



BUSINESS & INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SECTOR: Employment Trends & the SCCD Stackable Certificate Program

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Executive Summary

The Seattle Community College District has developed, and is currently implementing, a stackable, certificate program (BIT Program) that offers first-, second-, or third-level certificates, known as Office Assistant, Office Support, and Office Professional certificates, respectively. SkillUp Washington commissioned Seattle Jobs Initiative to undertake the following research, as part of its Social Innovations Fund and College for Working Adults investments in the BIT sector, to better understand the current employment landscape and to better provide potential workers with the skills and training necessary to fill office occupations. Further, through discussions and interviews with employers and staffing agencies, this research serves the dual function of marketing the BIT Program to local employers and increasing local buy-in regarding the value of a shorter-term stackable certificate program.

Current labor market information elucidates that the average hourly wage for many office occupations in King County exceeds that of Washington State, which also exceeds the national average. These occupations tend to be filled by female workers and individuals with education beyond high school (though the minimum requirement is typically a high school education). Many office occupations are projected to grow and hire over the coming years, though a few are on the decline (e.g., typists). Lastly, many of the job openings for office occupations will be generated from the need for more customer service representatives in the private sector and the need for replacement administrative workers (e.g., replacing a retiree) in the public sector.

Themes and recommendations culled from the employer and staffing agency interview process include:

- A high school diploma is the minimum education requirement for most office occupations, but employers are typically looking for experience as well.
- Knowledge of Microsoft Office Suite is critical, especially Outlook.
- Employers look for candidates that are computer savvy, can learn new software, and can adapt to changing technology.

- Any experience with Microsoft Access or SharePoint can be a plus.
- Beyond credentials and technical skill, subject area knowledge gives applicants an advantage in the hiring process.
- Employers have been able to hire applicants with skills and education beyond the requirements. Some employers prefer overqualified applicants, while others expressed concern about hiring overqualified applicants.
- Public job postings generate applicant pools filled with inappropriately qualified applicants. Many employers post open positions online, but still rely on internal referrals.
- Employers see nothing prohibitive about hiring from the community college system and, generally, have positive past experiences with community college graduates.
- Postsecondary education, be it a certificate program or additional training and classes, demonstrates seriousness and commitment on the part of job applicants.
- Employers and staffing agencies anticipate continued hiring needs for office occupations and the need for additional training for incumbent workers.
- The biggest challenge facing many employers and staffing agencies is finding qualified candidates to fill job openings.
- The role of the temporary worker is changing as more employers are utilizing a temp-to-hire approach. Because of this, community colleges might benefit from partnering and working with staffing agencies.
- Certificate programs, such as the BIT Program, require greater visibility and promotion.
- Building a solid resume and demonstrating technical skills was seen as necessary to get past recruiters' initial screening and to the interview phase of a job application process.
- Many applicants are ill-prepared for the interview process. Interview skills need to be taught and practiced.

Funding for this research was provided by SkillUp Washington. For more information about the study and its implications, please contact the author, Tyler Corwin, at tcorwin@seattlejobsinit.com.



Business and Information Technology Sector: Employment Trends & the SCCD Stackable Certificate Program

Overview

The business information technology (BIT) program is one of the longest and most established programs in the Seattle Community College District (SCCD). Since 2009, SkillUp Washington has invested and engaged in the BIT program as part of its College for Working Adults initiative (CWA). Through CWA, SkillUp tested the use of system reform strategies with a potential for scale, such as compressed, stackable certificates (delivered to cohorts of students), college and career navigation, access to emergency supports, cross-college curricula alignment, and employer engagement. Furthermore, *business technology* (now known as BIT) was identified as a priority sector by the City of Seattle's Pathways to Careers, a partnership comprised of businesses, educational institutions, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and labor to build pathways to middle-wage jobs. Additionally, Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) provides wraparound supports, career navigation, and pathways to careers through training and education programs, including the BIT program through the SCCD. Because of SJI's relationship with the SCCD and involvement in training for office occupations, SkillUp commissioned SJI to undertake the following research as part of its Social Innovations Fund and College for Working Adults investments in the BIT sector.

The SCCD has developed, and is currently implementing, a stackable, certificate program (BIT Program) that offers first-, second-, or third-level certificates, known as Office Assistant, Office Support, and Office Professional certificates, respectively. This BIT Program largely readies students for entry-level office occupations, providing them with beginner, intermediate, and more advanced office skills, including:

- Customer interaction
- Interpersonal communication
- Critical thinking
- Team dynamics
- Formatting business reports
- Proficiency in Microsoft Office
- Cultural competency in the workplace

Many community college certificate and Associate's degree programs require one to two years of course completion (see <http://www.sccd.ctc.edu> for degree offerings), which can be difficult or impossible for some students to complete (SJI typically

serves low-income populations and individuals facing multiple barriers). Further, the graduation rates for community colleges continue to be low; in Washington State, the graduation rate for two-year public community colleges is only 25.8 percent within 150 percent of the time expected for degree completion (e.g., within three years for a two-year/six-quarter degree).ⁱ While only graduating one quarter of students in 150 percent time seems low, the figure for Washington State is higher than 70 percent of the states in the country. The BIT Program is unique, in that without a one- or two-year course load, students can demonstrate a learned skill and content expertise through a certificate awarded after earning a fraction of the credits (between 16-27 credits per certificate completed depending on the school/certificate). Because of this, higher completion rates for the short-term certificate can be expected, and retention and progress should be improved because of the milestone that each certificate provides.

Beyond the difficulty retaining and graduating more students from community college programs, developing and implementing curricula that prepare workers for office occupations presents additional challenges. Education and training requirements for entry-level positions in office work are constantly shifting, especially in relation to the technical skills and software knowledge that is required. Furthermore, employers have expressed the ability and preference, in recent years, to hire job candidates with skills and training beyond the basic requirements; this complicates the task of graduating *employable* students from the community college system, as the job market has become more competitive in terms of educational attainment and training.ⁱⁱ Lastly, while the value of postsecondary course work, vocational training, and sub-baccalaureate degrees has been demonstrated,ⁱⁱⁱ employers and staffing agencies do not consistently utilize community colleges as a resource, or pipeline, for skilled labor.

The goal of this research is to better understand the current employment landscape in the BIT sector and to better provide potential workers with the skills and training necessary to fill office occupations. Further, through discussions and interviews with employers and staffing agencies, this research serves the dual function of marketing the BIT Program to local employers and increasing local buy-in regarding the value of a shorter-term stackable certificate program.

