

Journal #2: What qualities and goals do you have and how do they fit in with your career interest? Based on the soft skills discussed in this article, discuss one that is a strength for you and one with which you struggle. Share your hopes and plans for the next five years.

6 soft skills everyone needs and employers look for

Technical skills may get you an interview, but these six soft skills will get you the job.

By Larry Buhl

In a 2008 survey of more than 2,000 businesses in the state of Washington, employers said entry-level workers in a variety of professions were lacking in several areas, including problem solving, conflict resolution and critical observation.

You'll likely see these "soft skills" popping up in job descriptions, next to demands for technical qualifications. Employment experts agree that tech skills may get you an interview, but these soft skills will get you the job—and help you keep it:

Communication skills

This doesn't mean you have to be a brilliant orator or writer. It does mean you have to express yourself well, whether it's writing a coherent memo, persuading others with a presentation or just being able to calmly explain to a team member what you need.

Teamwork and collaboration

Employers want employees who play well with others—who can effectively work as part of a team. "That means sometimes being a leader, sometimes being a good follower, monitoring the progress, meeting deadlines and working with others across the organization to achieve a common goal," says Lynne Sarikas, the MBA Career Center Director at Northeastern University.

Adaptability

This is especially important for more-seasoned professionals to demonstrate, to counter the (often erroneous) opinion that older workers are too set in their ways. "To succeed in most organizations, you need to have a passion for learning and the ability to continue to grow and stretch your skills to adapt to the changing needs of the organization," Sarikas says. "On your resume, on your cover letter and in your interview, explain the ways you've continued to learn and grow throughout your career."

Problem solving

Be prepared for the "how did you solve a problem?" interview question with several examples, advises Ann Spoor, managing director of Cave Creek Partners. "Think of specific examples where you solved a tough

business problem or participated in the solution. Be able to explain what you did, how you approached the problem, how you involved others and what the outcome was—in real, measurable results."

Critical observation

It's not enough to be able to collect data and manipulate it. You must also be able to analyze and interpret it. What story does the data tell? What questions are raised? Are there different ways to interpret the data? "Instead of handing your boss a spreadsheet, give them a business summary and highlight the key areas for attention, and suggest possible next steps," Sarikas advises.

Conflict resolution

The ability to persuade, negotiate and resolve conflicts is crucial if you plan to move up. "You need to have the skill to develop mutually beneficial relationships in the organization so you can influence and persuade people," Sarikas says. "You need to be able to negotiate win-win solutions to serve the best interests of the company and the individuals involved."

When it comes to soft skills, show—don't tell

How do you prove you're proficient at, say, critical observation? Demonstrating these soft skills may be more difficult than listing concrete accomplishments like \$2 million in sales or a professional certification. But it is possible to persuade hiring managers that you have what they need.

To demonstrate communication skills, for example, start with the obvious. Make sure there are no typos in your resume or cover letter. Beyond that, enhance your communication credibility by writing an accomplishment statement on your resume or cover letter, says Cheryl E. Palmer, president of Call to Career. "Instead of stating, 'great oral and written communication skills,' say, 'conducted presentation for C-level executives that persuaded them to open a new line of business that became profitable within eight months.'"

Learn soft skills

The good news is that, like any skill, soft skills can be learned. The better news? Boosting your soft skills not only gives you a leg up on a new job or a promotion, but these skills also have obvious applications in all areas of a person's life, both professional and personal.

- **Take a Course:** Some colleges are mixing technology with areas such as effective written and verbal communication, teamwork, cultural understanding and psychology. Take a writing or public speaking course to boost your communication skills. Look for a conflict-resolution course or "leadership skills" class at your local community college.
- **Seek Mentors:** Be as specific as you can about your target skill, and when you're approaching a potential mentor, compliment that person with a specific example in which you've seen him practice that skill, advises Ed Muzio, the author of *Make Work Great*. "Then ask whether that person would be willing to share ideas with you about how you might achieve the same level of capability," he says. "Maybe it will grow into a long mentoring relationship, or maybe you'll just pick the person's brain for a few minutes."

- Volunteer: Working with nonprofit organizations gives you the opportunity to build soft skills. And listing high-profile volunteer work on your resume gives you an excuse to point out what you gained there. For example, "As chair of the environmental committee, planned and carried out a citywide park cleanup campaign. Utilized team-building, decision-making and cooperative skills. Extensive report writing and public speaking.

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