

Soft Skills for Successful Career

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ABSTRACT

Indian academia adds close to 3.5 million graduates and post-graduates every year; on the face of it, this does not seem to be a major challenge. However, a large number of these young professionals are not adequately equipped to face the highly competitive and very demanding corporate world of today. Most of their focus in the technology domain remains limited to working as a one-man army producing what they read, with little emphasis on application and creativity. Thus, there is a need to polish their skills with respect to disciplines like documentation, systematic processes and all round excellence. These problems are the symptoms of a lack of proper imparting of soft skills in aspiring students. This paper was written to articulate the importance of soft skills for successful career. 'Soft skills' is an abstract concept, which is, in fact, a compendium of several components like attitude, abilities, habits and practices that are combined adeptly to maximize one's work effectiveness. They are much more than just a set of good habits or key abilities. Soft skills are about integrating the right proportion of these components into formidable skills and eventually transforming those skills into competencies.

Keywords: Permeates, annotations, impeccable, crumble, arsenal, paradigm

INTRODUCTION

A recent report by a global research firm has indicated that the Indian IT industry is targeting multifold growth in exports in the

next couple of years. There is an estimated demand of 8, 50,000 IT professionals and 1.4 million IT personnel. Since Indian academia adds close to 3.5 million graduates and post-graduates every year, on the face of it, this does not seem to be a major challenge. However, a large number of these young professionals are not adequately equipped to face the highly competitive and challenging environment of the corporate

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world. Most of their focus remains limited to working as a one man army reproducing what they read, with little emphasis on application and creativity. This makes it difficult for them to survive in the world. There is a need to cultivate and polish their skills with respect to disciplines for their all round development.

Industry in general demands two special skills in every professional. One of these skills is the technical knowledge and the ability to grasp requirements and specifications. The other one is the soft skills. The first one is used to perform the required verification duties at work and the second one helps in planning an approach to solve the impending issues or problems. The bottom line is that a good professional will have a blend of both technical and soft skills. Having a proper balance of hard and soft skills is one way to level the playing field when competing against hundreds of other applicants in a complex job market. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirement for a job. Hard skills tend to be specific to a certain type of task or activity, while soft skills are broadly applicable. It is often said that hard skills will get you an interview but you need soft skills to get the job.

Whether you are the CEO, pumping your company or simply a potential recruit, you will be asked to generate your vision and often, you will be judged on it. Vision is the ability to project in the future. Vision is your perception of the future. It is a careful projection of today's world into tomorrow. Vision starts with today and sequentially

progresses to the final, 'target' scene in the future. Vision is not an empty rhetoric. It is something that can be implemented. It is not just a wish. It is an action plan. While vision is about things that are fuzzy, distant and often pertaining to the 'big picture', soft skills called 'personal accountability' deal with issues that are more transparent and immediate. Personal accountability is about how deeply you are committed to your job. It is about being thoroughly knowledgeable in all aspects of your domain, so that you can solve problems expertly, without twiddling your thumb or expecting someone else to do it for you. It is about how much you love your job and enjoy doing it. It is about how much you identify with your team and look out for it, instead of quickly blaming others for the things going wrong. It is about accepting your role and responsibilities at work, without making any excuse. It is about looking inwards for directions, rather than waiting for your manager's instructions on everything. It is about completing a job perfectly, without any loose ends. Given that so much, excellence is expected out of all of us these days, this is indeed a very vital part that you will need to excel in your job and become a shining star of your organization.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SOFT SKILLS

Soft skills complement hard skills and make one's efforts much more effective. The corporate world also puts tremendous emphasis on soft skills. Not just that, it looks out and recruits people with exceptional soft skills from among the pool of technically skilled people. Within its own workforce,

an organization always gives importance to employees with excellent soft skills. The best part about mastering them is that the application of these skills is not limited to one's profession, but their scope reaches all aspects of life. Technical skills may teach one how to meet the expectations of the job, but soft skills teach one to succeed and to exceed expectations.

Soft skills play a vital role for professional success; they help one to excel in the workplace and their importance cannot be denied in this age of competition. Excellent soft skills in this highly competitive corporate world will help us to stand out in a milieu of routine job seekers with mediocre skills and talent. Soft skills are now recognized as a key to make business more profitable and better place to work. Companies are not just assessing their current staff on the basis of their business skills but also assessing them on a whole host of soft skill competencies around and how well they relate and communicate to others. In this context, and according to Indian Business Research Centre (IBRC), the skills in highest demand through 2014 in contrast to technical skills include persuasion, negotiation, complex problem solving, time management and decision making.

The concepts of soft skills and professionalism have percolated down to other spheres as well-beyond the campuses of the corporate world. It is now considered a good idea to inculcate a measure of soft skills into anyone's skill-set, as a way of charging him or her with skills for life and as a lesson in civics.

