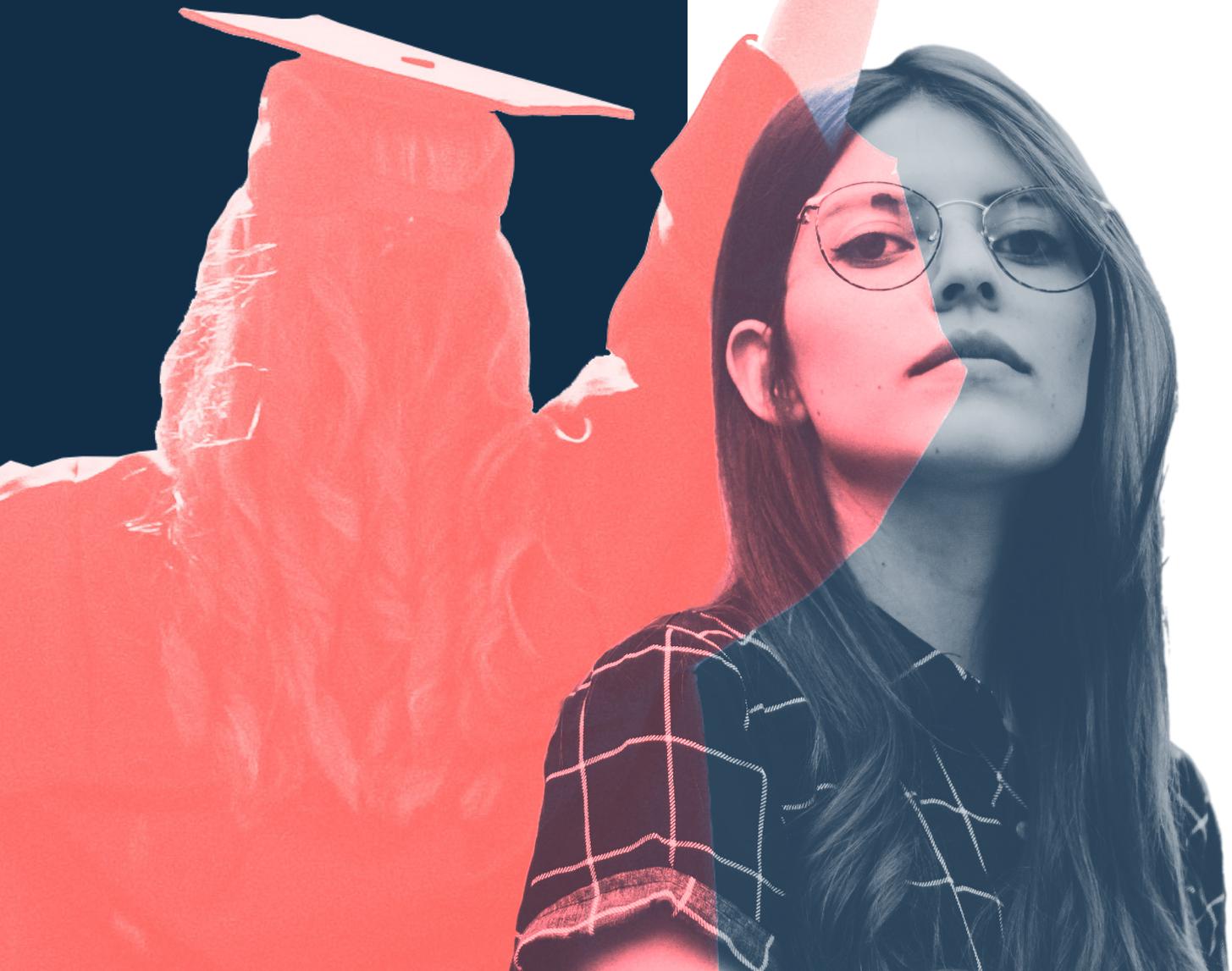




**From Skill to Instinct:** How Higher Education Can Bridge the Gap Between Classroom and Career

Prioritizing Social Instincts Practice for Young Professionals



## Introduction

Higher education institutions have traditionally focused solely on academia, providing students crucial, in-depth knowledge of their chosen fields. However, colleges and universities now need to consider the chief concern of their students: enhancing their individual worth in an exceedingly competitive and rapidly transforming job market. While an advanced degree remains a valuable tool, students simply require more from their higher ed institutions to prepare them for a successful and rewarding career.

