



“Soft skills are attributes Engage in meaningful interactions”

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Introduction:

There is no definitive list of soft skills. The term covers a wide spectrum of character traits and interpersonal skills that, generally, reflect how you interact with people. Some of the most commonly cited and recognised by employers as being desirable largely cover interacting with other people, such as communication, empathy, conflict resolution and listening. They can also cover skills such as problem solving, decision making, critical thinking, and adaptability. Others that fall under this umbrella might be time-management, attitude and flexibility.

Soft skills are arguably more challenging to develop, since they have little to do with knowledge or expertise, but are instead closely linked with a person's character. It requires a commitment to self-development and ongoing practice to improve your soft skills. In comparison, hard skills are more learned, technical and knowledge-based skills that you can develop, for example, through higher education. It goes without saying that these skills are also vital to establishing your success, and work in tandem with your soft skill set.

Why are they important?

While building the right educational foundations and earning appropriate qualifications are important, they're not enough to determine success in the modern age. The more widely accepted, holistic mantra for the 21st century is that soft skills and a willingness to learn is the natural pathway to success, rather than worrying solely about the mechanics of the job itself. So the theory goes: success will come if you focus on developing yourself.

To understand the importance of soft skills in the modern age, let's look at the stats. A study conducted by Harvard University suggested that as much as 80% of achievements in an individual's career are determined by soft skills and only 20% by hard skills. Other studies conducted go even further – changing those figures to 85% and 15% respectively. This doesn't reduce the importance of hard skills of course; it just goes to emphasise the importance of the skills that have, until recently, been overlooked.

A public interest study conducted by McDonald's in the UK predicted that over half a million people will be held back from job sectors by 2020 due to their lack of soft skills. This is because soft skills can be hugely important in giving you the edge in an increasingly competitive job market. The majority of employers today are looking to hire, retain, and promote individuals who are resourceful, ethical, dependable and self-motivated. Having effective

communication, a willingness to work and learn, and having a positive attitude go a long way in the modern workplace.

Not to mention that soft skills also give your hard skills a chance to shine. If you have the ability to communicate effectively with others in a workplace, then your ideas are more likely to take off, and abilities utilised to their full capacity.

How can you work on them?

A good starting point is to focus on your communication abilities: listen to other people in conversation, and respond to what they are saying; try and articulate yourself with clarity, and in a simple manner; concentrate on your body language; think about eye contact. These things are taken for granted by many, but making a conscious effort to improve your communication abilities can be the cornerstone of your success.

Of course, the internet is a great resource for these things. Many education portals offer professional courses that can develop things like public speaking and presentation skills, and even more directly ‘Improving Communication’ programmes. Some workplaces even offer professional development initiatives too – such as teambuilding activities and leadership courses.

It would seem that at the centre of achieving success is building and maintaining core skills that can help you in any job, throughout your life. If you become more confident in the way you interact with others, lead, and work in teams, opportunities will arise in both your personal and professional life.

In the modern workplace, you need more than technical skills to be successful in your career. Today’s employers seek candidates who can perform their jobs well but who can also fit into the company culture and interact with other employees. In order to do these things successfully, students need to develop soft skills.

Soft skills are attributes that enable you to engage in meaningful interactions with others. Since most jobs require teamwork, it’s important to possess soft skills to enhance your employability and achieve your dream job. They will help you increase your productivity in your career, build professional relationships and thrive at your job.

Read on to learn more about soft skills, their importance in your career, how to develop them and various books that you can read to improve them.

Often known as “people skills”, these skills refer to the abilities required to interact amicably with others in an office setup. They are personal attributes that affect your interaction and relationships with others. A few examples include:

Communication: An excellent communicator can put their ideas and arguments across in an effective way that does not offend anyone. Communication skills include listening, speaking and writing. Communication skills are important to:

- Writing clear and concise emails;
- Pitching an idea to the clients;
- Creating a compelling presentation;
- Socialising with co-workers and clients;
- Collaborating with team members.

Problem-solving: If you are easily able to analyse upcoming issues and develop creative solutions to overcome them, you are a problem solver. These people are critical thinkers, decisive, willing to ask questions and explorative. You need to be a problem solver to:

- Discuss a problem objectively;

- Examine how a problem affects the team and its productivity;
- Come up with possible solutions;
- Make plans to implement the solutions.

