

# The ACE of Soft Skills



# The ACE of Soft Skills

*Attitude, Communication and  
Etiquette for Success*

*Gopalaswamy Ramesh  
Mahadevan Ramesh*



Delhi • Chennai • Chandigarh

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*In fond memory of 'Appi' who epitomized lifelong learning,  
a cheerful attitude and endeared himself  
to people in diverse cultures and age groups*

*—Gopalaswamy Ramesh*

*To my mother and to the memory of my father*

*—Mahadevan Ramesh*



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## Foreword

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### Foreword from Industry

A recent report by a global research firm has indicated that the Indian IT industry is targeting multifold growth in exports in the next couple of years. This directly translates to an estimated demand of 850,000 IT professionals and 1.4 million ITeS-BPO personnel. Since Indian academia adds close to 3.5 million graduates and postgraduates every year, on the face of it, this does not seem to be a major challenge. But a large number of these young professionals are not adequately equipped to face the highly competitive and very demanding corporate world of today. Most of their focus in the technology domain remains limited to working as a one-man army reproducing what they read, with little emphasis on application and creativity. This makes it very difficult for them to work in teams. There is a need to polish their skills with respect to disciplines like documentation, systematic processes and all-round excellence.

In my view, the above problem of people not being able to work in teams and not being able to write or follow documentation is a symptom of a more deep-rooted problem—that of a lack of proper imparting of soft skills in aspiring students. We in the corporate sector want the students to be ‘industry ready’. By that I mean that they should be able to get into a job and be able to contribute right from day one—they should hit the road running. That is not happening today. The main ingredient missing in the making of a perfect professional is that of non-existence of what goes by the generic term ‘soft skills’.

It is in this context that this book *The ACE of Soft Skills* is very relevant, and addresses some of the core issues we need to retrain our students and professionals in. It is rare to find a book that provides in one place a compendium of all relevant skills, starting ground up from the basic attitude and going through the layers of communication and etiquette. From the industry perspective, I think some of the most relevant aspects that caught my eye in this book are the following:

- ▶ As we move towards globally distributed teams, which is more a norm than an exception in the IT and BPO sectors, it is essential that the Indian employees should know how to cope with and appreciate *diversity*.
- ▶ As India makes more advances in the BPO space, it is likely that the Indian professionals may be performing activities that are essential for business success, but may not be considered glamorous. This calls for the Indian employees to get a panoramic ‘big picture’, understand and value their contribution to the bigger cause and *take pride* in their contribution.

- ▶ Yet another demand placed by the geographic distribution of teams is that the team members must be able to communicate using multiple media like the *phone, e-mail, blogs and tweets*. For a country in which telephones have become mainstream only in the last decade or less, and Internet penetration is still not comparable to other industrialized countries, these are not skills that are very familiar and seldom taught in colleges.
- ▶ The Indian IT industry has moved from a pure resource model to a highly respected integrated team model, where the Indian engineers today work shoulder-to-shoulder with their counterparts from the USA and other countries. This requires them to interact in a sense of mutual respect, rather than act in a subservient, subordinate mode. This requires the soft skills of *effective communication* and embellishing with polished *etiquette*.
- ▶ As Indian professionals work with the more demanding and highly empowered professionals from other cultures like the ones from the USA, they should learn to be more assertive and know how to *make meaningful commitments and be able to say 'no'* when necessary.
- ▶ Finally, if you think I am being too narrowly focused on the IT and BPO segments, consider this: With its growing domestic market and increased wealth building of the middle class, international business houses like manufacturing companies, airlines, retail stores, fast-food chains and financial services companies are increasing and widening their presence in India. Employees in these segments are also going through the same effects of globalization and require the same skills to be able to communicate with, visit and to gel with people from other cultures. It is fair to say that these skills are very unique in that these are absolutely essential irrespective of which profession they are in.

