The Development of Soft Skills as an Aid to Job Retention and Advancement

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Introduction
Is it enough to train students how to do a job without teaching them how to get and keep a job? Are technical, hands-on skills the only skills that are important for their success on the job? Increasingly, human resource professionals and researchers are recognizing the essential nature of general employability skills and, specifically, soft skills and their relationship to job retention and advancement.

I. The Definition of Soft Skills

Words are defined by their usage. In fact, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary puts it this way: “How does a word get into a Merriam-Webster dictionary? This is one of the questions Merriam-Webster editors are most often asked. The answer is simple: usage.” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

The term “soft skills” is not in any dictionary that I have found, but it is in our vocabulary. Since words derive their meaning from the way they are used, let’s look at the way this term is commonly used.

Parsons (2008) defines soft skills as follows:

“Soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects. Unlike hard skills, which are about a person's skill set and ability to perform a certain type of task or activity, soft skills are interpersonal and broadly applicable.

Soft skills are often described by using terms associated with personality traits, such as:
• optimism
• common sense
• responsibility
• a sense of humor
• integrity
and abilities that can be practiced (but require the individual to genuinely like other people) such as:
• empathy
• teamwork
• leadership
• communication
• good manners
• negotiation
• sociability
• the ability to teach.

It's often said that hard skills will get you an interview but you need soft skills to get (and keep) the job.”
Soft Skills Vs. Hard Skills

Hard skills are “Specific, teachable abilities that can be defined and measured. By contrast, soft skills are less tangible and harder to quantify. Examples of hard skills include job skills like typing, writing, math, reading and the ability to use software programs; soft skills are personality-driven skills like etiquette, getting along with others, listening and engaging in small talk.” (Hard Skills, n.d.)

Soft Skills Vs. Employability Skills

Employability skills are sometimes called general or generic skills. Soft skills are a subset of employability skills. Employability skills are those transferrable skills that are useful in many jobs, but are specific to none.

The “common elements of various listings of generic skills” (Cleary, Flynn, & Thomasson, 2006, adapted from Gibb, 2004) are:

- **Basic/fundamental Skills**: such as literacy, numeracy, using technology
- **People-related skills**: such as communication, interpersonal, teamwork, customer service skills
- **Conceptual/thinking skills**: such as collecting and organising [sic] information, problem-solving, planning and organizing [sic], learning-to-learn skills, thinking innovatively and creatively, systems thinking
- **Personal skills and attributes**: such as being responsible, resourceful and flexible, being able to manage one’s own time, having self-esteem
- **Business skills**: such as innovation skills, enterprise skills
- **Community skills**: such as civic or citizenship knowledge and skills.

Note that the “people-related skills” and the “personal skills and attributes” above fit the definition of soft skills.

Note: Some talk about emotional intelligence as an aspect of soft skills. In any case, they are those intangible traits that make a person the kind of person you want to have working for you, with you, or over you no matter what else that person may know or be able to do.

A few summary definitions:
**Definition of 'Soft Skills'**

*The character traits and interpersonal skills that characterize a person's relationships with other people.* In the workplace, soft skills are considered a complement to hard skills, which refer to a person's knowledge and occupational skills. Sociologists may use the term soft skills to describe a person's "EQ" or "Emotional Intelligence Quotient" (as opposed to "IQ"). (Emphasis mine)

**Investopedia explains 'Soft Skills'**

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.

The soft skills required for a doctor, for example, would be empathy, understanding, active listening and a good bedside manner. Alternatively, the hard skills necessary for a doctor would include a vast comprehension of illnesses, the ability to interpret test results and symptoms, and a thorough understanding of anatomy and physiology.

**Summary:**

Soft skills are the character traits that enhance a person's interactions, and job performance. Soft skills are personal attributes that relate to an individual's likeability, and functional attitude toward work. Some examples are:
- Optimism
- Positivity
- Responsibility
- Sense of humor
- Flexibility
- Integrity
- Empathy
- Manners
- Ability to communicate
- Friendliness
- Enthusiasm
- Graciousness
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- The ability to teach
- Teachability

II. The Benefits of Soft Skills

1. Benefits to the employer
   “Companies have offered soft-skills training to employees for years. But as every battle-scarred trainer knows, these programs are typically the first to go when budgets are cut. Given a choice between funding a course on computer skills or a course on active listening, corporate bean counters more willingly sign off on the computer course. Why? Because until recently, there had been no hard evidence that soft skills make a difference.” (Caudron, 1999)

   - Research on 181 jobs at 121 companies worldwide showed that two out of three abilities vital for success were emotional competencies such as trustworthiness, adaptability and a talent for collaboration.