These expectations are continually expanding, placing students and educational institutions in a tough spot. The cost of education has continued to rise, while many students feel their degrees aren't leading to the jobs they want, leading to the perception that the value from their investment is on the decline.

But there's more to this change in expectations that is worth exploring. **Employers and hiring managers are increasingly looking for an emerging set of skills in their new hires, including those entering the workforce with a recent degree in hand.** Companies are looking for prospective employees who not only have the hard skills training needed to do the job, but also the social instincts that indicate a candidate will be a productive and effective member of their team.

With an increasing focus on social instincts, how do students find and take advantage of the opportunity to develop these abilities? How do they take the people skills they develop through their social lives and education and turn them into the vital instincts needed in their future careers?

This problem is exacerbated as both the working and education worlds continue to realize the impact of remote work, which drastically reduces opportunities to practice in-person people skills. Group projects, debates and general interaction with others have always been a large part of students' social education, and those opportunities have diminished with remote learning.

These questions led Mursion to explore what role higher education can play in the development of social instincts and better prepare graduates for the expectations of hiring managers and today's workplace. If students are viewing the launch of their careers as an integral objective of their education, then perhaps we should include higher education in the equation and bring these organizations into the conversation over how to close a critical skills gap.



## Key Findings



### KEY FINDING 1

#### Building a Team vs. Building a Resume

**44%** of HR professionals would hire an applicant with superior people skills over an applicant with superior hard skills



### KEY FINDING 2

#### The Cost of Going Remote

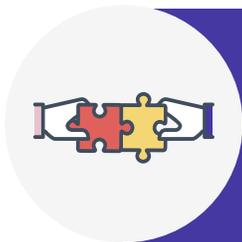
**47%** of HR professionals believe the pandemic has deteriorated employees' people skills



### KEY FINDING 3

#### Investments in Higher Education

**61%** of recent graduates feel somewhat or wholly unprepared for their career



### KEY FINDING 4

#### A New Kind of "Social" Studies

**93%** of recent graduates and **74%** of HR professionals believe that higher education should formalize opportunities to practice people skills

## Methodology

In May 2021, Mursion conducted a dual survey of more than 400 recent college graduates and more than 425 HR professionals to explore the importance of people skills in the workforce and discover how HR and emerging professionals want this gap to be improved.

**KEY FINDING 1:**

**Building a Team vs. Building a Resume — Social Instincts Critical to Success; But While HR Values Teamwork, Recent Grads Focus on Solo Skills**

**90%**

of recent graduates believe people skills are important to their job

Recent graduates, either looking to start or in the nascent stages of their careers, place high importance on soft skills and believe they play an important role in professional success. HR professionals agree — so much so that they commonly seek people skills over technical skills in prospective employees.

