

white paper



Workforce Concerns in Graphic Communications?

The solution is creating career awareness

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Results of the *Survey of the Graphic Communications Industry*
Published by the Graphic Communications Workforce Coalition
www.gccoalition.org

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Graphic Communication Workforce Concerns

The Graphic Communications industry, like many other manufacturing industries, faces serious workforce challenges in the coming decade. The fact is that our workforce is aging and in recent years companies have begun to more seriously consider the ramifications of that challenge. Our industry is not unique in facing a potential workforce shortage, but there is data available that can help us to understand the gravity of the situation for printing and graphics companies.

In 2016, Cummings studied diversity in graphic communications companies and as part of that research she identified some statistics on workforce age. Those figures are shown in *Table 1* along with a projection of what those age ranges are in 2020.

Percentage of Workers	Age Range in 2020 (projected)	Age Range in 2016 (actual)
35.8%	55–64	51–60
63.5%	Over 44	Over 40

Table 1. Projected and actual age ranges of the graphics workforce (Cummings, 2016).

There are issues with the simple projection of the 2016 data, because it is likely that some workers over age 60 have retired since this study was conducted. However, it serves the general purpose of illustrating the seriousness of the workforce age concerns. To further illustrate the makeup of workforce age these numbers are shown as pie charts in *Figure 1*.

This data is from just one of many studies conducted to quantify the problem and to illustrate how important future workforce development is to graphic communications. The recruitment, retention and training of our future workforce has been consistently identified as the number one issue that faces our industry today (PGSF, 2019).

Everyone seems to know it is a problem, yet there is not a cohesive or concerted effort to resolve the issue. Companies, schools, and organizations are working independently to figure out how to get young people interested and bring potential workers and leaders into the employment pipeline. This problem demands a bigger solution than can be executed by individuals—a group effort is required.

Projected Workforce Age Ranges

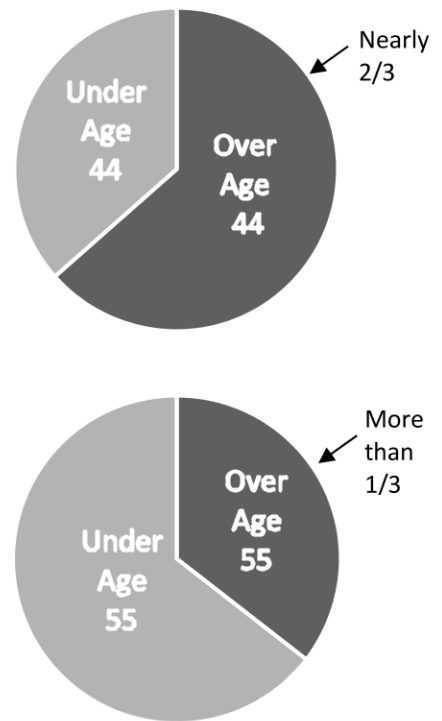


Figure 1. Projected age ranges of the graphics workforce (Cummings, 2016.)

The Graphic Communications Workforce Coalition

The Graphic Communications Workforce Coalition (GCWC) was formed in 2019, in response to the need for a cohesive, industry-wide effort to attract, recruit, and retain the next generation of workers. The group has more than 50 members consisting of associations, educators, and industry representatives who have united to address these key concerns. The guiding purpose of GCWC is to combine the separate efforts, experiences, and initiatives of various organizations. By coordinating actions, and sharing ideas and resources, it is expected that the whole industry will benefit. Details about GCWC, its mission, and initiatives can be found at www.gccoalition.org.

Membership in the GCWC is open to interested parties representing the graphic communications industry. Currently, there is no cost to join, only the desire to participate in the process. Those interested in joining GCWC can visit www.gccoalition.org/join-us.

One of GCWC’s first initiatives was to conduct a survey to determine what is needed to support the development of the next generation of talent. The results of this *Survey of the Graphic Communications Industry* follow.

GCWC Mission Statement

The purpose of the coalition is to coordinate the efforts of all organizations representing the broad scope of the graphics communications industry for creating awareness, recruitment of new people into the industry, providing a framework for apprenticeship and training programs, and the retention of the existing workforce. By combining the separate efforts, experiences, and initiatives of various organizations, coordinating actions and the sharing of ideas and resources, it is expected that all will benefit.

