

The talent crunch continues, as many firms compete for the best and brightest students to fill supply chain management roles. Well documented demographic and economic factors have contributed to a significant deficit in the availability of university graduates to fill an increasing number of jobs;¹ some have estimated that there are 6 to 9 positions out there for every available supply chain prospect. Having been a professor for nearly 30 years at three major universities, I’ve noticed some clear differentiators make some companies more successful in their recruiting efforts. Here are a few.

Four Best Practices for University Recruiting

1. Know your talent needs

There is a big difference between supply chain recruiters who come to campus equipped with a comprehensive and clear understanding of their organization’s talent needs and those who come “just looking for good people.” Yes, there is an argument to be made for getting the best people you can and then molding the organization around them. But larger organizations usually don’t have this kind of flexibility; so aligning talent with strategic objectives and capability needs of the organization is critical. The move toward digitization of supply chains provides a salient case in point. Many supply chain executives want to capitalize on new analytics and automation technologies, but few organizations have, or know how to recruit for, the talent needed to support these initiatives.

Supply chain leaders need to be directly involved in performing talent audits and capability analyses. Don’t leave this to the HR function, as they are usually less well-equipped to understand the changing technical and leadership requirements in our rapidly evolving field.

TCU’s Center for Supply Chain Innovation recently conducted a survey of business partners asking them about their supply chain talent needs. Their answers to two questions below might be helpful in spurring your thinking about your own organization’s needs.

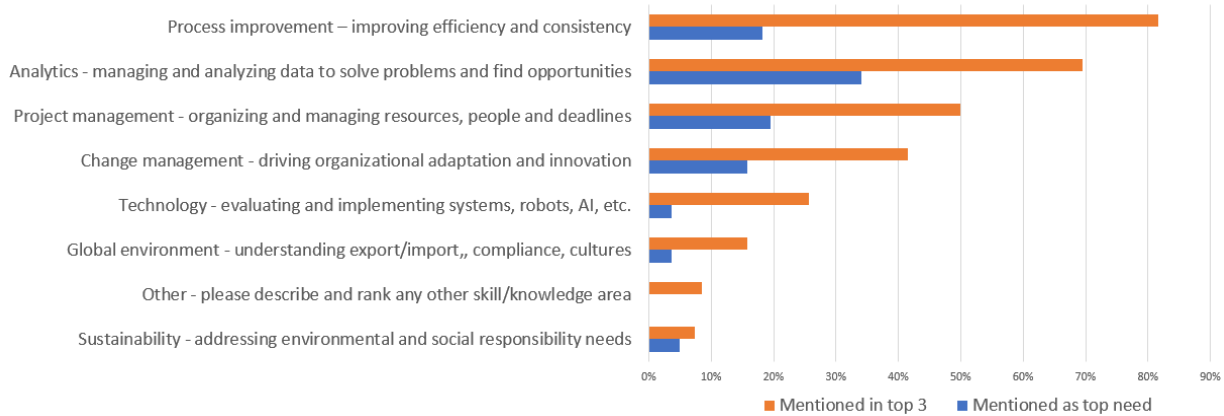
Survey Question 1: *Looking at your firm’s management of its entire supply chain, what is your single biggest need in terms of workforce talent?*

The “word cloud” at right identifies the key terms frequently occurring in the wide variety of responses we received. We categorized the responses into the following broad competency areas:

- Critical thinking and ability to synthesize information
- Understanding and applying analytics and other technologies
- People skills including communication, humbleness, listening, and leadership
- Big picture, end-to-end understanding of supply chain functions and how the fit together



Survey Question 2: Our programs cover the "supply chain basics" plus heavy emphasis on leadership, adaptability, critical thinking, and communication skills. In addition we address the topics below in some depth. *Please rank in order of priority (top to bottom) the skills/knowledge you are seeking in our students.*



2. Identify the right partners

After identifying your organization’s talent needs, you need to find the right academic sources. Like any other strategic sourcing decision, it’s critical to understand the capabilities, pros, and cons of the options. The number of universities that offer an academic major or certificate in supply chain management is exploding, at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Fifteen years ago there may have been 25 such programs in existence; today there are more than 200.ⁱⁱ These programs vary tremendously in their size, focus, faculty expertise, and student experience. Some programs are focused on logistics, others on procurement, others on operations, and some feature more integrated, “end-to-end” curricula. Some programs emphasize analytics and optimization, others emphasize broader communications and business acumen. Some are linked to engineering programs and some are not. Know the programs that interest you and ensure that they fit your needs. This means you will have to do your research!

Ask questions like the following to better understand a program’s strengths and weaknesses:

1. How many courses are students required to take in logistics, procurement, operations, etc.? What kinds of extra-curricular experiences do students usually have? To what technologies are they exposed?
2. How many faculty have expertise in supply chain management? How many of these are research versus teaching faculty? Are supply chain functional faculty all housed within a single department, or are they spread across areas? (this gives an indication of program integration)
3. Who are the primary companies that hire your students? What are the average and range of starting salaries?
4. How many supply chain students graduate each year? Where do they come from? (this gives some idea of their mobility for job locations)
5. What is it about the curriculum or student experience that differentiates your program from others? How often do you revise your program design, and who are the stakeholders and primary influencers in this process?

Along with strategic fit, you will want to establish other criteria to use in selecting university supply chain programs as key suppliers of talent. In many companies, this is a pretty ad hoc process, at best. For obvious reasons, executives often like to recruit at their alma maters. This approach does have its advantages, as alumni typically have a better understanding of what they are getting in new students, and there is usually added enthusiasm about “going home” to recruit. On the other hand, it’s a good idea to at least periodically do a more comprehensive and objective review of supply options. Programs do change over time, and the best options today might not be best tomorrow.

