a positive work environment, build teamwork, and minimize turnover.

Besides internships, universities were also encouraged to provide more simulation activities, where students are provided with 'what if' scenarios and encouraged to develop appropriate responses under unclear decision-making conditions. Research and grant-writing skills were also named by some informants as important in advancing in the field.

# EMPLOYER FOCUS GROUPS

## FINANCIAL SERVICES

This focus group, conducted on July 11, included representatives from Decker, Harth & Swavelly of Janney Montgomery Scott LLC; BNY Mellon; Lake Michigan Credit Union; and Bank of Tampa, as well as faculty from the Muma College of Business and the Dean from the Kate Tiedemann School of Business and Finance.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Students graduating in finance and accounting from USF were overwhelmingly considered as well-prepared for their first roles in these sectors.
- ▶ Technical skills like customer relationship management and analytics are key.
- ▶ Soft skills such as professionalism and respectful communication are crucial.
- ▶ Entitlement and lack of adaptability among young employees are noted.
- ▶ Mentoring is valued for career development.

In terms of basic competencies thought to be necessary in the financial services field, employers noted several general skills sets, software applications, programs and websites such as customer relationship management, document editing and manipulation, data mining, and analytics. More specifically, software applications, websites, and applications were named. These include Microsoft Office Suite, particularly Excel, along with Bloomberg Terminal, Python, Lacerte Tax, FaxUp, IBISWorld, Salesforce, Grammarly, and Chat GPT. Regarding job interview skills, panelists mentioned professional behaviors such as shaking hands, dressing appropriately, maintaining eye contact, doing research on the interviewing company, and using LinkedIn to network.

Panelists also provided advice for younger employees to possess in the field. These include: demonstrating a basic understanding of the financial services business at a macro level, possessing an awareness



of their own personality characteristics and traits, possessing motivation to learn new skills and competencies, communicating in a professional manner (forego text-style shorthand and be judicious in the use of acronyms), treating clients and colleagues with respect, and maintaining an organized workspace.

Possessing soft skills were mentioned as a way of advancing in the field. These included active listening, building relationships with clients, practicing consultative selling, and asking the right questions.

Participants noted a sense of entitlement among younger employees. This attitude manifested itself in terms of an expectations of speedy job promotions, turning employees' ideas into actions without vetting, exerting an air of self-importance, and disrespectful attitude toward senior employees.

A number of other issues were raised pertaining to younger employees, on various issues such as difficulty taking constructive criticism, and some degree of substance abuse such as kratom and barbiturates, as well as excessive social drinking.

There was an overall sense among participants that current managers and employees at their organizations are very willing to mentor young employees to help them succeed in the organization and advance in their careers.

Suggestions for USF course topics included simulations working on problem clients and abusive clients. On a positive note, panelists who had experience with and knowledge of USF students, colleges, and programs spoke highly favorably about them.