Method

Labor market research around the BIT sector was conducted, focusing on the jobs most closely associated with the BIT Program; these jobs were identified by community college staff during qualitative interviews (described below). Labor market information broken down by occupation included projected job openings, job growth and demand, wage information, occupational demographics, job

requirements, major industry categories, and the number employed. This research provided critical information on the office occupations that the BIT Program targets and informed the qualitative interviews with employers and staffing agencies.

SJI staff sat in on an SCCD BIT Sector Team meeting and interviewed BIT sector instructors and deans from the community colleges, as well as a project director, a program coordinator, and a WorkSource director, to develop a short list of key questions to ask employers during semi-structured telephone interviews. Using the Economic Modeling Specialists Int'l (EMSI) employer tool, an SJI researcher identified the BIT sector employers and staffing agencies in King County that employ the greatest number of administrative and office workers. The researcher reached out to these employers to setup 20-30 minute interviews, during which the key questions identified by community college staff were asked (see Appendix A for the complete interview protocol and questionnaire). Approximately twenty-five employers and staffing agencies were interviewed. Respondents were informed that their answers may be aggregated and documented for the purposes of this report, but that their individual responses, if used, would be kept anonymous. No incentives were offered for participation.

During the interviews, the BIT Program was marketed to employers - both as a source for new hires and as a resource to skill-up their existing workforce. Employers were given information regarding how to post new openings at the college, hire from these programs, and refer their current workforce to training. Further, employer contact information was gathered, when possible, to build and develop future relationships between employers, workforce development organizations, and community colleges.

Results

Labor Market Information

During the interviews with community college staff, each staff member was asked to identify the office occupations for which the BIT Program prepares students. The following eleven office occupations were identified by staff or were closely related to those identified (based on the Occupational Information Network [O*Net]):

- Customer service representatives
- File clerks
- Human resources assistants, except payroll and timekeeping
- Receptionists and information clerks
- Information and record clerks, all other
- Executive secretaries and executive administrative assistants

- Secretaries and administrative assistants, except legal, medical, and executive
- Data entry keyers
- Word processors and typists
- Office clerks, general
- Office and administrative support workers, all other.

(See full descriptions of each Standard Occupational Classification in Appendix B.)

Figure 1. Average Hourly Wages for Selected Office Occupations^{iv}

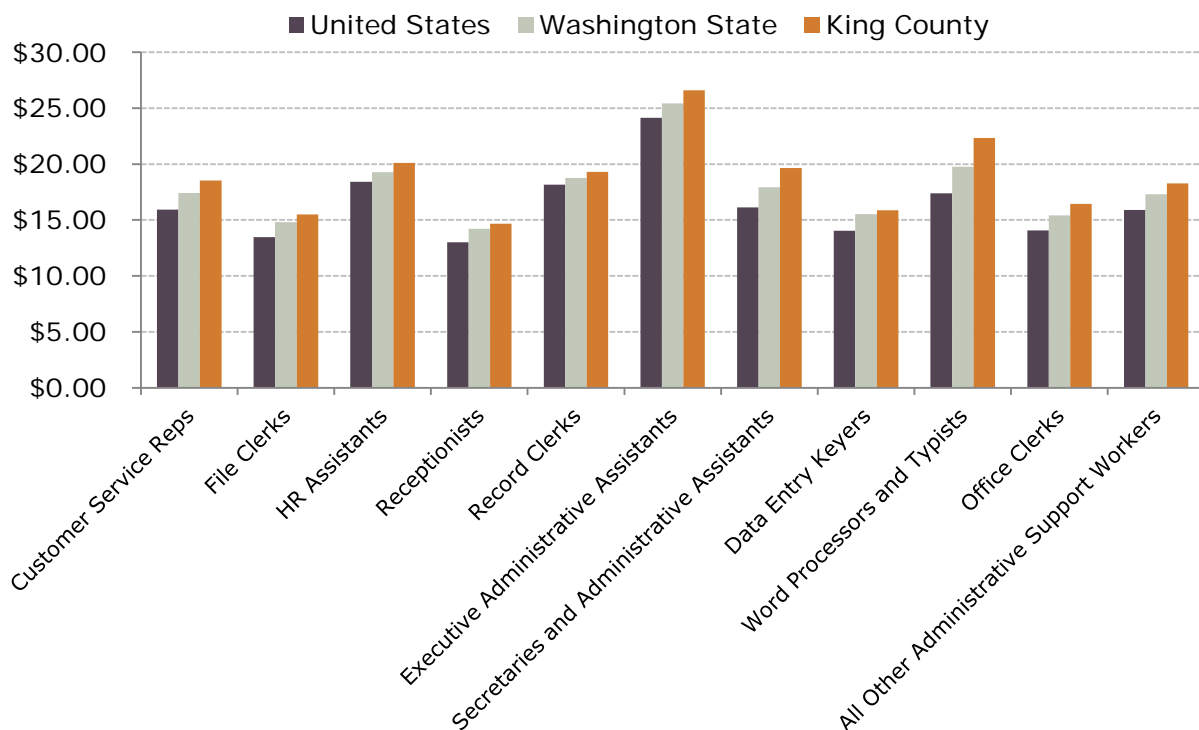


Figure 1 provides the average hourly wage for each of the identified office occupations for the United States, Washington State, and King County.¹ As the figure demonstrates, for each of the eleven occupations, the average hourly wage in King County is higher than the state average, which is higher than the national average. The majority of the occupations average \$15-\$20 per hour in King County; *Executive Administrative Assistants* have the highest average wage at \$26.60 per hour, and *Receptionists* have the lowest average wage at \$14.87 per hour.

¹ Estimates for King County are for the Seattle-King County Workforce Development Area.

