

Integrating Employability Skills in the Business Curriculum:

A Biblical Rationale

The employability of new graduates is of ongoing concern to educators and employers alike. Recent studies support the oft-heard contention that many entry-level workers lack basic employability skills and competencies.¹

Corporate organizational structures are allowing greater decision-making at the point of service. Consequently, in contrast to the workplace of only a few years ago, many employees now interact more closely with others in an intercultural team setting, spend more time at a computer, and rely less on supervisory staff. For employees to function well in this changing work environment, they must have good communication skills, teamwork and leadership skills, high ethical and moral values, and a good work ethic. While this article will focus on developing these skills in the college business curriculum, other academic disciplines must also prepare graduates with these attributes. Whether one is preparing for employment in a health profession, the school system, or the business world, these skills are essential.

Christian colleges are sometimes perceived as lacking the ability to impart the technical skills that are so highly prized by employers.² As Smith notes, such skills are resource-intensive, so many Christian colleges may lack the finances to obtain and maintain the hardware and software, as well as the qualified people to teach these skills.³ Although this may be problematic for some small institutions, most faith-based schools generally do a good job of providing basic knowledge and skills. More advanced technical skills are often available through on-the-job training.

Graduates of Christian schools of business may actually have an edge over other job candidates if their institutions have integrated biblical principles into the curriculum. By emphasizing and modeling a positive work ethic, clear ethical and moral values, the ability to communicate, leader-

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ship, and teamwork throughout the curriculum, Christian business professors will produce “value-added” graduates. Adopting specific teaching strategies used by Christ can help business professors incorporate the desired skills into the business curriculum.

Finding a Biblical Rationale

To discover a biblical rationale for these employment skills, we need to focus on and apply Scripture. Gillespie⁴ outlines three steps essential to this process. First, determine the original meaning of the biblical passage. Second, identify the universal principles involved. Third, apply the text on a personal level. Teachers and students alike must set aside preconceived ideas and allow the themes, concepts, and instructions that arise from the lives of biblical characters, and especially from the life and teachings of Christ, to speak to general business principles.

While Scripture does not clearly address every business concept or practice, careful analysis and application of many passages does provide support for certain skills, attitudes, or practices commonly accepted in today’s business world. The Christian business curriculum must not only address important social needs, but also ensure that the curriculum enhances the mental, spiritual, social, and physical well-being of its students.

A Biblical Rationale for a Strong Work Ethic

Max Weber has been credited with codifying what contemporary society refers to as the Protestant work ethic, which includes a preference for physical labor, respect for authority, and an emphasis on honesty and integrity. Weber’s seminal work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930),⁵ asserted that capitalism originated from the understanding and acceptance of work as an opportunity for human beings to display reverence for God.

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Conversely, indolence and wasteful consumption were regarded as sinful.

The Bible provides the rationale for a strong work ethic. Ecclesiastes 9:10 admonishes believers to diligently apply themselves to any given task while they are able. The Scriptures also suggest some important benefits from a good work ethic. Specifically, a work ethic and teamwork complement each other. Collaborative work enhances a sense of community. The interaction and interpersonal relations that result from group work help individuals value one another (see Proverbs 27:17; John 17; Nehemiah 12:44-47).

The Bible also requires that believers impose a sense of balance in their lives. The story of the rich young ruler (Luke 12:16-21) reminds us that an impassioned desire to accumulate wealth to the exclusion of service to God and community leads to separation from God and neighbors. If Christian teachers focus on the biblical basis for a work ethic, the passage from Proverbs 28:19 (KJV), “he that tilleth his land shall have plenty of bread,” can become a reality for faculty and students alike.

A Biblical Rationale for Ethical and Moral Values

Ethical and moral values such as honesty, integrity, trust, empathy, and respect for coworkers are highly valued by employers. With the influx of women and minorities, the workplace is becoming increasingly heterogeneous. Consequently, a variety of legal, ethical, and moral imperatives require that employers select workers possessing the necessary skills and attitudes to function in a heterogeneous, multicultural environment.

Scripture supports the importance of ethical and moral behavior and ad-

resses the issue of honesty, integrity, and trust from both a personal and an organizational perspective. Luke 10:30-37 poignantly illustrates the irrelevance of race, ethnicity, religious and cultural background, and social standing when individuals are confronted by ethical and moral dilemmas. The lawyer’s question of “Who is my neighbor?” implicitly addresses issues of kindness, love, respect, empathy, and inclusiveness. At the corporate level, this passage implies that employees and administrators must be sensitive to any action or inaction that would negatively affect others.

