

Hard Skills vs. Soft Skills

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Let us quickly review what is meant by each of the terms. Hard skills are characterized as teachable, specific abilities that can be defined and measured, observed, performed, and quantified. Hard skills are essentially job tasks, the activities that bring to life the job description. A few examples of hard skills include how many words per minute you can type, the ability to use specific pieces of equipment like a printer or a copier or lathe, or the dexterity to disassemble computer components. Hard skills also include your ability to write, analyze data, or speak in public.

Soft skills, in contrast, are less tangible. Businesses, hiring managers, vocational rehabilitation professionals, and job developers identify soft skills as desirable qualities that do not depend on your knowledge or perceptible talents. Soft skills are habits and traits. Behaviors. And while it is true that habits and traits are also perceptible and teachable, they differ from hard skills in that they are more about what you think and feel, and how those thoughts and feelings affect you and your behavior in the workplace as opposed to what you do or at what skill level you perform in the workplace. Additionally, soft skills differ from hard skills because they can change depending on where you are (i.e. the work environment) and the people you are with inside the work environment. "Soft skills also help you find yourself... and really make a difference because they help you to think critically," noted one job seeker with a disability.¹

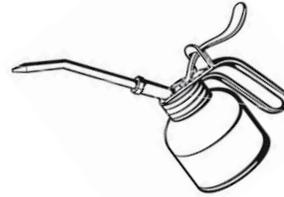
Risking the tedium of repetition I will restate that soft skills are the traits, work habits, and attitudes that all employees across all occupations need in order to obtain, sustain, and progress in employment. These include being dependable, punctual, adaptable, positive about work, and appropriately dressed and groomed. Soft skills also refer to such characteristics as the ability to get along with others, work both in teams and independently, work productively, and take initiative. Regardless of the size of an organization, employees must possess the hard AND soft skills necessary to do a job.

¹ U. S. Department of Labor "Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success: In Their Own Words"
<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/words.pdf>

The concept of hard skills and soft skills is best visualized when hard skills are depicted as cogs in the business machine, and soft skills are the oil that makes the cogs operate more smoothly together.



HARD SKILLS



SOFT SKILLS

We all can recite lists of soft skills. These lists vary from VR professional to VR professional, program to program, and are subjective for everyone. However, there is a common thread binding most lists. It is important to note that every task, every job, every employee in every business has an expectation of soft skills. Each task, each job, each employee, and each business are different. Within this common core of soft skills, each skill enjoys a spectrum of appropriate skill level required for each task, job, employee, or business. For example, a call center customer service agent will utilize a different level of communication skills than someone on the assembly line of an auto manufacturing plant. Problem-solving skill levels will contrast between an entry-level employee and a 25 year veteran of the firm who was recently promoted to vice president. Let us review the common core of soft skills in vocational rehabilitation curriculums and job readiness programs: Communication, enthusiasm and attitude, problem-solving and resourcefulness, professionalism, teamwork, networking, empathy, and time management.

- *Communication* disseminates in several forms: non-verbal, verbal, and written. Strong communication skills exist along a continuum, and not solely in one's body language, vocabulary, or writing. Communication skills development works on the mode of expression (nonverbal, verbal, written)—when to express yourself (which most times is situational), with whom to convey your message (coworkers, supervisors, upper level management), where is the most effective workplace venue to express yourself relative to the message (meeting room, break room, cubicle, private office, parking lot), when is the best time to relay your message during

work time, deciding the best form of conveyance (one-on-one or in a group setting, a printed memo or letter, email, voicemail), and analyzing the purpose of the communication (formal or informal information, technical, time sensitive).

Perhaps the most fundamental yet strongest communication skill is a genuine smile, and it is nonverbal. A smile, nod, glance, gait, posture, vocal tone, handshake, and even clothing and accessory choices are examples of nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is tied to other soft skills in that these various modes of expression can help convey confidence, enthusiasm, professionalism, problem-solving, teamwork, and even empathy in the workplace.

