

Soft Skills: Their Importance, and Their Impact in the Modern Workplace

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Partner Organization Mission and Product:

Salesforce is an Artificial Intelligence and Customer Relationship management company. Their CRM products bring together customer data across various channels from sales calls and interactions in brick-and-mortar stores onto a single, unified platform to enable businesses to track customer interactions across the customer journey and utilize this information to manage customer relations. Their latest product, Education Cloud, similarly aims to assist students throughout their lifetime, starting from the time they become prospective students and extending beyond their graduation once they have become alumni. Their core values and mission are to engender trust, facilitate customer success, and empower their business to enact change in the world.

Problem:

A key element outlined in Salesforce's problem regarding communicating soft skills is how students' soft skills can be tracked by the career service workers that partner with them. As opposed to technical skills which grow in a more linear fashion, soft-skills are more non-linear in nature. As a result, the development of soft-skills is harder to evaluate in a quantifiable manner, making it more difficult to track how a student's soft-skills evolve over time. The question then becomes what methods career service employees can employ to create a more quantifiable framework for evaluating a student's developing soft-skills.

On the path to constructing a quantifiable method to measure the growth of soft skills, I am to outline: the definition of soft skills and what differentiate them from hard skills; which soft skills are considered the most crucial; and how soft skills can drive productivity and business performance.

In order to discuss the potential impacts soft skills can have on the workplace, we must first define what soft skills are, and distinguish them from hard skills. Hard skills, also known as technical skills, are often defined as skills that are specific, teachable, and measurable (Krishna 55). Common examples of hard skills given often relate to technical subjects such as computer programming and data analysis (Krishna 55). On the opposite end of the spectrum, soft skills, also referred to as interpersonal skills, are characterized as abilities that stem from an individual's character, behavior, and personal attributes (Krishna 55; Robles 453). For these reasons, soft skills are often regarded as more elusive to quantify, and also more difficult to develop because they are not directly linked to a specific domain of expertise. However, this lack of a clear connection to a specialized field also enables them to be applied in a wide variety of fields. Among the multitude of soft skills that exist, some stand out as more notable and valuable than others.

Across various discussions of soft skills, five appear the most prominently, those being: communication, teamwork, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and adaptability (Krishna 55; Robles 455). Communication skills are concerned with not only expressing one's thoughts in a clear manner, but to also actively listen and comprehend the ideas of others on the same level (Wallace). Communication goes hand in hand with collaboration, as it is the process of working with others across various backgrounds and striving to understand each other to facilitate effective group work. Critical thinking skills are also critical to the workplace as they involve analyzing information to identify evidence to inform and support sound decision making (Wallace). Emotional intelligence, also known as EI, is the capacity to identify and regulate one's emotions and to anticipate the emotions experienced by others to better understand them (Wallace). Adaptability is the practical ability to remain flexible, which enables individuals to

handle obstacles or new challenges they encounter (Wallace). Though these skills evidently underlie many day to day responsibilities in the workplace their influence is more considerable than one may think.

Despite soft skills' reputation as being intangible and hard to quantify, they have substantial impacts on workplace performance. Soft skills are key in circumventing conflicts between colleagues. Strong teamwork skills and through mutual understanding fueled by emotional intelligence builds bonds between co-workers, forming a solid foundation for collaboration (Shillie 3). Clear communication plays a significant role in this by preventing arguments and misunderstanding from fostering between collaborators. Reducing conflicts and confusion increases productivity as work is not hindered by interpersonal issues, and team members can collaborate more effectively (Bucata 52). Soft skills are also indispensable for innovation. Individuals with problem-solving skills are able to think outside of the box and invent new, forward thinking solutions. Thinking ahead and the ability to adapt ensures companies will remain competitive in their field. These impacts are not just hypothetical, they have been demonstrated in real-world studies. In a study where interns and their overseeing managers were surveyed to assess intern performance, individuals who had a higher performance were also found to have ranked highly in their soft skills (Franco-Angel et al. 390). A high correlation between workplace performance and skill level suggests that soft skills contribute greatly to worker performance. Additionally, in a study where female garment workers working at a garment export firm in India underwent soft skills training, workers who underwent training were found to be "more productive by 7.4 percentage points [...] 13.5% higher than the control" who did not undergo training (Adhvaryu et al. 2168). The significant difference in productivity between the workers formally trained and soft skills and those who were not signifies the

underlying productivity potential for all workers. Eight months after the program's completion, productivity resulting from the training was calculated to have generated a net rate return of 256% (Adhvaryu et al. 2203). This study illustrates a direct relationship between soft skills and business performance. When soft skills improve an employee's performance, they also improve a business's revenue as well. This insight suggests hiring employees with soft skills would be greatly beneficial to companies. Having seen the impact soft skills can have on improving various aspects of work experience, how does this translate into their desirability in the workplace?

In a survey conducted by LinkedIn in 2019, over five-thousand talent professionals were asked to identify emerging trends in the workplace. Of the four trends identified by the study, soft skills was ranked the highest, being considered very important by 91% of the talent professionals (Lobosco). This high percentage indicates that soft skills are extremely valued, which was reinforced by the professionals in the study, who claimed that they are considered soft skills just as much, if not more, than hard skills in the hiring process (Lobosco). LinkedIn's 2024 Global Talent Trends study echoed similar sentiments; it found that 69% of executives in the United States "plan to prioritize hiring candidates with soft skills" in the upcoming year ("October 2024 Global Talent Trends"). At a percentage higher than 50%, this study reflects that not only is there a growing demand for soft skills, but that it continues to rise. With the rising demand for soft skills comes the question of what is responsible for this shift. In the same 2024 report, LinkedIn's Vice President and head of global talent acquisitions Erin Scruggs urged to hiring managers that "as AI increasingly takes on the less complex, more repeatable tasks being done by the workforce, companies will need to hire talent who have broader, uniquely human skills" ("October 2024 Global Talent Trends"). AI has rapidly learned and developed many types

of technical skills, posing an increasing threat to those in technical professions such as computer programmers and writers. However, because soft skills stem from a person's character they are uniquely human, and hard to replicate. As AI continues to evolve, I believe the soft skills utilized to complement them will continue to grow in value exponentially.

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