



Building Career Skills Through 4-H

If you could give one word of advice to young people about career success, what would it be? Some might say “go to college,” or “learn to use computers.” That is good advice, but does it work?

Surveys show that most young people are not fully self-supporting for approximately 10 years after completing high school. The average age of students at county colleges is 27 years. One third of county college students have completed a four year degree and attend county college for specific job training. More than 90 percent of parents who were asked if their son or daughter will graduate from college responded “yes.” However, only 20 percent of high school graduates will actually complete a four year program. Furthermore, many college graduates have been disappointed to learn that a college degree does not necessarily lead to a high-paying job. Yet without higher education, a majority of young people find themselves trapped in minimum wage jobs with no room to grow. Is there a solution to this problem?

Begin Early

Preparing children for the workplace does not mean encouraging a six year old to “get a job.” Rather, it is important to provide activities appropriate for the age group which help them develop career awareness. For example, first graders could use Legos to build an office or warehouse. By fifth grade children are ready for exposure to a variety of work sites. High school students have benefitted greatly from opportunities to work side by side on a project with an adult worker.

Job Skills of the Future

Young people need many skills in order to live happy, productive, and healthy lives in a rapidly changing world. Future workers will have many different jobs and will likely be employed in several industries. How can we prepare 4-H youth for a career which may be ever-changing?

The essential capabilities for future American workers have been established by national experts and published in a landmark 1991 report by the U.S. Secretary of Labor’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (the SCANS report). The study identified five workplace competencies and three foundation skills.

SCANS Workplace Competencies

- *Utilizing Resources.* Allocate time, money, materials, space, and staff.
- *Working With Others.* Participate in teams, teach others, serve customers, lead, negotiate, and work well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- *Using Information.* Acquire and evaluate data, organize and maintain files, interpret and communicate, and use computers to process information.
- *Understanding Systems.* Understand social, organizational, and technological systems; monitor and correct performance; design or improve systems.
- *Working with Technology.* Select equipment and tools, apply technology to specific tasks, maintain and troubleshoot equipment.



SCANS Foundation Skills

- *Basic Skills* – reading, writing, arithmetic, science, math, speaking, and listening.
- *Thinking Skills* – problem solving, reasoning, learning, creative thinking, and decision-making.
- *Personal Qualities* – self-esteem, integrity, responsibility, and sociability.

Learning Skills Through 4-H Project Work

Children learn best when they are having fun and feel engaged in what they are doing. What better way to teach career skills than through a 4-H project? Consider which of the SCANS skills fits the activity you want to do. For example, a dog project might include learning to groom in a team effort where young people interact and take turns leading, teaching, or following. Focus on the advantage of working together, emphasizing that teamwork is required in the workplace.

Many times we automatically teach workforce skills but 4-H members do not realize they can transfer these skills to a job, and therefore do not mention their 4-H experiences to prospective employers. Schools are doing more to help young people market themselves, but we can do much more to help 4-H members realize the value of their 4-H project work and community service activity. At the completion of a project, include an exercise in identifying the SCANS competencies the club members have learned. Each member can keep a portfolio to collect this information. Such an inclusive record not only builds self-esteem, but will be very useful at a later time when the 4-H'er is filling out college applications or going to job interviews.

4-H Leaders as Mentors

A mentor is someone who guides, advises, and supports another in achieving a goal. A 4-H club leader is a very important mentor for 4-H members. In a recent study, it was determined that young people who had a 10 minute conversation once a month with an adult not in their family were far less likely to engage in drug abuse or other risky behaviors. Other studies have shown that youth experience a higher level of success when they have frequent interactions with a caring adult. Adult guidance and supervision allows youth to acquire a sense of purpose and self-confidence. Young people thrive when they know they are valued and have a valuable contribution to make. 4-H club leaders, as mentors, can help youth succeed by incorporating workplace competencies in their 4-H projects and by identifying the skills learned which are important in the future workplace.

Begin with a Plan

Design 4-H projects, events, and other activities in a way that will challenge youth to achieve the SCANS competencies. For example, a woodworking project could be outlined as follows:



Woodworking Project

Project Phase	Project Tasks	Skills Learned
Getting Started	Brainstorm ideas Select team project	Listen, speak, think creatively Work with others, make decisions
Ready, Set, Go	Purchase materials Establish team schedule Select Woodworking manual Identify most pertinent chapters to be covered	Select equipment and tools Allocate money, time, space Acquire & evaluate data Interpret, communicate, read, problem solve
Study and Practice	Complete self-study chapter before each meeting, take test Building project one step at a time Assist team members Check tools & safety habits Maintain personal tool box	Acquire and evaluate data Apply technology to specific tasks, understand technological systems Teach others, lead, negotiate Troubleshoot equipment, correct performance, improve system Organize and maintain files
Community Service	Tour nature center to learn names of trees and plants Identify and write names of trees and plants Build wooden identification signs for nature center Reflect with mentor on the benefits to self and others	Acquire and interpret data Use computers, communicate Apply technology to specific tasks Self esteem, integrity, responsibility, sociability, and customer service

Workforce Skills Resources

If it seems like an overwhelming task, start simply. Ask someone you know to speak to the 4-H club about their job and how it relates to the 4-H project. Each experience will lead to the next. You may also wish to contact your county 4-H agent for more information.

Written by Gloria Kraft.

References

- Benson, P.L., J. Galbraith, and P. Espeland (1995). *What Kids Need to Succeed*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Company.
- U.S. Department of Labor (June 1991). *What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.



 *Did You Know...* 

A 3-leaf clover emblem was used for awards in the early 1900's.
The original H's were Head, Heart and Hands.
After World War I, Health was chosen over Hustle as the 4th H.

For more information on New Jersey 4-H, please visit www.nj4h.rutgers.edu.

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