

# Career Advice for Emerging Planners



SURVEY RESULTS TO GET HIRED AND  
SUCCEED IN YOUR FIRST PLANNING JOB

*Sponsored by the APA Arizona Mentorship Program  
and Professional Development Committee*

## Objective

To gain a better understanding of the workplace environment for recent planning graduates entering the job market. The findings in this summary will be shared with students, young professionals, and mentors to improve job readiness and training programs. The survey targeted all types of planners - representing the broad range of specializations and geographic regions - through APA chapter e-newsletters, executive leadership boards, and networking.

## Survey Design

- Response Period: **April 23 - July 15, 2014**
- Total Responses: **834** | 14% Arizona Residents
- Unique Zip Codes: **653**
- Workplaces Represented:

**72 %** Government Agencies

**20 %** Consulting Firms

**4 %** Non-Profit Organizations

**4 %** Non-Planning Related Organizations / Other

## Advisory Committee

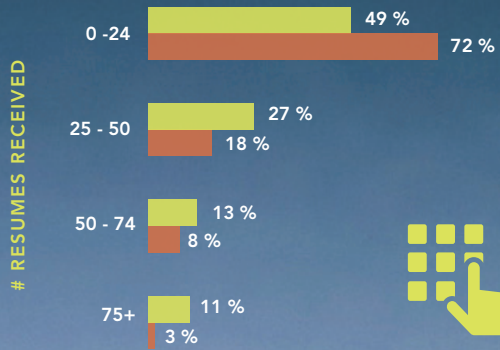
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**800**  
**RESPONSES**  
**REPRESENTING**  
**ALL 50 STATES**

HOW MANY TOTAL RESUMES/APPLICATIONS DO YOU TYPICALLY RECEIVE FOR ENTRY-LEVEL PLANNING POSITIONS?



EMPLOYED AT GOVERNMENT AGENCY | 587 RESPONSES  
 EMPLOYED AT CONSULTING FIRM | 160 RESPONSES

\*Totals may not equal 100% because of rounding.

The following “words of wisdom” were taken from the open response section of the survey. These opinions represent a diversity of perspectives from all types of planners and levels of experience. Please note the city and state reflect the survey respondents’ zip code and not a specific employer.

### Flexibility

- “In the current economy it is important to be open to getting any job opportunity that will provide you with resume-building experience. **You want to be selective, but not too selective.** Be open to applying to a range of job opportunities and remember that you don’t HAVE to take the job offer if you get one, but jobs are typically easier to find once you’re employed full time. You can use your first couple of jobs as stepping stones to something you’re more passionate about, and you might end up liking the first place that hires you more than expected.” - Baltimore, MD
- “If you’re just taking a job because you can’t find the dream job and need money, don’t express that in

“Expand your job search outside of what you “think” you want to do - you may just find what you **love** doing.”

Melissa Tiedemann, AICP  
 Stanley Consultants Inc.

# JOB SEARCH

your interview either verbally or nonverbally. No one likes to feel like a stepping stone. And **sometimes temporary can become permanent if you really commit.**" - Perth Amboy, NJ

- **"Be open on the location of new employment opportunities.** Often a small community offers greater experience than a larger city, and after a few years the experience enables one to promote to a more senior position in a larger jurisdiction."  
- Winchester, VA
- **"Apply for positions outside of traditional planning roles** (government, private consultant), including economic development, airport management, floodplain management, and water resources. Investigate opportunities in nonprofits, tribal planning, and international development, also."  
- Winslow, AZ
- **"Obtain as much relevant planning experience as possible** (e.g., internships, volunteer opportunities, etc.). Be open to relocating to areas of the country that are experiencing growth and expanding their planning programs. Do not get discouraged as Planning is a great career choice."  
- Casa Grande, AZ
- "When leaving school I had two job offers, one at a large city and one at a medium size city. After discussing with my professors, I opted for the medium size city and it helped grow me as a planner because I was able to work on everything instead of being stuck in one area. **I was able to explore various areas of interest and do things earlier in my career** I would not have been able to so early out of grad school. While the larger city had the 'glamor,' I got invaluable experience that led me to my current job where I'm the youngest Director of Real Estate."  
- Bentonville, AR