MEASURING SOFT SKILLS

Measuring these soft skills is not an easy task. In the most progressive companies, however, managers are looking for people's ability to communicate clearly and openly, and to listen and respond empathetically. They also want them to have equally good writing skills so that their correspondence does not undo all the good work their face-to-face communication creates. Good soft skills also include the ability of people to balance the commercial needs of their company with the individual needs of their staff. Being flexible and able to adapt to the changing needs of an organization also qualify as soft skills, as do being able to collaborate with others and influence situations through lateral and more creative thinking. The ability to deal with differences, multiculturalism and diversity is needed more than ever. Very few companies are untouched by the ever widening influence of other culture and excellent soft skills facilitate better communication and people's ability to manage differences effectively.

Soft skills have a lot to do with career opportunities. Soft skills refer to abilities that make people better employees and open doors to opportunities, which are not directly related to the subject matter of their jobs. In simpler language, soft skills refer to a person's ability to relate to others, to get him organized, to communicate in written, spoken or other forms, to conduct research or gather information about various topics as assigned and so forth. A person's soft skill is an important part of his individual contribution to the success of an

organization. Particularly the organizations dealing with customers face-to-face are more successful if they train their staff to use these skills. Soft skills are increasingly sought out by employers in addition to standard qualifications.

Soft skills are the personal traits and skills that employers state are the most important when selecting employees for jobs of any type for example safety, courtesy, honesty, reliability, team skills, flexibility, eye contact, cooperation, adaptability, writing skills, follow rules, self directed, good attitude, dependability, self supervising, personal energy, good attendance, work experience, good work history, motivational skills, interpersonal skills, valuing education, common sense, listening skill, commitment, communication skills and social graces. The soft skills you gain will equip you to excel in your personal life. It is a continuous learning process. In some parts of the world like in USA and Australia, soft skills are also known as world skills. If you are familiar with these skills you will be in a position to guide your boss towards success, i.e., working together for a common goal as a team.

As an illustration, the changing business scenario today has resulted in specific soft skills assuming importance as shown in table 1.

Effective communication skills are very important for our professional, personal success regardless of what business we are in. The purpose of communication is to get your message across to others clearly and unambiguously and the communication becomes successful when both the sender and the receiver understand the same information as a result of the communication. A study by the Centre for Creative Leadership (CCL) in June 2009 confirms the importance of strong communication skills in the development of effective leadership. Although leaders who were most effective during organizational transitions were skilled communicators – able and willing to articulate the rationale for change and good listeners but more than half the survey respondents reported that the leaders in their own organizations were not able to clearly communicate rationale for change due to poor communication skills. This study highlights the importance of communication skills.

In the last few decades in India, there

TABLE 1
List of soft skills

Business Paradigms in Engineering Services	Soft Skills demanded by these Paradigms
Project Management	Team work
Knowledge Management	Written English, writing skills
Integrated product teams (IPT)	Spoken English, verbal communication
Quality systems and processes	Mindset, attitude, attention to details, assertiveness, integrity
Global project teams	Business etiquettes, cultural sensitivity
Rapid changes in business and technology	Stress management
Innovation	Open, inquisitive mind, creativity

has been a mushrooming of demand for well rounded employees, i.e., people who are not only technically savvy, but also those who have the complementary soft skills. This spurt in demand is essentially due to a large increase in corporate employment opportunities. These increased opportunities arise due to new foreign based multinational corporations setting up business in India, existing multinational companies that are expanding their operations in India and the emergence of modern Indian companies, especially in the Information Technology and IT enabled service sectors. India's splash entry into an increasingly globalized world commerce meant that for continuous growth, there must be a steady supply of highly skilled workers to satisfy the needs of industries. While India's technical schools and colleges have done a great job of imparting world class technical training, concepts like soft skills training is also provided to the students. It has been highlighted by a Job Outlook 2009 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NAE), the top characteristics looked for in new hires by 276 employer respondents were all soft skills: communication ability, a strong work ethic, initiative, interpersonal skills and team work. Thus, for 'advantage India' to work and for India to be competitive in the world arena, several educators and employment consultants have suggested that we re-double our efforts in educating our college students and young professionals in the basic of soft skills. We believe that already giant steps are being taken to achieve a high

degree of 'soft skills literacy' through formal and informal channels.