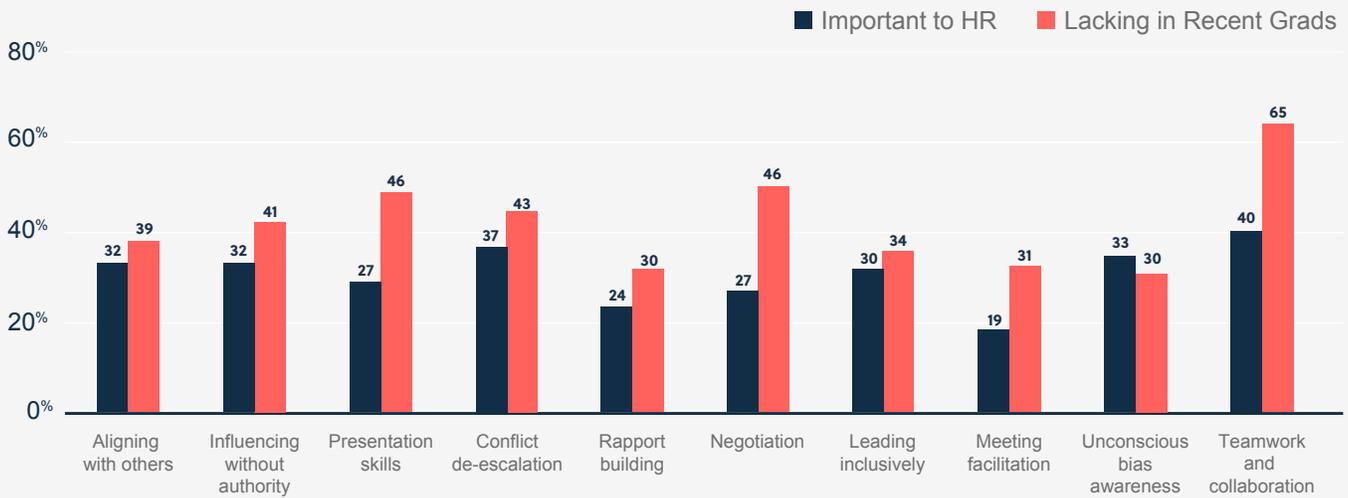


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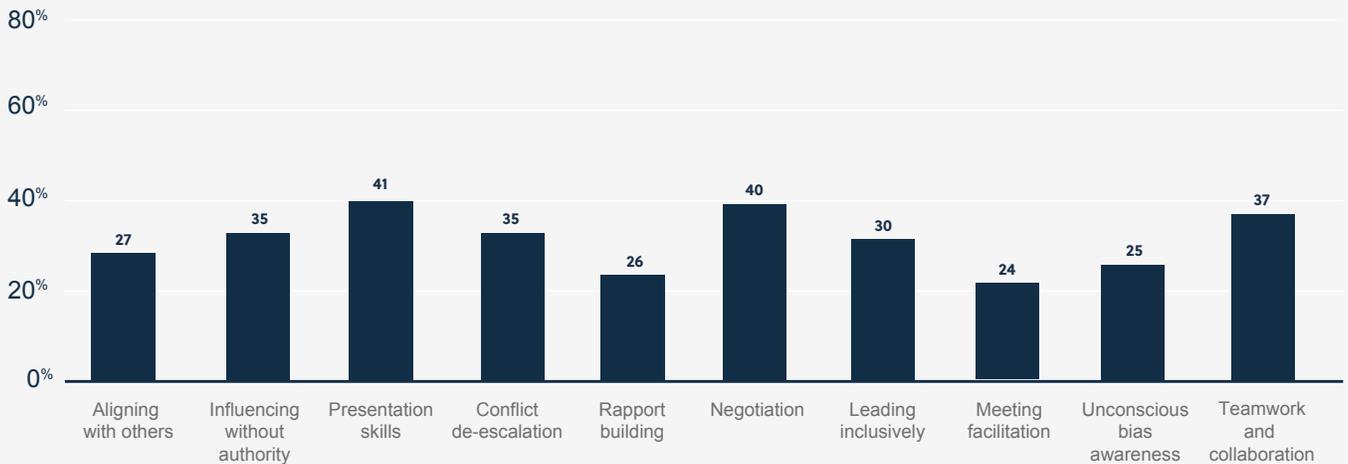
However, when this skill group is broken down into individual traits, recent graduates and those looking to hire them show some disconnect on which skills are most important. Out of a long list of professional people skills, HR professionals place the utmost importance on teamwork and collaboration, skills that promote mutual consensus in the workplace. However, these are also the traits many HR managers believe recent graduates are lacking. Recent graduates are more focused on self-developmental people skills that are more marketable in the job market. They listed teamwork and collaboration third, behind presentation and negotiation skills.



### Important to HR and Lacking in Recent Grads



### What skills do recent grads believe they need to develop more?



This divergence between recent graduates and HR makes hiring and getting hired a more difficult process than it already is, with HR looking for skills and traits that emerging professionals are not focused on.

While each side of the hiring aisle places value on different traits, there is another issue for recent graduates at hand. HR is concerned with recent graduates' level of social instincts on the whole — **only 9% believe that new graduates and emerging professionals have all the individual interpersonal skills they need to successfully manage their careers.** The lion's share of HR believes that recent graduates and emerging professionals aren't prepared for the working world.

