



SUBSTANTIATING SOFT SKILLS AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AS PREREQUISITE AT WORKPLACE

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Abstract

Soft Skills are those attributes that enhance the employability of the individual and also enable success and satisfaction in personal and professional life. While studying the term 'softskills', one actually studies and understands about personality traits, communication skills, manners, ethics and social attributes. Hard skills and soft skills go hand-in-hand and ought to be inculcated together especially when one is a student. Although knowledge and the technical skills to acquire a job can be gained, the challenge thereafter before that individual is to maintain the job and climb upward towards success at workplace. Here, the significance of softskills is realised and therefore, it is certainly not wise to neglect it but attempt to teach or make aware of the necessity to imbibe soft skills to those who are unaware of it. This research paper is an attempt in this direction, focusing on the meaning of soft skills, definition, different traits and attributes that are included under this term, significance and some consequences of lacking these skills. The paper would have been incomplete without the mention of communication skills. So, there are references made to communication skills, its four main types- verbal, non-verbal, written and visual, the need to understand and work on one's communication skills. In recent times, these soft skills are also considered in selection-testing, mainly helping the employers to identify the individuals likely to succeed in training as well as in job. Therefore, it is believed that the academic period ought to be the period to inculcate these skills in students through the curriculum or even through workshops or courses. This will prepare them for good and effective performance in their respective educational institutions and later in their workplaces. Additionally, it would assist students in self-evaluation and help them pinpoint areas of their learning programmes where and how they may actively work to enhance these skills.

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With the need to have and to develop industry-centric programs and courses aiming at employability opportunities to the students, emphasis has also been made to refine the soft skills along with the communication skills. The term 'soft skills' has been defined by Collins English Dictionary as 'desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include common sense, the ability to deal with people and a positive flexible attitude.' Very different from the technical skills or hard skills as they are also known as, soft skills enables one to perform more effectively at work place and become an asset. Often the difference between success and failure in an organisation can be the communication (or lack thereof) between colleagues, the ability to read between the lines, clarity and precision in direction of activities or even the camaraderie between office mates. In such scenarios, it is soft skills that make or break the day rather than any technical know-how.



Soft skills include personality traits, social skills, positive work ethics and attitude, communication skills as well as emotional intelligence. Enhancing one's personality helps to attain confidence, self-esteem and inculcate qualities like positive attitude, flexibility, patience, punctuality and willingness to learn. Employers do look for recruiting those who do not just possess the required technical skills but also become good leaders in future – the ability requiring possession of some soft skills. Moreover, these soft skills and communications skills working hand in hand with the acquired knowledge and technical skills are crucial for making advancement in the workplace.

Compulsory schooling provides formal education, and it is widely believed that education should teach a minimum of formal information that will act as the basis or building blocks for subsequent learning in both school and in life. Formal knowledge is incorporated in the school curriculum's numerous academic fields (for example, English, science, mathematics, foreign languages). Stasz, in her article, continues by stating that the search for skill requirements is likewise predicated on the notion that skills transfer from the place where they are learnt, which is in school, to the place where they accumulate some labour market value (job). If the skills required in work are identified, the school should be able to design curriculum to ensure that students acquired those significant skills.

In the workplace, companies have had focused selection testing almost exclusively on cognitive abilities, in part because a literature in industrial-organizational psychology attested to its preeminent importance in identifying workers most likely to succeed in training and on the job. For a generation, it was taught that other factors, like personality, had little bearing on employment outcomes or pretty much anything else. There have been sporadic references to the value of character traits in learning and the workplace, but they were uncommon. Only in the 1990s did things start to shift as psychology blended around a five-factor model of personality. As a result, the idea that personality did matter spread quickly and started to add to the body of knowledge concerning its significance.

