Executive Perceptions of the Top 10 Soft Skills Needed in Today's Workplace

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Abstract

Hard skills are the technical expertise and knowledge needed for a job. Soft skills are interpersonal qualities, also known as people skills, and personal attributes that one possesses. Business executives consider soft skills a very important attribute in job applicants. Employers want new employees to have strong soft skills, as well as hard skills. This study identified the top 10 soft skills as perceived the most important by business executives: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic.

Technology has had a profound impact on skills that employers want from business graduates today (Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010). The shift from an industrial economy to an information society and an office economy means that many jobs now place an emphasis on integrity, communication, and flexibility (Zehr, 1998). Historically, technical skills, also known as hard skills, were the only skills necessary for career employment; but today's workplace is showing that technical skills are not enough to keep individuals employed when organizations are right-sizing and cutting positions (James & James, 2004). Because soft skills are critical for productive performance in today's workplace, current and future business leaders are emphasizing the development of soft skills (Nealy, 2005). While technical skills are a part of many excellent educational curricula, soft skills need further emphasis in the university curricula so

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that students learn the importance of soft skills early in their academic programs before they embark on a business career (Wellington, 2005).

Much research has been done on the importance of soft skills in the workplace (Klaus, 2010; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogel, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2010; Nealy, 2005; Smith, 2007). One study found that 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills, while only 25% is dependent on technical knowledge (Klaus, 2010). Another study indicated that hard skills contribute only 15% to one's success, whereas 85% of success is due to soft skills (Watts & Watts, 2008, as cited in John, 2009). As employers are progressively looking for employees who are mature and socially well adjusted, they rate soft skills as number one in importance for entry-level success on the job (Wilhelm, 2004).

Purpose and Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to determine the critical soft skills that employers want from their employees so that business educators can promote these skills in their curriculum to improve the employability of graduating business seniors.

Method and Procedures

Students in a junior-level business communication class were each required to interview two executives each semester for their final project. After the interview, the student gave the executive a "thank you" letter and an evaluation survey from the course professor, along with a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The evaluation survey asked the business executive to comment on the performance of the student during the interviewing process. Additionally, the survey asked about topics that the business executives deemed important for business graduates to study. During the spring semester 2011, the executives were also asked to list the 10 most important soft skills they wanted new employees to possess when hired for a position within their organization.

Forty-five students were enrolled in the two business communication courses during spring semester 2011, so 90 executives received the survey. Of those 90 business executives, 49 (54%) responded by returning the questionnaire in the self-addressed, stamped envelope. A list of 517 soft skills (with repetition) was created. Some executives listed more than 10 soft skills; therefore, more than 490 items were gathered. After the skills were coded with like terms and themes, 26 soft skills emerged. The 10 soft skills that were listed most often by the executives were then included in a questionnaire to be rated by importance. Some examples of the "like" terms that were categorized as one of the 10 most mentioned *soft skill attributes* are listed in Figure 1.

After the top 10 soft skills attributes were determined, a 5-point Likert-type scale was created that would measure the strength of importance of each attribute. During the fall semester 2011 and spring semester 2012, the questionnaire was distributed to the business executives (along with the "thank you" and evaluation survey) by the

- Communication – oral, speaking capability, written, presenting, listening
- Courtesy – manners, etiquette, business etiquette, gracious, says please and thank you, respectful
- Flexibility – adaptability, willing to change, lifelong learner, accepts new things, adjusts, teachable
- Integrity – honest, ethical, high morals, has personal values, does what's right
- Interpersonal Skills – nice, personable, sense of humor, friendly, nurturing, empathetic, has self-control, patient, sociability, warmth, social skills
- Positive Attitude – optimistic, enthusiastic, encouraging, happy, confident
- Professionalism – businesslike, well-dressed, appearance, poised
- Responsibility – accountable, reliable, gets the job done, resourceful, self-disciplined, wants to do well, conscientious, common sense
- Teamwork – cooperative, gets along with others, agreeable, supportive, helpful, collaborative
- Work Ethic – hard working, willing to work, loyal, initiative, self-motivated, on time, good attendance

Figure 1. Ten soft skill attributes categorized from executive listings

students after they conducted the interviews for their field report. There were 91 students in three classes over those two semesters, so the survey was sent to 182 executives. A response was received from 57 (62.6%) executives.

The questionnaire asked the executive to rate the level of importance of each of the 10 soft skills attributes. The range of *extremely important* (5), *very important* (4), *somewhat important* (3), *not very important* (2), and *not important* (1) was used.