   - Emotional intelligence matters in surprising places such as computer programming, where the top 10% of performers exceeded average performers in producing effective programs by 320%, and the superstars at the 1% level produced an amazing 1,272% more than average. Assessments of these top performers revealed that they were better at such things as teamwork, staying late to finish a project and sharing shortcuts with coworkers. In short, the best performers didn't compete – they collaborated. (Caudron, 1999)

2. Benefits to the Employee
   - Getting Hired
   I asked Professor M.J. Zygmont a few questions on this subject. Professor Zygmont is a SPHR (Senior Professional in Human Resources) certified human resource professional with extensive management experience who now teaches HR, OD and management courses at Central Penn College.

   Q: “If you were hiring a person for a position in which you would need to work with that person, would you be more concerned with that person’s specific job skills (hard skills) or their attitude and personal attributes? In other words, which one of these skill sets do you consider more important?”
A: “I would be more concerned with their attitude and personal attributes, specific job skills can be taught more easily than the “soft” skills you are referencing. They too can be taught, however, some are more ingrained than others.” (M. J. Zygmont, personal communication, 1/18/2012)

“Employability skills are vital to finding employment, 82 per cent of businesses said it is the single most important consideration when recruiting graduates, according to a CBI survey. However 70 per cent of employers said that university students need to do more to prepare themselves to be effective in the workplace.” [CBI = Confederation of British Industry]. (Working toward, 2011)

- Getting Promoted

“Studies of close to 500 organizations worldwide indicate that people who score highest on EQ measures rise to the top of corporations. Among other things, these ‘star employees’ possess more interpersonal skills and confidence than ‘regular employees’ who receive less favorable performance reviews.” (Caudron, 1999)

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**Soft-Skills and Long-Run Labor Market Success**

Abstract:
The long-run impact on earnings of motivational and social factors is assessed using data from the Panel study of Income Dynamics (PSID). Our analyses use a sample of men first observed in their 20s and relates their social and motivational traits to labor-market attainments measured 15-25 years later. We also examine the role of on-the-job training and labor supply in accounting for the link between earnings and these motivational and social traits. In contrast to most previous work with these data, we find considerable analytic power for a number of traits. Taken together, our motivational measures are as powerful as completed schooling in accounting for future labor-market success. Some of our social-trait measures serve as negative predictors of earnings, while a measure of the cleanliness of the respondent's home was a persistently powerful positive predictor of labor-market success.

(Duncan, & Dunifon, 1998, emphasis mine)

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III. The Most Valued Soft Skills

Another question for Professor Zygmont:

Q: What are the top two or three soft skills that you would look for in a coworker or employee?

A: All of these skills are critical for success (job retention and advancement) but if I had to pick I would say, not in any particular order and from the list you provided: ability to communicate (optimism would fit here), flexibility, integrity. (M. J. Zygmont, personal communication, 1/18/2012)

“According to a study of what corporations seek when they hire MBAs, the three most desired capabilities are communication skills, interpersonal skills and initiative – all of which are elements of emotional intelligence.”

(Caudron, S., 1999)
IV. The Training of Soft Skills
Why and How?

1. Why?
   - Because of the benefits to our students and to their employees that we have already mentioned.
   - Because it’s good for society, as a whole, to have more people who:
     - Are polite and considerate
     - Are able to work together
     - Have a sense of responsibility to their jobs
     - Have integrity
     - Etc.
   - Because we, as CTE teachers, are required to do so.

_The State of Pennsylvania requires that CTE teachers help their students develop employability skills, including soft skills. CTE teachers need to choose from the following standard those which they will adopt into their program, and then document integration of these standards in their lesson plans._

13.3.11. GRADE 11

_Pennsylvania’s public schools shall teach, challenge and support every student to realize his or her maximum potential and to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to:_

A. Evaluate personal attitudes and work habits that support career retention and advancement.
B. Evaluate team member roles to describe and illustrate active listening techniques:
   - Clarifying
   - Encouraging
   - Reflecting
   - Restating
   - Summarizing
C. Evaluate conflict resolution skills as they relate to the workplace:
   - Constructive criticism
   - Group dynamics
   - Managing/leadership
   - Mediation
   - Negotiation
   - Problem solving
D. Develop a personal budget based on career choice, such as, but not limited to:
   - Charitable contributions
   - Fixed/variable expenses
   - Gross pay
   - Net pay
   - Other income
   - Savings
   - Taxes
E. Evaluate time management strategies and their application to both personal and work situations.
F. Evaluate strategies for career retention and advancement in response to the changing global workplace.
G. Evaluate the impact of lifelong learning on career retention and advancement.
2. How?
Professor Zygmont says, “Training of this type would most likely require more of a counseling atmosphere vs. a professional job-focused approach.” (M. J. Zygmont, personal communication, 1/18/2012)

