

Soft Skills: What, Why, and How

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“I had to let Angela go this morning. She is a top-notch engineer but she can't seem to get along with any of her co-workers and she's a nightmare with our clients. It's such a shame. She's an incredibly gifted software designer but her lack of soft skills is killing our business.” This actual event (names and profession changed) demonstrates the critical need for soft skills in the workplace. Soft skills, such as the ability to work in harmony with others, complement the hard skills. In fact, “Computerworld's 2007 hiring and skills survey reported IT executives want workers who demonstrate a broad range of soft skills in addition to technical abilities. Soft skills include understanding business process, working well with teams, and knowing how to get their points across (communication).” (Avante Leadership Group, 2012) Communication is just one area under the sizeable umbrella covered by the term “soft skills”. This paper defines this term, explains why students need it, and how we can provide the training.

Before we consider the teaching method, we must first understand the subject matter involved, what it isn't and more importantly what it is. Hard skills are easily recognizable as those required for success in a discipline. Among some of these are calculus, statistics, chemistry, finance, accounting, anatomy and so on. Intuitively we understand the need for these static skills in their professional realms. They are unchanging from job to job, company to company, or even boss to boss unless it involves something unethical. Hard skills engage left-brain thinking. Soft skills on the other hand are less easily defined, highly dynamic, and utilize right brain thinking. Investopedia defines them this way, “Soft skills have more to do with who we are than what we know. As such, soft skills encompass the character traits that decide how well one interacts with others, and are usually a definite part of one's personality. Whereas hard skills can be learned and perfected

over time, soft skills are more difficult to acquire and change.” (see attached list for more examples). While specific definitions vary one constant remains. The degree to which a job requires them and at what proficiency varies with the type of job. For instance, a self-employed pathologist may not require a high level of verbal communication skills but needs reasonable proficiency in written communication. Conversely, a successful car salesman absolutely needs excellent verbal communication while needing only limited written skills. Clearly pinning down an exact definition is not the goal. Instead using a base definition allows us to understand and then apply the “why” in the equation.

While colleges focus on academic hard skills (as is expected), soft skills are left by the wayside. Some of these skills may have a possible genetic component. For the most part however, it is assumed college students learn soft skills in the process of development from parents, coaches, employers, and other experiences in life. Sadly, these assumptions may have been accurate fifty years ago perhaps, but in the 21st Century they are no longer valid. Furthermore, contemporary employers believe hard skills contribute less than 16% to ones success (Chaturvedi, et. Al, 2011). They reason, “Hard skills can be taught, soft skills must be developed.” Since soft skills are really just another name for interpersonal skills or more technologically accurately termed Emotional IQ, it stands to reason they are learned through experience rather than education. Therein lies the challenge for our colleges. In order to adequately prepare our students to successfully compete in today’s economy we must provide the necessary tools. Undoubtedly soft skill training should be one of these tools. Training teaches hard skills on the job, yet there is really no “on the job” training for something like self-control, which is most assuredly a job killer when you don’t have it.

Since our colleges are now filled with students severely lacking in these areas and employers demand high proficiency in them, we would best serve our students and community by providing training. Many colleges are answering that

call. For instance, Macomb Community College offers the courses as one-hour optional seminars each semester but students earn 0.1 CEU per seminar attended (www.macomb.edu). University of Oklahoma offers a series called “Student Success Seminars” but adds in one-on-one “Success Consultations” with trained Peer Learning Assistants (www.uc.ou.edu). Many colleges work them into their SLS courses, which makes perfect sense given their subject nature. Some colleges tie workshop completion as one criterion for specific scholarships (Chicago Scholars). Lone Star College System uses on-line bundled resources from Colleges and Universities all over the nation (www.lonestar.edu). One program I found very intriguing partners businesses with colleges in providing these workshops. The program, “Skills For America’s Future” teams companies like Gap, McDonalds, and Discovery Communications with local community colleges providing soft skill training needed to succeed in today’s job market (Ashford, 2012). Other colleges offered workshops through the Career Center, Learning Lab, and certain campus clubs.

No matter the delivery method, most classes were one hour or less. The one exception was the Skills for America’s Future program as some were daylong workshops. Additionally, none were required for two or four year degree programs, which is key in motivating students to attend these types of classes, seminars, or workshops. Some programs offered only a few per semester while others offered more than thirty. On a relevant but humorous note, one college offering most seminars more than once per semester posted the following notice in the seminar schedule, “Time Management Seminar offered once per semester, no make up sessions.” I guess that really drives home the message!

Soft skills, Emotional IQ, interpersonal skills are all terms describing tools needed for success in the 21st century economy. They encompass a broad category of traits, which are not traditionally learned in the academic setting. However, it is clear businesses consider them just as valuable if not more than the hard skills

learned in college. If we purpose to provide our students with the best possible opportunity for success after college then we must bridge the gap with training. Given the numerous subject areas and the various venues it becomes simply a matter of devising and instituting the plan best suited for our student population.

Soft Skills Examples List

COMMUNICATION SKILLS:

- * Listen effectively
- * Communicate accurately and concisely
- * Effective oral communication
- * Communicate pleasantly and professionally
- * Effective written communication
- * Ask good questions
- * Communicate appropriately and professionally using social media

DECISION MAKING / PROBLEM SOLVING

SKILLS:

- * Identify and analyze problems
- * Take effective and appropriate action
- * Realize the effect of decisions
- * Creative and innovative solutions
- * Transfer knowledge from one situation to another
- * Engage in life-long learning
- * Think abstractly about problems

SELF-MANAGEMENT SKILLS:

- * Efficient and effective work habits
- * Self-starting
- * Well-developed ethic, integrity and sense of loyalty
- * Sense of urgency to address and complete tasks
- * Work well under pressure
- * Adapt and apply appropriate technology
- * Dedication to continued professional development

TEAMWORK SKILLS:

- * Productive as a team member
- * Positive and encouraging attitude
- * Punctual and meets deadlines
- * Maintains accountability to the team
- * Work with multiple approaches
- * Aware and sensitive to diversity
- * Share ideas to multiple audiences

PROFESSIONALISM SKILLS:

- * Effective relationships with customers, businesses and the public
- * Accept and apply critique and direction in the work place
- * Trustworthy with sensitive information
- * Understand role and realistic career expectations
- * Deal effectively with ambiguity
- * Maintain appropriate decor and demeanor

- * Select appropriate mentor and acceptance of advice

EXPERIENCES:

- * Related work or internship experiences
- * Teamwork experiences
- * Leadership experiences
- * Project management experiences
- * Cross disciplinary experiences
- * Community engagement experiences
- * International experiences

LEADERSHIP SKILLS:

- * See the “big picture” and think strategically
- * Recognize when to lead and when to follow
- * Respect and acknowledge contributions from others
- * Recognize and deal constructively with conflict
- * Build professional relationships
- * Motivate and lead others
- * Recognize change is needed and lead the change effort

References

1. Chaturvedi, A., Yadav, A. K., and Bajpai, S. Communicative Approach to Soft and Hard Skills. VSRD-IJBMR, 2011, 1:1-6

Internet Resources

2. Avante Leadership Group: <http://www.avanteleadership.com/about/research>
3. Ashford, Ellie: <http://www.communitycollegetimes.com/Pages/Workforce-Development/Skills-for-America%E2%80%99s-Future-promotes-partnerships-.aspx>