Verbal communication is the use of sounds and words to express oneself when sharing information, and includes the spoken word as well as sign language. Strong verbal communication is the effective use of words, not the words themselves or run-on sentences or extravagant presentations. Verbal communication skills development works on knowing appropriate (and inappropriate) words used in a workplace and in YOUR workplace. It encompasses tone of voice and volume, as well as articulation—articulation based on one's best ability with pronunciation and pace at which one speaks, not based on that of a trained orators. Nonverbal and verbal communication are inextricably linked because we are human! Being able to use the tools of nonverbal and verbal communication as skills that are inextricably linked is key.

Smiling and speaking are much easier for most people than writing it down, or written communication. For some reason, writing has the nomenclature of being daunting, intimidating, and hypnagogic. The need for workplace writing skills and the level at which they are executed are situational depending on the job tasks. Regardless of the writing skill usage or level, accurate and succinct writing skills enhance performance, and often simplify the job and increase productivity. Writing skills are used in nearly every aspect of work: Reports in the forms of checklists to updates to business analysis, client and customer notes, order taking, proposals, memos, email (internal, external, formal, informal), human resources forms, presentations, scheduling, job applications, and much more.

A side note: It is essential to include listening in communication skills because communication is not one-dimensional, especially in the workplace. Communication breaks down without the ability to accurately receive and interpret another's message (i.e. listening) whether it is nonverbal, verbal, or written.

Lastly but not least, compelling and powerful communication skills for people with disabilities are necessary for the development of not only self-advocacy and self-determination, but important skills for the workplace and personal successes as well.

- In the workplace, *enthusiasm and attitude* not only make the day seem to fly by, but also make the employee indispensable and valuable to the employer. Enthusiasm, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is an active interest in something that you like or enjoy. Workplace enthusiasm does not imply that you clock in every day while shouting with joy from the rafters. It does suggest, however, that the reason you clocked in goes beyond the paycheck. It suggests that because there is an interest in what you are doing, engagement with the tasks, coworkers, and overall environment is prevalent. The interest (enthusiasm) can be directly or indirectly related to the actual tasks performed in your position. In fact, many employers would rather provide job skills training to an enthusiastic but inexperienced worker than hire someone with perfect experiential qualifications and a less-than-positive attitude. Once hired, an enthusiastic employee will typically show up on time, exhibit interest in the job, and demonstrate a willingness to listen, learn, and try new things. Overall, an employee with enthusiasm comes across as someone who wants to be at work and who is willing to do what it takes to get the job done, resulting in sustainable employment.

- Everybody can benefit from having good *problem-solving* skills as we all encounter problems on a daily basis. Some of these problems are more severe or complex than others. And while it would be ideal to have the ability to elucidate all problems efficiently, with timeliness, and without difficulty, unfortunately, there is no one way in which all problems can be solved. Part of problem-solving is that if you cannot solve the problem, you know where or to whom to go to have assistance with solving that problem.

- Knowing where or to whom to go to solve the problem is *resourcefulness*. Resourcefulness can also benefit workplace performance by providing alternative solutions to a problem or adjustments to processes if solving the problem itself is difficult or impossible.

· *Professionalism*—Merriam-Webster to the rescue again: The skill(s), good judgment, and polite behavior expected from a person who is trained to do a job well. Professional behavior descriptors include responsibility, integrity, accountability, and excellence. Professionalism incorporates being accountable because you take ownership of situations in which you are involved, you see them through, and take responsibility for what happens—good or bad; you do not blame others if things go wrong. Professional behavior is the outcome when soft skills combine with dexterous hard skills. Some good judgment is brought to the business, and some are learned and adapted to the business culture once working in the business. Professionalism, or good judgment, embodies most of the other soft skills—appropriate communication, being interested and showing attentiveness to your role with the business, applicable problem-solving, working cooperatively on a team, and demonstrating consideration for scheduling. Professionalism is also finding a way to be productive all of the time.

