

# Why English Majors are the Hot New Hires

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After years of emphasis being put on math and engineering degrees, here's why English majors may be in high demand.

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Years ago while interviewing an English major, I mentioned that—for many reasons—I liked hiring individuals who have a degree in the humanities. When I finished speaking, I noticed that the applicant was slightly choked up. He said, "You are the only person who has made me feel good about my degree." It's not uncommon for English majors—or anyone majoring in the humanities for that matter—to get a bad rap. Even [Marc Andreessen](#), founder of Netscape, not too long ago said that people should get math-oriented degrees; otherwise, they will end up working in shoe stores.

We place a great value on a STEM education (degrees in science, technology, engineering and mathematics). But are the tables turning? Are hiring managers beginning to see the value that a liberal arts education—and an English major in particular—brings to the workplace? Recently, some high-profile businesspeople came out in favor of hiring English majors. Bestselling author and small-business expert [Steve Strauss](#), for example, has admitted that "English majors are my employee of choice." And [Bracken Darrell](#), CEO of Logitech, had this to say: "When I look at where our business is going, I think, boy, you do need to have a good technical understanding somewhere in there, to be relevant. But you're really differentiated if you understand humanities."

## The Popularity of English Majors

Employers are looking to hire English majors because these applicants bring a set of skills that businesses need:

**Communication skills:** In a recent [Job Outlook Survey](#), employers rated the "ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization" as the most important candidate skill. Communication is at the heart of any business. Everything that happens in an organization requires communication. This is one of

the areas in which English majors excel: They have learned to speak well; they are well-read and have an extensive vocabulary; they spend years learning how to present a thesis coherently, and how to construct an argument; and they are trained to debate and defend their point of view logically. Bringing an English major to the fold is a much needed salve for organizations today, where poor communication skills are the norm rather than the exception.

**Writing skills:** A [Metlife survey](#) found that 97 percent of business executives rate writing skills as very important. English majors—perhaps more than any other major—are trained to write well. A major part of what business owners do to gain clients has to do with writing, whether it's writing an advertisement or a marketing brochure, a good sales letter or an email sales campaign. Businesses also need people who can create powerful content for the company blog, develop a strong social media presence and craft a compelling description of products and services for the company website. Even companies that conduct their sales on the phone or use telemarketers need to start with a good script. The ROI of writing is invaluable for any business.

**Researching skills:** All business owners need to stay current on changes and developments in their field. They also need to have absolute accuracy in any communications with clients. Having someone on staff who excels in conducting research is a very viable asset. English majors are drilled in conducting in-depth research.

**Critical thinking skills:** The ability to analyze an issue and question assumptions applies to all kinds of information in a business setting. English majors are taught to deconstruct and analyze a problem, and package their conclusion so others can understand their line of thought. These are highly transferable skills that are vital for the success of a business.

**Empathy:** More and more, businesses are recognizing the importance of empathy in the workplace. In [The 'Soft Skill' That Pays \\$100,000+](#), author George Anders discovered over 1,000 listings for highly paid jobs where employers list empathy as a necessary qualification. And these were not just jobs in traditionally compassionate sectors, such as health care and nonprofits; they included companies in technology, finance, consulting and aerospace, to name a few. Think Microsoft, Dell, Raytheon, Symantec, Pfizer and McKinsey.

There are numerous [studies](#) that correlate empathy with increased sales, with the best performing managers of product development teams and with greater efficiency in an increasingly diverse workforce. Empathy is indeed the oil that keeps relationships running smoothly. Dan Pink, in [A Whole Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule The Future](#), lists six areas that are vital for success in the new economy market—one of these is empathy. As he puts it, you can't outsource empathy, or automate it. You need to have empathic people in your organization.

How does this relate to English majors? A University of Toronto [study](#) on the effects of literature on empathy shows that those who read fiction frequently have higher levels of cognitive empathy; i.e., the ability to understand how another person feels. [Keith Oatley](#), one of the researchers, said the reason fiction improves empathy is because it helps us to "understand characters' actions from their interior point of view, by entering into their situations and minds, rather than the more exterior view of them that we usually have." This improves interpersonal understanding and enhances relationships with customers and business associates. When you hire an English major, you're likely hiring someone who brings cognitive empathy to the table.

## The Beginning of a Trend

So is a wider range of employers recognizing the value of a liberal arts education? "There is a pattern," says [Dr. Jane Robbins](#) of the University of Arizona, "of employers asking for more liberal-arts training for all kinds of professions—engineering, medicine, the law, and certainly management." She adds, "Many people may not know that philosophy and English, not just biology, are common undergraduate majors for physicians."

[David Boyes](#), CEO of Sine Nomine, a technology consulting company, says, "We don't need mono-focused people. We need well-rounded people." His company puts all new hires through a one-year training program that covers the basics—like how to write an effective business document—and includes some philosophy and history.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities conducted a recent survey of what employers want from new hires. Its survey report, [It Takes More Than a Major: Employer Priorities for College Learning and Student Success](#), shows that more than half of business executives want college graduates to have not only field-specific knowledge and skills, but a broad range of skills and knowledge. They place less value on the undergraduate major and more on a capacity to think critically, communicate clearly and solve complex problems. In an interview, [Debra Humphreys](#), vice president at The AACU, said that the economic downturn has "put a premium on college graduates who are really multifaceted ... people who have both broad knowledge and skills, as well as field-specific skills." According to Humphreys, this concern has intensified over the years.

## What Does This Trend Mean for You?

The trend of employers looking for both field-specific skills and broad skills indicates that employees who combine a liberal arts major—especially an English major—with another major degree, such as business, science or technology, will have a competitive advantage. If businesses continue to look for and hire such individuals, they will no doubt have a positive impact on the workplace by creating more diversity in an organization.

All companies can benefit from having a mix of left-brained and right-brained individuals on the team. Take IDEO, one of the most innovative companies in the world: One of the components for innovation at IDEO is having extremely diversified teams solve problems that are traditionally handled by monolithic groups, such as just engineers or just designers. Instead, IDEO's innovation teams include 10 different types. One of these is The Caregiver, who uses empathy to understand each individual customer and create a relationship; another is The Storyteller, who captures the imagination with compelling narratives in whatever medium best fits the message: video, animation, even comic strips.

As a business owner, you could gain an edge in the global marketplace and be better positioned for success with such multifaceted individuals in your camp. Have you hired an English major yet?

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