Essential Soft Skills for Workplace Success

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Abstract

Employers assess and judge their employees on their knowledge of both technical skills and soft skills. Until the recent past, technical skills were given top priority. However, that perception has changed over time. The knowledge of soft skills is now being considered as important as or more important than technical knowledge. Professional success depends upon a host of parameters such as experience, expertise, skill level, personality traits, work style, communication style, and work-life balance. Soft skills have also become a key parameter of professional success. This paper looks at the factors that have contributed to the acknowledgment of the significance of the soft skills at workplace and also presents the ways in which the knowledge of the soft skills could be enriched to go up the career ladder. It proposes a list of key soft skills such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, team work, cross-cultural communication and personal accountability, which are expected to be the game changers. It is hoped that the employees' knowledge about essential soft skills would enable them to become productive and mindful professionals at their workplaces. It is also implied that employees view soft skills as valuable assets rather than extraneous matters in their professional success. The insights presented in the paper, if deployed diligently, could augur well for career growth and enable the employees to remain relevant even if the job and technology scenario keep changing.

1. Introduction

Companies and business organizations have changed the way they look at hard skills and soft skills. For too long, hard skills are regarded as the game changers that could enhance an organization's productivity, and the soft skills are "generally viewed as "nice to have"—maybe even something you are just born with—but not critical for success." (Klaus et al (2008)). However, there is an increasing realization now that soft skills add value to a company, and the companies have started "linking competency in the soft skills arena to positive performance appraisals and salary

increases" (Klaus et al.). Cartwright (2019) opines that "Today's employers are looking for more than just a few years of experience — they want qualified candidates with soft skills." Of course, though it depends on the nature of the job whether employers look for more of soft skills or hard skills in a candidate, it is being increasingly felt that conscious training in soft skills will help one to become irreplaceable in most organizations.

2. Background

Defining the term soft skills is a herculean task as it has varied connotations. Klaus opines that "there's nothing *soft* about soft skills". In fact, soft skills are, as reported by Paterson (2019), "Now more appropriately referred to as "power skills," a term coined by Dartmouth University president Philip Hanlon". A wide range of things such as personality traits, social behaviours, social etiquette, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, interpersonal relations, time management, stress management, etc. are subsumed under soft skills. These skills are normally contrasted with one's educational qualifications, technical skills, and language learning ability, etc., which are termed as hard skills. It is also presumed that learning and evaluating soft skills are harder and more time-consuming than hard skills.

Soft skills have occupied the center stage in professional and academic environments. Studies conducted by Google, LinkedIn, and Aspiring Minds give surprising and shocking details about the significance of soft skills. These studies suggest that there are a host of soft skills that are associated with professional success. "The seven top characteristics of success at Google are all soft skills: being a good coach; communicating and listening well; possessing insights into others (including others different values and points of view); having empathy toward and being supportive of one's colleagues; being a good critical thinker and problem solver; and being able to make connections across complex ideas." (Strauss (2017)). Candidates aspiring for jobs must also take note of the rising status of soft skills and act accordingly, for as noted by Skill Survey "67% HR managers would hire a candidate with strong soft skills even if hard skills are weak." Candidates should also showcase the soft skills they are endowed with on their resumes. Rele (2018) explains that "Hard skills may look impressive on the CV but soft skills essentially make your candidature stand out at the job interviews." It is worth noting that students who are trained in soft skills during their academic life would be able to transfer the same in their future work environments. Appleby states: "After all, preparation for success in the world of work is one of the most important goals of a college education, so it made sense for me to help my students become aware that the soft skills that can help them to

succeed in the college classroom will also be those they will need to enter and thrive in the workplace after they graduate."

Soft skills assume greater significance in the changing job scape. Artificial Intelligence is changing the modern work spaces and environments. Job market is gripped by uncertainty- some jobs are made redundant; new jobs are created. This essentially goes to prove that a person's hard skills could quickly get outdated, but the soft skills such as ability to learn new things, for instance, learning aspects of jobs that haven't been automated, flexibility, coping with changes, creative problem-solving will be in ever greater demand. Carpenter (2019) suggest that "As we all adjust to the future of work, human employees will need to acquire new skills and adapt to the increasingly capable machines augmenting their skills in the workplace." It appears plausible that irrespective of the levels of automation that take place in the future, employees that are strong in empathy, compassion, collaboration and creativity will be valued by their employers.

Commenting on the significance of soft skills, Sreehari (2020) states that "Expectedly, soft skills have become a deal breaker in today's work environment. Recruiters consider that soft skills are vital ingredients for the young workforce. Soft skills assumed greater significance in view of demands on the workforce to establish bond with co-workers, to work in collaborative environment with others, to understand the needs of the clientele and to come up with innovative solutions using emotional intelligence, critical mind set and creative thinking."