**KEY FINDING 2:****The Cost of Going Remote — Missed Opportunities, Deteriorating People Skills****68%**

of HR professionals believe their employees' people skills were either average or below average prior to the pandemic

In our most recent report, [OOO, Out of Mind: The Unintended Impact of Remote Work on Critical Communication](#), we explored the way remote communication has suffered as workers — much like students — were suddenly forced to remote environments during the pandemic. We found that remote work was making it easier to avoid difficult conversations and leaving critical issues like Diversity, Equity and Inclusion poorly addressed.

Now, we've found that it is not just new graduates who are facing the disdain of the HR department. The shortage of social instincts permeates all levels of the command chain. Pre-pandemic, HR was blasé with even their more tenured employees' social instincts. A majority rated their existing staff's people skills as average or below average.

When the pandemic hit, and employees went home in droves, many were unsure about the future of work. While the WFH shift lasted far longer than many imagined, in-person work is not disappearing for good. Many businesses are adopting a hybrid approach, requiring employees to spend some time in the office and at home.

**58%**

of HR professionals said their company will adopt a hybrid remote work schedule

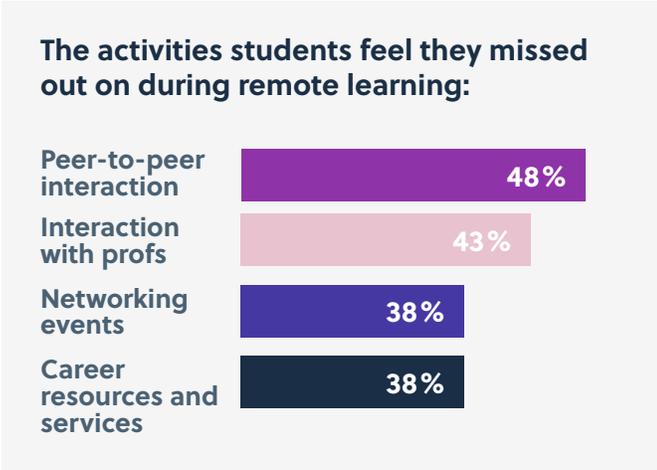
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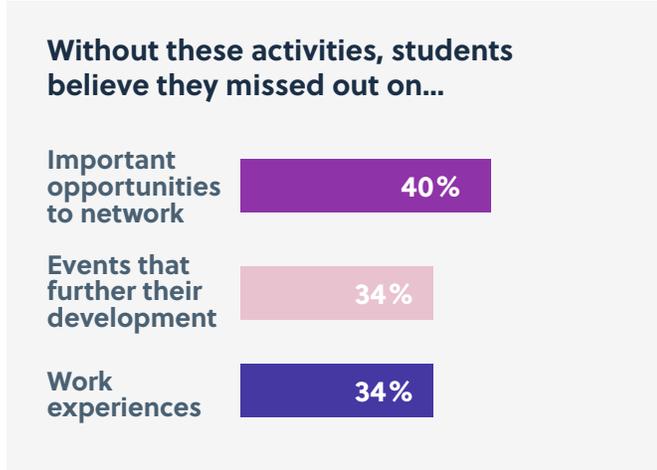


**During remote learning, 48% of recent graduates said they felt like they missed out on peer-to-peer interactions, and 43% said they missed out on interactions with their professors**



Recent graduates are also feeling the pangs of the pandemic. Students who transitioned to remote education missed out on crucial opportunities to hone their interpersonal skills, leaving them out of practice and making it that much harder to turn their people skills into social instincts.

Recent graduates also reported missing out on career-building experiences and opportunities as a result of remote learning. Facilities and events that traditionally acted as a launching pad for young professionals had been shuttered by the pandemic.



These missed opportunities are not going unnoticed. Many believe that remote learning will have a direct impact on their personal and professional development going forward.

**KEY FINDING 3:****High Career Returns are Expected on Investments in Higher Education****90%**

of recent graduates expected that the time and money invested in getting a degree would result in a job in their intended career field, and **57%** said they got their degree to make themselves more valuable in the job market

**61%**

**of recent graduates feel somewhat or wholly unprepared for their career**

While attending college or university is an academic pursuit, the majority of students pursue higher education to increase their value in the job market. Upon completing their degree, they expect a return in the form of employment. More than half of recent graduates said the primary reason for getting their degree was to better their chances of getting a job. However, almost half said that moment of pay-off was either delayed by half a year or has yet to come at all.