#### HOW DO YOU FIND QUALIFIED APPLICANTS FOR ENTRY-LEVEL POSITIONS? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



EMPLOYED AT GOVERNMENT AGENCY | 599 RESPONSES  
EMPLOYED AT CONSULTING FIRM | 163 RESPONSES

## Perseverance

- "Don't give up. The race is not given to the swift nor the battle to the strong, but to the one WHO ENDURES TO THE END. If you don't get the job you want, a better one is out there for you. This may sound strange but seek wisdom and direction in your career search. **You are applying for a position for a long-lasting career not just a job.** Have fun. Enjoy the process." - Fontana, CA
- "If there isn't a position available in your desired city/town, don't be afraid to call someone who is a leader in that town and ask for 30 minutes of their time to tell them what you're looking for and ask for their advice. These **'informational interviews' are a great way to network and uncover opportunities** that you may not have known existed before."  
- Greenwood, MS
- **"Have a plan to feed yourself for a year or so** because finding entry level work these days is incredibly hard."  
- Fairfax, VA
- "Keep trying, **it may take several months or more than a year to land a job.**" - Davenport, IA
- "Be friendly to everyone since we all cannot hire directly. Most of **it is a process that takes time.**" - Dover, DE
- "If you can't find a full- or part-time position, be sure to **volunteer or run for a board.** Serving on a board or committee can be invaluable experience." - Swanzev, NH
- **"Your career is in your hands.** Don't expect employers to look after your career success." - Phoenix, AZ

## Networking

- **"Learn about the organizations involved in your field of interest,** and attend events they hold if you can. I've been amazed at the students who've approached me to learn about what we do without having done any homework whatsoever. Doing that wastes the time of the professional you are trying to network with, and is counterproductive to say the least!" - Durham, NC
- "Networking is essential to your career. The first job was the hardest for me to land but because I work with a variety of people on a day-to-day basis and have a good reputation, **I have been recruited for every position thereafter.**" - Stafford, TX
- **"Always follow up with people you meet** at networking events." - Denver, CO
- **"Join the APA Early Career Program** for emerging professionals; become involved in APA Chapter and Section activities." - York, PA
- "Take advantage of every single opportunity you can to advance yourself, including ample networking. As an entry level planner, **sometimes it's the minor details that can set you apart** from other entry level planners." - Ankeny, IA
- "To get a job in a small-ish community: get to know planners! **We would almost always rather hire a known entity** - a former intern, or someone with local connections or a recommendation from someone we trust." - Lancaster, PA
- "Take advantage of informational interviews and networking. **Don't rely on applying to jobs posted online.**" - Chicago, IL

## Job Applications

- “**Always send a cover letter** with your resume or attach a cover letter to the online application form. This is your chance to link your resume to the job description and it’s your best opportunity to show the employer why they should interview you.”  
- Boulder, CO
- “**Be complete and specific when listing how you were involved or what tasks you did** with school projects, internships, and jobs.” - Appleton, MN
- “Get feedback from professionals on your resume and **double-triple check it for typos!** Bring work samples to your interview; have informational interviews at places you like even if they aren’t hiring; it never hurts to be there in person and make connections; show you’re willing to learn.” - Baltimore, MD
- “**Do not have your parents call on your behalf** / stop them from calling.” - Allentown, PA

## Preparation

- “Research the agency/organization to which you are applying. Know its interests and issues and **be prepared**

**to show how your skills and background intersect with the agency’s needs.”** - Meridian, ID

- “**Go to public meetings** of the cities before you apply. You can tell a lot about the city and staff from the public meeting and it really helps you get an idea of what you are about to get into.” - Plano, TX
- “**Research the jurisdiction** if looking for a public sector job because even if the position is open, the governing board may not take you seriously enough to accomplish many planning tasks. Try to determine how seriously your input will be considered by the final decision makers.”  
- Benson, AZ
- “If you are going into a governmental position, **be prepared and willing to learn the hierarchy of the organization** - especially the names of the elected officials. Also, be prepared to enter the world of gray - ‘yes’ and ‘no’ become ‘may,’ ‘perhaps’ and ‘unlikely.’ There is a new vocabulary that comes with time in any planning position. And be prepared to serve - the people who are the subject of your plans know better than you how their part of the world works. Listen. Be humble. And listen again.”  
- Geneseo, NY

# INTERVIEWS

“The interview starts from first contact and lasts until you’re back home. **Every step of the process is an opportunity** to show that you are a capable planner and a team player.”

