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Soft Skills - What Do the Employers Expect from Their Employees?

R. Karthikeyan, M.A., M.Phil. and G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

1. Introduction

In today's global economy, human resources or knowledge assets are considered as the first and foremost wealth of a firm. Employability of candidates is determined not only by the technical competencies / sound knowledge but also by a set of soft skills. There is a high demand for soft skills in the workplace. Employers seek to ensure industry success by recruiting and retaining employees who have a variety of skills and personal attributes, as well as technical skills.

Individuals need a wide range of soft skills to form and maintain relationships. In addition to technical competencies, soft skills are the underlying principles that trademark a company for professionalism.

This paper focuses upon the basics of soft skills, importance of soft skills, difference between soft skills and hard skills, highlights the research works undertaken on soft skills, lists out the competencies that are required for employability, the personal attributes that are needed for professionals and ways to enhance soft skills.

2. What are Soft Skills?

Soft skills is a sociological term relating to a person's Emotional Intelligence (EQ), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness and optimism that characterize relationships with other people.

Soft skills are those that apply across a variety of jobs and life contexts. They are also known as several other names, including key skills, core skills, essential skills, key competencies, necessary skills, transferrable skills and employability skills.

3. Why are Soft Skills important?

Soft skills are important because jobs today require flexibility, initiative and the ability to undertake many different tasks. Employers now focus on adaptation, cost reduction, increased productivity and new markets, products and services. In the present context, employees need to demonstrate teamwork, problem solving and the capacity to deal with non-routine processes. They are expected to make decisions, take up responsibility and communicate effectively. Employers seek to recruit and retain employees with these skills. Proficiency in the broad range of generic skills has become the main requirement for the modern worker. Education providers are also interested in Generic skills because they encourage learners to be more reflective and self-directed.

4. Hard Skills versus Soft Skills

Let us see the difference between Hard skills and Soft skills.

Hard skills	Soft skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are technical or administrative procedures related to an organization's core business. • Easy to observe, quantify and measure • Also easy to train, because most of the time the skill sets are brand new to the learner and no unlearning is involved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are related to person's emotional intelligence and how people relate to each other by communicating, listening, giving feedback, cooperating as a team member, solving problems and resolving conflicts. • hard to observe, quantify and measure • Very difficult to train because a lot of unlearning is involved.

5. Research Findings on Soft Skills

A number of research works have been undertaken on soft skills such as the Mayer Committee set up by the Australian Education Council and Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training in Australia (1991) and the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) in the US (1992), etc.

The Mayer Committee defined key competencies as: "... competencies essential for effective participation in the emerging patterns of work and work organisation. They focus on the capacity to apply knowledge and skills in an integrated way in work situations. Key competencies are generic in that they apply to work generally rather than being specific to work in particular occupations or industries. This characteristic means that the key competencies are not only essential for participation in work, but are also essential for effective participation in further education and in adult life more generally. (Australian Education Council, Mayer Committee 1992, p.7)

Mayer Committee's report on Key competencies shed more light on definition for each of the seven competencies. The following are identified as key competencies:

- Collecting , analysing and organizing information
- Communicating ideas and information
- Planning and organizing activities
- Working with others and in teams
- Using mathematical ideas and techniques
- Solving problems
- Using Technology

5.1. Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS)

The title of the report is "What Work Requires of Schools". The primary objective of the report is to help teachers understand how curriculum and instruction must change to enable students to develop those high performance skills needed to succeed in the high performance work place. This report also defines the five competencies and three-part foundation that constitute the **SCANS** skills.

5.1.1. Five Workplace Competencies

1. Identifying, organizing, planning and allocating resources.
2. Working with others
3. Acquiring and using information
4. Understanding complex inter-relationships
5. Working with a variety of technologies

5.1.2. A Three-Part Foundation

- Possessing Basic skills such as Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Listening and Speaking.
- Thinking creatively, making decisions, solving problems, seeing things in the Mind's eye, knowing how to learn and reasoning.
- Having personal qualities such as displaying responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, Integrity and Honesty.

6. Eight Core Competencies and Expectations of Employers

Apart from the sound knowledge, every candidate is expected to possess the following qualities irrespective of their field of study. The following 8 core competencies maximize the employability of candidates.

- **Communication skills** – which contribute to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers
- **Teamwork skills** – which contribute to productive working relationships and outcomes
- **Problem-solving skills** - which contribute to productive outcomes
- **Initiative and enterprise skills** - which contribute to innovative outcomes
- **Planning and organising skills** - which contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning
- **Self-management skills** - which contribute to employee satisfaction and growth
- **Learning skills** - which contribute to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes
- **Technology skills** - which contribute to effective execution of tasks.

7. What Personal Attributes Does One Need to be Employable?

Personal Attributes play a vital role in deciding the employability of a candidate. In 1999, the Australian Industry Group commissioned a report into the training needs of Australia's industries (Allen Consulting Group 1999). The report canvassed the views of 350 companies from the manufacturing, construction, and information technology sectors. Among many findings, the report notes that: ... an increasing premium is being placed on generic skills, both 'hard' (notably IT [information technology] skills) and 'soft' (eg. problem-solving, team skills, willingness and ability to adapt) to be developed prior to recruitment (Allen Consulting Group 1999, p. v).

The Group has identified the following as most important personal attributes:

- Loyalty
- Personal presentation
- Commitment
- Common sense
- Honesty and integrity
- Positive self-esteem
- Enthusiasm
- Sense of humour
- Reliability
- Ability to deal with pressure
- Balanced attitude to work and home life
- Adaptability
- Motivation

8. How to Enhance Soft Skills?

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Soft Skills - What Do the Employers Expect from Their Employees?

Both Industry and academia are breaking their heads whether it is possible to enhance soft skills in a few hours of training. During the initial stages of one's career, sound knowledge is very much essential to get good assignments. However, when it comes to growing in an organization, personality alone matters. Imparting Training on Soft skills becomes all the more relevant in a country like India where the education system does not provide amenities to enhance one's soft skills. Students can enhance their soft skills, if they train themselves, because most of soft skills are acquired rather than in born. If they feel that they are inadequate in any of the competencies, they need to imbibe those competencies by practice. Everyone who aspires to acquire soft skills need to ask themselves the following questions.

1. Am I a team player?
2. How well do I manage time?
3. What are my best and worst traits?
4. How do I react to criticism / feedback?
5. What are my strengths and weaknesses?
6. Am I good at resolving conflicts?
7. Do I possess honesty, loyalty and Integrity?
8. Do I have a high level of commitment?
9. Am I good at communicating with others?
10. Do I possess self-esteem?

9. Conclusion

Many corporates around the world invest a lot of money to enable their employees to handle themselves at work and how to relate with their customers and peers. In today's working environment, where customers and stakeholders are demanding more, infusing the soft skills in the minds of work force is of paramount importance. In the era of globalization, it has become absolutely imperative for every organization to develop the soft skills of employees. Greater responsibility lies on the shoulders of academia to inculcate soft skills in the blossoming minds of young people in order to make them job-ready.

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