Figure 2.² Percent Female for Selected Office Occupations (King County)^v

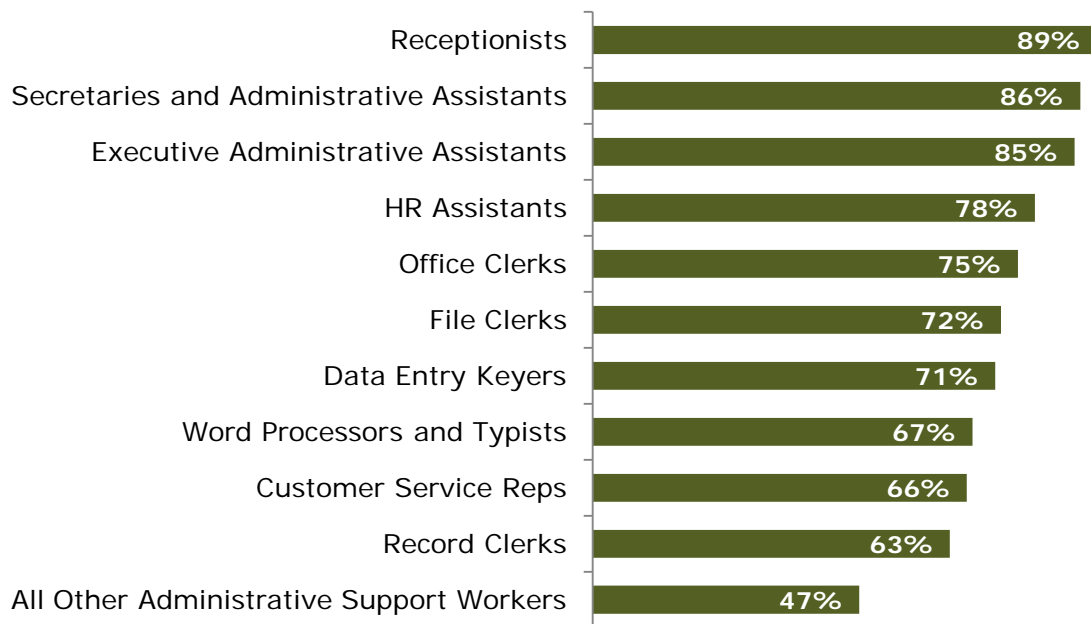


Table 1. Demand and Growth in King County, and Average Level of Education in the United States, for Selected Office Occupations^{vi}

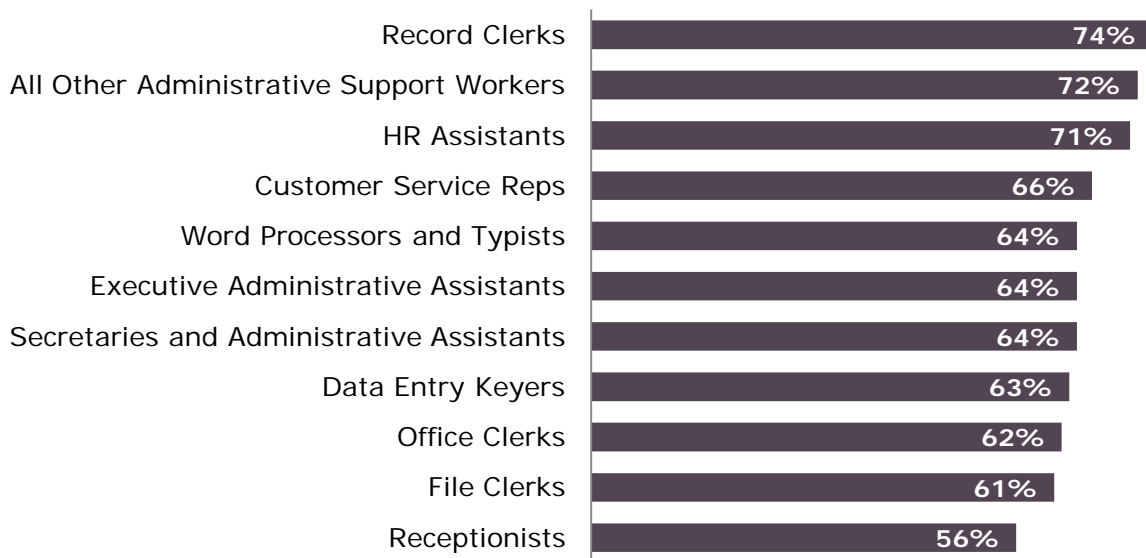
Occupation Title	King County			Average Education (US)
	Demand	Short-term Growth	Long-term Growth	
Customer Service Reps	↑	↑	↑	HS/GED
File Clerks	↓	↔	↔	HS/GED
HR Assistants	↑	↑	↑	HS/GED
Receptionists	↑	↑	↑	HS/GED
Record Clerks	↑	↑	↑	HS/GED
Executive Administrative Assistants	↑	↑	↑	HS/GED
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants	↑	↑	↑	HS/GED
Data Entry Keyers	↓	↔	↑	HS/GED
Word Processors and Typists	↓	↔	↓	HS/GED
Office Clerks	↑	↑	↑	HS/GED
All Other Administrative Support Workers	↑	↑	↑	HS/GED

² Information for this table was compiled from Economic Modeling Specialists, Int'l, which obtains data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and O*Net Online.

Figure 2 (see page 5) illustrates the percentage of employment filled by female workers in the eleven identified office occupations in King County. For every occupation listed, with the exception of “Office and Administrative Support Workers, All Other,” the vast majority of workers holding jobs within the occupation are female. This is especially notable for *Receptionists*, *Administrative Assistants*, and *Executive Administrative Assistants*, where well over 80 percent of incumbent workers are female.

Nationally, all of the office occupations listed have an average level of education of a high school diploma or its equivalent (see **Table 1**). The minimum requirement of a high school diploma for these occupations was reflected in the qualitative interviews as well.

Figure 3.³ Percent Employed with More than a High School Education for Selected Office Occupations (United States)^{vii}



While the average level of education is a high school diploma or equivalent, and this is often the *stated* minimum education requirement, the reality is that the majority of workers in the selected office occupations have some education beyond high school. **Figure 3** depicts the share of incumbent workers (within the selected occupations) who possess educational attainment beyond a high school diploma or equivalent. For each occupation listed, well over half of the incumbent workers

³ Information for this figure was compiled from Economic Modeling Specialists, Int'l, drawing data from the Washington State Employment Security Department, Labor Market and Economic Analysis Branch and the National Center for Education Statistics.