Data Findings and Analysis

Executives overwhelmingly indicated that integrity and communication were the top two soft skills needed by employees in today's workplace. All 57 (100%) of the executives indicated that integrity and communication were very important or extremely important. Over three fourths of the respondents (84.2%) indicated that courtesy was an extremely important skill, and over half (71.9% and 61.4%, respectively) reported that responsibility and interpersonal skills were extremely important. The frequency of each response and the percentages that indicated the level of importance of each soft skill attribute as perceived by business executives can be seen in Table 1.

The mean score and standard deviation of each of the soft skill attributes related to its perceived level of importance is shown in Table 2. Each of the soft skill attributes had a mean score of ≥4.12 based on a 5.0 scale, where 5 = *extremely important*, 4 = *very important*, 3 = *somewhat important*, 2 = *not very important*, and 1 = *not important*. None of the soft skills attributes received a *not important* ranking. Teamwork skills and Flexibility each received one response for *not very important* (by different executives).

Table 1. Perceived Level of Importance of Each Soft Skill Attribute in Today's Workplace (N = 57)

Soft Skill Attribute	Not Important 1		Not Very Important 2		Somewhat Important 3		Very Important 4		Extremely Important 5	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Integrity							4	7.0	53	93.0
Communication							5	8.8	52	91.2
Courtesy					2	3.5	7	12.3	48	84.2
Responsibility					5	8.8	11	19.3	41	71.9
Interpersonal skills					9	15.8	13	22.8	35	61.4
Professionalism					7	12.3	23	40.4	27	47.4
Positive attitude					6	10.5	25	43.9	26	45.6
Teamwork skills			1	1.8	16	28.1	15	26.3	25	43.9
Flexibility			1	1.8	12	21.1	20	35.1	24	42.1
Work ethic					14	24.6	22	38.6	21	36.8

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Each Soft Skill Attribute Relative to Perceived Level of Importance (N = 57)

Soft Skill Attribute	M	SD
Integrity	4.93	0.26
Communication	4.91	0.28
Courtesy	4.81	0.48
Responsibility	4.63	0.64
Interpersonal skills	4.46	0.75
Positive attitude	4.35	0.66
Professionalism	4.35	0.69
Flexibility	4.18	0.82
Teamwork skills	4.12	0.88
Work ethic	4.12	0.77

Defining Hard and Soft Skills

The term *soft skills* has been around a long time in both business and educational settings, in corporate meetings, and in curriculum development (Evenson, 1999). When people think about their skills, they usually reflect on practices that they have perfected, such as keyboarding with speed and accuracy or wiring the electronics in an automotive system. Basically, when individuals use the term *hard skills*, they typically are referring to the definition of skill as defined by Random House Dictionary: the ability, coming from one's knowledge, practice, aptitude, to do something well; competent excellence in performance; and a craft, trade, or job requiring manual dexterity or special training in which a person has competence and experience

Soft Skills = Interpersonal (People) Skills + Personal (Career) Attributes

Figure 2. Soft skills are more than interpersonal skills

(http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/skills). Hard skills are those achievements that are included on a résumé, such as education, work experience, knowledge, and level of expertise. Examples of hard skills include job skills like typing, writing, math, reading, and the ability to use software programs (Investopedia, 2012).

The real soft skills definition is not about skills in the traditional sense. The Collins English Dictionary defines the term *soft skills* 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" (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/softskills). Soft skills are character traits, attitudes, and behaviors—rather than technical aptitude or knowledge. Soft skills are the intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator.

Soft skills are character traits that enhance a person's interactions, job performance, and career prospects (Parsons, 2008). The greatest feature of soft skills is that the application of these skills is not limited to one's profession. Soft skills are continually developed through practical application during one's approach toward everyday life and the workplace (Arkansas Department of Education, 2007; Magazine, 2003). Unlike hard skills, which are about a person's skill set and ability to perform a certain type of task or activity, soft skills are interpersonal and broadly applicable (Parsons, 2008).