The Big-Five model tends to be quite a significant medium herein, as it shortlisted the areas under personality traits. These areas or characteristic traits have been taken as representatives to link them as stepping-stones to success, such as, extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experience. Extroversion deals with the extrovert and introvert nature of an individual wherein, the extent of either of this nature can influence the performance of the individual and his image. Agreeableness gauges a person's level of friendliness or reserved nature, cooperation or guardedness, flexibility or rigidity, trust or caution, good natured or moody, softness or toughness, and importantly, tolerant or being judgemental. Emotional stability is included in the model as it takes into account how an individual reacts to a particular situation and deals with it smoothly. Those individuals with a really positive attitude and calm approach tend to rate high in this area and likely to move closer to success in their work. The need for emotional stability or in other words, emotional intelligence, is that it enables one to gain personal as well as professional success. With the gaining of the ability to manage and channelize emotions in positive manner, an individual can manage to relieve stress, build strong relations with people, empathise, overcome challenges and conflict. Moreover, it helps in setting and achieving career and personal goals.

Conscientiousness characterizes the extent of being organised, reliable, hardworking and goal-oriented or vice-



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versa. Lastly, the degree to which an individual is interested in expanding their horizons or narrowing them, learning new things or sticking with what they already know, developing proactive learning attitude by seeking out information, working on building up already gained knowledge, meeting new people or associating with current friends and colleagues reflects their openness to experience.

Amongst the research studies conducted, particularly relevant were such studies that showed how these big-five personality factors - most often including conscientiousness (including more of the trait of striving, being organized, and working hard) - predicted both workplace and academic success. Additional non-cognitive factors, such as academic goals, institutional commitment, social support and involvement, academic self-awareness, conscientiousness, a tendency to procrastinate, a need for cognition, I grade goals, time management skills, and persistence or effort regulation, were suggested by other meta-analyses as predictors of school performance (grades and retention).

In this set of soft skills regarded essential to be inculcated, one needs to mention about teamwork also. When working in a team, the manner of complementing each other's skills and efforts, accepting, embracing and playing the role one's supposed to play in the team, good communication, flexibility and adaptability – all these qualities showcase the individual having understood the meaning and significance of teamwork and bringing out good performance. In addition to this, possessing attributes like empathy, punctuality, confidence, motivational spirit, good habits and mannerism play great role in giving the best performance and moving a step closer to success and satisfaction. Apart from this, there is decision-making and problem-solving ability that is essential. It includes characteristics such as identifying and analysing the problem, taking effective and appropriate action, coming up with creative and innovative solutions, keeping in mind the impact of the decision taken, learn from everything and think abstractly. These characteristics may be prioritized differently by individuals depending on their approach, what is important to be noted is that all these characteristics prove handy when one faces challenges at workplace.

The mention of the term 'communication skills' here may probably give rise to the question, very well in today's times put forth by Bruce Tulgan – “Are more and more people today becoming weaker at interpersonal communication simply because we are all becoming so accustomed to communicating with our devices and losing the ability to communicate well in person and on the phone?” It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that effective communication skills form the keystone of the whole concept of Soft Skills. The significance of having good communication can be best understood from the fact that it enable to avoid any sort of misunderstanding and misinterpretation at work place. Speaking, listening, seeing, and empathising are all components of effective communication. Understanding the contrasts between face-to-face interactions, phone calls, and digital communications like email and social media is also beneficial which is possible through effective communication.

The four main types of communication include verbal, non-verbal, written and visual. An individual needs to communicate effectively with colleagues, friends and seniors at workplace as in, use proper words, think before saying anything, be grammatically correct if not perfect, etc. Self-assessment is expected to be done by an ideal employee – one who listens attentively and prefers listening more than speaking, empathises with others, focuses on finding at least one potential solution to the problem instead of just complaining about it, and acknowledging



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people for their good work irrespective of how big or small.