Table 2. Currently Employed, Projected Openings, and Major Industry by Occupation in King County (arranged by highest projected openings)^{viii}

Occupation Title	Number Employed	Projected Annual Openings	Major Industry (%) ⁴
Office Clerks, General	23,016	852	Colleges, Universities, and Professional Schools (State Government) (16.1%)
Customer Service Representatives	16,703	842	Electronic Shopping (7.1%)
Receptionists and Information Clerks	9,635	531	Offices of Physicians (except Mental Health Specialists) (12.6%)
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants, Except Legal, Medical, and Executive	15,231	385	Colleges, Universities, and Professional Schools (State Government) (15.4%)
Executive Secretaries and Executive Administrative Assistants	9,029	293	Colleges, Universities, and Professional Schools (State Government) (15.4%)
Office and Administrative Support Workers, All Other	4,391	149	Colleges, Universities, and Professional Schools (State Government) (23.5%)
Human Resources Assistants, Except Payroll and Timekeeping	1,342	65	Colleges, Universities, and Professional Schools (State Government) (9.0%)
Information and Record Clerks, All Other	1,753	63	Federal Government, Civilian, Excluding Postal Service (26.2%)
Data Entry Keyers	1,525	55	Temporary Help Services (12.0%)
File Clerks	1,584	43	Offices of Lawyers (10.4%)
Word Processors and Typists	413	3	Local Government, Excluding Education and Hospitals (20.4%)

⁴ Major industry represents the percent of workers within the occupation that are found in a particular industry. For example, 7.1% of customer service representatives in King County are in the electronic shopping industry.

have some education beyond high school. This makes the competition for these positions particularly difficult for individuals with only a high school diploma, and even more so in King County, where the population has higher educational attainment than the rest of the country (75 percent of King County residents have attained education beyond high school, compared to 57 percent nationally).^{ix}

Table 1 further demonstrates that of the eleven office occupations focused on here, all are considered in demand in King County, with the exception of *File Clerks*, *Data Entry Keyers*, and *Word Processors and Typists*. For these three occupations, little or no growth is expected in the short-term and only *Data Entry Keyers* are expected to grow in the long-term. *File Clerks* and *Word Processors and Typists* are not only out of demand in King County, but these occupations are also not projected to grow. Further evidence of the growth of the majority of office occupations, barring the aforementioned three, is provided by **Table 2**.

Based on projected annual job openings over the next three years, *Data Entry Keyers*, *File Clerks*, and *Word Processors and Typists* are expected to have the fewest openings in King County. Two additional occupations, *Human Resources Assistants (Except Payroll and Timekeeping)* and *Information and Record Clerks (All Other)*, anticipate relatively slow annual growth in terms of job openings; each occupational category is projected to have fewer than 100 job openings per year. The next “tier” of occupations that are projected to experience *moderate* growth annually over the next three years are *Secretaries and Administrative Assistants (Except Legal, Medical, and Executive)*, *Executive Secretaries and Executive Administrative Assistants*, and *Office and Administrative Support Workers (All Other)*. These three occupational categories are projected to have approximately 400, 300, and 150 job openings per year, respectively. Lastly, three occupation groups are projected to have over 500 job openings annually over the next three years in King County: *Office Clerks (General)*, *Customer Service Representatives*, and *Receptionists and Information Clerks*. These three occupational categories are projected to have approximately 850, 850, and 530 job openings per year, respectively. The caveat should be noted, however, that the skills and training required for particular office occupations (e.g., receptionists) are increasing, as employees are expected to multi-task, troubleshoot, and have richer content expertise. For more information on the core competencies (skills, knowledge, and abilities) required of each office occupation, refer to Appendix C.

In King County, most office workers employed in these eleven occupations are working as *Office Clerks (General)*, *Secretaries and Administrative Assistants (Except Legal, Medical, and Executive)*, and *Customer Service Representatives*. To a lesser degree, a significant number of workers are also employed as *Executive*

Secretaries and Executive Administrative Assistants and Receptionists and Information Clerks (see **Table 2**). **Table 2** additionally provides the industry where the highest percent of workers within an occupational classification are employed – over 15 percent of *Executive Secretaries and Executive Administrative Assistants*, for example, are employed by colleges, universities, or professional schools (state government). By and large, office occupations in King County are found in government, education (public and private), physicians' offices and hospitals, large online and brick-and-mortar retailers (for customer service and sales, in particular), offices of lawyers, temporary help services, insurance agencies, and software and computer systems designers.

In sum, current labor market information elucidates the landscape for office occupations in King County. The average hourly wage for many office occupations in King County exceeds that of Washington State, which in turn also exceeds the national average. These occupations tend to be filled by female workers and individuals with education beyond high school (though the minimum requirement is typically a high school education). Many office occupations are projected to grow and hire over the coming years, though a few are on the decline (e.g., typists). Lastly, many of the job openings for office occupations will be generated from the need for more customer service representatives in the private sector and the need for replacement administrative workers (e.g., replacing a retiree) in the public sector.

Qualitative Study

As described in the *Method* section of this report, approximately twenty-five employers and staffing agencies completed 20-30 minute phone interviews in response to the items listed in Appendix A. Respondents consisted of human resources specialists, recruiters (and recruitment managers/specialists), presidents, vice presidents, staffing managers, and other parties responsible for hiring decisions. Apart from staffing agencies, *local* or *regional* employer representatives were interviewed from city and county government, school districts, hospitals and medical centers, universities, insurance companies, regional and national banks, and public utilities companies. The major themes, recommendations, and lessons learned from employers and staffing agencies that work with a significant number of office employees were noted. The themes highlighted below are in direct response to the questions posed in Appendix A; additional themes and recommendations culled from the interview process are included in the *Discussion and Recommendations* section of this report. The quotations used are paraphrased from transcribed interview notes.

A high school diploma is the minimum education requirement, but employers are typically looking for experience as well.

Nearly every employer and staffing agency said that a high school diploma is the minimum requirement for their office occupations. Employers expressed that the job requirements typically vary by position and level, but that the variation is largely related to experience. Experience, particularly job-related experience, often trumps education; solid work history and experience in the field influence many employers' hiring decisions more so than a certificate or degree.

Most of our employers are really looking for someone with experience, not specific to any educational background. Experience is the number one indicator of a successful job placement. By and large, the positions we are placing people in require a high school diploma. I'm all for additional certification, and I think many employers will like to see that, but experience is still going to be the major factor.

-Staffing agency

Training and education can be substituted for experience, but the short-term certificate [the interviewer] described probably wouldn't be sufficient. With the certificate, a person would still need some experience, job training, or an internship.

-Employer

The minimum requirements really vary by department and position. For many of our administrative positions, though, we require a high school diploma and several years of clerical experience.

-Employer

Knowledge of Microsoft Office Suite is critical, especially Outlook.

When asked about the technical skills or software knowledge required for most office occupations, employers could not emphasize enough the importance of knowing Microsoft (MS) Office Suite (Word, Excel, etc.), especially MS Outlook. Several employers even noted that basic skills in MS Office are not sufficient, and that employees really need more intermediate skills (e.g., creating spreadsheets, manipulating data). When speaking to the specifics of the MS Office Suite, several employers remarked that PowerPoint is becoming less important in office occupations, but that Outlook has become exceedingly important. Many of the skills

required of administrative work are directly related to tasks performed in Outlook, such as scheduling, calendaring, reserving a meeting location, and other logistics.