Professionalism is an appropriate core concept in which to include workplace attire, grooming, and social media because these decisions are all about good judgment as well. Professionalism is not represented by a coat and tie or tailored suit and pumps. Professional attire is the clothing most suitable for the job tasks and work environment, including footwear. That could be a uniform, a color of shirt or pants/skirt designated by the employer, closed-toed shoes, limited size of accessories, covered tattoos, or similar specifications. Not all attire will be specifically outlined by human resource policies, but all company policies directly or indirectly prefer clean clothes, and well-groomed appearance. Grooming includes not only clean clothes but neatly arranged hair, use of deodorant/antiperspirant, good oral hygiene (brushing teeth, using mouthwash), and shoes in good repair to name a few.

Choices about social media are tied quite closely to professionalism, and the decisions about what is posted including written messages and photos can affect employment. A good rule is, “If you wouldn’t want your mother or your kids to see it or read it, don’t post it!” Additionally, politics and religion can be polarizing conversations that should be given careful thought before publicly posting views.

· Most employment is not solitary. Every business is a team, with pieces and parts cooperatively engaged in a common goal, the bottom line. *Teamwork* is as essential in small businesses as in

large corporations, although the makeup, size, and the number of teams vary from business to business and from industry to industry. Teamwork benefits both the employer and employee. Some of the advantages include fostering creativity and learning, blending strengths, enhancing communication, sharing the workload, improving efficiency, escalating experience, building trust, teaching problem-solving, promoting a sense of ownership, and encouraging risk-taking. In essence, teamwork strengthens soft skills for the employee and the bottom line for the employer. It should be noted that even with self-employment or a 'one-man' operation, there is a certain amount of teamwork involved. Collaboration with clients and suppliers creates a team-like working arrangement.

- *Networking* does not have to induce panic. It is simply relationship building. Like communication, networking is a continuum of interacting with other people to exchange information and develop contacts, most often relating to job and career purposes. A network can range from exclusively the job seeker and job developer to a LinkedIn account with 500+ connections. Networking is not *metworking*. Not everyone you meet or work with is right for your network, and a limited and resolute group will make networking activities more manageable, and not to mention more fruitful. Networking is not *betworking*. Collecting business cards or work-related friend requests on Facebook are a gamble with regard to securing a sustainable job or building a career. Know that networking is necessary, even if it is with a limited, targeted pool of compadres. To lessen the anxiety about networking, think of your network as your posse. Having a posse when trying to find a job can generate valuable leads and tender significant referrals or recommendations. Having a posse once you get to the workplace can help navigate the new environment, and discreetly practice soft skills while on the job.

- *Empathy* might be considered sympathy on steroids. To synopsise the differences between the most common meaning of these two terms: sympathy is feeling compassion, sorrow, or pity for what another person encounters, while empathy is putting oneself in the shoes of another, actually having felt or experienced something similar about which you feel compassion or pity. In the workplace, it is the difference between offering an inconsequential pat on the back to the stressed, deadline-challenged colleague in passing and offering a genuine smile of encouragement that speaks from experience (or at least from your expectation of that potential experience). To be clear, employment-related empathy does not propose you become close, personal friends with every coworker. Business-based empathy "... can show a deep respect for

coworkers and show that you care, as opposed to just going by rules and regulations. An empathic style can make everyone feel like a team and increase productivity, morale, and loyalty."²

· Success at work necessitates a balancing act with the rest of life's activities and managing to get it all done, and *time management* is a useful tool in the balancing tool box. Time management is not simply clocking in and out at the scheduled times. Although punctuality is an employer expectation, it should be a lifestyle fundamental. Adhering to time constraints reduces stress, increases productivity, indorses respect, facilitates goals, and improves focus. Time management includes knowing the routine and schedule of regular activities such as work, school, and church, combined with intermittent activities such as medical appointments, volunteer shifts, holiday and life celebrations such as birthdays and anniversaries along with the awareness of the blocks of time each of these activities requires. Our parents or teachers would refer to this as planning ahead!

That ends our list!

For more information on soft skills and how they relate to disability inclusion in the workplace, please read *The DisABILITY A-Player Plan: Employee of the Month Every Month* available n Amazon, or visit www.miwd.org and www.abilityfocusedstaffing.com.

² DeLores Pressley, "The Importance of Empathy in the Workplace" sbnonline.com, November 16, 2012