Soft Skills Include More Than People Skills

People skills are a core component of soft skills (Cafasso, 1996; Klaus, 2010). People skills are the interpersonal attributes that characterize a person's relationships with others. Some researchers note that interpersonal skills are the most important skills at all levels of the job (Sheikh, 2009; Smith, 2007). While many authors equate interpersonal skills with soft skills (James & James, 2004; Perreault, 2004), interpersonal skills are only one facet of soft skills. In addition to interpersonal skills, soft skills include personal qualities and career attributes (James & James, 2004; Nieragden, 2000; Perreault, 2004). Personal attributes might include one's personality, likeability, time management prowess, and organizational skills (Parsons, 2008). Career attributes can include communication, teamwork, leadership, and customer service (James & James, 2004). People skills are the foundation of good customer service, and customer service skills are critical to professional success in almost any job (Evenson, 1999; Zehr, 1998). People skills promote a positive attitude, effective communication, respectful interaction, and the ability to remain composed in difficult situations (Evenson, 1999). Therefore, soft skills are made up of the combination of interpersonal (people) skills and personal (career) attributes, as shown in the equation in Figure 2.

Communication is an important interpersonal skill in today's global business environment (John, 2009; Timm, 2005). It is often assumed that communication is a fundamental skill that everyone knows and does well. Unfortunately, that assumption is usually not a reality. Communication, or the lack thereof, has been the reason for many tragedies and disasters that have taken place within the financial industry, health care, and the wider environment in recent years (Jelphs, 2006).

Businesses want resourceful employees with soft skills at all levels ("Employers Value Communication," 2004; John, 2009) with interpersonal qualities (Rodas, 2007) who can collaborate, motivate, and empathize with their colleagues (Klaus, 2010). Business leaders complain that graduates do not have soft skills such as work ethic, verbal and nonverbal communication, attendance, interview abilities, and positive attitude. As one employer said, "We want somebody who shows up on time, somebody who works hard and someone who's trainable" (Arkansas Department of Education, 2007, p. 13). When asking business educators' perceptions of the importance of specific soft skills for success in today's workplace, Mitchell et al. (2010) found ethics and general communication skills as extremely important, with 57% stressing written communication and 56% indicating time management and organization skills as extremely important.

Soft skills are employability skills that are transferrable in many jobs. Cleary, Flynn, and Thomasson (2006) define general employability skills as follows:

- Basic/fundamental skills: technical, knowledge of task, hands-on ability
- Conceptual/thinking skills: planning, collecting and organizing information, problem-solving
- Business skills: innovation and enterprise
- Community skills: civic and citizenship knowledge
- People-related skills: interpersonal qualities, such as communication and teamwork
- Personal skills: attributes such as being responsible, resourceful, and self-confident

Note that the "people-related skills" and the "personal skills" (attributes) above fit the definition of soft skills. "Soft" skills can also be called "applied" skills or "21st-century skills" (Gewertz, 2007). Soft skills have more to do with who we are than what we know. As such, soft skills encompass the character traits that decide how well one interacts with others, and are usually a definite part of one's personality. Whereas hard skills can be learned and perfected over time, soft skills are more difficult to acquire and change. Klaus (2010) compares the "bedside manner" needed by medical students to communication skills training needs for business curriculum. The soft skills required for a doctor, for example, would be empathy, understanding, active listening, and a good bedside manner. Alternatively, the hard skills necessary for a doctor would include a vast comprehension of illnesses, the ability to interpret test results and symptoms, and a thorough understanding of anatomy and physiology. The hard and soft skills must complement one another (Nieragden, 2000).

Importance in Today's Workplace

Soft skills are as important as cognitive skills (John, 2009; Zehr, 1998). Giving students soft skills could make the difference in their being hired for a job in their field (Evenson, 1999), and the lack of soft skills can sink the promising career of someone who has technical ability and professional expertise but no interpersonal qualities (Klaus, 2010). Wellington (2005) describes the soft skills of success based on his experiences in different management positions, primarily within human resources. Successful managers who were promoted had both excellent technical and soft skills, especially the willingness and ability to work positively with others. Cobanoglu, Dede, and Poorani (2006) concluded that soft skills were among the most important skills in the job requirements for a hotel information technology manager: Communication was the most important, followed by critical thinking, and then the knowledge of information technology.

The research for the 21st century shows that potential employers want to hire applicants with strong interpersonal skills ("Employers Value Communication," 2004; Glenn, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2010; Perreault, 2004; Sutton, 2002; Wilhelm, 2004), but new graduates are falling short of employers' expectations (National Union of Students, 2011). Employers stress that educators should be teaching their students how to cooperate with others in the workplace and successfully acquire customer service skills (Evenson, 1999). In fact, soft skills are so important that they are ranked as number one and extremely important for potential job hires in many occupations and industries (Sutton, 2002). Hiring applicants who have interpersonal skills is instrumental for successful organizations to maintain a competitive advantage (Glenn, 2008). Soft skills are critical in the technical workplace (James & James, 2004), and business professionals need these skills because employers value them (John, 2009).