MS Office Suite is very important... Outlook seems to be the most important; administrative positions require knowledge of how to schedule meetings and use people's calendars.

-Staffing agency

Not a lot of people use Outlook in their homes, but many of the businesses we work with do, so the ability to use Outlook to manage appointments, schedule meetings, and reserve resource rooms is critical.

-Employer

Employers look for candidates that are computer savvy, can learn new software, and can adapt to changing technology.

While having basic skills in MS Office and the Windows operating system is crucial, applicants must also possess the ability to learn new software and computer programs. Having familiarity with a variety of hardware and user interfaces can be essential to learning new software as well. Employers, by and large, stated that a new employee can be trained in different technical skills so long as they have the eagerness and ability to learn. This ability to learn, however, is based on an employee's fundamental understanding of how to operate, navigate, and troubleshoot a computer.

People need to be computer savvy more than anything. It isn't about knowing particular software, rather being able to learn new software quickly. That said, people need to provide examples of the software they are able to utilize and a certification might help. It's not enough to say that you are a quick learner; you have to be able to demonstrate that you are a quick learner through your experience.

-Staffing agency

Sometimes employers request that a person know SharePoint, but if a worker is computer savvy, they can learn SharePoint and other programs on the job.

-Staffing agency

Any experience with Microsoft Access or SharePoint can be a plus.

A number of employers recognized the growing importance of MS Access and SharePoint. Generally, experience with either of these programs is not a job requirement, but as administrative workers are expected to perform a greater variety of tasks, knowledge of and/or experience with MS Access or SharePoint will make a job candidate more employable. Working with either program demonstrates the ability to work with and conceptual knowledge of relational databases and cloud computing.

Technology-related skills are hugely important. Any experience with relational databases, like Access, makes a candidate attractive. Often our administrative workers are required to enter, maintain, and manipulate data, especially when crafting a report. SharePoint has become increasingly important as well.

-Employer

Some of the businesses we work with have been moving toward SharePoint. SharePoint has been around for a while, but it is new to a lot of administrative workers. Having SharePoint skills may become more important, though for now, many people can learn it on the job.

-Employer

Beyond communication and interpersonal skills, administrative workers need time management, organizational, and multi-tasking skills.

The most oft-cited soft skill (non-technical skill) was the ability to communicate, including verbal, written, and electronic communication. Other important soft skills that were highlighted include: flexibility, detail-orientation, dependability, critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, ability to work in a team, customer service (interpersonal) skills, maturity, and the ability to build relationships. These are soft skills that are desired by employers across a variety of industries and occupations.^x Specific to office occupations, employers stated that time management, the ability to multi-task, and strong organizational skills are of the utmost importance.

Many of our positions support a specific director, so it is important that an administrative worker is competent in "gate-keeping." That is, the worker can prioritize tasks, manage time, demonstrate competency in multiple areas. We need individuals that can provide clerical support, while reconciling a credit card account, while the phone is ringing in

the background. We need someone that is able to prioritize what tasks require their [supervisor's] immediate attention.

-Employer

Most importantly, can they multi-task? Gone are the days where a pure "receptionist" position exists. You can't simply answer phones anymore, but also need to be able to take on multiple projects.

-Staffing agency

Beyond credentials and technical skill, subject area knowledge gives applicants an advantage in the hiring process.

Closely tied to experience, employers from specialized industries (e.g., healthcare, banking) to more generalized industries (e.g., government, public education) agree that having subject area knowledge or expertise offers applicants a substantial advantage in the hiring process. Subject area knowledge can reduce the amount of on-the-job training required, increase employees' aptitude for the work, and help build relationships with clients and customers. Most employers interviewed were quick to note, however, that subject area knowledge is not necessary, but makes an applicant more appealing.

Experience in a relevant field makes applicants more desirable. If a person is familiar with [the field's] terminology, that's a plus.

-Employer

I wouldn't say that subject matter experience is absolutely necessary, though any relevant subject knowledge or experience, for example human resources experience, is great.

-Employer

Many of [our] administrative positions must deal with multiple contractors and vendors, so having a diversity of experience across fields can help an employee to be successful.

-Employer

Employers have been able to hire applicants with skills and education beyond the requirements. Some employers prefer overqualified applicants, while others expressed concern about hiring overqualified applicants.

The current economy and number of individuals still looking for work has created a surplus of skilled labor across occupations. Interviews with local employers have elucidated the fact that the vast majority of employers feel that they are able to, and actually prefer to, hire individuals with skills, training, and education beyond the stated job requirements.^{xi} The BIT sector employers and staffing agencies expressed a similar sentiment, with mixed views on whether or not they feel concerned about hiring “overqualified” applicants. Many employers felt that applicants with additional education or experience actually made better employees, which assuaged any concerns they had about turnover within the position. Other employers expressed that they hire overqualified applicants with some apprehension, largely due to worry about turnover and the additional costs associated with restarting the applicant search and training process.

Yes, employers absolutely prefer to hire applicants with extra skills or education, especially for upper-level administrative positions. Employers do express concerns that overqualified people won't stay in the job as long, but this often doesn't prohibit them from hiring the person with the A.A. or B.A. degree.

-Staffing agency

We have definitely been able to hire people with qualifications above the requirements. Given the recession and everything, we have been able to gather larger applicant pools of individuals with more extensive experience. There isn't too much concern about hiring overqualified individuals; the only real concern would be that the person might get bored and leave the job, but it's really on the hiring manager to identify candidates that will not be bored by the position.

-Employer

Public job postings generate applicant pools filled with inappropriately qualified applicants. Many employers post open positions online, but still rely on internal referrals.

Employers tended to post job openings in multiple locations, including company job boards, Monster.com, Craigslist, CareerBuilder.com, Indeed.com, LinkedIn or WorkSource. To a lesser degree, employers reported using staffing agencies, canvassing neighborhoods, and attending job fairs. Employers expressed the continued importance of internal referrals, which underscores the value of building personal and professional networks for job seekers. Generally speaking, public job postings, especially to online repositories, generate large applicant pools of

inappropriately qualified applicants, which puts some applicants at a disadvantage when resumes are screened based on educational attainment or experience.

CareerBuilder and Craigslist are becoming increasingly popular, even though this creates an interview pool with a lot of unqualified applicants. The employers we work with use these internet tools, though largely as a supplement to the referral process and temp agency hiring.