Survey of the Graphic Communications Industry

The survey was developed in late 2019 and administered in the first quarter of 2020. It was voluntarily distributed by members of GCWC through their respective organizations. A total of 157 individuals responded to the survey. Respondents were asked to classify their involvement in the graphics industry as being either a Service Provider/Supplier, Support Organization/Association, or Educator/School. Each classification was well represented, as shown in *Table 2*.

Question 1. What type of organization do you belong to?	Number	Percentage
Service Provider Print/Marketing/In-Plant or Supplier Hardware/Software/Supplies	69	44%
Support Organization or Association	19	12%
Educator or School	69	44%
Total	157	100%

Table 2: Classification of Survey Respondents.

While the number of responses is not large, it does provide input from all stakeholder groups within graphic communications. Importantly, it provides equal representation of the views of businesses and schools, as well as input from support organizations. This broad sample of responses is adequate to provide GCWC with snapshot data that identifies the current needs of our industry.

The survey consisted of four common questions that all participants answered, and nine questions based on the type of organization. For example: Companies received questions about training and retention of employees, while educators got questions related to student enrollment. In the following sections, responses and findings from the *Survey of the Graphic Communications Industry* are shared.

Career Awareness is a Critical Need in Workforce Development

Workforce development, ensuring that we have enough skilled workers and technical managers so that our industry thrives as the baby-boomers retire, is often cited as a critical need of graphic communications companies. To gauge perceptions of the kinds of workforce development options that are most needed, all respondents were asked this question—*shown is a list of workforce development options. Thinking about the graphic communications industry and what you feel is needed to attract and retain workers, rank these from most effective (1) to least effective (7).* The workforce development options on the list were: *Apprenticeships, Career Awareness, Hand-On Equipment Training, Internships, Online Continuing Education, Scholarships, and Skills Training & Certification.* The overall results of this ranking are shown in *Table 3.* The results shown in this table classify a workforce development option as “effective” if a respondent ranked it first, second, or third.

Workforce Development Options	Overall Rank	Number Ranking as Effective	Percentage
Career Awareness	1	64	74.42%
Internships	2	45	52.33%
Hands-on Equipment Training	3	43	50.00%
Skills Training & Certification	4	39	45.35%
Apprenticeships	5	38	44.19%
Scholarships	6	32	37.21%
Online Continuing Education	7	6	6.98%

Table 3. Overall ranking of workforce development options by survey respondents.

The top three effective means to attract and retain workers in graphic communications, as rated by all respondents, are: 1. *Career Awareness*, 2. *Internships*, and 3. *Hands-On Equipment Training*. The overall percentages for each of the top three ranked items are greater than 50%, which does indicate clear agreement among respondents that these workforce development options are “effective”. *Career Awareness* is the obvious top-ranked item with 74.42% of respondents across all sectors rating it in the

top three, and with 45.35% ranking it first, “most effective”, of the workforce development factors. Among educators, 79.17% ranked *Career Awareness* as “effective” which illustrates the point that increased awareness of career options in printing and graphics is needed to motivate young people (students) to pursue this profession.

Internships were ranked second with 52.33% of all respondents rating them as “effective” in workforce development. Respondents from the industry sector ranked *Internships* second most effective, just behind *Career Awareness*, with 60.00% rating them as “effective”. Interestingly, *Apprenticeships* which are ranked fifth overall, were ranked third (behind *Career Awareness* and *Internships*) by industry sector respondents. It would seem that increased awareness of career options in the graphics industry, paired with information about internships and apprenticeships could motivate students to pursue this field of study and ultimately help to meet the workforce needs of our industry.

The third ranked item was *Hand-On Equipment Training* with 50.00%. Related to this item is *Skills Training and Certification* which was ranked fourth with 45.35%. Relevant training using equipment is rated an “effective” means of attracting and retaining workers by all survey respondents. Possibly, positioning graphic communications as a high-tech industry could improve our overall image and attract a new pool of talent.

Additionally, some open-ended comments collected as part of the survey, in response to the question—*share any additional comments you think are relevant to the future success of the mission of the Graphic Communications Workforce Coalition*—were related to the idea of *Career Awareness*.

Open-Ended Responses Related to Career Awareness

- *Young people today don't think that a career in printing is glamorous enough or sustainable. Therefore, until we can change that thinking we will continue to struggle to find people to work in this field.*
- *This industry needs to become more inclusive of all people in order to remain relevant and that starts at the ground level - sponsor print related functions for after school programs - engage with career counselor staff in middle and high schools - have seminars in the local library about the emerging technology that is "print".*
- *Graphics Communications is a highly technical industry however we are perceived as strictly trade or manufacturing which doesn't have a large appeal to the upcoming workforce.*
- *We need to become more attractive to young college graduates. We need to think about competitive pay and creating cultures we can speak to. Internships would also be helpful.*

As a result of the findings of this survey, generating career awareness about opportunities in graphic communications, should be the primary goal of companies who want to ensure a strong future workforce. GCWC has identified this as a top priority and is seeking to identify ways to support companies, associations, and schools in their efforts. To that end, this survey also sought to identify current graphic communications promotional efforts and their effectiveness.

