UC SANTA BARBARA

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# Smart and Socially Adept

Wanted: Highly skilled individual who is also a team player. In other words, someone who knows his or her stuff and also plays well with others.

Two qualities are particularly essential for success in the workplace: book smarts and social adeptness. The folks who do well tend to demonstrate one or the other. However, according to research conducted by UC Santa Barbara economist Catherine Weinberger, the individuals who reach the highest rungs on the corporate ladder are smart *and* social. Her findings appear in a recent online issue of the Review of Economics and Statistics.

Weinberger, a researcher with the Institute for Social, Behavioral and Economic Research, studied data linking 1972 and 1992 adolescent skill endowments to adult outcomes. She discovered an increase over time in the labor market valuation of individuals with a combination of both cognitive ability and social skills.

“I did the study in a very similar way to the studies on math scores,” said Weinberger. “Every 10 years or so, the U.S. government surveys a representative sample of high school students and has them take tests. Then they follow these people for about 10 years to know how they’re doing in the labor market when they reach their late 20s.”

Weinberger had been using those data sets to examine the relationship between being a leader in high school and being in high demand in the job market later on, and she began to wonder how those two types of skills were related. “But the data

sets I had at the time weren't really comparable enough across time to be able to answer the question carefully," she said.

Then she found a 1999 study designed to be comparable to one from 1979. Like the earlier study, it started with high school students and followed them into the labor market for exactly the same amount of time, asked almost exactly the same questions about leadership and gave very similar math tests. "So then I felt I could accurately measure the trends in the relative importance of different bundles of skills," Weinberger said.

Before she analyzed the data, she wanted to learn whether the importance of math scores was still on an upward trend, and she hypothesized that in recent years emphasis might have shifted toward leadership, communication and social skills. "Instead, what I found was that the two trends occurred at exactly the same time and in interaction with one another," Weinberger said. "One without the other didn't happen."

Today's labor market, according to Weinberger's findings, is looking for higher-skilled workers who are also well-rounded. For the person who is both smart and socially adept, the upward trend is really strong. "It's measured in two ways and I get the same results either way," she explained.

In the first part of the analysis, Weinberger looked at students' math scores during high school and how socially engaged they were, be it on sports teams, as yearbook editors or in some other leadership role. Then, to provide an alternative measure of skills, she used a different data set and looked at the skills required in people's jobs.

Some of these were management positions that required both intelligence and social interaction. Others required one or another type of skill — cognitive ability for, say, number crunching, or strong social skills for positions such as those in sales and marketing. "Using these two different measures of skills, I see exactly the same patterns," Weinberger said. "The people who are both smart and socially adept earn more in today's workforce than similarly endowed workers in 1980."

Weinberger also learned that individuals today who possess one skill or the other are doing about as well as those in the past. "In 1980, there was no additional benefit to having both skills; today there is," she said. "Even so, both those who are pretty good at math but not very social and those with below-average book smarts who are really good with people are doing fine. At the same time, students who are neither

socially nor academically engaged in school are doing even worse than we realized."

Weinberger's findings could have ramifications for creating effective education policies. "I think the next questions to ask are whether people are naturally this way and there's nothing you can do about it, or if they can be educated differently to give them stronger and more balanced bundles of skills as they go into the labor market," she said.

"Just making students sit down and learn math and try to get their test scores up isn't enough," Weinberger continued. "Giving up recess to focus on math skills might not be the best investment in our future workforce."

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## About UC Santa Barbara

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