Soft skills could enable an employee to deal with the ever-changing workplace dynamics relating to new technologies, climate change concerns, new viruses, and remote working. To navigate these new realities, which could possibly be challenging and disorienting, employees need to equip themselves with traits such as clarity, positivity, hope, and resilience. Finetuning the knowledge of essential soft skills such as self-awareness, emotional intelligence, team work, cross-cultural communication, critical thinking, and personal accountability are the game changers that could enable employees to remain relevant in their workplaces.

3. Top Soft Skills for Workplace

Self-awareness

Eurich (2017) categorizes self-awareness into internal self-awareness and external self-awareness. She considers that "self-awareness is *the* meta-skill of twenty-first century – the foundation for high performance, smart choices and lasting relationships. An understanding one's

own self is internal self-awareness. External self -awareness involves how others see you. A conscientious employee must be aware of his roles and responsibilities, work mindfully and professionally to reach requisite goals in a transparent and democratic manner. Self-awareness is a key ingredient that could achieve quality results at a workplace. Being aware of one's mood swings, style of work, ability to cope with pressure, ability to relate to co-workers, working under deadlines, and clarity of decisions about various aspects of work are some of the things that could enhance effectiveness at workplace. Employees should keep a journal to record their thoughts about their work and their behaviour at workplace to become more self-aware and to achieve better productivity.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence refers to manging emotions. Salovey and Mayer (1990) describe emotional intelligence as "set of skills hypothesized to contribute to the accurate appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself and others, the effective regulation of emotion in self and others, and the use of feelings to motivate, plan, and achieve in one's life." Daniel Goleman, a globally acclaimed psychologist and behavioural scientist, states that "By teaching people to tune in to their emotions with intelligence and to expand their circles of caring, we can transform organizations from the inside out and make a positive difference in our world." Talking about the relevance of emotional intelligence in the workplace, Brown (2021) contends that "Using emotional intelligence in the workplace can improve decision making, help social interactions run smoothly, and enhance employees' ability to deal with stressful times. Recognizing, understanding and regulating emotions is key to workplace success. Employees should learn to balance their reasoning and emotional abilities to develop into holistic personalities.

Team Work

Ability to work in teams is a much-valued skill at modern workplaces. Effective teams could produce better results than individuals working alone. Butterfield states that "Successful teams can complete more tasks and produce more high-quality results than a person working alone." Butterfield lists five elements that are essential to ensuring team success – discuss the team goals, clearly understand each member's roles and expectations, let a team member emerge as the leader, show respect for differences and create a sense of urgency. One can learn to work successfully in teams if one is ready to participate actively in different aspects of team tasks, establish strong connect with

other members, recognize team contributions, and focus more on positives that emerge from the team work than dwell on occasional misunderstandings, differences and delusions.

Cross-cultural Communication

Highlighting the need for cross-cultural communication, Gorman (2020) states that "To be successful in a world that is rapidly changing, you need to communicate effectively. But when there are people with different backgrounds and cultural norms, making yourself understood can turn out to be a real challenge. Cross-cultural communication is important because it helps you prevent conflicts and misunderstandings." Effective communication at workplace should involve understanding and respecting varied cultures, being alert about communication style, and using humour and slang at permissible levels.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is an important soft skill for life as well as professional success. Doyle (2020) defines critical thinking as "the ability to analyze information objectively and make a reasoned judgment. It involves the evaluation of sources, such as data, facts, observable phenomena, and research findings." According to Insight Assessment, business professionals must display five critical thinking skills - problem analysis, evaluating alternatives, precise contexts, ambiguous contexts and quantitative contexts. As critical thinking plays a key role in various aspects of one's career such as decision making, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, employees need to work consciously to cultivate critical thinking skills with a scientific and systematic approach.

Personal Accountability

Ramesh and Ramesh (2013) describe personal accountability as a soft skill which is part attitude and part techniques. They consider that this skill is "an implicit collection of a lot of things like goal-setting and execution based on your shareholder's expectations, your own vision of your job, responsiveness to customers, the fire within you, your views and ideals – just about anything that will make you a self-starter and a clean-finisher of things in your area of expertise. According to them, the components of accountability include taking initiative and boldness, problem-solving, accuracy and perfection, exceeding expectations or wowing the customers, taking up slack for others – relationship with team, resourcefulness, open-mindedness, communication and follow-through and

professionalism. Employees that possess the key elements of personal accountability will be trusted and valued by their employers. They should feel responsible, understand their roles clearly, do their work displaying qualities such as initiative, resourcefulness and mindfulness. Mindful professionals grasp the various aspects of work with greater subtleties and grab the opportunities to shine and progress effortlessly at workplace and in their personal lives. Personal accountability as a soft skill should not be treated as less important than other key soft skills such as team work and cross-cultural communication.

4. Conclusion

As companies consider soft skills as an asset in their employees, the employees must not view soft skills as extraneous matters in their professional success but must give due respect and work diligently and consistently in updating their knowledge of the essential soft skills. Since the knowledge and deployment of soft skills drives the professional vigour, employees must utilize all avenues and resources to enhance their knowledge of the soft skills that are related to their own specific context.

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