Georges (n.d.) poses a rhetorical question in this way: “Suppose you wanted to become skillful at something. Anything. Golf, karate, selling refrigerators, negotiating, making presentations, being a ‘leader’ instead of just a manager – whatever. The point is, you want to become truly proficient. Your objective is not just to know something about the thing; you want to be able to do the thing, and do it well. Would you:

- Read a book?
- Watch a video?
- Hire a motivational speaker?
- Attend a seminar?
- Try a few role-plays?
- Practice with an expert coach under realistic working conditions until you achieved fluency?

Georges (n.d.) considers soft skills training a myth, asserting that “When it comes to soft skills, companies and the ‘trainers’ they employ, almost never do any training at all. What they do instead is education. ‘Soft-skills training’ is mostly a myth. The reason it doesn’t work is because it doesn’t happen.”

**The point is that simply telling is not training. In order to develop these skills in our students, we need to train and coach them consistently, over time.**

Caudron (1999) writes:

**How do you develop emotional intelligence at work?**

Because emotional intelligence can have such a significant impact on the bottom line, it makes sense that companies would be willing to help employees develop the competencies that contribute to EQ. Unfortunately, many employers may be going about it the wrong way.

"What's shocking is that although there's a lot of literature about what is needed to make long-lasting behavioral changes, a lot of people haven't taken it seriously," explains Murray Dalziel, global managing director of organization effectiveness and management development services at the Hay Group in Philadelphia. Instead, when it comes to developing EQ, he says the training industry is full of nice packaging, but many of these efforts are spray-and-pray approaches. "They spray employees with a concept, and pray that it will make a difference," he explains.

Dalziel ... explains that learning the skills that contribute to emotional intelligence can't be done in a one-shot training course.”

**Here is what a CTE teacher can do:**

1. Integrate soft skills training in your instructional time.
2. Include soft skills training incidentally in your instructions and interactions.
3. Remind your students that they are graded on their employability and soft skills.
4. Enforce practice in your classroom.
5. Model employability and soft skills in your program by:
   • The way you teach.
   • The way you relate to students. (Be professional, not a “buddy.” Don’t discipline with sarcasm. Be mature, self-controlled.)
   • The way you interact with other instructors.
   • The way you relate to your employers
     (Administration, Tax-payers, School Board, Pennsylvania)

Conclusion

Hypocrite
1. a person who puts on a false appearance of virtue or religion
2. a person who acts in contradiction to his or her stated beliefs or feelings
   (Merriam Webster Dictionary)

We usually think of this as a religious term, but it is actually a theatrical term. It refers to a person who is playing a part. He or she is not, in reality, the person they are pretending to be. Many of us have had some sort of religious or church experience, and have heard about hypocrites in the pews. They make a show of being something that they really are not. They pretend to have something together in a way that is superior to other people, but they don’t. When they are confronted about their hypocrisy, they have an excuse or rationalization as to why they are in an exceptional position and are therefore not really required to live up to the expectations that they impose on other people.

In this case, it is entirely possible that, in your school, the hypocrite in the pew is you. You need to be a model of the kind of personal character that you believe students need to have.

Three reasons:

1. Students Learn by Example
   We have already seen that telling is not training.
   • Students learn soft skills from their teachers, many of whom are far too expressive in their negative opinions about their working conditions:
     o Don’t complain about your administrators
     o Don’t whine about your paycheck
     o Don’t fuss about your excessive responsibilities
     You be the grownup in the room. Express positive opinions. If that is not possible, quit teaching.

   They learn their soft skills from their teachers as well as their parents and peers. You need to be a good example of the kind of personality that employers are seeking, so they can see it in action.

2. You are Still Becoming
   You are still becoming someone. You have not stopped becoming. You will not stop becoming. What kind of person are you training yourself to be? If you begin now to be an easy-going, tolerant, enthusiastic, positive person – doing your best, and thinking the best of other people, you will be a much happier person next year and the year after.

3. It Is Right
Being a person with poor soft skills is not just counterproductive to your students, nor just detrimental to your personality. It is wrong to be a bad person. In spite of recent opinions or social developments, right and wrong still exist in this universe. It is right to be good and wrong to be bad. Being a difficult employee is bad; being a valuable employee is good. And being a valuable employee who serves as an example and influences young people to be valuable employees is even better than good.
References


