

7 indispensable soft skills to develop

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Oftentimes when you're eyeing job descriptions, you're haphazardly and unintentionally checking off what requirements you match. Being fluent in programs, applications and languages are your hard skills — the technical aspects that allow you to master your job effectively and efficiently. While a robust set of hard skills is necessary for a flourishing career, it's your soft skills that bring your performance to life.

These often-underrated proficiencies make you a team player, a confident and compassionate leader and a dedicated, loyal professional. Much like you would continue your education or take a course to enrich your knowledge bank, continuously improving your communication style, body language, and working style is essential to success, too.

As workplace expert Amy Cooper Hakim, Ph.D. explains, "An employee can be taught how to use a certain computer program much more quickly than she can be taught how to establish rapport or trust with a colleague or customer. Bosses look for those with excellent soft skills to lead others, to gain customers and to share and promote ideas in group settings."

Here are some of the skills you may want to work on.

Make more eye contact

Though it's likely been quite some time since you consciously minded your manners as your mother taught you, some of her life lessons extend far beyond childhood. One of which is making eye contact. As children, we are instructed that seeing eye-to-eye — literally — is a sign of mutual respect and assurance. But as we continue in our adult lives, facing disappointments and setbacks that may send our confidence down a notch, looking someone square in their baby blues might feel more difficult.

Executive coach and entrepreneur Stacey Hanke says this behavior is the only one that builds an all-too-important agreement between two people, in business or in life: trust. Especially if you're ahem, eyeing, a raise or a promotion, trying to snag a big deal for your company or give negative feedback to your direct report, if you look around the room instead of them, you won't be taken seriously.

"If you can't connect and engage with your listeners, you jeopardize building trust with your listeners. If your listeners don't trust you, you will not have influence on them," she says.

To improve this skill, start small with your friends and family. Since you know and spend a vast amount of time with these folks, it feels more natural to maintain eye contact with them while you're catching up on the latest gossip, seeking advice or discussing your upcoming travel plans. The more often you engage in this type of behavior, the easier it will become to apply the ritual to your workplace.

Speak in sentences, not paragraphs

We all have that pal who means well, but frankly, can't tell a story without it rambling on for ages. You might find it endearing when you're sharing beers on trivia night, but carrying out long-winded monologues doesn't usually go over well in the professional environment.

As Hanke explains, speaking in paragraphs instead of sentences can frustrate those listening and make them automatically tune-out when you take the floor.

"We all live in a fast-paced world receiving messages 24/7 every day. Speaking in short bullet point sentences, pausing to allow your listeners to stay with you will help you be heard above the noise," she says.

To put this skill into practice, pinch yourself on the wrist each time you're about to chime in. This will serve as your reminder to think before you speak, giving you a minute to summarize your opinion or additional note without stuttering your way to a conclusion.

Stand up for your ideas effectively

With limited budgets, changing economies and a turbulent political climate, it's more important than ever to effectively communicate your ideas and needs with your employer. This is often a task that's easier imagined than executed, according to Hakim, who notes many people struggle with being clear. An example might be when you are trying to make a case for an additional employee, but you come unprepared with stats to prove your case and you back down instantly at the first criticism.

Instead of being confident and ready to go up to bat for your ask, you might cower because you fear rejection or you're unable to truly dictate what you mean, what you need and why you need it. Hakim says joining a Toastmasters meeting can be a helpful, judgement-free way to improve your speech skills and put them into action, so you can win your case — and stop working overtime.

Give your voice an audit

Sure, you can't change the voice you were born with. But you can audit your rhythms, enunciation, and volume to best serve your career.

Not sure how you sound, or can't remember the last time you were recorded? You're definitely not alone, according to Hanke. She explains that "most individuals believe they sound different than what their listeners hear. Especially during virtual conversations your voice is critical because in most cases you can't see your listeners."

Hanke suggests recording yourself whenever you can.

"Audio and video don't lie. These tools give you the opportunity to experience what your listeners experience when you're communicating with them," she says. "Until you take this step, there is a strong probability you are basing your level of influence and how others perceive you based on what you believe to be true rather than what your listeners experience."

Practice being flexible

Timelines shift forward. Deadlines get missed. Contractors don't always follow through or meet your expectations. Budgets get cut. Sometimes managers are inconsiderate. It's all part of the natural ebb-and-flow of any profession, and your ability to flow with the inevitable is a must-have soft skill, according to Hakim. "We need to be able to change direction quickly and embrace new ideas. Make a resolution to practice adapting to change," she says.

One easy way to implement this flexibility is to again, take a pause before saying 'no' to any idea, request, or ask that might feel like it's out of your comfort zone. The same goes with any tendency to complain. Take a moment to truly think if your negative mentality will change an outcome or if it will actually make the situation worse by poisoning others.

"Remember that top leaders — and employees! — embrace different ideas and thoughts from those who are flexible and happy," Hakim says.

Practice positive facial expressions

No, this doesn't mean you should smile your way through something that makes you uneasy or pretend like you're ecstatic when you're having a rough day. Rather, this soft skill relates to how you treat others and how you express your opinion. As Hanke notes, if a colleague is articulating their excitement for a new deal, project, or promotion and you don't respond to their joy genuinely, they may doubt your intention.

The same goes when you're giving a presentation — if you're not amped up and supportive of your own ideas, it's difficult to engage others to hop on board.

Prioritize problem-solving skills

As a skill that borders between hard and soft, problem solving abilities are clutch for career advancement and team leading. The more actively you demonstrate your way to turn a disappointment into an achievement, the more trusted and valued you will be at your workplace and by management.

Instead of merely relying on technology, Hakim says being able to exercise your brain on-the-spot is more impressive.

“Use your mind to think critically and to determine the most efficient and effective way to get to an end goal. Those who can think for themselves and who can justify proposed ideas are those who make headway in the business world,” she says.

You don't have to go back to school to double-down on this soft skill, but you can return to your childhood by playing a game! There are fun ways to improve your cognitive skills, like playing brain-training games when you're waiting in line at Starbucks.

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