Productivity: As an employee, you should develop skills that are a sign of productivity such as strategizing, organizing, planning and delivering results. You need productivity skills for:

- Managing a deadline and staying focused;
- Developing a project plan that includes all details such as goals; requirements and available resources;
- Balancing multiple projects at a time and shifting priorities;
- Identifying factors causing delay and assessing how to address them.

Digital proficiency: This soft skill is especially important in the digital age as it helps employees navigate through modern technology to achieve a goal. Digital proficiency helps in:

- Making the most of productivity software;
- Being comfortable in using both desktop and cloud-based technologies for business goals;
- Using the internet to research and communicate;
- Choosing the best software for any specific purpose.

Creativity: Creative employees can come up with innovative solutions for various problems. Thinking creatively allows you to continuously learn and to push boundaries. Creativity can help in:

- Brainstorming ideas and solutions;
- Asking questions to generate original ideas;
- Keeping an open mind to evaluate tough situations;
- Keeping a positive attitude.

Confidence: Confidence is your belief in your ability to fulfil the goals assigned to you. It is one of the most critical skills to develop. Confidence helps you solve problems without giving up. Confidence also helps you in:

- Maintaining positivity in difficult circumstances;
- Maintaining assertiveness whilst being polite in a conversation;
- Serving successfully in a leadership role;
- Communicating and arguing your opinions without offending others.

Self-awareness: Being self-aware is essential for the continuous development of your professional and personal skills. Self-awareness helps in:

- Self-reflection and learning from previous mistakes;
- Collaborating with a team;
- Building strong and lasting relationships with colleagues and team members;
- Providing effective customer service.

Why are soft skills important in the workplace?

- **The modern workplace is interpersonal.** Collaborations are an integral component of any workplace. Skills such as listening and writing ensure that there is a smooth flow of ideas without any conflicts. This creates a productive and healthy work environment.
- **Soft skills set you apart.** Good communication and negotiation skills can help you gain an edge over other candidates. Hard skills can be learnt in a limited time but these skills are harder and take longer to develop,

since they depend more on your nature rather than knowledge level. Having these skills can help you deal with challenges in the workplace.

- **They complement hard skills.** Technical skills aren't enough to bring out your best in a job. All careers require soft skills to utilise technical expertise at the right time and place. For example, if an executive is trying to close a deal with a customer, they will need sales knowledge along with excellent communication skills.
- **Future workplaces will depend more these skills.** With advancements in technology, many technical jobs are beginning to be outsourced to automation and artificial intelligence (AI). This will result in more jobs relying on soft skills to be the key differentiators in a workplace.

How can you develop soft skills?

You can learn these skills by enrolling in various soft-skill courses at different institutions. You can also keep practicing the following habits to enhance them.

- **Aim to be heard:** To communicate effectively, it is essential that you are mindful of the other person's wishes and sensibilities. You should avoid offensive language or remarks that might hurt the other person. Make sure you have an idea of what the other person wants to talk about before changing the topic of conversation.
- **Make eye contact during face-to-face interactions:** Direct eye contact provides assurance that you are paying attention to the other person. The recipient will feel more engaged in the conversation.
- **Monitor your body language and observe others:** Be conscious of your body language when you interact with others. Make sure you send out positive vibes and try not to come across as closed-off, defensive or rude.

You can develop these abilities over time by keenly observing how other individuals interact. You should follow their posture, gestures, tone of voice and eye contact to gather clues about their thought processes.

- **Practice public speaking:** If you feel uncomfortable with public interactions, try speaking in front of a mirror. With practice, your speech will flow more naturally. Be aware of your pace, tone and volume.
- **Work on your listening skills:** You must be a good listener to be a good communicator. Be aware of the urge to interrupt someone when they are talking. Always let the other person finish before putting your point across.
- **Improve your written communication:** You can take courses or join free workshops to improve your written communication skills. Anything you write should be clear and concise and make the reader understand your point of view.

