

# The Hard Truth About Soft Skills- Part 2: Cultivating Soft Skills in Professional Services

By John Quirk

## Introduction

[In Part 1 of this series](#), we explored the critical importance of soft skills in professional services, identifying ten core competencies that drive success in our industry. We examined how these skills - from communication and leadership to emotional intelligence and conflict resolution - form the foundation of exceptional client service and organizational excellence.

As we turn to Part 2, our focus shifts to the practical aspects of cultivating these essential skills within professional services firms. How can organizations systematically assess, develop, and integrate soft skills into their culture and operations? This paper will provide strategies and insights to help firms build a workforce that excels not just in technical expertise, but in the human elements that truly differentiate top performers.

## Assessing Soft Skills in Professional Services

The first challenge in cultivating soft skills is accurate assessment. Unlike technical skills, which can often be measured through certifications or concrete outputs, soft skills are inherently more subjective and context-dependent.

That being said, there are several tools and methods that can provide valuable insights into individual soft skills:

- **360-degree feedback:** This approach gathers input from an individual's supervisors, peers, and direct reports, offering a comprehensive view of their soft skill proficiency.
- **Behavioral interviews:** Structured interviews that probe for specific examples of past behavior can reveal a candidate's soft skill strengths and areas for improvement.
- **Situational judgment tests:** These assessments present realistic scenarios and ask individuals how they would respond, providing insights into decision-making and interpersonal skills.
- **Self-assessment tools:** While not sufficient on their own, self-assessments can be valuable for increasing self-awareness and identifying areas for growth. Two particularly useful tools in this category are:
  - **DISC Assessment:** This tool evaluates behavioral styles across four dimensions: Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Conscientiousness. It can

provide insights into communication preferences, decision-making styles, and how individuals interact with others.

- **StrengthsFinder:** Developed by Gallup, this assessment identifies an individual's top talents from a list of 34 themes. Many of these themes align closely with key soft skills, offering a foundation for understanding and developing these competencies.

To create a soft skills baseline for your organization, consider combining these methods. The goal is not to create a rigid scoring system, but to develop a nuanced understanding of your team's current capabilities and growth areas. By using tools like DISC and StrengthsFinder alongside other assessment methods, you can gain a multi-faceted view of your team's soft skill profiles and tailor your development efforts accordingly.

## Developing Targeted Training Programs

With a clear assessment in hand, the next step is developing targeted training programs. Effective soft skills training goes beyond generic workshops, tailoring content to your organization's specific needs and culture.

Key principles for effective soft skills training include:

- **Customization:** Align training with your firm's values, client expectations, and strategic goals.
- **Balance:** Combine group workshops for shared learning with individual coaching for personalized development.
- **Real-world application:** Incorporate case studies and scenarios drawn from your firm's actual experiences to make training relevant and immediately applicable.
- **Progressive development:** Create a structured path for skill advancement, from basic awareness to independent mastery.

## Case Study: PSC Group's Approach to Soft Skills Training

At PSC Group, we implemented a comprehensive soft skills program that exemplifies these principles. While the specifics of our program are proprietary, its core elements offer valuable lessons for other firms:

- Alignment with organizational goals: Our program was designed to support our promises to clients, employees, and prospects, ensuring that soft skill development directly contributed to our strategic objectives.
- Structured progression: We created clear levels of skill development, from awareness to operational proficiency to independent capability. This structure provided a clear path for growth and allowed us to track progress effectively.
- Integration of technical and soft skills: Rather than treating soft skills as separate from technical expertise, our program integrated both elements, recognizing that the most effective professionals excel in both areas.
- Cultural reinforcement: The program became a cornerstone of our company culture, shaping how we hired, developed, and promoted talent.

## Mentorship and Peer Learning

While formal training is crucial, some of the most effective soft skill development occurs through mentorship and peer learning. Consider implementing:

- Formal mentorship programs: Pair less experienced team members with seasoned professionals who can provide guidance on navigating complex client relationships, leading teams, and other soft skill challenges.
- Peer learning groups: Create opportunities for colleagues to share experiences, discuss challenges, and learn from each other's successes and failures.
- Communities of practice: Establish groups focused on specific soft skills, allowing individuals to dive deep into areas of particular interest or need.

## Integrating Soft Skills into Performance Management

To truly prioritize soft skill development, it must be integrated into your firm's performance management processes. This involves:

- Incorporating soft skills into performance evaluations: Alongside technical KPIs, assess how well individuals communicate, collaborate, and demonstrate leadership.
- Setting SMART goals for soft skill development: Help team members set Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound goals for improving their soft skills.

- Aligning soft skill proficiency with career progression: Make it clear that advancement within the firm depends not just on technical expertise, but on soft skill mastery as well.

## Fostering a Culture that Values Soft Skills

Ultimately, the success of any soft skills initiative depends on creating a culture that truly values these competencies. This requires:

- Leadership commitment: Senior leaders must model the importance of soft skills and consistently reinforce their value.
- Recognition and rewards: Celebrate examples of exceptional soft skill application, perhaps through internal awards or case studies.
- Hiring and promotion decisions: Make soft skills a key criterion in hiring new talent and promoting from within.

## Addressing Challenges in Remote and Hybrid Work Environments

The shift towards remote and hybrid work has created new challenges - and opportunities - for soft skill development. Firms must adapt by:

- Enhancing virtual communication skills: Provide training on effective video conferencing, digital collaboration tools, and written communication in remote contexts.
- Building trust and rapport virtually: Develop strategies for creating strong relationships without in-person interaction.
- Fostering virtual collaboration: Teach skills for effective teamwork and project management in distributed teams.

## Measuring the Impact of Soft Skill Development

To justify ongoing investment in soft skill development, it's crucial to measure its impact. Consider tracking:

- Client satisfaction scores
- Employee engagement and retention rates
- Project success rates
- Time to promotion for employees engaged in soft skill development programs

While some benefits may be difficult to quantify, combining these metrics can provide a compelling picture of the ROI of soft skill initiatives.

## Conclusion

Cultivating soft skills in professional services is not a one-time effort, but an ongoing commitment to developing well-rounded, highly effective professionals. By implementing structured assessment and training programs, fostering a culture of continuous learning, and integrating soft skills into performance management, firms can create a powerful competitive advantage.

In our final installment of this series, we'll explore advanced applications of soft skills in professional services and examine future trends that will shape the landscape of our industry. As the business world continues to evolve, one thing remains certain: the firms that excel in the human elements of professional services will be best positioned to thrive in the years ahead.

## About The Author

*John Quirk has over 30 years of experience leading successful professional services firms. John has a proven track record of building high-performing teams, fostering award-winning cultures, and delivering exceptional client value. His previous white papers have explored innovative approaches to talent management, metrics, and organizational success. You can find those papers and more at [Quirk's Next Thing](#). You can reach John at [john.quirk@gmail.com](mailto:john.quirk@gmail.com).*