Jennifer Albers, AICP  
City of Yuma, Arizona

## Basics

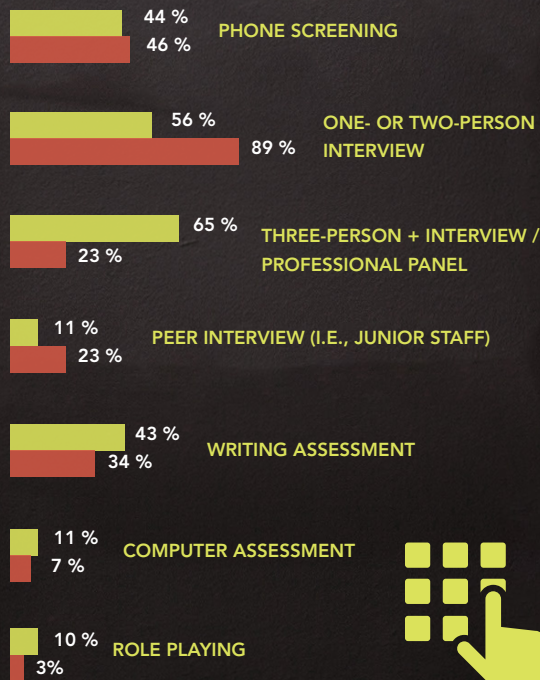
- “**Be yourself during an interview.** You have the skills needed to perform the job. Determining if you will be a ‘good fit’ for the organization/department is the #1 challenge for a hiring manager.” - Sapulpa, OK
- “The basics are important: **appearance, communications, attitude.** If you get an interview, don’t forget to send the thank you note afterward!” - Greensboro, NC
- “Recognize that **the employer’s needs are more important than your past experience or career goals** for the future - at least in the short term.” - Lancaster, PA
- “During interviews **show enthusiasm, willingness to learn and resourcefulness.**” - Deerfield, IL
- “**Have a strong portfolio of projects exhibiting your skills;** your work experience and job duties - what you contributed to the firm or organization; be professional during interviews and always come well-prepared!” - Fairfax, VA
- “**Stay off your phone** during the interview process. Seriously...”  
- Phoenix, AZ

## Asking Questions

- "Remember, **you are not only interviewing for a new job, but for a new boss.** Do not be afraid to ask questions of your potential employer to find out if they are going to be your mentor (or help you find one), if they are going to help you find opportunities for growth and development." - Galveston, TX
- "It's not about the money: you should be grateful for any planning job in this economy. Interview your employer like they are interviewing you. What can they do for your career? What tasks will you be exposed to? Will I be pigeonholed into a repetitive job or exposed to the full breadth of planning? **Think of your first job as an apprenticeship.** Doctors, lawyers, architects, chefs, tradesmen, and even farmers go through apprenticeship positions to learn their trade. Don't rock the boat, bide your time and learn everything you can. Worry about landing the perfect position after you have honed your skills and paid your dues." - Windsor, CT
- "**Listen, be respectful, don't be afraid to ask questions as you are not expected to know the answers.** Work well in a team environment. Don't get too frustrated with politics. Planning is spelled with a 'P' for one reason...it's POLITICAL. Doesn't matter how good a report, recommendation or plan may be if it is not accepted. You need to learn to function in a political environment." - Smyrna, GA



### WHAT INTERVIEW METHODS ARE USED BY YOUR COMPANY OR ORGANIZATION? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY)



■ EMPLOYED AT GOVERNMENT AGENCY | 598 RESPONSES  
■ EMPLOYED AT CONSULTING FIRM | 164 RESPONSES

“Build skills in research, analyses, varied computer skills, GIS, facilitation and negotiation. Nowadays **planning requires flexibility and adaptability** using broad-based general skills and a willingness to learn on the job.”