-Staffing agency

We are required by law to post open positions to the [public] job board. We get so many applicants, however, that we don't need to post them anywhere else. We often get several hundred applications for each administrative job opening.

-Employer

Employers see nothing prohibitive about hiring from the community college system and, generally, have positive past experiences with community college graduates.

The only mention of deterrents to hiring graduates of the community college system involved the possibility that employers perceive community college graduates to have less "real world" experience or less training/skill. Even these impediments, however, were mentioned as hypothetical; the majority of employer and staffing agency representatives expressed having no concerns with hiring from the community colleges, having positive experiences working with past graduates, and seeing nothing that would prevent them from hiring from the community colleges in the future.

Finding work for community college graduates is like finding work for anyone else. If they have the proper skills and can demonstrate that they do good work, they will make a good fit.

-Staffing agency

Postsecondary education, be it a certificate program or additional training and classes, demonstrates seriousness and commitment on the part of job applicants.

Employers and staffing agencies perceived the value of the BIT Program, certificates in general, and any additional postsecondary education and training. One staffing agency representative was quick to note, however, that certificates

mean little if the applicant cannot demonstrate the skills and abilities on the job. Most employers felt that taking additional coursework and training beyond high school demonstrates a commitment to self-improvement and continuing education, and is indicative of a serious job applicant.

We also look for additional college courses or a college degree to both show learned skills as well as ambition.

-Employer

A certificate program like the one you described would demonstrate to employers that an applicant is serious about their education and gaining the skills for the job, but the certification doesn't mean much if the applicants cannot demonstrate the skills. The program needs to really teach the skills at a high level of quality.

-Staffing agency

Anytime a person shows the initiative to continue and pursue further education, it is usually a sign that they are motivated. This translates into a good worker.

-Employer

Employers and staffing agencies anticipate continued hiring needs for office occupations and the need for additional training for incumbent workers.

Employers, and staffing agencies alike, expressed that the demand for administrative workers continues to grow and that the need for qualified individuals to fill office occupations is ever-present. Several employers noted that their administrative positions tend to be "high flow" or have high levels of turnover, and that this constant churn results in administrative job posting on a regular basis. (More than one employer claimed to post at least one administrative job per week.) Only a few employers expressed that they had been cutting back on administrative staff. Further, more than half of the employers and staffing agencies expressed that they have workers that could benefit from additional training at the community college, most often related to training in new technology and software updates.

There is an ongoing need due to attrition from older office workers retiring. Not a lot of new positions are being created, but we certainly see a number of openings.

-Employer

Our [incumbent] workers could benefit from additional training, especially when it comes to software and training individuals on new technology.

-Employer

It would be great to have the option to send workers back for additional training. We often look to private vendors for training and upskilling. If there is something similar being offered by the community colleges, we would be interested. Specifically, I can see some of our workers needing training in customer service.

-Employer

The biggest challenge facing many employers and staffing agencies is finding qualified candidates to fill job openings.

As the final interview question, respondents were asked what the biggest challenge is that they currently face as an employer or staffing agency (not necessarily related to office occupations). Answers ranged from the inability to compete with private sector technology employers for skilled IT professionals to employers vetting temporary workers so extensively that by the time job offers come through, applicants have moved on. The most common response by far, however, was that it has been difficult to find *appropriately* qualified applicants to fill job openings. This included references to candidates lacking the experience or the skills that employers are seeking.

There is definitely enough demand. We are having a hard time finding qualified candidates to fill the open positions.

-Staffing agency

Our biggest challenge is finding candidates with the experience.

-Employer

Definitely the lack of skilled laborers presents a challenge. People are applying for jobs for which they aren't qualified.

-Staffing agency

Discussion and Recommendations

In addition to the direct responses to the interview questions (framed in the results, above), several unanticipated observations and recommendations were revealed through this research. First, the role of the temporary worker is changing as more employers are utilizing a temp-to-hire approach. Because of this, community colleges might find it fruitful to partner and work with staffing agencies. As one staffing agency representative noted:

Many employers are using temporary agencies as a “try before you buy” approach. Because of this, hiring a temporary worker has become very similar to interviewing for a full-time job. Ninety percent of employers looking for temp workers are requiring a resume, and most of those an interview as well (sometimes an interview with one or multiple people). This is a radical departure from the “quick start” approach of putting someone into a job the next day, or for a week or two, or for a few months.

-Staffing agency

Furthermore, certificate programs, such as the BIT Program, require greater visibility and promotion. The SCCD could benefit from posting program information and training opportunities to Career Bridge and similar workforce training resources. Also, making access to program information as easy and transparent as possible could generate interest in pursuing office occupations and enrolling in the BIT stackable certificate program. Increasing awareness about the program and the certificates' curricula may proliferate interest amongst employers as well, both in recognizing the program as a credible resource for skilled workers and as a resource for incumbent worker retraining.

If someone came to me with the type of certificate that you described, I would think it is absolutely wonderful. It sounds like a great program for preparing people to become office workers. I wonder how you are getting the word out to employers and recruiters though. It might not mean much if the employers doing the hiring haven't heard about the certificate.

-Employer

In addition, building a solid resume and demonstrating technical skills was seen as necessary to get past recruiters' initial screening and to the interview phase of a job application process. Several staffing agency representatives expressed disappointment that great candidates were overlooked because they could not get

past the resume screening process. Courses related to interview skills and how to construct a quality resume could be offered or built into existing curricula.

Workers need to have to hard skills first before their soft skills are even looked at. They need to get to an interview based on the hard skills in their resume.

-Staffing agency

Employers can't see beyond the resume. We have some great candidates, but employers miss out on these opportunities because of screening criteria and what they see (or don't see) in a resume.

-Staffing agency

Lastly, many applicants are viewed as ill-prepared for the interview process; interview skills need to be taught and practiced. Employer and staffing agency responses reflected a growing concern that job seekers lack basic interview skills and knowledge of interview protocol, such as how to dress properly, communicate articulately, or act in a meeting.

Professionalism and [knowing] how to dress are important. Seattle is more casual, but some of these job seekers just don't know how to dress appropriately.

-Staffing agency

The ability to interview is very important... demeanor, appropriate dress, etc.

-Employer

It can be hard to find employees with promotable qualities. They might sound great over the phone, but they lack the polished appearance. This is an entry point for many people on their way to a career... it is difficult to place them in a position where they will be representing the organization.