Even though some money is devoted to training managers to comply with workplace rules and teaching them the financial basics, oftentimes little attention is given to soft skills (White, 2005). Many senior executives view the concept of training soft skills as simply a motivational seminar that inspires employees but offers little use for job application or value to the company that pays for the training (Onisk, 2011); and some will say that hard skills, such as those in construction, computer programming, or accounting, take precedence over knowing how to be diplomatic with an upset customer or show finesse as an effective team member (Evenson, 1999). In contrast, Klaus (2010) notes that she frequently finds senior managers complaining that their newest employees lack the interpersonal skills needed for success in the business world. Personality measures are equally important predictors of work success as cognitive ability and work accuracy.

Moad (1995) justifies the increases in training budgets driven by changes to client/server technologies and the need for soft skills in business. Soft skills must be quantifiable and measured in returns, with the benefit translated into the bottom line (Onisk, 2011). Hard skills are specific, teachable abilities that can be defined and measured. By contrast, soft skills are less tangible and harder to quantify (Bronson, 2007). Measuring the impact of soft skills training on the return on investment (ROI) versus the impact

of hard skills training is a challenge (Georges, 1996; Redford, 2007). Calculating the ROI and measuring the effectiveness of communications training, ethics, teamwork skills, and other softer skills is extremely difficult; therefore, many corporate training departments are reluctant to provide soft skills training. However, Moad (1995) notes that the impact of softer skills on ROI much more than justifies the money spent on training. Hard skills alone may be meaningless without soft skills. For example, software testers need two types of skills: one skill set to perform technical duties at work and one skill set to approach work with a positive attitude (soft skills; Magazine, 2003).

As a result of economic restructuring, European and Welsh business executives are trying to raise the skill levels of the workforce in order to boost productivity and economic growth and reduce unemployment. To engage workers with negative experiences of formal learning (e.g., school), there has been an increase in more informal learning, much of which is focused on soft skills, such as self-confidence and communication skills (Holtom & Bowen, 2007). Corporate trainers are implementing in-house training that teaches how to read people, draw out clients, and build relationships: skill-oriented executive education that fills in the holes of their employees' formal educations "all while bringing their humanity and personality into the mix" (Klaus, 2010, p. 9). Another method of promoting soft skills in organizations is to team up a newly hired employee with an expert mentor, who has been in the industry for 20 to 35 years. One Texas company begins the mentoring process informally, then involves an official mentorship relationship, and then returns to informality. The mentee learns both technical and soft skills from the mentor, such as the ability to cooperate with managers, peers, and customers (Riley, 2006).

Implications for Business Educators

Today, the national concern among business executives and professors is that high school graduates do not have the set of soft skills they need to be successful in college or in the workplace (Gewertz, 2007; National Union of Students, 2011). A survey of 400 leading American corporate managers in 2007 indicated that 70% of high school graduates lack professionalism and work ethic skills (Bronson, 2007). Another report, analyzing data from the U.S. Department of Labor, indicated that even though managers value interpersonal skills most in new employees, business graduates were not being taught the people skills they needed (Mangan, 2007). As educators open the lines of communication with employers, soft skills continue to be a topic of discussion (Kilday, 1996).

Companies are continuing to rate their employees' interpersonal skills as more important than their analytical abilities (Klaus, 2010). It is often said that hard skills will get you an interview but you need soft skills to get (and keep) the job. Success is based not only on what you know but also on how you can communicate it (Klaus, 2010). Technical skills are taught so that graduates can meet the job expectations and know-how (Magazine, 2003). Hard skills are easily justified and quantified, but

preparing students with soft skills could make the difference in whether they find, and keep, the job for which they earned a degree (Evenson, 1999). Even in the quantitative areas, educators must instill the importance and development of soft skills in addition to the specific discipline foundation. Surprisingly, most of one's education is time spent on learning technical skills (Magazine, 2003), but integration of soft skills with technical skills is critical (McGee, 2007). Information technology professionals, for example, can enhance their job security (i.e., safe from outsourcing) by integrating the required soft skills necessary for their job with their technical skills (Cafasso, 1996; McGee, 2007). The results can be easily quantified in information technology as returns are often immediate and the alternative costs would not be acceptable because the inherent value of these soft skills programs is intuitive at every level of the organization (Onisk, 2011).