Scott A.K. Derrickson, AICP  
State of Hawaii, Land Use Commission

WHAT QUALIFICATIONS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT WHEN HIRING ENTRY-LEVEL PLANNERS? (SELECT TOP TWO)



834 RESPONSES

# EXPERIENCE AND SKILLS

## Internships

- "Intern! **Real world experience is the most valuable way to gain skills** and to figure out what you want to do." - Belleville, IL
- "Internship, internship, internship! No job is too little, no task can be done too detailed, and **no little job can be done too detailed quickly enough.**" - Chandler, AZ
- "Internships and fast, quality writing are very important. **For team projects, be able to show what 'you' did exactly.**" - Franklin, MI
- "Seek opportunities to do community-based projects and internships while in school. In hiring, **I am particularly interested in those who have had some practical, real world application** of the planning concepts learned in school." - Warrenton, VA
- "Don't be afraid to take a job that you might think is 'too' entry level. You need some experience. Once you find a job, be proactive, show what you can do, share ideas. But remember that **change and new ideas take time.**" - Idaho Falls, ID
- "Don't be overly concerned about accepting an intern or counter-oriented type planning position for your first job. The pay might be low, but the knowledge gained will be invaluable to future advancement in this field. **Most skills developed in Planning will be acquired performing the many seemingly insignificant tasks** performed as a novice Planner. Persevere!" - Biloxi, MS
- "Have a **strong portfolio of projects exhibiting your skills**, your work experience and job duties - what you contributed to the firm or organization. Be professional during interviews and always come well-prepared!" - Fairfax, VA
- "**Be patient.** Take an internship, or any other opportunity, that gets your foot in the door at an institution you care about." - Philadelphia, PA
- "**If able, don't be afraid to work an unpaid internship.** The experience outside of school is well worth it and the connections you make will benefit you for the rest of your career." - Albuquerque, NM

## Communication

- "**Work hard at refining written and verbal communication skills.** Being able to communicate your message clearly in plain language to citizens, stakeholders, and elected/appointed officials in all formats is critical!" - Berryville, VA
- "Planning is still - thankfully! - a profession of face-to-face human interactions. **Technical skills are great, but people skills are necessary.**" - Boston, MA
- "WRITING SKILLS!!!! Cannot overemphasize this. Learn to write clearly, succinctly, so that whatever you write is able to be **understood by the non-planner** (un-learn all the planning jargon you just picked up in school)." - Rochester, NY
- "**You will write way more than you ever thought,** reports, emails, memos, building reviews, zoning reviews. You will encounter angry people, if you don't take un-solicited criticism well, you need to learn how to constructively take and/or deflect it." - Twin Falls, ID
- "**Master the art of a clearly and completely written staff report** because it is the story teller of 'why' something happened. Minutes are often vague summaries and leave out important details which then leaves this document the only other way to communicate the issues many years from now to people that have no idea what transpired." - Spearfish, SD

## Diversified Skills

- "Your career will evolve over time... but your grounding in planning and design can come in handy even if you specialize in one aspect of the industry. Try to get a **mix of public, nonprofit, and private sector experience.**" - Merion Station, PA
- "Planning graduates should **develop a unique skill set that distinguishes them from other job applicants.** Planners should develop high level expertise in a specialty, such as economic analysis, hazardous materials, transit, visual analysis, public involvement, economic development, zoning, project management, or other areas. Double majors in established professions, such as law or engineering, have an advantage." - Albuquerque, NM
- "**Learn technical skills,** don't accumulate titles or pieces of paper in school." - Oklahoma City, OK
- "Take a **course in economics or real estate finance!** The material taught in our universities is all too often divorced from economic reality." - Fort Meyers, FL
- "Be willing to be a **generalist planner starting out.** You can specialize later." - Juneau, AK
- "New graduates with 'design' expertise are more marketable to both the private and public sector. This includes design software such as InDesign and SketchUp. I believe it is **beneficial for every planner to work in the public sector for a few years,** as it helps to understand the most pertinent issues, as well as the importance of public participation and the role that politics plays in development." - Thomasville, GA