Promotion is Vital to Graphic Communications

GCWC's *Survey of the Graphic Communications Industry* also asked questions about marketing and promotion related to graphic communications that have been perceived as successful. The open-ended survey question—*Describe any graphic communications industry initiative(s) that you feel have succeeded in bettering our industry's workforce development*—was asked of business and association respondents. A variation—*Describe any graphic communications industry initiative(s) that you feel have succeeded in helping students become interested in careers in graphic communications*—was posed to educators.

This question centered on identifying which initiatives have succeeded in attracting workers to the field of graphic communications. The responses were categorized based on a keyword analysis of the raw data. When responses were coded some fit within multiple categories and some remain uncategorized. A total of 94 responses were coded. The eight categories that emerged, their descriptions, and the number of responses per category are shown in *Table 4*.

The largest category was *None Successful* with 17 responses, or 18% of respondents. Interestingly another 8 responses, 8.5% of respondents, feel that relevant industry *Marketing / Public Relations* are needed. Combined these two categories total 26.5% of respondents, who feel that there has not been a successful industry promotional initiative. While this is not a majority, it is meaningful that in response to an open-ended question, more than a quarter of survey participants think that efforts to promote the industry have been ineffectual and need to be improved.

Number	Category	Description
17	None Successful	Cited of lack of initiatives or ineffective initiatives that have led to disappointing results. Includes N/A responses.
16	Association or Group	Affiliation with or participation in a graphic communications-related group or association.
16	Tradeshow or Similar	Attending a tradeshow or other event designed to promote graphic communications.
13	School Engagement	Actively engaging with schools for the purpose of achieving workforce development goals.
12	Technologies & Certifications	Use of modern equipment and processes, also includes technical or skill certifications.
8	Marketing / Public Relations	Marketing and promotion are needed. Very few successful examples given.
7	Apprenticeship/Internship	Apprenticeship/Internship/Job Shadowing
5	Scholarships	Students receive financial support while pursuing higher education or technical training.

Table 4. Categorized open-ended responses describing existing graphic communications initiatives.

Tradeshows or Similar and *Association or Group* each received 16 responses, 17% each, a total of 34% when combined. This is promising because more than a third of survey participants are interested in and willing to engage with associations and events in the graphics field. Coming together with others in our industry is something that we find inspirational and it provides a way for us to get noticed and promote ourselves. However due to the current global health crisis, this year has seen the postponement of Drupa, the cancellation of the SkillsUSA competition, and Printing United move to a virtual format. These changes are likely not permanent, but in the short term they will impact the visibility of the graphic communications industry and could result in a lost opportunity to engage with and inspire our next generation of workers. Organizations and associations should be seeking out ways to engage their memberships and provide outreach, as these events are clearly valued by all survey respondents.

The categories of *School Engagement* and *Apprenticeships/Internships* combined garnered 15 mentions, and account for 21.2% of responses. Since apprenticeships require related technical instruction, which is often administered by schools, and internships are typically completed as part of a degree program, it makes sense to consider both of these categories together. A few examples of the open-ended responses in these two categories were:

School Engagement Responses

- *Need to speak at schools and job forums.*
- *Hosting local class visitations to our facility and a partnership with local college offering industry-related 2- and 4-year degrees.*
- *Enhanced interaction with local high school students through tours and summer jobs.*

Apprenticeships/Internships Responses

- *Providing internships.*
- *Apprenticeship and paid internship programs.*
- *Our main effort has been through this Apprenticeship Program in an effort to encourage the next generation of field technicians within our industry as a significant portion of our existing workforce nears retirement age.*

While working with schools in some way is of interest to a fair number of survey contributors, it appears from the responses as though these ventures are being made by individual companies or institutions. If resources were available to facilitate communication between businesses and schools or suggestions were provided for ways to interact, these *School Engagement* activities could become more prevalent and improve their impacts.

