

Hard Facts on Soft Skills

People skills can determine career advancement opportunities

LAST SUMMER, I ran into my old friend, Sam, who works in a senior technical position for a large organization. As we talked, Sam mentioned a discussion he had with his manager about the possibility of being promoted to a supervisory-level position that had just opened.

“Sam, you’re excellent at your job, and I don’t know what we’d do without you,” his manager said. “But before I could recommend you for a team leader position, you’re going to have to work on your soft skills.”

Ouch. As soon as Sam said “soft skills,” I knew what his manager was getting at. Having studied engineering and economics in college and having worked with technically adept people ever since, I’ve met my share of introverted, arrogant or otherwise socially challenged colleagues who were competent in their hard skills—such as programming, statistics or metallurgy—but were difficult to understand or get along with. Daniel Goleman, a Pulitzer Prize nominee¹ and author of *Working*

With Emotional Intelligence, skillfully explains:

The rules for work are changing. We’re being judged by a new yardstick: not just by how smart we are, or by our training and expertise, but also by how well we handle ourselves and each other. This yardstick is increasingly applied in choosing who will be hired and who will not, who will be let go and who is retained, who is passed over and who is promoted ... The new measure takes for granted having enough intellectual ability and technical know-how to do our jobs; it focuses instead on personal qualities, such as initiative and empathy, adaptability and persuasiveness.²

Soft skills encompass a range of attributes loosely grouped into two categories: self-management skills (such as resilience, persistence and perceptiveness) and people skills (such as active listening, effective mentoring and clear communication). This skill set, when coupled

with your training and technical abilities, can earn you the position you desire. A 2014 Harris poll of more than 2,100 hiring managers revealed that a whopping 77% believe soft skills are just as important as hard skills when evaluating potential job candidates, and 16% said they were even more important.³

Studies identifying which soft skills are most important in business vary based on the specific industry and one’s rank in an organization. An IT director, for example, will require a different and certainly broader set of soft skills than an entry-level manufacturing engineer. Executives and apprentices, however, require skills that fall under these areas: communication, teamwork and willingness to learn.

Communication

Communication is the lifeblood of every organization. Without it, people are islands, isolated from everyone around them.

For leaders to achieve an organization’s goals, they must use a spectrum of communication skills, including: listening to concerns of subordinates and superiors, confronting difficult situations in their departments, and teaching concepts and procedures to new audiences. Uniting an organization’s staff behind a single purpose or strategy requires the right communication.

Some people display communication skills more naturally than others, but mastering these skills is a journey in which each new situation provides an opportunity to learn. For example, some people are able to provide one-on-one coaching to a protégé but find it difficult to present new information in a group setting.



To improve your communication skills, you must learn fundamentals of a method, such as conflict resolution negotiation, and insert yourself into situations that require the application of what you have learned. To learn to play an instrument, you must actually play it.

Teamwork

Another contrast between hard and soft skills is that a job hunter's hard skills are typically spelled out on his or her résumé, but that person's soft skills are not revealed until the interview. In other words, it's your hard skills that get you the interview, but it's your soft skills that likely separate you from the other qualified candidates.

Your ability to get along with other people is being evaluated by your potential employer from the moment you walk into an interview. Every time I sit across the table from a job candidate, I ask myself, "Will this person fit into our team?"

Assessing someone's ability to collaborate with others, however, is difficult in a single interview. It usually takes multiple interviews and reference checks to determine whether a person possesses the attributes to work well on a team. For people seeking promotions, their abilities to function effectively on teams are already known by their organizations and will determine much of their success.

Marty Brounstein, a leadership consultant and author of *Managing Teams for Dummies*, identifies key qualities of an effective team player, such as reliability, active participation, flexibility and a pattern of treating others in a supportive and respectful manner. Brounstein explains that team players "look beyond their own piece of the work and care about the team's overall work."¹ By doing so, these professionals also position themselves for greater opportunities in their organizations.

Willingness to learn

The willingness to learn is a hallmark of every great leader. W. Edwards Deming once said, "Learning is not compulsory ... neither is survival."² Likewise, advancing professionals in every field do not just draw from their reserves of experience to achieve their goals, but they also continually add to their proficiencies. And this willingness to learn can be developed on a daily basis.

When you encounter a word in an online article that you've never seen, do you skip over it? Or do you right click on it to search for its meaning? The willing learner tends to right click.

Willing learners are also more likely to raise their hands in a training session to ask for clarification, seek out the opinion of mentors regarding a sticky problem or receive criticisms without reacting defensively. This type of curiosity and adaptability is a trait that nearly every employer values.

Now what?

Thankfully, possessing soft skills is not a matter of getting a good draw in the genetic lottery or being visited by the "soft skills fairy." Soft skills can be learned and honed just like hard skills. By seeking the right information, practicing what you learn and soliciting honest feedback about your progress, you can develop your soft skills and become a more effective and valued contributor in your workplace.

Reading the right books or taking classes on soft skills are fabulous starting points. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie is considered the seminal text on developing people skills. Dave Ramsey's *EntreLeadership* or John Maxwell's *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* also are excellent, contemporary books on the topic. Articles or training videos from organizations such as Mindtools.

com or Kalliance.com also provide great resources, too.

Joining a committee at work—something outside your current sphere of influence—provides an excellent forum for putting your newly learned skills into practice. Volunteering at your local school, church or food bank, or offering to mentor younger members of your community also are tremendous opportunities to interact with new people in new ways.

Lastly, solicit candid feedback from peers, especially people you recognize as having firm foundations in skills you might lack. Open the door to receiving feedback by asking someone, "How can I improve the way I interact with others?"

Soft skills pay dividends. When coupled with the appropriate hard skills, they lead to better job opportunities and promotions. Actively listening and engaging with the people around you, exercising empathy, and using an ever-widening range of soft skills also will put you on the path to becoming a more enjoyable and inspiring person. And that journey is a reward in itself. **QP**

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