

Soft Skills in the Workplace

Second Edition

Instructor's Guide

Overview

When most of us think of skills, we think of job-specific skills such as a mechanic's ability to repair engines or a pilot's ability to fly a plane. Yet many of the most important skills needed in today's workplace are used in nearly every job. They are soft skills—the personality traits and interpersonal skills that allow us to adapt to changing circumstances, manage time and resources, and work well with others.

Soft skills are highly valued by employers. Because most job-specific skills can be easily taught, employers would prefer to hire individuals with the required soft skills, such as adaptability, dependability, responsibility, and leadership and communication skills. This video discusses the importance of soft skills in the workplace and shows employees and job seekers how they can use their soft skills—or improve them—to be more productive and successful at work. It is divided into five sections, each covering a subset of soft skills as follows:

- Making a Professional Impression (reliability, appearance, mannerisms, time management)
- Acting with Integrity (honesty, work ethic)
- Communicating Effectively (written, verbal, and nonverbal communication)
- Working as Part of a Team (teamwork and conflict resolution)
- Pushing Yourself to Succeed (goal setting, staying positive, career management)

The video provides opportunities and questions for group discussion after each section. Feel free to follow the cues, pausing for activities and discussion as your own schedule dictates.

Presentation Suggestions

Begin by asking students about their own experiences at work. Have they had difficulties with customers or coworkers who were disrespectful, unreliable, or dishonest? Have they had difficulty working on a team or communicating with others? Have they struggled with being on time, making decisions, following instructions, or being professional?

Odds are students will have experiences with people who lack some of the basic soft skills required in the workplace, and every student can probably identify one or two soft skills that they could improve on themselves. Point out that like all other skills, soft skills can be learned and

improved. Also remind students that they are responsible for their own actions, attitudes, and behaviors, and that the point of this video and discussion is to think about ways to enhance their *own* soft skills.

When you feel students have begun thinking about these issues, give them the **Anticipation Quiz** to complete prior to watching the video. If you wish, allow the students to state their answers and discuss them.

Show the video. Encourage students to take notes or to make changes to the answers they put down for the Anticipation Quiz while watching the video.

At the conclusion of the video, ask students to discuss any changes they made to their answers on the Anticipation Quiz as a result of information they learned. Follow up this discussion with the **Activities**.

Use the **Discussion Questions** to request oral or written responses from students.

Give the **Quick Quiz** at the conclusion of class and correct the quizzes as a group. Assign the **Homework Option**, if desired.

Anticipation Quiz

Directions: Answer these questions as completely as possible. You may revise your answers as you watch the video.

1. What are some of the differences between soft skills and job-specific skills?
2. True or false: Knowing how to dress appropriately is a soft skill?
3. What does it mean to act with integrity at work?
4. What are some of the keys to being an effective listener?

Answer Key

1. Soft skills are necessary in almost every job and are closely tied to personality traits and people skills. Job-specific skills are targeted to a particular occupation.
2. True
3. (Answers may vary) Work during the time you are paid to work, follow rules and regulations, do your job correctly, own up to your mistakes.
4. (Answers may vary) Give speaker your full attention, ask for clarification, keep an open mind, watch body language and other nonverbal cues.

Activities

Activity #1

Title: Assessing Your Skills

Format: Individual/Group

Time: 20-25 minutes

Materials: Worksheet, pen

Procedure:

1. Use the worksheet on the last page of this study guide to get students thinking about their soft skills (you can make as many copies as necessary). Have them circle if each skill is a personal strength or if it needs improvement. For each skill that needs improvement, have students brainstorm one or two strategies for improving that skill.
2. Have students work in groups to discuss their strengths and weaknesses and share positive strategies for improving their soft skills.
3. Come together as a whole class and go down the list of soft skills, compiling a “playbook” of strategies for improving each of them.

Activity #2

Title: Tell Me About a Time When...

Format: Pairs

Time: 20-25 minutes

Materials: List of interview questions

Procedure:

1. It is important to articulate your soft skills in an interview or performance review. Students will take turns roleplaying an interview-type scenario. The “interviewer” should pick (or be assigned) one of the questions listed below and ask it. The “interviewee” should then answer that question, providing specific examples of their soft skills at work. Then partners should switch roles (using a new question).
 - Tell me about a time when you took the initiative at work...
 - Tell me about a time when you helped your team excel at a project...
 - Tell me about a time when you successfully dealt with an irate customer or client...
 - Tell me about a time when you stood up for what you believed in at work...

- Tell me about a particularly difficult goal you achieved at work...
 - Tell me about a time when you made a positive impact at work...
2. If you'd like, you can model a good response by having a student ask you one of the questions as well, either before or after their roleplaying session.

Discussion Questions

1. Which are more valuable: job-specific skills or soft skills? Why? Are there some occupations where job-specific skills are more important? Which soft skill is the most important in your particular line of work?
2. Employers expect you to represent their company professionally. How do your actions, behaviors, and appearance reflect on the reputation of the company you work for? What can you do to make a professional impression?
3. Soft skills come in handy when dealing with difficult customers or clients. What are the most important soft skills for workers who deal directly with the public? What are some effective strategies for calming irate customers and making sure they are satisfied?
4. Because employers are looking for them, it is important for job seekers to showcase their soft skills on resumes and in interviews. What are some strategies for persuading potential employers that you have the required soft skills for a job?
5. Many soft skills allow us to deal effectively with others, to appreciate their strengths and respect their differences. How have globalization and the increasing diversity in the workforce changed the need for soft skills? What soft skills are more important now than they were ten years ago?

Quick Quiz

Note: You may read these questions out loud, allowing time for students to respond, or copy and hand this out as a written exercise.

Directions: Indicate whether each statement is true or false, according to the video.

1. Soft skills are talents you are simply born with and cannot be learned or improved.
2. Soft skills easily transfer from one job to the next.
3. Being professional means paying attention to how you look as well as how you act.
4. Employers expect you to spend part of your work day checking personal email and handling personal business.
5. Active listening means never asking questions.

6. Acting with integrity includes taking responsibility for your own mistakes.
7. Teamwork requires you to respect the opinions of everyone, even if you don't agree with them.
8. Your attitude can affect the attitudes and work ethic of those around you.
9. Email is the best way to communicate highly sensitive or complex information.
10. You are responsible for setting many of your own work and career goals.

Answer Key

1. False
2. True
3. True
4. False
5. False
6. True
7. True
8. True
9. False
10. True

Homework Option

Have students keep a “Soft Skills Journal” in between this and the next class. Have them make note of situations where they use the soft skills discussed in class, both effectively and ineffectively. Tell them to come prepared to share some of their experiences with the rest of the class.

Soft Skills Self-Assessment

Soft Skill	Your Skill Level	Strategies for Improvement
Communicating clearly	Strength Needs Improvement	
Solving problems	Strength Needs Improvement	
Being honest	Strength Needs Improvement	
Being reliable	Strength Needs Improvement	
Following instructions	Strength Needs Improvement	
Getting along with others	Strength Needs Improvement	
Taking responsibility	Strength Needs Improvement	
Managing time	Strength Needs Improvement	
Listening	Strength Needs Improvement	
Keeping a positive attitude	Strength Needs Improvement	
Acting professional	Strength Needs Improvement	