The biblical account of the wealthy businessman, Nabal, who was “churlish and evil in his doings” (1 Samuel 25, KJV), should be a stark reminder to business practitioners of the consequences of pride. His increase in wealth was to some degree attributable to the protection he received from David’s men. Yet, Nabal discounted their protection and the resulting social stability, crediting his success to his own efforts. Business professionals in contemporary society often fall into the same trap. They forget the contributions of employees and the local community when making decisions about layoffs or relocation to a more favorable economic environment. While the Bible does not criticize prudent business decisions that increase profit, it does forcefully condemn the selfish use of profit or the abuse of others (see Proverbs 10:2; 16:8; 21:13; 21:29).

The deceitful practices of the tax collectors in Luke 19 and the money-changers in the temple (Mark 11:15-17) are similar to price fixing, tax evasion, fraud, and other unethical practices commonly found in contemporary business environments. The experience of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 is a sobering reminder that integrity and honesty in business affairs is more important than short-term monetary gain.

The collegiate business curriculum, then, should reflect this biblical rationale for moral and ethical values

and be infused with the timeless values of trust, honesty, integrity, and consideration for others. Through modeling and classroom discussion, students can learn such values and resist the subtle practices of some corporate cultures.

A Biblical Rationale for Communication Skills

Communication skills, both oral and written, have consistently ranked high as requisites for job success.⁶ Some may see this as a Western concern, from a culture that values a liberal-arts education whose graduates can communicate effectively. However, for a biblical rationale, one need look no farther than the Genesis creation story, where God modeled effective communication. Prior to Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden, God spoke with them face to face (Genesis 3). Yet divinity has used other methods to communicate with human beings. In a post-Fall world, the Bible serves as a primary source of communication between God and humankind.⁷

The example of Jesus is also instructive. While on Earth, He relied heavily on the use of descriptive and colorful verbal communication, using stories filled with images, metaphors, and symbols to which His audience could readily relate.

Finally, a part of the biblical rationale for developing effective communication skills is the inspired advice regarding tone and content of a message. Paul in Ephesians 4:29 suggests that messages should be positive and beneficial to others. Communication skills, then, are important both in interpersonal relationships as well as in the pivotal interaction between God and humanity.

A Biblical Rationale for Leadership Skills

While scholars extol a large number of leadership qualities, employers usually focus more narrowly on specific skills they want college graduates to possess. Employers expect new



employees, particularly those in leadership or middle management roles, to be motivated to work enthusiastically with others and to inspire colleagues and subordinates.

From a biblical perspective, however, leadership begins with mission. For instance, Noah mobilized his family to perform God's mission of building an ark while warning of the impending cataclysm. Moses, who was initially uncertain of his abilities, stuck to his God-given mission to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Jesus also had a clear mission, which He pursued and accomplished. In Matthew 20:28 (KJV), Jesus described His mission of servant-leadership by saying that "the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Leadership from a biblical perspective also requires the leader to ac-

quire and develop human and physical resources. In Matthew 4:19 and Mark 6:7-12, Jesus' recruitment, training, and subsequent motivation of His disciples to spread the gospel illustrates this important dimension of leadership. Paul's work of training leaders in the early church and his mentoring of Timothy reiterates the importance of these attributes. Biblical leadership includes working with and motivating others, using assets wisely, and serving others to achieve a shared mission. Adventist colleges should use these principles to design programs that equip students to effectively participate in the community and at their workplace.

A Biblical Rationale for Teamwork Skills

Teamwork skills include the ability to work collaboratively with others. The growing reliance on small

The Bible provides the rationale for a strong work ethic.

groups in the workplace has created a demand for workers who can function in a self-directed group. Because of their strong sense of individualism combined with ethnocentrism, people in the Western world find it hard to practice these skills. The Bible is replete with advice to shun individualism and to work with others to accomplish shared objectives. Exodus 17 shows how the teamwork of Moses, Aaron, and Hur enabled the Israelites to prevail over Amalek. In both the Old and New Testament, we find ample support for the value of teamwork (see Nehemiah 3-6, 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4). From a scriptural perspective, working collaboratively not only makes humans less selfish, but also provides them with the opportunity to understand themselves and their neighbors by developing interpersonal relationships that emanate from teamwork. To combat the debilitating effects of sin—pride, jealousy, selfishness, and exclusivity—God Himself, through the Trinity, demonstrated teamwork in the creative and redemptive process.