-Employer

Beyond these additional recommendations, this research has elucidated some critical lessons learned and takeaways for the SCCD and, more broadly, for training and curricula related to office occupations. Employers and staffing agencies could not underscore more the importance of general computer savvy, the ability to troubleshoot independently, and working knowledge of MS Office Suite (especially Outlook). Particular skills like Access, SharePoint, and content expertise are sometimes preferred, but generally not required of applicants. Furthermore,

administrative workers, in particular, need time management, organization, multi-tasking, and prioritization skills to be effective “gatekeepers” of information. Networking and personal contacts continue to be essential for job search, as employers and staffing agencies are inundated by large applicant pools, which often contain a number of overqualified applicants.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that, in King County, many office occupations pay a relatively higher average wage (compared to the state and nation), are predominantly filled by female employees, and are typically filled by individuals educated beyond the minimum job requirements. Labor market information and the qualitative interviews revealed that there is still demand for administrative workers in the region, particularly in government, education (public and private), healthcare, sales, and temporary help services (which provide administrative support across industries). Ultimately, the consistent need for administrative workers, coupled with the fact that employers see inappropriately qualified applicants and perceive no barriers to hiring from the community college system leads to the following conclusion: Community colleges, through programs like the BIT stackable certificate, have the opportunity to supply employers and staffing agencies with a pool of skilled labor to fill the demand for administrative job openings. These employers and staffing agencies, however, need easy access to information on the programs offered and need to view the community college system as a viable resource and pipeline for talented workers. Paying attention to employer demand for particular training, education, and skills can only be part of the equation, however; employers need to be engaged and partner with workforce development organizations and the SCCD to match the supply of and demand for particular skills and training and, also, to improve the transition from postsecondary education and training to employment and careers.

Funding for this research was provided by SkillUp Washington. For more information about the study and its implications, please contact the author, Tyler Corwin, at tcorwin@seattlejobsinit.com.

Appendix A – Interview Protocol and Questionnaire

The following interview protocol, script, and questionnaire were utilized when speaking with employers about the BIT sector and the employment landscape for office occupations. The script was slightly adjusted for staffing agencies, as the conversation was geared toward their “clients” (employers) rather than employees or job applicants.

Interviews were scheduled over the phone with approximately 20 employers and 10 staffing agencies for 20-30 minutes each. The interview pool of employers was determined based off of interviews with the community college deans, existing relationships, and research into the area’s largest employers of BIT sector workers.

Script:

Hello, my name is _____ and I am the _____ at Seattle Jobs Initiative. We are reaching out to a number of regional employers to learn about the skills and training required of workers that fill your office jobs (e.g., administrative assistant, receptionist, office manager or HR assistant). At Seattle Jobs Initiative, we aim to create opportunities for people to support themselves and their families through living-wage careers. We accomplish this by routing individuals through training and education programs, many of which are provided by the Seattle Community College District. The colleges have designed a new business and IT certificate program and we want to make sure it accurately and adequately prepares new and incumbent workers for these jobs.

We value your input and would like to set up a time when we can have about a 20-minute conversation about your needs as an employer and how we can further tailor the program to meet them. I’m happy to meet you in person or just talk over the phone. What day and time are convenient for you?

At the time of interview:

Before we begin, I want to let you know I will be writing up a brief paper based on the responses from employers. Your responses may be aggregated with the responses of others, and your individual responses will be kept anonymous.

Before we talk about what you need from employees in office occupations, I’d like to briefly let you know about the business and information technology training program that is currently being offered by several Seattle community colleges (North, South, and Central). There are three certificates available that build on one another as students progress through the program. The three certificates provide students with beginner, intermediate, and more advanced

office skills, including customer interactions, interpersonal communication, critical thinking, team dynamics, formatting business reports, proficiency in Microsoft Office, and cultural competency in the workplace. The program largely readies students for entry-level office occupations. Students that complete *all three* sequences are trained in prioritizing multi-faceted projects and managing other employees. The goal of our conversation is to gain a better sense of the value of these types of certificates to your company, as well as to gain a broader understanding of the employment landscape for office assistant occupations.

Questionnaire:

1. What are the minimum education and training requirements for your entry-level administrative jobs? (*Remind them of the jobs, if necessary*)
2. What are the technical skills needed to perform the duties of an entry-level administrative employee? What software knowledge is necessary?
3. Are there important non-technical skill requirements/demands for these positions? How are these skills weighted versus having a degree or certificate? Versus technical skills?
4. Beyond what is necessary, are there skills and training that make applicants more desirable for administrative jobs? What skills give an applicant an edge in the hiring process?
5. Do you prefer to hire, and are you able to hire, people with skills and education beyond the requirements? (*If applicable*) And, do you have any concern about hiring overqualified individuals?
6. Where do you typically find candidates for these positions? Do you utilize community colleges to recruit talent? Temp or staffing agencies? General calls for applications?
7. Have you hired community college graduates in the past? If so, what has been your experience working with past community college graduates?
8. What would it take for the Seattle community college system to become your first stop for your office staffing needs? What may be preventing you from utilizing the community colleges as a resource for skilled workers?
9. Do you anticipate having hiring needs for these positions in the near future (i.e., positions you will need filled)?

10. Do you have any existing (incumbent) employees that could benefit from business and information technology-related training at the community college?
11. Internships and job shadowing allow employers to get to know students in the program and see if they're a fit for your organization. Can we work with you to create these types of opportunities? They are of no financial cost to you.
12. Can you or someone else on staff also be involved in other ways? Perhaps speaking to a classroom, posting jobs on the job board, or providing your input on future curriculum based on your company's needs?
13. What are the biggest challenges facing your company right now?

Appendix B – Occupation Descriptions^{xiii}

Customer service representatives (SOC 43-4051) interact with customers to provide information in response to inquiries about products and services and to handle and resolve complaints. Excludes individuals whose duties are primarily installation, sales, or repair.

File clerks (SOC 43-4071) file correspondence, cards, invoices, receipts, and other records in alphabetical or numerical order or according to the filing system used. Locate and remove material from file when requested.

Human resources assistants, except payroll and timekeeping (SOC 43-4161) compile and keep personnel records. Record data for each employee, such as address, weekly earnings, absences, amount of sales or production, supervisory reports, and date of and reason for termination. May prepare reports for employment records, file employment records, or search employee files and furnish information to authorized persons.

Receptionists and information clerks (SOC 43-4171) answer inquiries and provide information to the general public, customers, visitors, and other interested parties regarding activities conducted at establishment and location of departments, offices, and employees within the organization. Excludes "Switchboard Operators, Including Answering Service" (43-2011).

Information and record clerks (all other; SOC 43-4199) description not listed separately (because it encompasses all other).