Over a decade ago, the National Business Education Association's Policies Commission for Business and Economic Education (2000) noted the upcoming shortage of skills in today's workplace that stresses the need for interpersonal skills, above and beyond academics, technical skills, and hands-on training. Schools must do a better job of teaching "soft skills" if students are to succeed in the evolving American economy (Zehr, 1998). Nontechnical interpersonal skills are needed in addition to having technical competence. Integration of soft skills into the business curriculum promotes hiring of students in today's workforce (Glenn, 2008; James & James, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2010; Perreault, 2004; Wilhelm, 2004). Oftentimes, educators are already trying to cover more content than reasonably possible in the classroom, so asking for a unit on soft skills can be burdensome to those teachers who are already dealing with a tight curriculum schedule (Evenson, 1999). Schools must balance the preparation of students for both high-tech jobs and office jobs (Zehr, 1998).

Soft skills can be included into the curriculum easily by spreading the content throughout the semester (Evenson, 1999):

1. Introduce students to basic people skills so they understand how to get along with people.
2. Segue to teaching essential customer service skills.
3. Foster student understanding by facilitating a problem-solving discussion based on real-life situations.
4. Have students demonstrate the people skills they have learned using role-play exercises in a mock business setting.

One school in Great Britain requires secondary students to compile specialized electronic portfolios to measure their soft skills, such as teamwork, in completing various assignments, research projects, and presentations. This portfolio requirement and soft skills assessment is intended to improve the availability of vocational options for high school students (Mansell, 2006). Sacramento New Technology High School also assesses soft skills of the students. In addition to course content knowledge, math students are evaluated on team collaboration and oral communication. These two

interpersonal skills are among 10 student learning outcomes that students must master as they advance through all of their academic courses. The embedded assessments in coursework were designed to build soft skills as well as subject matter content (Gewertz, 2007).

One of the main challenges of soft skills training faced by educators is that we still have not figured out how to teach soft skills, nor have we figured out how to assess them and capture the impact of such programs on learners (Holtom & Bowen, 2007; Zehr, 1998). The outcomes of soft skills training are often intangible and provide gradual or deferred returns (Onisk, 2011). If teachers have the proper resources, they can do a better job preparing the employees that businesses are seeking in today's environment (Kilday, 1996).

Faculty development for business professors should be designed to assist with integration of interpersonal skills into the business curriculum (Mitchell et al., 2010). Research indicates that the typical learning styles of all students are not necessarily suited to the acquisition of generic skills. Boyce, Williams, Kelly, and Yee (2001) use a learning theory framework to support the use of case studies as an instructional method to capture various learning styles and, therefore, develop soft skills. When designing business curricula, soft skills that ranked low should still be emphasized because there could be a lack of value placed on the skill, or a lack of understanding of how to integrate the soft skill into the business curriculum (Mitchell et al., 2010).

Summary

Research suggests that soft skills are just as good an indicator of job performance as traditional job qualifications (hard skills). Hard skills are the technical abilities and knowledge that one possesses, whereas soft skills are those personal attributes and interpersonal qualities that are intangible. Although soft skills are important to recognize and improve, hard skills are critical on the job as well. While employers exceedingly want new employees to possess strong soft skills, the hard and soft skills must complement one another.

This study identified the top 10 soft skills as perceived the most important by business executives: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic.

Business executives consider interpersonal skills a very important attribute in job applicants. They want employees who are honest, can communicate well, get along with others, and work hard.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Corporate recruiters want candidates with soft skills who add value with their soft skills, and also have the ability to make a difference in the workplace. Business employees need to communicate effectively, get along well with their coworkers, embrace teamwork, take initiative, have high work ethic, and portray professionalism.

This study identified the top 10 soft skills attributes deemed critical by business executives. Even though all of the soft skills appear very important, not all are perceived by business executives to be equally important. This study found that communication, integrity, and courtesy are the most important interpersonal skills for success.

Soft skills are critical in today's workplace and should be viewed as an investment. Even though interpersonal skills are critical for employers, many job applicants and current employees in business do not have adequate interpersonal skills. Organizations need to train current employees to enhance their soft skills.

Although we see many challenges, we also have many opportunities to prepare business students for today's workforce. Business educators need to understand the importance of interpersonal skills for their students and include soft skills in their curriculum. Instructional strategies and methods can be applied in the classroom to enhance interpersonal skills. Soft skills and hard skills should be integrated to create a well-rounded business graduate.

Further research is needed to study interpersonal skills and determine if other soft skills are deemed as important as the attributes found in this study.

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Bio

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