So, what are soft skills? Soft skills are those skills which are required for an individual to relate to and survive and succeed in his or her environment. Whether you work in IT industry or manufacturing industry, whether you work in a family business or a multinational corporation, soft skills are those skills that are absolutely essential for success. Soft skills are somewhat like survival instincts wherein people get fine-tuned and adapt to their environment. Soft skills are essential irrespective of which profession we are in. These skills are an indispensable addition to anyone who wants to improve his/her employability. As it has been mentioned in Computerworld's survey made in 2010 IT are increasingly looking for staff who demonstrate a broad range of soft skills in addition to their technical abilities. Survey respondents said writing and public speaking are two of the most important soft skills they look for when hiring new employees. Thus, soft skills are about being able to apply the right language at the right time and at the right place. But, there is much, much more to them. The business environment has changed significantly over the past decade or so largely due to the advent of the internet and the convergence of computing and communication.

In most businesses today, work almost flows across geographies. If you take the example of the manufacturing industry, raw materials may come from India, assembling can take place in Taiwan; the finished goods

may be transported to and sold in the US. An employee in Australia may enter his expense report into a central system, and this may get processed by a BPO outfit in India and the payment may be made through an American bank. This cross-border workflow has necessitated increased communication and has placed additional demands on soft skills. One may have to interact with many people from different cultures. Both the quantity and diversity of interactions have increased substantially. This brings about several additional challenges.

CHALLENGES

First is the linguistic challenge. An individual should be able to articulate his or her thoughts so as to cross the language barrier. Even between India and the USA where one can argue that English is the common language, the usage and conventions used are different. A second challenge is the cultural challenge. As we said earlier, soft skills transcend communication. The diversity of cultures in different countries has necessitated that people adapt themselves to the cultures of each of these countries. When interacting with people from more than one country, this quick adaptation becomes a serious challenge. A third challenge, perhaps where the effect of technology is highest, is the proliferation of the different media of communication and collaboration. Communication and collaboration today have to be effectively done through various means like e-mail, chat, video conference, phone calls as well as face-to-face meetings.

The first step would be to know the final

picture your entire team or organization is aiming for. That will give you important information as to what type of picture it is. Then, use these facts to arrive at a plan of how you will distribute the work among the team members. All of them are working towards a common goal. Do not become self-centred while working to achieve group goal. Everyone relates to the environment, succeeds in the environment and helps others succeed in the environment. When the team members do not see the big picture, there is no clear division of labour. This may result in a lot of efforts focused towards 'local optimization', while compromising a 'global optimization'.

When you see the big picture and understand your role in creating the big picture and take pride in it, you will be automatically filled with a lot of passion and motivation. This motivation will surely act as fuel for you to feel good about yourself and you will be able to display better self confidence and thus relate to the environment better. The result of this passion is that you will always strive for excellence and nothing but the best.

Our present day work culture is predicated upon working efficiently in groups and most of us have been indoctrinated into these concepts even before we started our careers. The conventional wisdom is that the group's well being is far more important than your individual well being and you should surrender your individual identity at the gates of your organization and performs only as a member of your team. Your individual performance will

be whitewashed by the larger performance of the group. Never lose an opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues. It is your responsibility to seek feedback and work on improvement. Once you start being an integral part of the team and start cherishing and living the team goals, your own stature and importance will grow in the organization. You will find that you will start enjoying being in the team and soon you will start appreciating the fact that it takes different types of people to achieve the shared team vision.

Diversity awareness is not an easy skill to acquire and hone. To begin with, you need to have an aptitude for cross cultural experience and then, you should equip yourself with the mindset and the knowledge to pursue international dealings. You may be able to use this skill partially in your job, but supplementing it with self learning and professional training can greatly enhance your job performance.

In this super charged climate, only the fittest survive and if you are not constantly aware of the changing environment around you and able to adapt and change as necessary-you will find yourself slowly dropping out of the race. Learning ability is another important soft skill. It comprises having a spirit of inquiry, an air of inquisitiveness and not having reservations about learning from any source.

Time management is a matter of attitude, reinforced by strict discipline. You have to realize that there is not an unlimited supply of time, even though it may seem like there is always a tomorrow. All of us have to

realize that we should not let time pass us by, but rather, actively divide our workdays into time slots and allocate them appropriately to different tasks and carry out this plan perfectly. Time is precious and you should treat it exactly like you would treat money or anything that you only have a limited supply of. When we talk about time management, it is not the time that we actually manage. We manage ourselves, our tasks, so that we make the most of our time.

Good attitude is a behavioural skill, which cannot be taught. However, it can be developed through continuous training. It represents the reactive nature of the individual and is about looking at things with the right perspective. You must be ready to solve problems pro-actively and create win-win situations. We must be able to take ownership, i.e., the responsibility for our actions and to lead from the front without calling it quits at the most critical moment. The more valuable employee is one who can grow and learn as the business changes. Soft skills are as important as hard skills to an employer looking to hire-regardless of industry or job type.