The HCL Enterprise has always been contributing to improving skills of students as well as its employees. We have launched the HCL Career Development Centers (HCL CDC), where we place a significant emphasis on making the aspirants 'industry ready', employable professionals of which imparting the necessary soft skills is an essential part. Our efforts in helping career development would not bear full fruit unless people who have rich practical experience come forward to share their experiences with the community. It is indeed fitting that two seasoned professionals who come from very strong multicultural and multidisciplinary industry backgrounds are writing this book. What is more, their simple, easy-to-read style, adorned by practical examples brings to life realistic scenarios that one faces.

I am sure this book will be an indispensable addition to anyone who wants to get a real perspective on soft skills and aims to go further in his or her career. I wish the authors all the best in repeating and exceeding the success of their earlier books.

**Ajai Chowdhry**  
Founder-HCL

Chairman & CEO-HCL Infosystems Ltd

### Foreword from Academia

Over the past four decades, I have been privileged to be associated with such institutions as Carnegie Mellon University, Kellogg School of Management, Bauer College of Business in University of Houston, in the USA. In India, too, I have been involved, over the last 20 years, in founding the PGPM programme at MDI, Gurgaon; as the founding faculty and chairman of the faculty of the Indian School of Business (ISB); and, as the Dean, in founding Great Lakes Institute of Management, a reputed and successful institution in India. During this exciting journey, I have had the opportunity to work with and mentor literally hundreds of students from India, who are highly successful in their chosen careers. All these great men and women have a few things in common—that they are not only experts in their chosen fields, but are also the most articulate; their power of compelling communication match their high level of intellect; their strong conviction and pride in what they believe in fuel this intense drive and conviction; their adaptability to multiple cultures and environments make them successful in the global arena. In short, I believe that the success is directly attributable to the appropriate mix of the so-called soft skills in their persona. I have seen this belief reinforced in my association as a board member in Personalitree, which inculcated soft skills in the Indian college students of engineering and management, by making them cultivate the right-brain functions that are so essential for soft skills.

When one of our adjunct faculties, Gopalaswamy Ramesh, approached me with a request for a foreword for a book on soft skills, I was intrigued and had several questions—what new things can be written about soft skills? In what new ways can these be said to create a lasting impression? Upon closer look, I found several things unique about this book:

- ▶ By defining soft skills as those skills that are required to succeed in one's environment, the authors have given the most broad-based, appropriate and results-oriented definition of soft skills that I have seen.
- ▶ By covering a broad spectrum of topics relating to soft skills—a positive attitude towards oneself and towards the group, taking ownership, dealing with tough situations and so on—this book is significantly more than a quick-fix, spoken-English communication guide.
- ▶ This book includes the full range of communication scenarios in a business environment—starting from resumé-writing to interviews to meeting management and proposal-writing—and, hence, would be useful to everyone, regardless of which stage of their career they are in.
- ▶ The authors have brought in challenges and solutions relating to the use of modern-era-communication vehicles such as e-mail, phone and text messaging, thus increasing the direct practical relevance of the book. Most of the earlier business communication text books sidestep this important aspect of adapting to these new media.

- ▶ The authors have followed a novel approach of using typical work scenarios (which they have called 'Snapshots') to illustrate the concepts and approaches, making the learning highly experiential. The presence of cartoons lightens the reading, without reducing the quality of content.
- ▶ A number of graduates from successful academic institutions like the Great Lakes get placed in MNCs. It is essential for these students to get sensitized to the realities of working in multicultural, trans-border, multifunctional teams. This book amply highlights this important area. The authors have also shown that they have a clear pulse of the sensitive areas by covering topics dealing with diversity awareness and how to say 'no'.

I strongly believe that we should ingrain soft skills into our professionals by catching them young. As a part of our social responsibility, Great Lakes is working with a few schools in Chennai and providing exposure and experience to school students to inculcate effective soft skills. This will enable them to hit the road running when they get into college. And we should continually reinforce these skills at all levels, till they become a habit for them.

I am delighted that Professor Gopalswamy Ramesh, who teaches in the MBA programme at Great Lakes, which nurtures all the values, has put in this effort in co-authoring this book. I would like to suggest that this book and the principles and practices discussed here should be covered at the school level itself and re-emphasized at the college level.