It is unlikely that any one person will possess all the necessary managerial, financial, marketing, and legal skills needed to make any enterprise a success. Therefore, both employers and employees need to be educated to embrace the diversity of skills and abilities that each person can bring to an organization. Consequently, college business courses must emphasize the value of teamwork. Not only do employers find it is essential for effective job performance, but the Bible also clearly teaches it.

Methods for Teaching Employability Skills

Four specific strategies can be used to infuse these employability skills into the business curriculum: the lecture method, case studies, storytelling, and cooperative learning. We will briefly describe each method and show its biblical applications, particularly in the life of Jesus.

Lectures

While the lecture is still one of the most popular teaching strategies in higher education,⁸ it has often been criticized by educational practitioners as a passive and ineffective means of promoting learning. Yet Christ included the lecture in His repertoire of teaching strategies⁹ (particularly when He had a wide range of issues to cover). But it is important to note that Christ varied the length of His discourse in order to maintain the attention of His audience. According to Horne,¹⁰ Jesus “spoke in concrete, pictorial, imaginative language, which easily catches and holds attention.” Because the business curriculum includes a wide range of issues, the lecture is still a significant tool. When lecturing, like Christ, instructors should employ metaphors, illustrations, and descriptive images to capture the attention of their listeners. Most importantly, like Christ, teachers need to vary the length of lectures in order to maintain student interest.

Case Studies

The case-based method of business school instruction dates back to the 1920s, when Harvard Business School began to emphasize a problem-centered approach based on real-life situations. By way of definition, Carlson and Schodt¹¹ state that “cases are narrative accounts of actual or realistic situations in which policymakers are confronted with a need to make a decision.” Some of Jesus’

parables may be seen as depictions of real-life events or cases, which challenged His hearers to analyze and understand. The case study method encourages students to think critically and to make decisions. Christ’s use of the Good Samaritan story is an example: It challenged the lawyer to iden-

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tify the central problem and to offer an objective assessment. Case studies, particularly when done in connection with a group approach, allow the teacher to integrate ethical and moral values into the classroom while also providing practice in teamwork.

Storytelling

Zuck gives four reasons why the use of stories is effective and why Christ used them. First, people enjoy hearing about other people. Second, parables or stories “have intrigue because of the challenge of analogies.”¹² In other words, the story “challenges the hearer or reader to decipher the

point being made.”¹³ Third, people are better able to appreciate abstract ideas when they are presented in a concrete way. Finally, stories allow the listener to actively visualize, imagine, and identify with others’ situations.

Business students are captivated by stories about personal experiences in the corporate world. When students are reminded of the excesses of the 1980s and 1990s and the ethical lapses of former Wall Street mavericks or the Enron, Global Crossings, and WorldCom fiascos, they acquire a better appreciation of the need for ethical practices in business.

Cooperative Learning

Because businesses want teamwork skills and there is a biblical mandate for their use, Christian business teachers need to identify effective ways to infuse these skills into the curriculum. Johnson, Johnson & Smith¹⁴ describe cooperative learning as “the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning.” Small group cooperative learning has a biblical precedent in Jesus’ active involvement of the disciples in His ministry. He sent the Twelve in groups of twos to exorcize demons, to heal the sick, and to preach the kingdom of God (Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6). He commissioned the Seventy, sending them in pairs to heal the sick (Luke 10:1-17).

Johnson, Johnson & Smith¹⁵ also suggest five basic elements that must be included in a cooperative learning session:

- Positive interdependence (each member of the group needs the others to succeed individually and collectively);
- Face-to-face interaction (students help and teach one another to make connections between past and present learning);
- Individual accountability (each member has an obligation to complete the assigned tasks);
- Social skills (each group mem-

ber needs to acquire and use interpersonal and leadership skills); and

- Group processing (activities should enhance team building and team effectiveness).

Students at Andrews University School of Business in Berrien Springs, Michigan, are encouraged to work in groups. Teachers sometimes encounter resistance to this, but by the end of the semester, most students agree that working as a team helped them to develop a greater understanding of the concepts being taught, as well as how to work with others.

Conclusion

This article’s development of a biblical rationale for the integration of employability skills in the business curriculum is certainly not exhaustive. However, the authors hope that these ideas will help those developing the business curriculum in Christian institutions to adopt an intentional approach that integrates these skills across the curriculum. Ideally, this should include not only course content, but also assembly programs and other campus and community activities such as Students In Free Enterprise (SIFE) and honor societies.

While employer demand offers an incentive for administrators and teachers to integrate these skills, the biblical rationale should provide an even greater incentive. Applying the strategies presented in this article can help business students not only to develop a deeper understanding of academic information, but also to develop the necessary skills to advance on the job and to better serve God and their communities. ✎



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