Verbal communication is by far the most commonly used in day to day life. It is also the most prone to miscommunications. Often, while talking a person may use pronouns to denote certain individuals or objects and the other person may believe this to be something else altogether. Then there are examples where ambiguity (whether intentional or not) can even lead to murder. This last is literal when King Henry II commented at large “Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?” and the knights at hand took the order to heart and killed Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In modern times, often such commands are made with intention to maintain a farce of plausible deniability. While this is an example of an extreme scenario, quite often we find people in the corporate world unable to talk or explain in a concise and clear manner with a purview to make the other party understand. One last thing here, is that just how important verbal communication is, it is equally important to listen.

With the advent of the telephone and now with video calls, the art of writing maybe dying a slow death. But the power it wields is undeniable. Often, an entire 30 to 45 minutes meeting maybe completely avoided if one party chooses to write down their requirement or even query beforehand. The other problem of such meetings is that often the parties may take away different things and all may miss part of the whole ask. In such cases it becomes even more critical to document the outcomes of the meeting in a form that may be referred to for the future. The other aspect why written communication is very important is that it is supposed to be ironclad and hence all-important meetings such as Board Meetings have to be documented as a part of records for official purposes.

A subset of written communication is writing of emails. This includes using correct salutations, correct addressing in to and cc, and maintaining trail chains while replying. Today’s corporate world is all about the email and clearing one’s emails. What one needs to remember is that writing ought to be clear and accurate for it is crucial for effective leadership communication. Readers are more likely to recall an error than the message when a letter, report, or programme handout contains one. So, what helps here is preparing rough drafts of all the important reports or letters, proof-reading every document written, avoid making any assumptions and writing only what must be understood to make a proper decision.

Finishing off with visual communication, for the corporate world this is primarily limited to presentations and this is the difference between success and failure. The difference between a quick ppt containing bullet points which serve as a talking point and one consisting of eye-catching infographics, eye-catching points that leave an impact is the difference between just another meeting and something that leaves a lasting impression on the target audience. A cliché that is often used to describe a good presentation is that it is the modern form of story-telling but honestly speaking a well-made 4 or 5 slide presentation can be more effective than a long meeting or message. Going hand in hand with verbal communication are non-verbal cues. These are the subtle things that affect how the other party may perceive your words. Are you making eye contact, are you stuttering (the sign your showing lack of confidence), are you smiling or there is complete lack of emotion? and so on. To put it in simple words, non-verbal communication includes posture, eye movements while communicating, one’s appearance, head and hand movements – as in, nodding or waving; appearance also plays important part under body language and most importantly, facial expressions. Many a times, one’s facial expression may reveal what words don’t or they may even lead to misinterpretations, which is definitely not good for an effective communication.



Perhaps the biggest non-verbal cue is simple, the tone of voice used while talking. In today's post corona world, where more meetings are taking place on a digital platform like Microsoft Teams, Zoom or Google Meet, the scope for miscommunication increases manifold. For instance, a senior executive speaking in a meeting with abstract terms and speaking while looking sceptically can be very off putting and may lead to undesirable consequences. Alternatively, the trend of not switching on the camera during meetings with or rather communication with faceless voices, may seem normal but tends not to convey the entire message. In conclusion, verbal and non-verbal communication go hand in hand. And while the quote 'An action speaks a thousand words' is true, a clear message accompanied by direct eyecontact, a firm tone and ended with a smile can really help one achieve his goal.

Fortunately, there are people who realise the significance of possessing soft skills along with hard skills but unfortunately, there are also some young people who do not or remain unaware of it. Having both the sets of skills enable one to not to just get the job but also maintain it and become a valuable asset at workplace. Even if one may lack or is not so good in any one aspect of soft skill, for instance, an individual has the habit of making lot of hand movements which is not regarded perfectly appropriate or unable to make proper eye-contact while communicating ; yet, it is never too late to work on it or even learn and inculcate it. However, the best period to understand and learn about soft skills is the academic period and the place, the educational institutions – imbibing hard skills and soft skills hand-in-hand.

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Becket’s defiance to the king enraged the latter and in this fate of rage, one story made claim that the king was heard to have said the above quoted words. His four knights interpreted it literally, though one can’t say what King Henry actually tried to mean and Becket gets murdered.

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