



Soft Skills Training

High-growth organizations understand they must invest in and maximize the “human capital” of their workforce just as they do the physical assets. Developing soft skills in all employees is one part of the larger human capital agenda. Such skills are as important as technical know-how in growing and developing a workforce, particularly with an eye toward leadership roles such as supervisors. These skills also are critical to an organization’s productivity, success, and performance—more so in a tough economy and a competitive business landscape.

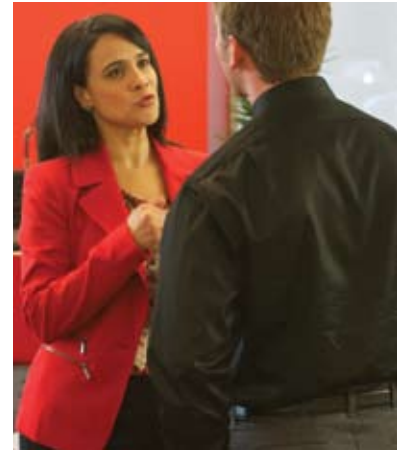
What are Soft Skills?

Soft skills are what we commonly refer to as people skills—the non-technical skills and traits that affect a person’s ability to interact effectively with coworkers and customers. Such skills include problem solving, communication, and conflict resolution. For supervisors, it also includes coaching. These are the same skills required to land a job, stay employed, and advance in the workplace, as well as help others do the same. Soft skills are not a substitute for specific subject knowledge and technical skills. Rather, soft skills enhance these areas, allowing all employees to make the most of their specific knowledge and technical skills¹. It’s the difference between being a subject matter expert, and being a reliable resource who can convey that knowledge to others.

Soft Skills Predict Success

How adept an employee is in the area of soft skills can predict how successful he or she is in life, and programs that enhance this skill set play an important role in the workplace². In fact, a lack of soft skills is more likely to lead to termination of employment than a lack of cognitive or technical skills³. According to the Stanford Research Institute and Carnegie Mellon Foundation, 75 percent of long-term job success is directly related to soft skills, while only 25 percent of success is attributed to technical knowledge⁴.

Research shows that people with soft skills are more employable and are better able to move up in the workplace. In a 2007 survey by the International Association of Administrative Professionals⁵, 67 percent of hiring managers said they would hire an applicant with strong soft skills but weak technical skills. By contrast, only 9 percent would hire someone who had strong technical skills but poor interpersonal skills. The overwhelming majority (93 percent) felt technical skills are easier to teach than soft skills. Soft skills may be even more important for experienced workers than new employees. A poll by the Society for Human Resource Management in conjunction with WSJ.com/Careers⁶ found that “continuous learning and skills training are crucial to sustaining workforce readiness among



employees of all experience levels.” The poll goes on to state that “in addition to addressing skills gaps, training and professional development programs can help workers prepare for emerging skills needs in the workplace as well as to transition skills sets for workers who are embarking on new career paths or stepping up to increased responsibilities”⁶.

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Changing Landscape of Work

Preparing all employees for increased responsibilities takes on greater urgency as the workforce continues to grey. As the largest pool of workers—the Baby Boomers—steps into retirement, organizations are left with a substantial staffing challenge, raising concerns about productivity and continuity⁶. This is especially true in the area of knowledge transfer, which often happens at the supervisory level. The ability of the outgoing generation to pass institutional knowledge on to the next is crucial to business continuity. A loss of institutional knowledge threatens safety, sustainability, and operations processes.

Succession planning is compounded by the fact that there are now four generations working side-by-side in the workplace, from Traditionalists and Baby Boomers to Gen X and Millennials, each with different viewpoints and ways of communicating. For successful knowledge transfer to occur, a host of soft skills—including strong communication skills—is necessary.

It's also important to note that the demands of the 21st century workplace mean talent development cannot be done in a “business-as-usual” fashion. Today's workplace continues to change rapidly. There are no jobs-for-life. Workers bounce not only from employer to employer, but also from sector to sector. At the same time, technical skills and subject knowledge become obsolete faster than ever⁷.

Fortunately, while technical skills may constantly need updating, soft skills are, by their very nature, transferable. These skills help workers stay productive no matter what their position or experience level, from line worker

to supervisor. Soft skills also help mitigate the negative repercussions that may result from turnover or business expansion. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, investing in all workers increases productivity and quality of work, and builds worker loyalty to the firm⁸.