# SUCCESSING A

## Positive Attitude

- "Attitude counts! No matter the prestige of your university and/or degree level, **you can learn something from everyone**, even the most jaded public servant. Never think you're too good for a job. An ideal candidate balances self-reliance and creativity with a willingness to learn and team-player diplomacy." - Media, PA
- "...As an entry level planner, **you will be doing grunt work**. Your attitude about the grunt work and how well you do the grunt work and improve upon the grunt work processing will move you up the ranks." - Morris, NJ
- "Work hard, keep a positive attitude. **The real world is not black and white but mostly shades of gray that take compassion, critical thought and experience to navigate.**" - Phoenix, AZ
- "**Prepare yourself to withstand criticism and negativity** and still function positively (in other words don't let the \_\_ get you down)." - Monroe, CT
- "**Always respect the local culture** and what the place is... the history and heritage. Respect the citizens and they will be far more open to hearing what you have to say. Finally, remember that we are here to serve the public, do everything you can to make their visit an enjoyable one, excellent customer service in government offices is a rare thing these days... be the one that makes a difference. To you it's just more project, but to that person it is everything." - Murphy, ID
- "In planning, especially government planning, projects and programs can take a long time to implement and complete. **Patience is a virtue.**" - Belvidere, NJ
- "Learn to have a poker face! **Do not try and change the department you end up working for until you have been there long enough to know**

"Don't expect to start out at the top. **It takes hard work, humility, and a long time to earn your way up.** Be patient and learn as much as you can along the way."

Jamie R. Simone, AICP  
The Trust for Public Land



# T WORK

**the job.** Only then can you provide valuable insight on how to enact positive change. Do or do not, there is no try." - Prescott, AZ

- "A **mature, professional attitude** is critical along with being positive and willing to LISTEN." - Clemson, SC

## Earning Your Keep

- "As an employee, you need to be self-motivated and able to **learn new skills with minimal direction** from management. When first starting out, you make the best impression by putting in long hours when necessary, and showing initiative." - Jersey City, NJ
- "**Exceed expectations**, including your own." - Urbandale, IA
- "Keep any sense of entitlement at home. You have to **earn your way up through hard work** and proving yourself." - Colleyville, TX
- "Entry level planning is not exactly what is painted in the classroom. Rarely is an entry level planner, on day one, asked to write an entire comprehensive plan, complete a local area plan, or draft development standards for an overlay zoning district.... **I want to know how a candidate problem solves under tight deadlines.** I am interested in what kind of work ethic a candidate has and whether that person will go above and beyond or will do the bare minimum for a paycheck. I am also looking for someone who has a genuine desire to learn and grow." - Caldwell, ID
- "**Jump in there! Don't be shy!** Instead be curious, open to new ideas, and project confidence." - San Francisco, CA
- "**Go above and beyond.** The profession is extremely competitive." - Fort Collins, CO

### WHAT TRAITS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT FOR ENTRY-LEVEL PLANNERS? (SELECT TOP TWO)



834 RESPONSES

- "You need to be a **self-starter that can work with good (and sometimes limited) direction.**" - Bend, Oregon
- "Do not be troubled nor discouraged when you realize that your course work does not translate well your first few years after graduation. Instead, **focus on being an asset to your employer**, learning and absorbing as much as possible, and networking. After a couple of years/promotions, the puzzle pieces begin to take shape, and your appreciation for both the craft and your schooling will make more sense. In the meantime, work hard, bring a positive and willing attitude, and develop a passion for planning, even when performing what you may consider trivial or trite work." - Little Elm, TX

## Passion for Planning

- "**Expressing interest in the field of planning is the most important thing to convey to an employer** for an entry level job. Learn and become efficient in GIS and some type of graphic illustrator computer software program." - Mount Vernon, NY
- "**A passion for planning and community development** and the ability to write well are essential. We can teach the technical skills on the job." - Dover, Delaware
- "I'm finding that the difference between a good planner and a great planner is that the **great planners really like people a lot!**" - Durham, NH
- "**Planning is like Monopoly**, once you understand the rules, it is quite fun." - Prineville, OR
- "Be passionate and present in planning conversations. Be open to learning and **treat your job like it's the job everyone wants.**" - Easton, PA