When new graduates were able to enter the workforce and transition to working professionals, they reported feeling underprepared to manage their success or grow their careers. Despite the years of training and preparation they had in school, recent grads still felt they lacked vital interpersonal skills needed to prosper in the workforce.

This consensus of liability among new and emerging professionals evidences a gap in how the people skills developed in early life turn into social instincts needed in the workplace, often overlooked by the professional and educational training systems. HR is not optimistic about closing this skills gap and believes concrete steps must be taken to improve it.

The vast majority of HR professionals believe that true improvement lies in adequate training, followed by consistent practice and improvement. Training allows controlled growth for professionals, new or experienced. While continued practice turns those essential people skills into everyday social instincts.

**86%**

**of recent graduates are either still looking for a job in their intended field or said it took more than six months to land one**



**KEY FINDING 4:**  
 Students and HR Call on Higher Education for a New Kind of “Social” Studies

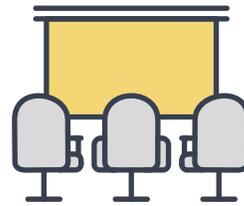
**90%**

of HR professionals believe recent grads are entering the workforce only somewhat prepared, and universities should do more to equip students with essential people skills

HR professionals and new graduates alike are left wondering who is responsible for this people skills gap. HR, already tasked with onboarding and company-specific training, is turning to higher education to offer formal opportunities for students to develop soft skills. In fact, more than a third of respondents wish universities would take this opportunity for development a step further and implement formal classes specifically designed to help students navigate the workplace properly.



**93%** of recent graduates and **74%** of HR professionals believe that higher education should formalize opportunities to practice people skills



**37%** of HR professionals believe that higher education should implement more classes geared toward navigating the workplace

The majority of HR professionals believe that under-developed people skills are due to a lack of practice. With an increasing number of applicants lacking social instincts, HR is passing the buck to higher education, saying colleges and universities simply aren't doing enough to prepare their students for the realities of the working world, and that they're focusing too much on implementing job-specific "hard skills."



- **51%** of HR professionals believe that a lack of practice is what holds individuals back from developing proper people skills
- **36%** of HR professionals believe that higher education puts more emphasis on teaching hard skills required for a new job
- **43%** of HR professionals believe that higher education doesn't provide students enough opportunities to practice soft skills

For most of their lives, young professionals have had informal people skills training at best. Once-a-semester presentations and group projects that are expected to develop critical skills are often the most formal soft skills training they will receive.

