

# Survey of Southwest Michigan Employers Executive Summary

Conducted by EPIC-MRA

Commissioned by:



# About the Architect of the Survey

## **EPIC-MRA**

Lansing-based EPIC-MRA is the most quoted polling firm in Michigan. The company is regularly cited by national news media and provides polling, consulting services and development of advertising, public relations and marketing for school districts and community colleges; national, state and local governmental agencies; trade, professional and public interest associations; hospitals and health care providers; commercial clients; and partisan and non-partisan candidates.

A sampling of the numerous surveys conducted by EPIC-MRA so far this year includes statewide surveys on media, taxes, and the culture of education, as well as statewide and regional political and business surveys.

## **Presenter**

Ed Sarpolus, vice-president of EPIC-MRA, primarily works in the area of survey sample design and information systems analysis of surveys. He also concentrates on database management, as well as devoting much of his time and effort toward marketing for the firm. Sarpolus was the Information Systems manager for the central staff of the Michigan House of Representatives from 1985 to 1992, and served as a member of national and state task forces on redistricting.

## Survey summary — A story of two realities

### 7.4% unemployment yet, employers struggle to find employees

Over 5,800 people in the Berrien County and Greater South Haven Areas are looking for employment. At the same time, employers in the region have difficulty finding qualified candidates to hire for both new and existing open positions.

The Survey of Southwest Michigan Employers study confirms Lake Michigan College's desire to place increasing emphasis on the **sciences, technology and math areas** is exactly what is needed so more people can succeed in today's workforce. Indeed, science is becoming the new "basic skill," because the concepts and habits learned in the discipline are transferable to so many other core skill sets.

The study also presents the College with **new program development opportunities** to help students develop the "soft skills," such as the ability to work in teams. It strongly suggests that students should be taught to:

- think independently
- communicate well in writing and speaking
- work effectively with computers and technology
- collaborate in a team atmosphere

To be successful in today's and tomorrow's economy, employees must be adaptable multi-taskers, and be as creative as the very businesses for which they work.

The rich diversity of businesses in the region, in both size and type, seems to create **equal parts opportunity and challenge for the College**. With more than half of the businesses having five or less employees, it is not cost-effective for the College, or these businesses, to create site-specific programs. And with so many different types of businesses, the range of training and education needs is great. To respond, the College must **explore interactive technologies** that will make it possible to offer a broader array of programs that can be accessed by employees from multiple sites and times.

Advanced education and training can be the economic engine for the region Lake Michigan College serves. To be successful, however, **the College must invest the resources necessary** to keep program offerings current and have the flexibility to meet continually changing business and community needs.

## 23% of area firms project new hires for next year, up from present year

Twenty-three percent of area firms say they anticipate adding new full-time employees, in addition to replacement hires, during the next year. Another six percent are undecided. The rest (71%) say they don't anticipate new hiring.

This represents a slight increase in hiring compared to the present year, when 16 percent of area firms report they hired at least one new full-time employee.

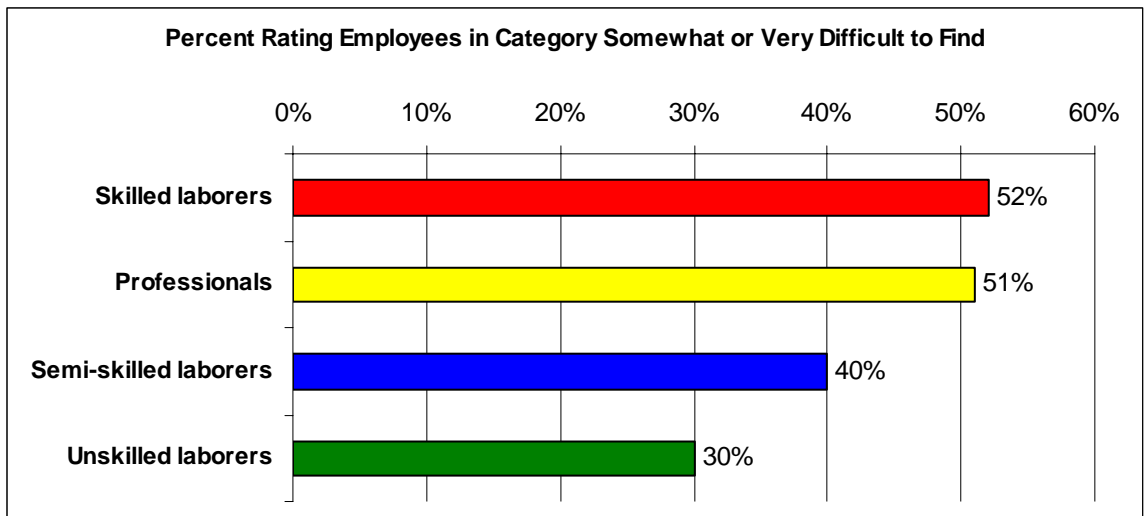
Among firms that anticipate hiring next year, the mean number of new full-time positions will be 6.32, while the median number is two.