## Diplomacy

- "If you work for the government, **you will need a strong backbone.** Understand that you're making recommendations to an elected body who is responsible for the final decision." - Bozeman, MT
- "**Be honest; be respectful.** Don't bullshit using fake charm. If in a leadership position involving politics, know enough to control your own spin." - Aptos, CA
- "Don't shy away from politics and the 'wicked problems' of planning. Embrace them. Get to know elected officials on a personal level. See yourself and the planning profession as helping to **lead the way through the middle of challenges - not just 'facilitating' good development.**" - Emmett, ID
- "They don't teach you how to be apolitical in a highly-charged political environment. Stick to the facts, respect the community's values that employs you - even if it conflicts with your own, and above all else: Offer your professional advice and **do not take it personally if your advice is not heeded.** It's not personal." - Orange, VA
- "Question #1: the most important thing we look for when hiring are **people skills and tact.** You can't get that from a resume, typically, however." - Albany, NY
- "Be aware of and don't underestimate the impact of politics on planning decisions. **Sustainable change is usually accomplished in baby steps.** Appreciate opposing viewpoints and don't take yourself too seriously. :)" - Tulsa, OK



# BASIC SKILLS

“Anything that helps the public understand planning issues is valuable... visuals, economic analysis, social impact tools. Our profession needs to **increase its relevance and accessibility** to the general public.”

Gail O'Reilly, PP  
Townworks LLC

“Learn to **think critically** and **write impactfully** and succinctly.”

George Homewood, AICP  
City of Norfolk, Virginia

“Find something you enjoy and become great at it. Planners are often viewed as generalists, but you will set yourself apart from the group if you're able to excel at something. **Be the best you can at your chosen skill** - the 10,000 hour rule.”

Darren Groth, AICP  
City of Denton, Texas

WHAT TECHNICAL SKILLS ARE PREFERRED OR NECESSARY TO SUCCEED AT YOUR WORKPLACE?	Government Agency	Consulting Firm	Non-Profit Organization	Non-Planning Related Organization or Other
TOTAL RESPONSES (2 SKIPPED THIS QUESTION)	602	165	32	33
<b>Written Communication</b>				
● Not Important	0 %	1 %	3 %	0 %
● Preferred Skill	6 %	5 %	9 %	3 %
● <b>Necessary Skill</b>	<b>95 %</b>	<b>95 %</b>	<b>88 %</b>	<b>97 %</b>
<b>Public Speaking</b>				
● Not Important	1 %	3 %	3 %	3 %
● Preferred Skill	35 %	<b>50 %</b>	41 %	41 %
● <b>Necessary Skill</b>	<b>64 %</b>	47 %	<b>56 %</b>	<b>59 %*</b>
<b>Mapping (e.g., GIS)</b>				
● Not Important	8 %	9 %	35 %	6 %
● <b>Preferred Skill</b>	<b>69 %</b>	<b>59 %</b>	<b>52 %</b>	<b>66 %</b>
● Necessary Skill	24 %	32 %	13 %	28 %
<b>Page Layout and Graphic Design (e.g., Adobe InDesign, Illustrator, Photoshop)</b>				
● Not Important	33 %	19 %	32 %	33 %
● <b>Preferred Skill</b>	<b>62 %</b>	<b>57 %</b>	<b>48 %</b>	<b>52 %</b>
● Necessary Skill	6 %	25 %	19 %	15 %
<b>Demographic Analyses and Projections (e.g., Excel, Census, SPSS)</b>				
● Not Important	14 %	18 %	29 %	9 %
● <b>Preferred Skill</b>	<b>67 %</b>	<b>52 %</b>	<b>39 %</b>	42 %
● Necessary Skill	20 %	31 %	32 %	<b>48 %</b>
<b>Drafting (e.g., AutoCAD)</b>				
● <b>Not Important</b>	<b>80 %</b>	<b>53 %</b>	<b>87 %</b>	<b>73 %</b>
● Preferred Skill	19 %	39 %	13 %	27 %
● Necessary Skill	1 %	9 %	0 %	0 %
<b>3D Illustration (e.g., SketchUp, Revit, 3ds Max)</b>				
● <b>Not Important</b>	<b>66 %</b>	40 %	<b>65 %</b>	<b>55 %*</b>
● Preferred Skill	33 %	<b>52 %</b>	35 %	48 %
● Necessary Skill	2 %	9 %	0 %	0 %
<b>Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram)</b>				
● <b>Not Important</b>	<b>58 %</b>	<b>56 %</b>	26 %	<b>50 %</b>
● Preferred Skill	38 %	39 %	<b>61 %</b>	41 %
● Necessary Skill	5 %	5 %	13 %	9 %

Totals may not equal 100% because of rounding. \* Respondent selected more than one option.