Executive secretaries and executive administrative assistants (SOC 43-6011) provide high-level administrative support by conducting research, preparing statistical reports, handling information requests, and performing clerical functions such as preparing correspondence, receiving visitors, arranging conference calls, and scheduling meetings. May also train and supervise lower-level clerical staff. Excludes "Secretaries" (43-6012 through 43-6014).

Secretaries and administrative assistants, except legal, medical, and executive (SOC 43-6014) perform routine clerical and administrative functions such as drafting correspondence, scheduling appointments, organizing and maintaining paper and electronic files, or providing information to callers. Excludes legal, medical, and executive secretaries (43-6011 through 43-6013).

Data entry keyers (SOC 43-9021) operate data entry device, such as keyboard or photo composing perforator. Duties may include verifying data and preparing materials for printing. Excludes "Word Processors and Typists" (43-9022).

Word processors and typists (SOC 43-9022) use word processor, computer or typewriter to type letters, reports, forms, or other material from rough draft, corrected copy, or voice recording. May perform other clerical duties as assigned. Excludes "Data Entry Keyers" (43-9021), "Secretaries and Administrative Assistants" (43-6011 through 43-6014), "Court Reporters" (23-2091), and "Medical Transcriptionists" (31-9094).

Office clerks (general; SOC 43-9061) perform duties too varied and diverse to be classified in any specific office clerical occupation, requiring knowledge of office systems and procedures. Clerical duties may be assigned in accordance with the office procedures of individual establishments and may include a combination of answering telephones, bookkeeping, typing or word processing, stenography, office machine operation, and filing.

Office and administrative support workers (all other; SOC 43-9199) description not listed separately (because it encompasses all other).

Appendix C - Core Competencies (Skills, Knowledge, and Abilities) Rated 70⁵ or Higher in Importance by Occupation^{xiii}

Occupation Title	Skills	Knowledge	Abilities
Customer Service Representatives	Active Listening; Speaking	Customer and Personal Service	Oral Expression; Oral Comprehension; Speech Recognition; Speech Clarity
File Clerks	N/A	Clerical	Near Vision; Oral Comprehension; Written Comprehension; Category Flexibility; Information Ordering
Human Resources Assistants, Except Payroll and Timekeeping	Reading Comprehension	English Language; Clerical; Customer and Personal Service; Personnel and Human Resources	Oral Expression; Oral Comprehension; Written Comprehension
Receptionists and Information Clerks	N/A	Customer and Personal Service; Clerical	Oral Expression
Executive Secretaries and Executive Administrative Assistants	Active Listening; Speaking; Reading Comprehension	Clerical	Oral Expression; Oral Comprehension; Written Comprehension
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants, Except Legal, Medical, and Executive	Active Listening; Speaking; Reading Comprehension; Writing; Time Management	Customer and Personal Service; Clerical; English Language	Oral Expression; Speech Clarity; Oral Comprehension; Written Expression; Written Comprehension; Near Vision; Speech Recognition
Data Entry Keyers	N/A	Customer and Personal Service; Clerical	Written Comprehension; Near Vision; Finger Dexterity
Word Processors and Typists	N/A	Clerical; English Language	Near Vision
Office Clerks, General	N/A	Customer and Personal Service; Clerical	N/A

⁵Workers, occupation experts, and occupation analysts were asked to rate each skill, ability, and knowledge competency from "Not Important" (1) to "Extremely Important" (5). These scores were then standardized on a scale from 0-100.

Note: Two occupational classifications (Office and administrative support workers, all other and information and record clerks, all other) are excluded as O*Net does not provide the core competencies for classifications involving "all other" designations.

Notes

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ⁱⁱⁱ David K. Brown, "The Social Sources of Educational Credentialism: Status Cultures, Labor Markets, and Organizations," *Sociology of Education* 74, no. 4 (2001): 19–34; Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, *Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), accessed August 1, 2013, http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm; Anthony P. Carnavale, Stephen J. Rose, and Andrew R. Hanson. *Certificates: Gateway to Gainful Employment and College Degrees* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2012); Diana Furchtgott-Roth, Louis Jacobson, and Christine Mokher. *Strengthening Community Colleges Influence on Economic Mobility* (Washington, DC: Economic Mobility Project, Pew Charitable Trusts, 2009), accessed August 5, 2013, http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Economic_Mobility/EMP_COLLEGES_v10.pdf.

^{iv} Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Employment Statistics: May 2012 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), accessed July 24, 2013, http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_nat.htm; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Employment Statistics: May 2012 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates Washington* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), accessed July 24, 2013, http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_wa.htm#43-0000; Washington State Employment Security Department, *Learn About an Occupation* (Olympia, WA: Washington State Employment Security Department, 2013), accessed August 6, 2013, <https://fortress.wa.gov/esd/employmentdata/reports-publications/occupational-reports/occupations-in-demand>.

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^{vi} Washington State Employment Security Department, *Learn About an Occupation* (Olympia, WA: Washington State Employment Security Department, 2013), accessed August 5, 2013, <https://fortress.wa.gov/esd/employmentdata/reports-publications/occupational-reports/occupations-in-demand>

^{vii} Economic Modeling Specialists, International, *EMSI Analyst: Economy: Occupation Report: King County, 2013-16, 2013.2 Class of Worker, QCEW + Non-QCEW Employees* (Moscow, ID: Economic Modeling Specialists, International, 2013), accessed July 11, 2013, https://west.economicmodeling.com/analyst/?t=6L5b#h=JJRp&module=economy&page=occupation_report.

^{viii} Economic Modeling Specialists, International, *EMSI Analyst: Economy: Occupations: King County, 2013-16, 2013.2 Class of Worker, QCEW + Non-QCEW Employees* (Moscow, ID: Economic Modeling Specialists, International, 2013), accessed July 30, 2013, <https://west.economicmodeling.com/analyst/?t=6JwR#h=JHNO&module=economy&page=occupations>

^{ix} U.S. Census Bureau, *Selected Social Characteristics In The United States, American Community Survey, 2007-2011, 5-Year Estimates* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), accessed August 5, 2013, <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>.

^x Jennifer Pritchard, *The Importance of Soft Skills in Entry-Level Employment and Postsecondary Success: Perspectives from Employers and Community Colleges* (Seattle: Seattle Jobs Initiative, 2013).

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^{xii} National Center for O*NET Development, *O*NET OnLine: Administrative and Support Services Industry* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment & Training Administration, 2013), accessed August 2, 2013, <http://www.onetonline.org/find/industry?i=56&g=Go>

^{xiii} Ibid.