What are 21st century skills?

The 21st century skills are a set of abilities that students need to develop in order to succeed in the information age. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills lists three types:

**Learning Skills**
- Critical Thinking
- Creative Thinking
- Collaborating
- Communicating

**Literacy Skills**
- Information Literacy
- Media Literacy
- Technology Literacy

**Life Skills**
- Flexibility
- Initiative
- Social Skills
- Productivity
- Leadership

**New Skills for New Jobs**
These skills have always been important for students, though they are particularly important in our information-based economy. When most workers held jobs in industry, the key skills were knowing a trade, following directions, getting along with others, working hard, and being professional—efficient, prompt, honest, and fair. Schools have done an excellent job of teaching these skills, and students still need them.

To hold information-age jobs, though, students also need to think deeply about issues, solve problems creatively, work in teams, communicate clearly in many media, learn ever-changing technologies, and deal with a flood of information. The rapid changes in our world require students to be flexible, to take the initiative and lead when necessary, and to produce something new and useful.

**Demand in the Workplace**
These are not just anecdotal observations. The following quotations come from *Up to the Challenge*, a report by the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), Career Technical Education (CTE), and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21):
The employment titan **Manpower** reports that despite the recession, 31 percent of employers throughout the world struggle to find qualified workers because of “a talent mismatch between workers’ qualifications and the specific skill sets and combinations of skills employers want.”

The **American Management Corporation** reports that employers want workers who can think critically, solve problems creatively, innovate, collaborate, and communicate.

The **National Association of Manufacturers** reports, “Today’s skill shortages are extremely broad and deep, cutting across industry sectors and impacting more than 80 percent of companies surveyed. This human capital performance gap threatens our nation’s ability to compete . . . [and] is emerging as our nation’s most critical business issue.”

The **National Academies** indicate that “The danger exists that Americans may not know enough about science, technology, or mathematics to contribute significantly to, or fully benefit from, the knowledge-based economy that is already taking shape around us.”

The **New York Times** reports that low-skilled workers are being laid off and “turned away at the factory door and increasingly becoming the long-term unemployed . . .” This issue results from a disparity between the skills that worker have and those that employers need.

We want to hear from you! How critically and creatively do your students think? How well do they collaborate and communicate? Share your insights below.

[http://www.thoughtfullearning.com/resources/what-are-21st-century-skills](http://www.thoughtfullearning.com/resources/what-are-21st-century-skills)


**Examples of Using Critical Thinking to Make Decisions in the Workplace**

*by Ruth Mayhew, Demand Media*
Critical thinking skills are helpful in all work situations. The thinker image by JoLin from Fotolia.com

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- What Is the Relationship Between Critical Thinking & Conflict Resolution?
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- Examples of Conformity in the Workplace

Critical thinking is essential in the workplace, particularly for employees in management roles. Their decisions can affect an individual employee, a department or the entire workforce. Therefore, critical thinking skills are sought-after professional characteristics for employees with high-level responsibilities and authority. Regardless of the individual's position, rank or status, examples of the use of critical thinking skills to make workplace decisions are evident everywhere.

**Overview**

The Critical Thinking Community attributes to Linda Elder a definition of critical thinking proposed in 2007. Elder states that critical thinking is "self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way. People who think critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably, empathically." Fair-mindedness, complemented by rational decision-making in a reasonable manner that emulates empathy, is a characteristic any employer would be lucky to have in all of its employees.

**Human Resources**

An example of critical thinking within the context of human resources involves an employee relations specialist responsible for conducting workplace investigations. The decision whether to suspend or terminate an employee
alleged to have engaged in sexual harassment must be based on critical thinking. Fact-finding interviews, witness statements and the assessment of witnesses’ credibility are self-guided and self-disciplined methods that can be used to deduce whether the employee's actions or behavior constitute sexual harassment. In addition, identifying the effect a suspension will have on the employee and his performance, as well as the employees he manages, are other considerations that require the use of critical thinking processes.

**Marketing**

Using Elder's definition of critical thinking, public relations, sales and marketing employees utilize their critical thinking skills in making decisions related to the public perception of the company and the company's products and services. For example, packaging a product that appeals to certain population groups based on stereotypical assumptions isn't generally a good marketing tactic. However, using marketing techniques that create widespread appeal, regardless of the target market's ethnicity, gender or other characteristics, can prove to be beneficial for the company and may result in the product being accessible to a broad range of customers. For example, a car advertisement that appeals predominantly to women buyers may need to avoid any stereotypical images to enable the product to appeal to a broader consumer base. Thus, marketing professionals must use critical thinking skills to examine their branding concept from a perspective that eliminates gender in advertising the car's features. For example, if the car is eco-friendly, that feature could serve as the advertisement's focus rather than gender.

**Customer Service**

Employees who have regular contact with business customers, be they other businesses or individuals, use critical thinking skills every time they engage in conflict resolution. Product knowledge and understanding the customer's needs are part of conflict resolution. Using that knowledge to achieve a satisfactory resolution is part of the process of using critical thinking in the workplace. An example is a utility company's customer service agent who uses independent judgment and critical thinking in the decision to extend the due date of a delinquent electrical bill during the summer months for a customer with a previously spotless payment record. His critical thinking skills are in use when he considers what the best and most rational solution is. Reviewing the customer's pay history through a self-guided process results in a decision based, in part, on empathy for customers suffering from unbearable heat.

**References**

- The Critical Thinking Community: Defining Critical Thinking
- Talent Culture; 7 Steps: Critical Thinking in the Workplace; Chris Jones; April 2011
- The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga: Critical Thinking