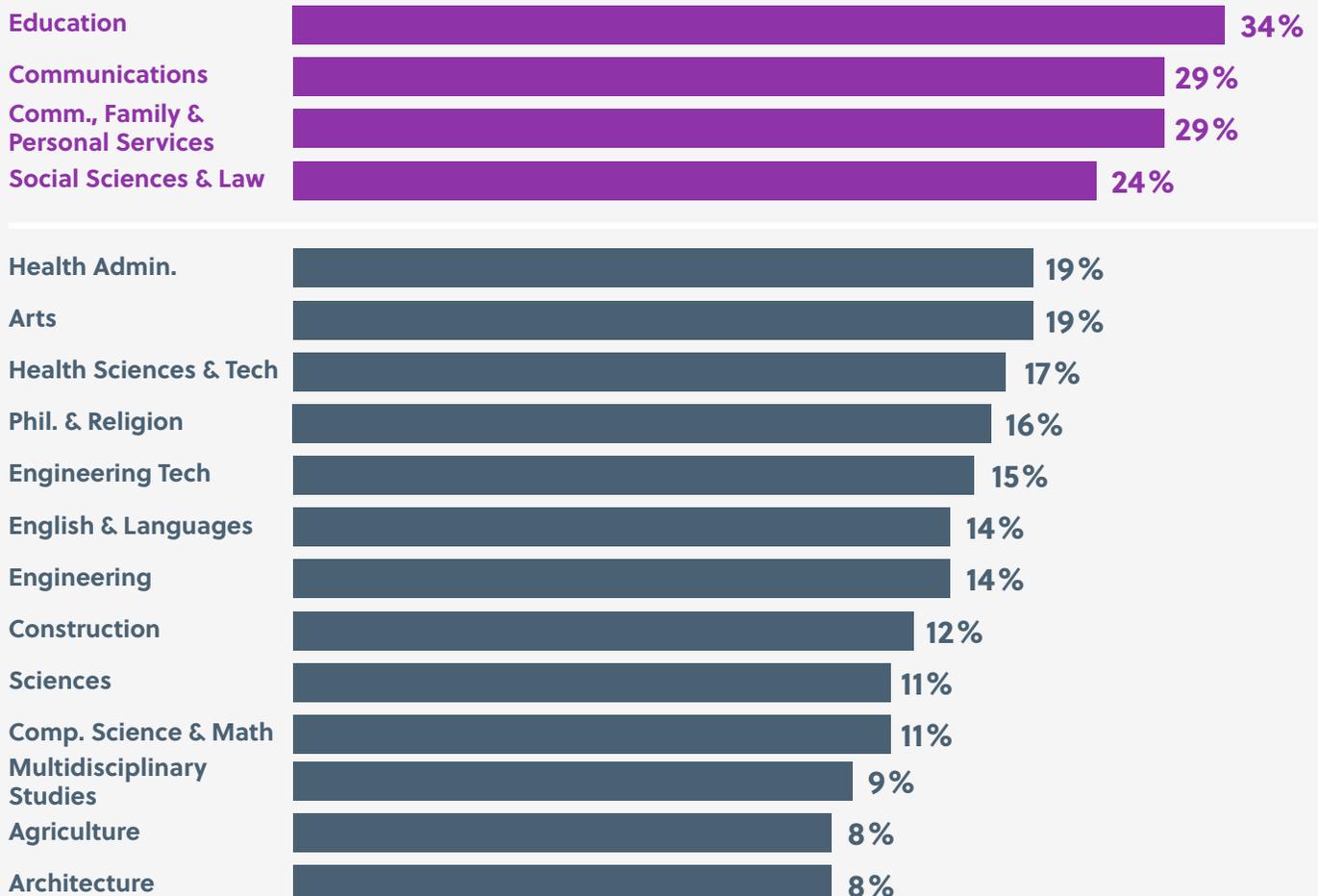
Many believe they should have been provided more formal opportunities to hone these skills, transforming them from practice to instinctual while still in the classroom. While some areas of study like education and communication involve social instinct practice, very few grads reported learning any people skills in a classroom setting, and that lack is evident to HR.

**only 12%**

**of recent graduates learned their people skills in the classroom**

Although the use of people skills is more evident in jobs like teaching or community services, social instincts are critical to succeeding in all types of careers. The lack of formal education and training in these skills is evident to both recent grads and those looking to hire them — and they think it's time to balance the scales.

### Which category of college majors enter the professional world with the highest levels of people skills?



## Conclusion

While traditional academia and hard-skills training will always be integral to higher education and career advancement, it's clear that a critical component is being left out. Even before the pandemic, people skills training was informal and infrequent. Yet many still had the opportunity to practice to some degree. Now, after being dispersed for well over a year, even those with great social instincts are struggling to snap back to normal. And many believe the broad erosion of people skills will continue unless formal action is taken.

This lack of collegiate training in people skills is creating a rift between the academic and professional worlds. HR professionals are seeing more and more recent graduates enter the workforce with underdeveloped social instincts or none at all. The skills gap is so prevalent, HR is unimpressed even with current employees' social instincts, evidencing that despite seemingly constant informal practice, people skills need something more to improve and advance into social instincts.

To close this gap, both students and HR professionals are looking to the higher education system — calling on colleges and universities to embrace opportunities to formalize interpersonal training and offer a chance for these critical skills to become instinctual prior to entering the workforce. Colleges and universities play a vital role in the lives of students, who enter expecting the pay-off of meaningful employment. And it's the responsibility of those institutions to equip students with the skills they need to succeed.

If higher education is able to instill in students the indispensable people skills that will help them stand out and pursue mobility in their careers, they can ensure students of all backgrounds have equitable opportunities to engage in their future roles. In this, HR and students are aligned.

**Building a bright and inclusive future requires all of us to work together. Let's make sure we know how.**