Soft Skills Lacking in Workplace

Yet, despite the well-established importance of soft skills in the workplace, companies continue to report a deficit of these people skills. In the United States, for example, 92 percent of senior executives say there is a serious gap in workforce skills, citing soft skills as the area with the biggest gap and manufacturing as the sector most severely affected⁹. This skills gap translates into less investment in U.S. companies, missed opportunities for growth, and lost profits⁹. Because soft skills are so critical to a company's economic competitiveness, it's imperative that employers play an active part in developing these skills in all employees.

How can organizations ensure their employees develop the necessary skills to be personally successful, blunt the negative affects of turnover, and meet the challenges of business growth? Of employers participating in an Adecco Staffing survey⁹, 85 percent believe the soft skills gap could be alleviated with corporate job training.

It's not just wishful thinking. The Indiana Business Research Center reports that a program to train Indiana workers in a range of soft skills is not only improving employee performance and satisfaction, but also is helping prepare technical workers for promotion into supervisory roles¹⁰.



All employees could benefit from a variety of soft skills training. But for most, particularly those in supervisory roles, there are six vital skill sets: communication, conflict resolution, coaching for performance, decision making, meeting effectiveness, and training job skills.

These six skill sets, which exemplify life-long learning and abstract thinking, provide employees with a solid base in the workplace. They become increasingly important as employees mature and move into positions of greater responsibility within an organization¹¹.

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Communication

Employers and potential employees alike believe the ability to communicate effectively, accurately, and concisely is the most important soft skill an employee can possess ¹¹. Good communication leads to efficient and effective productivity, improves team performance, and bolsters workplace safety.

To communicate effectively in the workplace, employees must master four guidelines ¹²:

- Identify the message and its purpose
- Choose the appropriate means of communication
- Deliver the message
- Solicit feedback and respond accordingly.

Conflict Resolution ¹³

In the workplace as in life, conflict is inevitable. But given the right set of skills, employees can address conflict in ways that foster win-win outcomes.

To do so, workers need to:

- Understand their role in managing and resolving conflict
- Be aware of the potential sources of conflict in the workplace
- Know how to react to conflict in ways that are positive and helpful to all
- Learn to resolve conflict in collaborative ways.

Coaching for Performance ¹⁴

Coaching is a skill particularly geared towards those employees in leadership roles or preparing for such a position. Just as organizations as a whole must invest in and maximize the human capital that is their workforce, so too must

those in leadership nurture and develop the people working under them. The two main pillars of effective coaching are:

- Creating a positive and productive environment
- Providing constructive feedback.

The first step is to create a workplace environment that motivates workers to perform at their best. That means an environment that empowers employees, sets realistic goals, gives timely and meaningful recognition, encourages self-development, and provides appropriate training.

Feedback is an important vehicle for teaching workers what is expected of them and how to make improvements in their performance. It's for this reason that delivery is so crucial—it's not just what you say, but how you say it. That takes a special set of soft skills.

Decision Making

Decision making refers to the ability to identify and analyze problems, and then take effective and appropriate action to alleviate those problems. To do so, employees need to gather information and identify facts, recognize possible solutions, and then select the best alternative after weighing the pros and cons for each solution ¹⁵. For employers and potential new employees, the ability to make sound decisions is one of the most important skill sets a worker can have ¹¹. Research also shows that organizations that fully develop analytic skills in all workers will continue to be the top performers in the coming years ¹⁷.



Meeting Effectiveness ¹⁸

Whether it's a daily shift briefing or a monthly team gathering, conducting meetings is a prime function of those in leadership roles. Done right, meetings are an important tool for presenting instructions, assigning tasks, delegating responsibilities, and passing information down the chain of command. By contrast, ineffective meetings waste time, hinder productivity, and reflect poorly on the organizer.

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To be successful, leaders such as supervisors must master both the skills involved in planning a meeting, as well as those skills needed to properly execute a meeting. That includes skills such as identifying the meeting's objective and planning accordingly, setting the meeting tone, and being able to keep the meeting on track.

Training Job Skills ¹⁹

A common responsibility for supervisors and managers is conducting work-based training, such as on-the-job training for the workers they supervise. Training can be as diverse as workplace protocols for new employees to refresher training for seasoned workers.

Ensuring a successful training session takes practice. Supervisors need to understand why job training is necessary, and they need to know

how to carry out that training in useful and effective ways. To conduct successful on-the-job training, supervisors must have a clear grasp of the following:

- The steps needed to create effective training
- The characteristics of an appropriate learning objective
- How to plan relevant and useful training
- How to effectively present training.

Investing in corporate job training that targets soft skills is an effective way to communicate these six skill sets to workers, and help them learn to use soft skills in the workplace.

Organizations that focus on developing their employees' soft skills will not only reap benefits for their workers in terms of personal success and career development, but will also create continuous improvement and growth for the organization itself.



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