

Employer attitudes on traditional degrees vs. online degrees

The working world has changed: No longer must job candidates have traditional four-year degrees to be considered for professional positions. Not only has online education become more popular, it has also become more sophisticated, with virtual learning experts developing immersive, dynamic online courses that are as valuable and informative as their on-campus counterparts.

This shift has caused recruiters and hiring managers to take a new look at how they evaluate a job candidate's education and experience. While several years ago, an online degree may have been considered inferior to a traditional degree, that sentiment has significantly changed.

The [MRINetwork 2017 Recruiter Sentiment Study](#) found that more than 50 percent of recruiters and almost half of employers (43 percent) have no preference for candidates based on traditional versus alternative degrees. Another 13 percent of employers even prefer candidates with alternative degrees.

"To adapt to this changing landscape, employers should adjust their recruitment and interview processes to reflect the growing prevalence of online degrees," says Sherry Engel, vice president of learning and talent development for MRINetwork. "This will ensure that they're not overlooking top talent for the positions they wish to fill."

Engel recommends three best practices for what employers should consider when presented with a candidate who has an online degree:

1. Look for accreditation

With the sophistication of today's virtual learning software and models, online degrees can be just as prestigious as those earned from traditional universities. The online program might be offered by a brick-and-mortar institution, such as the University of Cincinnati or Harvard University, or it may come from an online-only institution. Either way, if the program is accredited, that's a strong sign that it's a high-quality, respected program. U.S. News & World Report recommends that employers look to see if the school is accredited by the Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. There are also smaller state or regional accreditations that can also attest to a program's substance.



To further evaluate a candidate's education, ask what their program was like, why they enrolled in it and if it enriched their learning, taught valuable skills and prepared for their desired career.

2. Evaluate experience

Clearly, the degree itself is not the sole determining factor of whether a person has the skills and perspectives necessary for the job - experience plays a key part as well. In fact, in a survey of 50,000 employers conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, experience outweighed academic credentials among all industries, particularly in the science/technology, services/retail, and media/communications segments. Internships and employment during college rose to the top of the list as the most heavily weighted attributes considered by employers.

Employers also recognize that earning an online degree is not easy, especially when many who chose this form of education are juggling jobs or family obligations at

the same time. Undoubtedly this experience has helped them gain technology skills, discipline and time management abilities that are applicable in nearly every profession. Use interviews to not only ask candidates about their work, volunteer and travel experiences, but also to inquire how the e-learning experience has enabled them to effectively manage a diverse array of tasks.

3. Focus on cultural fit

In addition to degrees and experience, cultural fit has become increasingly important in determining whether a person would be well-suited for a job. During the interview process, employers should try to get a sense of whether the candidate would mesh well with the mission, values and social climate of the company. For example, a candidate who strongly prefers to work alone with little oversight may not function well in a company where collaboration is prioritized. Asking behavior-based questions such as "What do you believe is the ideal work-life balance?" and "How do you deal with stressful situations at work?" can help you get a sense of a candidate's cultural fit.

"While the negative perception of alternative degrees has not been completely eradicated, online degrees no longer have the stigma that they once had among employers and recruiters," concludes Engel. "This is encouraging because it means companies are rethinking how they hire, to ensure they're bringing on the best talent for each role."