## Finding qualified employees – A challenge for business

Newly created positions are available, but ...

- 43% of the businesses that had them this year had trouble filling those positions
- 68% of those that had difficulty said there were not enough qualified candidates

Examples of positions employers had difficulty filling include nurses, programmers, social workers, machine operators, inspectors, clerical positions, engineer managers, web designers, accountants, sales representatives and general laborers.



## More than \$600,000 in play

The combined hourly wages and salaries of the positions that area firms *in this sample alone* had difficulty filling this year come to \$602,580. Of these positions, half paid more than \$31,000 per year.

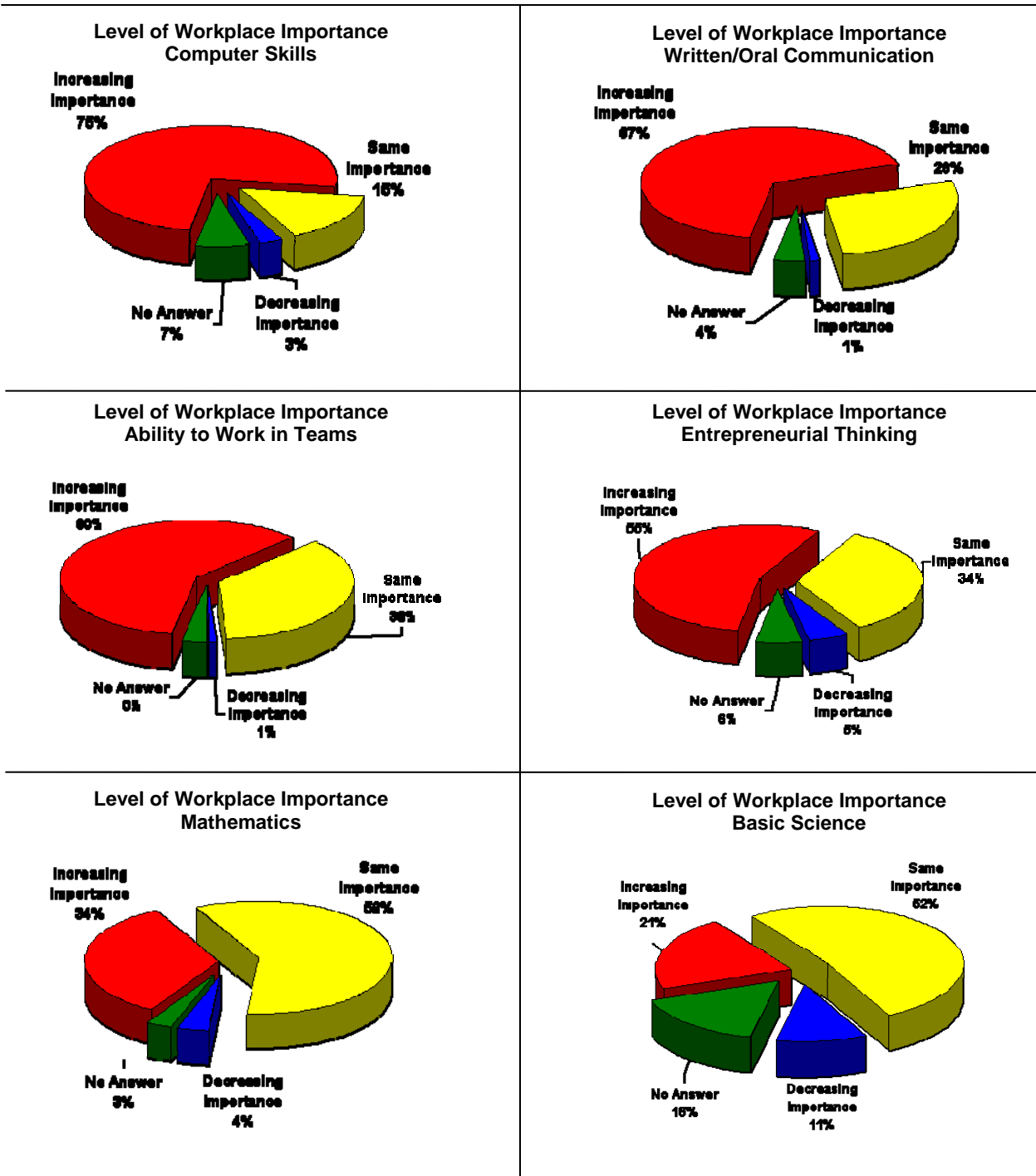
# Job qualifications—The bar is getting higher

