

Education researchers at Pearson teamed up with the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) to conduct a review of the research literature on the importance of collaboration skills for employers as well as how to teach and assess these skills in K-12 and higher-education classrooms. The ability to work in teams is one of the most sought-after skills among new hires, yet research suggests that students may not be graduating with the level of skills needed to succeed on the job. What follows is a summary of the most significant findings.

Why Is Collaboration Important?

The ability to collaborate is increasingly identified as an important educational outcome in and of itself rather than a means of organizing instruction to teach other subjects. The P21 Framework for 21st Century Learning includes collaboration as one of the four Cs, along with creativity, critical thinking, and communication. Research indicates that a focus on developing collaboration skill is important for at least three reasons:

1. Those with more developed collaboration skills enjoy better in-school group performance, and teaching students to work together can enhance the effectiveness of collaborative approaches to teaching other concepts.
2. Strengthening students' collaboration skills can also enhance their prospects for employment and job advancement once they leave school. In particular, people who know more about collaborating go on to enjoy higher performance in team settings, and employees with better collaboration skills earn higher performance ratings on the job, better salaries, and bigger bonuses.
3. Teaching young learners how to work with others within a community on social issues can improve students' commitment to civic participation.

Is There a Skills Gap?

Due to changes in the workplace, we have seen companies move to greater emphasis on new organizational structures that encourage and facilitate team-based work. At times, this teamwork is carried out virtually by remote employees who are not co-located. Accordingly, recent large-scale surveys of employers reveal that collaboration and teamwork are among the most important employability skills for new hires, with as many as 94 percent of companies in one survey identifying the ability to work in teams as either "very important" or "absolutely essential."

Despite the importance of teamwork and collaboration skills, there is a long-standing concern that institutions of higher education (IHEs) are not producing graduates with the collaboration skills needed to succeed on the job. On one employer survey, only 37 percent of companies felt new graduates were well prepared to work in teams.

What Collaboration Skills Do Learners Need?

Many frameworks for collaboration and teamwork exist, but the elements that are common across multiple frameworks include:

- interpersonal communication;
- conflict resolution;
- task management.

Individual skill in collaborating varies depending on a person's willingness and ability to consider the views of others, to coordinate ideas and problem-solving processes with those of teammates, to forge consensus, and to use negotiation strategies to compromise and resolve conflicts.

How Can Employers Support Skill Development?

Like any skill, collaboration must be taught explicitly. We can no longer assume that simply putting students into groups is enough to support learning. Rather, instructors must engage in some amount of direct instruction, teaching students what good collaboration looks like, as well as strategies for working together. Students must also have opportunities to practice their collaboration skills under instructor supervision and to receive feedback on their performance.

To ensure coherent and consistent implementation of education for collaboration and teamwork skills that are relevant in the workplace, stronger alignment is needed between K-12, higher education, and employer stakeholders. Employers can engage in outreach to educational institutions to forge both formal and informal partnerships. Formal partnerships might include industry leaders working with four-year IHEs and community colleges to help establish alternative college education programs that are tightly aligned to the skill needs of that particular business sector. Other ways of formal partnering might include having business leaders serve on special advisory boards for educational institutions or accreditation organizations, participate in drafting educational standards, or even enter the classroom to teach clinical or applied courses in their areas of expertise. Less formal partnerships might include supporting internships or apprenticeships for both high-school and college students, and tailoring those experiences to ensure that participants gain training and high-quality feedback on their teamwork performance. Support could even be as simple as having business leaders participate in “career day” events at local schools, leading students through a team-building exercise.

If collaboration and teamwork skills are critical for employee success — and our review of the research strongly suggests that they are important for many fields — employers must align their recruiting, hiring, and compensation strategies to reward workers that demonstrate high levels of collaboration skill. Finally, once on the job, employers should develop their own collaboration skills training and make it broadly available to employees, along with appropriate professional development opportunities that allow individuals the chance to grow their own skills in the context of varied cross-functional teams.