Your professionalism should be impeccable even in the face of a brewing disaster. Any way you act, you should not compromise your professionalism. Even if things are crumbling around you, you should play with professional pride until the last whistle is blown. Like professional athletes who give their much clichéd 110 percent effort in all the games-not just in the games they are winning-you too, should be duty bound and perform in your job at

the highest level. So, keep those reports, documentations and testing coming till the bitter end.

VISION

We spend a good part of our lives at work. We even derive our identities through our jobs. We get all sorts of rewards and recognition through work; and, for many of us, this is probably the only path to success available in life. We should not be afraid to use every tool in our arsenal to achieve this. We collectively refer to this arsenal as the soft skill, 'work to succeed'. Hard work starts with vision, but it does not end there. As an old saying goes, 'the vision must be followed by the venture'. It is not enough to stare up the steps-we must step up the stairs. Hard work is not just about the number of hours you put in, but also what you get accomplished at the end of the day. It is not so much about how busy you are, but why you are busy. The bee is praised. The mosquito is swatted. When people are not successful, they blame it on luck, without introspecting whether they have given the devil its due and worked hard. It is useful to realize that the only way to overcome hard luck is by hard work.

When we send a message as a part of communication, it can reach the receiver in more than one way: through the words we use, through the voice we use and through the body language. Imagine you are writing a letter to a person A, talking to a person B over phone and meeting a person C face-to-face and trying to convey the same message in all the three cases. Who do you think

would receive the message most clearly? In all likelihood, it is person C. In 1971, a research published by Albert Mehrabian showed that:

- Words account for 7 percent
- Tone of voice accounts for 38 percent
- Body language accounts for 55 percent of the message

Body language is the most potent vehicle of communication. It is absolutely essential to hone the skills in harnessing this vehicle. Body language supersedes everything else-your words, slides and even voice. Different elements of body language work in unison-a positive improvement in one constituent usually has ripple positive influence on others. To start with, we may not have all the constituents functioning at the same level of effectiveness, but realizing the positive energy among these constituents, build upon your greatest strengths to fine tune what may not be so well developed. Your voice dictates who you are. People associate a lot of significance with your voice. People judge you by your voice. They come to conclusions about your confidence level, your well being, your energy levels and your sincerity by just judging your voice. In fact, whenever we are asked to act according to our conscience, we are told to listen to the inner voice. Our voice is a powerful instrument in communication that can make the delivered message more convincing and more appealing for the audience and could display your passion in what you are communicating. The good news is that a musical voice is not really an

essential criterion for a good vocal channel. Even better news is that you can develop a good voice by cultivating certain practices and habits. In fact, voice is just one aspect of good vocal channel. There are certain important constituents of a good voice channel. These are:

- Pronunciation and articulation
- Emphasis
- Pace
- Pitch
- Volume
- Pause

Soft skills define an engineer's approach towards work and life and in most cases define stress that is more individual specific. The best part about mastering it is that the application of these skills is not limited to one's profession, but their scope reaches beyond. Soft skills teach one to succeed and to exceed expectations. There are situations that we come across during our day-to-day work life as a design or verification engineer in which one person performs better than the others just on the basis of soft skills – be it winning an argument with someone on the basis of his/her communication or finding multiple task effectively because of superior organizational abilities.

Our reactions in a complex setting vary widely with situations, emotions, time, belief, knowledge and expertise. Therefore, the quality of a job done by an engineer is directly proportional to his/her psychological maturity and profoundness required, adopted and developed with age

and experience. Soft skills get developed and matured in the course of time.

CONCLUSION

Recent challenges of globalization are proving that the weightage for technical excellence towards overall effectiveness has reduced making way for newer skills like the knowledge of interacting with trans-national cultures, business etiquettes, expected and acceptable behaviour in new geographies, handling telecoms, graphic communication including use of annotations with pictures. Traditional soft skills continue to be relevant and these include adaptability, open mindedness, problem solving, decision making, communication skills, self learning, empathy, team work, knowledge discovery, motivation, attitude and a spirit of enquiry.

Everyone has some form of soft skills. They just need to look at areas in their personal life where they get on with others, feel confident in the way they interact, can solve problem, and are good at encouraging. The best news to all is that soft skills can be developed on an on-going basis through proper training, insightful reading, observation and of course practice, practice, practice.

The importance of soft skills is not only in the beginning of one's career but the same permeates throughout the professional life. As one starts progressing in career, the importance of soft skills keeps on increasing with increase in public dealing and an increased interaction with the clients and peer colleagues. Research in many fields, such as sales and marketing,

software development, engineering and law, has shown that to be successful in the workplace, knowledge alone is not enough. Soft skills are needed to deal with the external world and to work in a collaborative manner. Thus, we must ingrain soft skills into our professionals by catching them young, so that it will enable them to hit the road running when they get into the professions. We should continually reinforce these skills at all levels, till they become a habit for them.

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