Additional criteria you might want to consider include:

- **Rankings** – Rankings are actually a pretty blunt instrument when it comes to describing the quality and character of a university supply chain program. They are heavily influenced by size and legacy effects. Nevertheless, getting new hires from top ranked programs can send signals to your employees and competitors that you are investing in top talent. The popular Gartner rankings (2018) are shown below.ⁱⁱⁱ

Rank	Gartner Graduate	Rank	Gartner Undergraduate
1.	Pennsylvania State University	1.	Pennsylvania State University
2.	University of Michigan	2.	Rutgers University
3.	University of Tennessee	3.	Auburn University
4.	Michigan State University	4.	Michigan State University
5.	Rutgers University	5.	University of Tennessee
6.	University of Minnesota	6.	Arizona State University
7.	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	7.	The University of Texas at Austin
8.	Arizona State University	8.	Western Michigan University
9.	The University of Texas at Dallas	9.	Georgia Institute of Technology
10.	University of Wisconsin-Madison	10.	Northeastern University
11.	Georgia Institute of Technology	11.	University of Minnesota
12.	Indiana University	12.	University of Wisconsin, Madison
13.	Northeastern University	13.	University of South Carolina
14.	The Ohio State University	14.	Texas Christian University
15.	North Carolina State University	15.	University of Arkansas
16.	Texas Christian University	16.	Marquette University
17.	Wayne State University	17.	University of Houston
18.	University of Southern California	18.	Syracuse University
19.	Howard University	19.	The Ohio State University
20.	The University of Texas at Austin	20.	University of North Texas
21.	University of South Carolina	21.	Bowling Green State University
22.	Syracuse University	22.	Miami University
23.	University of Houston	23.	The University of Texas at Dallas
24.	University of Washington	24.	Texas A&M University
25.	University of San Diego	25.	Wayne State University

- **Proximity** – Being physically located near a university makes it easier to interact with faculty and students more frequently, which can produce big dividends in hiring the best students.

- **Customer service** (where YOU are the customer) – University supply chain programs vary in the amount of support they provide to recruiters. While just about all business and engineering schools have “career services” staff, some programs also have staff and Supply Chain Centers that provide networking/recruiting events, student showcases, resume books, and advisory services *just for supply chain recruiters*. These kinds of services lower the transaction costs associated with finding and hiring students that meet your needs.

3. Build the relationship

Treat your university partners as “strategic suppliers” – this means engaging in collaborative efforts to improve the relationship, as well as the quality and availability of the “product” (the graduates). Collaboration can be both formal (structured) and informal (relational). Building “relational capital” is a powerful way to create better outcomes. Ask your supply chain personnel to meet and interact with faculty and program leaders on a regular basis. Invite faculty to tour your facilities and to give “lunch and learn” talks; explore joint research opportunities; invest in faculty and program development – all with the aim of improving the quality of graduates you eventually intend to hire. The first principle of improving a strategic supplier’s capabilities is to create interactions that involve multiple direct stakeholders from both the buyer and the supplier. Don’t leave it to your HR people and the university’s career services staff to manage the relationship.

If you don’t have a student internship program, start one! Internships and student projects are great ways to “try before you buy,” while getting projects done that might otherwise be neglected. Internship experiences also offer great opportunities to provide feedback to the supply chain program on what seems to be working well and what can be improved in their students.

Finally, measure the outcomes, especially over long term. The most successful hiring firms track the progress of hires from different programs, and again feed this information back to the faculty and program administrators. Universities want to know how they can improve their graduates to meet your needs. Help them do it!

4. Gain a recruiting edge

Not every company is an Amazon, Apple, or Google, with instant name recognition and a sexy industry. Especially for millennials and generation Z, companies need to make a compelling case describing the contributions that new hires can make to society as well as to the firm’s bottom line. It is especially important for recruiters from not well-known firms to build their brand among new-hire prospects at targeted schools, and perhaps for those from well-known firms to counter misperceptions about their organizations.

There are many ways to invest in building your firm’s brand and visibility. Participating in advisory boards, speaking in classes and at university events, extending tour opportunities, and offering student project opportunities are ways to get your company name out there and to create buzz among the student and faculty communities. Many companies hold information sessions (usually with pizza). Try to do something out of the ordinary that is also linked to your brand and culture. Students highly value candid conversations with top executives instead canned videos and presentations created by HR staff.

Develop and deliver a compelling vision of career opportunities at your firm. Describe how your firm makes a difference in the world, how new hires are developed, and the career paths available. Many students are particularly looking for high value leadership development/rotational programs. I have seen students take lower compensation offers in order to gain access to well-designed development programs. Give prospects a clear vision of the possible journey they can take with your firm, including examples of real people who have pursued such paths.

Finally, gain a recruiting edge by moving early and fast. The recruiting cycle seems to start earlier every year, with the top students going as early as September and October of their senior year. Many return from their summer internships with an offer in hand.

It's a Seller's Market

Barring a major recession, the competition for new talent is likely to remain fierce for the next few years. Supply chain executives who truly believe that people are their organization's greatest assets will take the time and effort to invest in understanding their talent needs, developing relationships with well-aligned, strategic university partners, and creating a strategy to win in the recruiting battles that are happening at the top supply chain programs around the country. When procuring strategic assets, there are often great potential gains to be found in building relationships with important suppliers who offer exceptional product value. Procuring talent at select university supply chain programs is no different.



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ⁱ <https://www.elementum.com/chain-reaction/4-reasons-for-the-supply-chain-talent-shortage>;
<https://www.supplychaindive.com/news/supply-chain-challenge-hiring-talent-digital-MHI/553587/>;
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ⁱⁱ http://www.ismmagazine-digital.com/ismmagazine/supply_in_demand_2015?pg=23#pg23

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/business-supply-chain-management-logistics>
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