

The growing importance of soft skills in the workplace.

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For decades the focus of management was on the so-called "hard" skills. That is, the emphasis centered on the technical skills necessary to effectively perform within the organization. These skills tended to be more job-specific or more closely related to the actual task being performed.

Today, employers crave managers with the critical soft skills. These skills tend to be more generic in nature. In other words, these are skills key to effective performance across all job categories. And these soft skills have come to play an even more crucial role in management positions in today's environment. As the world has changed and the nature of work has changed, the skill set required of managers has changed.

Without doubt, for decades the business world placed a great deal of value on traditionally masculine traits for managers. With the increase in the number of women in the workforce for the past two to three decades, more attention has been given to the traditionally feminine characteristics. There was then a move to develop the androgynous manager - one who embraced the best of both the traditionally masculine characteristics and the feminine characteristics. This has evolved today to the recognition of placing more importance on the soft skills.

At first considered "soft," some are now referring to these skills as life skills thereby conveying the more global aspect of this skill set. Some researchers have also suggested these skills are really the "hard stuff" of management.

In the last few years, survey after survey has been conducted in American businesses. Employers have been asked the skills they want to see in their employees. Time after time the results remain consistent. The soft skills are in demand. Unfortunately, these are the skills that are in short supply today. Topping the list for most American businesses are skills such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, team player skills, ethics, creativity, an ability to value diversity, responsiveness and a willingness to change.

Communication Skills

[Communication skills](#) remain a major concern of many employers today. It is critical every employee (and most especially managers) be able to communicate both verbally and in written form. Management is all about getting things done through others. Without an ability to effectively communicate, this work cannot be accomplished. Those individuals who are polished in their communication skills are also more effective in getting things done.

Technology has somewhat complicated the communication process for many. While disseminating information faster and to a larger number of people, the advanced technologies have changed the way in which communication is conducted in many organizations. Today with the widespread use of e-mail, the traditional chain of command is often not followed in communication patterns. People skip levels in the chain of command to communicate directly with those who have the information they need.

In addition, there has been an entirely new set of etiquette rules (referred to as "netiquette") that reflects the appropriate way of using these new technologies. Perhaps the greatest challenge to using some of the new technologies is the loss of the personal touch. Specifically, the nonverbal component is missing.

Interpersonal Skills

With the demise of the command-and-control manager, the importance of interpersonal skills has grown. Managers can no longer rely upon their position of power (or their legitimate authority inherent in the position they occupy in the organization). With today's teams being utilized more extensively, the tool that becomes important is the interpersonal skill set (as part of the manager's personal power base).

Employees must be able to get along with others. And they must be especially skilled in getting along with others who are not like them. The team environment further enhances this requirement for interpersonal skills. Katz recognized these human relations skills as being one of the three key management skills required for success at all organizational levels.

Team Players

Interpersonal skills are important in helping one become a better team player. Managers walk an especially thin line. The very people they must cooperate with are also those with whom they compete. That is, managers must be team players and work in cooperation with their peers (as well as their subordinates in many cases). And yet these same peers compete for the limited resources of the organization - financial, physical and human.

Being a team player today also means working with a diverse team. And this diversity goes beyond demographic characteristics. For example, it involves accountants working with marketers, engineers, [human resource](#) managers and those from many other functional areas.

Ethics

Employers today seek employees who are ethical - who do the right thing. Employers don't want to hire unethical people and then teach them to be ethical. Instead, they want to bring in those who already understand ethical behavior.

With society placing greater demands on businesses to act more ethically and raise their standards of behavior, this can only be achieved through the efforts of each individual employee.

As the behavior of company employees is closely scrutinized, companies need to know their employees are making the right choices.

Creativity

Those employees who are creative will contribute extraordinary efforts to today's organizations and will help outline the vision for tomorrow's organizations. Companies have learned they can no longer conduct business exactly the way it was conducted even ten years ago. Today's changing environment requires companies to adapt to the current world. This means employing people who "think outside the box."

Rational problem solving is not enough today. Creative problem solving and an ability to identify opportunities is critical in this dynamic environment. Employees who can "think outside the box" and present new solutions to the old problems will be highly valued.

Value Diversity

A diverse workforce presents wonderful opportunities for companies and for individuals to succeed. It does, however, require that all employees learn to value this diversity and celebrate the differences among people. While it is the tendency for people to surround themselves with others who are just like them, this can be counterproductive. Research has proven heterogeneous groups (as opposed to homogenous groups) are more creative.

This diversity, however, must be valued and the actions of people must reflect this.

Truly valuing diversity means treating everyone as an individual with unique needs. For managers, this means tailoring rewards to each individual rather than using "one size fits all" rewards. To value diversity then, the manager must begin by getting out of the office, walking around and really getting to know others. Only then can the manager begin to appreciate the differences among individuals and begin to utilize those unique talents to enable each person to contribute to the organization in their own way.

Valuing diversity doesn't just apply to employees. It also means valuing diversity in the organization's customer base. Market segmentation is crucial in today's diverse marketplace. Only by understanding these various markets can the organization be responsive to their diverse customers and their needs.

Fast, Agile And Responsive

Organizations have been told repeatedly to become fast, agile and responsive to maintain their competitive position. Employees today must be likewise. All employees should consider themselves as working in a boundary-spanning position. That is, it is the responsibility of each employee (management and non-management alike) to scan the external environment to watch for changes which may impact the organization.

Furthermore, as these changes are monitored and recognized, employees must know how to respond. The responses to these changes that must be made within the organization to respond should be clearly thought out and articulated -- and done so quickly.

Taking too much time to respond to these changes in the external environment may very well put the organization at risk. Time is of the essence and employees must think fast on their feet.

The time horizon for reflection and contemplation grows shorter each year.

Willingness To Change

Above all else, employees must be ready, willing and able to change. No one can remain wed to the past.

This willingness to change means tactfully challenging the status quo. Employees can no longer blindly obey, but rather must question what they do.

The heart of process reengineering is to continually ask if this is the best way to something or if it even needs to be done. Continuous improvement requires that each and every employee be willing to change.

In addition, employees must take this one step further and be willing to create some of this change. This goes hand-in-hand with the need for creative people. Employees must constantly search for that "better mousetrap."

The Complete Package

Many of these soft skills are interdependent. That is, as one skill is developed, one or more of the other skills are also being developed. The true value to the organization is in having the complete package in as many employees as possible.

Self-awareness is critical. All employees are responsible for their own career development today. This means every employee must know what they can and cannot do. A complete inventory of knowledge, skills and abilities (referred to as KSAs) should be performed on a regular basis. This should then be compared with the KSAs considered critical to success in the workplace.

While many employers feel they can [train employees](#) in the technical skills needed to perform the job, there is more concern with the ability to teach the softer skills. Therefore, more companies are seeking job applicants that already possess these soft skills.

Employees of the twenty-first century must be committed to the soft skills. And this commitment doesn't begin the first day on the job. This is a commitment that starts even prior to entry in the workforce and stems from the dedication to become a lifelong learner -- constantly updating and revising skills to better meet the needs of the changing marketplace.