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Want to get hired? Take competence test

BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

Editor's note: Enquirer contributor Howard McEwen, whose day job is as an investment professional, recently decided to take a work skills assessment test at Gateway Community and Technical College to see how he would fare as someone already in the working world.

COVINGTON - Gateway Community and Technical College recently received a \$60,000 grant from the Kentucky Adult Education program to provide work skills assessment. The test that Gateway uses is called WorkKeys.

Applicants passing three WorkKeys tests - applied mathematics, reading for information and locating information - are awarded a Kentucky Employability Certificate (KEC) that demonstrates to employers proficiencies in these areas.

ADVERTISEMENT Good news, but I wanted to know more. I wanted to know what a fresh high school graduate faces when taking one of these tests. So I decided to sit for one of them.

I am an investment professional with degrees in finance and accounting, so I confidently chose the applied mathematics test. It sounded like a responsible thing to do until I found myself getting up early on a recent Saturday.

I had test anxiety. I was a numbers guy taking a basic math skills test. My opportunity for embarrassment was high. True, a bad grade really didn't matter to me. But I did have to write this story and maybe admit I had failed.

Kids taking the test worry about more than embarrassment. They have a job on the line. The KEC is a key to their futures.

But 18 years out of high school was giving me the same butterflies.

Getting lost on the way didn't help much, especially when Gateway's director of public relations, Margaret Thomson, had e-mailed me precise directions. Not only is Gateway one of Northern Kentucky's hidden educational gems, the Covington campus is literally hidden on a hilltop off the 12th Street exit.

I arrived five minutes late and was greeted at the door by Thomson and Caprice Johnson, who would be administering the test. Johnson had me complete a form. She readied the



ZOOM

Provided Photo

Our intrepid reporter Howard McEwen appears to be trying to channel the answer to a WorkKeys question. Those who pass earn a certificate that can be helpful in getting a job.

computer, then ushered me into the testing room full of study carrels with computer monitors that you looked at through glass on the desktop. Questions were answered using a keyboard. I had Station 7.

The "grade" on a WorkKeys test is given as a level three through seven. To get a Kentucky Employability Certificate, you have to receive a level four on each of the three tests.

Johnson gave me two sharpened pencils, two sheets of blank scrap paper, a formula sheet, then left the room. I had 60 minutes to answer 33 questions.

I blew through the first few questions: relatively easy level three or four questions such as how to make change or figure an average. Then number 12 hit - balancing a checkbook.

Although I do have my accounting degree, a few years ago a bounced check taught me that it's the easy things that can trip you up. I triple-checked my answer.

On question 13, I needed an antacid.

On question 22, I needed a tissue.

An upset stomach and a runny nose - test preparedness wasn't my forte.

I was speeding through the answers now. Then question 28 brought things to a full stop.

A certain pool needed a certain number of ounces of chlorine that was only sold in two-liter bottles. I had no idea how many ounces were in a gallon or how many liters were in a gallon. "What am I?" I thought. "Canadian?"

Scratching down some nonsensical calculations I rediscovered the formula sheet that Johnson gave me. Bingo! Got the answer. Raced through the final five questions and mouse-clicked off that I was done.

Upon my return Johnson gave me my grade. A level seven, the highest possible. Embarrassment avoided. I was pretty proud. It meant ... not much to me, someone employed with a solid work history.

But to a lot of kids across the Commonwealth, it's a start. It's a foot in the door. To employers, many small ones that can't afford testing services, it's a guarantee that at least the young person they're thinking of hiring is skilled.

My only bit of advice to them is to go to the bathroom first and bring one of the little packets of tissue my wife keeps in her purse.

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