• Importance of Soft Skills for Students

- Over 80% of respondents in each of the 4 populations (principals, parents, teachers and superintendents) indicated that it was equally as important to assess both academic and non academic skills. And the workforce seems to agree. The study noted previous research that demonstrated 60% of employers felt a broad range of skills were important for recent college graduates to achieve long-term career success.
- Having a nonacademic skillset is important for student-patients as well. The students who receive educational services in an alternative or hospital setting face a wide range of challenges that can impact their learning and ability to participate successfully in the social aspect of school and society as well. It is vital to the student's success that they learn how to navigate and overcome personal challenges, and expand their social emotional skills to understand and work around issues they may face as a result of, or in conjunction with, their diagnosis.
- Fostering problem-solving skills, teamwork and critical thinking skills also provides an opportunity for students to be successful in a new area, therefore having the potential to boost their confidence and ability to connect with and lead groups of peers in activities.

What are the 4C's of Soft Skills Education?

In no particular order, the 4C's are:

1. Critical thinking
2. Communication
3. Collaboration
4. Creativity

These are the soft skills. The skills that relate to human agency in a technological and mechanical and ever changing economy. These are the skills that will still be in need, even as the machines take over all our other standard jobs.

Now I believe teachers all over the world already focus on these areas. We know the needs of our students and we are doing our best to prepare them, to a degree. The degree is the point that the 4C's model emphasizes and it is the point for us to reflect on now.

To what degree are we engaging in soft skills education?

1. Are we explicit about these things?
2. Do we teach them explicitly as skills?
3. Are we evaluating these skills?
4. Do students self and peer evaluate these skills?
5. Have students internalized these skills and made them into habits?

Degree of Soft Skills Education:

I believe teachers already aim to cover these skills, but it's the degree to which we do them explicitly that I believe we need to be doing a bit more effectively. So let's look at the areas we, and our children, and younger generations, need to know in order to be empowered and productive citizens of the not too distant future.

What can lecturers do to enhance their students' soft skills?

A first step in improving soft skills of students is to raise their awareness about the importance of soft skills and the consequences of shortcomings in this regard. Students should be encouraged to enhance their soft skills by applying the methods we mentioned before, e.g. reading dedicated books, attending courses, and joining clubs or societies to broaden their horizon, like debating societies, Toast Masters who are practicing Rhetoric, or scientific societies who offer presentations and discussions. A formal approach to the problem would be to incorporate soft skills subjects into a programme's curriculum. On lower levels a course that requires students to do a bit of research and to present their results to the class afterwards has been proven as being quite effective. On graduate level a course on management skills, including e.g. some communication skills together with the management of time, conflict, cultural issues, and of major importance, oneself, has in practice been well received by students. However, very often the curricula are already overloaded with hard skills courses, making it almost impossible to add or substitute courses. Furthermore, other lecturers might be ignorant of the importance of soft skills and hence, do not support dedicated courses in this regard. A very elegant way of offering soft skills training to students is to embed it into the teaching of hard skills. This way, no changes to a programme's curriculum are necessary; instead the change will be reflected in the lecturers' teaching methodology. An increase in group discussions, letting students do presentations, and using special methodologies like De Bono¹ or NeuroLinguistic Programming (NLP)² can be applied throughout a course. This approach to practicing soft skills requires some re-thinking and re-planning of existing hard skill courses. During a presentation at the Polytechnic of Namibia Professor Rob Krueger³ offered an interesting approach to the problem by turning the purpose of a lecture upside down, i.e. making the content of a lecture the vehicle to teach soft skills. An example would be a mathematics teacher who plans a lecture by firstly determining what soft skills s/he wishes to enhance on that day, and then secondly considers how the required mathematics content can be arranged to support this goal. Correctly applied, such an approach to teaching will automatically increase the attractiveness and effectiveness of a course regarding both, hard skills and soft skills.

Conclusion:

Considering the fact that during the last decades in society the perceived importance of soft skills has increased significantly, it is of high importance for everyone to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. This is not particularly difficult. Once a shortcoming in a certain area of soft skills has been identified at oneself, there are numerous ways of rectifying such a deficiency. Educators have a special responsibility regarding soft skills, because during students' School and University time they have major impact on the development of their students' soft skills. Besides raising awareness regarding the importance of soft skills and encouraging students to improve their skills, lecturers should actively practice soft skills with their students. A very effective and efficient way of doing this is to include soft skills training into the teaching of hard skills. As a positive side effect the lessons will become more attractive, which in turn will increase the success rate of learners. Soft skills fulfill an important role in shaping an individual's personality by complementing his/her hard skills. However, over-emphasising it to such an extent should not taint the importance of soft skills, that hard skills, i.e. expert knowledge in certain fields, are demoted to secondary importance.

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