80% of the positions required some type of degree, certificate or special training beyond a high school diploma. On balance, employers see the need for all basic skills as increasing, rather than decreasing.

## Employers seek ever greater skills

In addition to specialized training, employers require key basic skills of people they consider qualified candidates. For each six skill areas examined, employers are seeing an increase in the importance of skills. The percentage of employers who feel there is an increasing importance of particular skills in their workplace:

- 75% - Computer skills
- 67% - Written/oral communications
- 60% - Ability to work in teams
- 55% - Entrepreneurial thinking
- 34% - Mathematics
- 21% - Science



## Lake Michigan College district – A diverse mix of businesses

### Among respondents:

- 60% employ one to five employees
- 25% employ six to 25 employees
- 5% employ 26 to 50 employees
- 3% employ more than 50 employees

**34% hire only full-time employees.**

### Types of businesses:

- 14% Professional Services (e.g., legal, insurance, real estate)
- 12% Retail
- 12% Manufacturing or manufacturing supplier (e.g., machine shop, fabrication, plastics)
- 11% Business Services (e.g., vehicle services, printing, landscaping)
- 11% Healthcare
- 6% Food service
- 6% Tourism or Recreation (e.g., motel, golf course)
- 5% Construction (e.g., underground utilities, home builder, excavation)
- 4% Finance
- 3% Public Service (e.g., city/twp government, police, senior services,)
- 3% Education (e.g., museum/library, special education, tutoring)
- 2% Agriculture
- 1% Marine Services
- 1% Public Utilities
- 9% Other

## Survey Background

During July 2007, polling firm EPIC-MRA conducted a study of Southwest Michigan businesses to assess their challenges in addressing workforce needs, the types of skills they seek in new employees, and what they want in the way of education and training for the workforce. Data from the study will help Lake Michigan College to:

- Bring focus to how it is addressing the needs of area employers,
- Develop new educational and training programs and services,
- Provide local media with information on today's and tomorrow's jobs in the region.

In addition, the study will help the citizens and businesses served by the College understand the role the College plays as a major catalyst for economic growth and knowledge-based employment for the area.

### Elements of the Study

- Study surveyed 400 businesses by phone, in 8-10 minute interviews
- Study identified type of business (14 categories) and products produced or services provided
- Study identified current hiring practices and projected hiring for next year (new and replacement)
- Study assessed difficulty in filling positions by category, ranging from unskilled to professional
- Study identified reasons for difficulty of filling positions
- Study identified skill set and degree requirements for positions to be filled
- Study identified salaries of positions to be filled