The category called *Technologies and Certifications* comprised 12.8% of responses. What is interesting about this category is that it contained no responses from the industry sector. However, educators and association respondents feel that working with up-to-date equipment and having the opportunity to become certified in technologies is appealing to both students and employees. Industry respondents did not view this as a selling point or a way to attract employees. This minor difference in perception could actually provide another avenue for businesses to attract new talent—by emphasizing the high-tech aspects of their processes and the products they produce.

Despite individual efforts by companies, organizations, and educators no holistic approach to positioning printing and graphics as a desirable career path currently exists and one is needed. It fits with the mission of GCWC to act as a liaison to bring together interested parties, share information, and provide a model for workforce development. A logical place to begin, is to examine and reflect upon what schools have to offer.

The Future Workforce is in a School Near You

The answer to the question, “Where can we find a young workforce?” is fairly obvious—in schools. Throughout survey responses, using schools to promote awareness of graphic communications careers, as well as a resource for hiring, was consistently mentioned. Additionally, findings of the *Survey of the Graphic Communications Industry* identified awareness of graphic communications careers as the primary way to develop a future workforce. This survey contained specific questions for teachers that provided information about how schools play a part in graphic communications workforce development.

First teachers were asked—*How would you classify the relationship of your school with graphics companies in your area?* Excellent. Good. Average. Poor. As shown in Figure 2, 60% of educators classify their relationship with graphics companies in their area as Excellent or Good, which means that 40% feel those relationships are Average or Poor. These critical relationships need to be improved if schools can hope to provide the workforce boost that graphic communications needs.

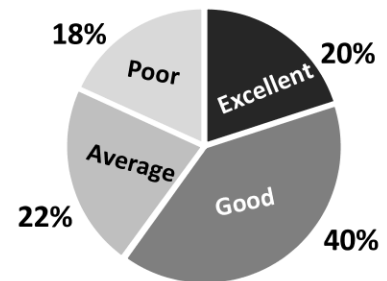


Figure 2. School-Industry Relationship Ratings by Educators.

A second questions asked specifically of educators was—*How would you classify enrollment in your graphic communications program?* Full. Average. Low. Extremely Low. Unfortunately, 23% of graphic communications programs identify their enrollment as Low or Extremely Low. Low enrollment puts programs in danger of being eliminated. It is unlikely that the industry will grow and flourish if nearly a quarter of current graphic communication programs have low enrollment and could potentially close.

We have known for years that our industry is missing out on attracting young workers. In a 2013 article about industry challenges, Jerry Scher was quoted as saying—“As an industry, one of the greatest challenges we face is that we tend to not be on the radar of large numbers of talented workers.” While partnering with schools may not be the only way to cultivate career interests among young people, it is a readily available option. Every community has a high school and it is during those years that students begin to home in on a career path. If we want the best and brightest to choose this field, we need teachers and businesses to partner and demonstrate the opportunities that are available in graphic communications. While it is promising that 60% of teachers feel that they have Excellent or Good relationships with graphics companies in their area—it is not enough. Improving those relationships, so that students connect what they are learning with an interesting and lucrative career, is a direct path to improving the workforce.

Be a Part of the Solution

The workforce challenges in graphic communications are well documented and now the GCWC *Survey of the Graphic Communications Industry* has identified a clear solution—career awareness. We need to make the next generation aware of the essential, relevant, and high-tech jobs that graphic communications has to offer. Regardless of your current position, there is something you can do to increase awareness of the opportunities offered by our industry. Specific examples of outreach for individuals are provided in *Table 5*.

Companies and Organizations	Teachers and Schools
Contact your local high school to find out what classes they offer that are related to graphics.	Reach out to a local printing or graphics business to find out what they look for when hiring.
Offer to speak to a high school or middle school class about your business.	Arrange for your students to have a virtual tour of a business in your area.
Offer a student an opportunity to job shadow in your company.	Ask a graduate who is working in printing or graphics to speak to your current class.
Establish an internship program with a college or technical school.	Set up a job shadowing or mentoring program with businesses in your area.
Participate in career fairs at schools in your region.	Encourage students to research and explore career options in printing and graphics.
Let area teachers know when you are hiring.	Engage students in graphics-related events and competitions.

Table 5. Examples of Career Awareness Outreach for Individuals

Remember that because this issue affects the future of our whole industry, it will likely take more than the efforts of one individual to succeed in overcoming this workforce shortage. You can have a greater impact by partnering with other organizations. A great first step is to join GCWC. Membership is open to all parties with an interest in graphic communications. Currently, there is no cost to join, only the desire to increase awareness of opportunities in graphics. You can join GCWC by visiting www.gccoalition.org/join-us.

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