The most important attribute for a student to succeed in soft skills is attitude, if they want to compete with the best of class from the USA and the rest of the world. I am confident that this book will enhance this recognition and make the students and professionals, at all levels, master this aspect. It is certain that all of them will immensely benefit from this book. I wish the authors and the book all the very best in this endeavour.

**Bala Balachandran**

J. L. Kellogg Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Accounting  
and Information Management

Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA;

Founder and Dean, Great Lakes Institute of Management, Chennai, India;

Executive Professor and Strategy Advisor to the Dean,  
Bauer College of Business, University of Houston, TX, USA

## Preface

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The past decade or so has been an exciting time in India. The behemoth, India Inc. not only woke up, but also has been on a relentless march towards a dominant position in the international business arena. And this is happening against the backdrop of an increasingly globalized world economic order and to the sounds of revolutions in telecommunication and information technologies. The growth hormone that is driving this process is the millions of young men and women professionals of India who design electronic chips, develop software, manage off-shored infrastructure remotely and answer phone calls in BPO call centres. As the world gets even more globalized and as India's competition is trying to chip away at its advantages, it is crucial that India's workforce remains world-class, through re-training and continued improvement and that a steady stream of fresh men and women are groomed in the art and science of being professionals. We believe, based on our personal experience in various capacities, that to create and nurture successful professionals, one needs to instil in them a strong measure of the so-called soft skills. It is our opinion that to succeed in today's—and tomorrow's—competitive environment the acquisition, cultivation and fine-tuning of soft skills is highly essential. This book is born out of our desire to articulate this point of view, and be a part of this educational process that produces top-notch professionals.

'Soft skills' is an abstract (and somewhat nebulous) concept, which is, in fact, a compendium of several components like attitude, abilities, habits and practices that are combined adeptly to maximize one's work effectiveness. They are much more than just a set of good habits or key abilities. Soft skills are about integrating the right proportion of these components into formidable skills and eventually transforming those skills into competencies. Our first task in this book is to demystify what one means by soft skills, and then, to provide a fairly comprehensive list of such skills in an organized and systematic manner. We then proceed to examine and analyse each of these skills in detail.

We believe that soft skills are not just the icing on the cake, but part of the dough itself. Good soft skills have their roots in a strong and healthy attitude, of feeling good about oneself and being able to relate to the environment better. This attitude will be reflected in effective communication, polished by proper application of etiquette appropriate to a given situation. It is, in our view, essential that all the three components—attitude, communication and etiquette—get their due importance and attention, and in that order. You cannot have good communication gushing out of a poor attitude, nor can you sugar-coat poor communication with etiquette that is superficial. That is why we have organized this book into the three parts—Attitude, Communication and Etiquette (ACE), in that sequence. The unique approach we have tried in this book is to get a *holistic* coverage of the attitude, communication and etiquette dimensions, focusing attention on basics (not complicated theories),

detail-orientation through examples and emphasizing ethics and flexibility. Perhaps, a more complete title for this book could be the ABCDEF (Attitude, Basics, Communication, Detail-orientation, Etiquette and Ethics, and Flexibility) of soft skills, but for reasons of brevity and sharper focus, we stay with the ACE of soft skills.

Our effort is mainly aimed to help those young professionals who are just starting out their corporate careers. This book should be an ideal companion to company-sponsored orientation programmes for new employees. Undergraduate students nearing graduation would also find this text useful and may want to incorporate this in their preparation for campus interviews and so on. This can be used as an ideal textbook for a one- or two-semester, non-credit or informal course during the final year of engineering or MBA/MCA courses. Even experienced employees and managers will find this book useful and HR departments should be able to design short courses and workshops based on the material covered in this book. This is a values-based book and, therefore, one can view this book as a general book on work ethics and organizational behaviour, whether you work in the corporate sector or not.

We have designed this book to mean different things at different levels. At one level, this is a self-help book to be read and discovered by a reader at his or her own pace and in his or her own sequence of topics. To facilitate the non-linear reading of this book, we have included a lot of hypothetical case studies ('snapshots'), boxed examples, tables, diagrams and detailed cross-references to related topics elsewhere in the book. We would like this book to be a comprehensive tool in one's career growth plans and be an effective handbook, to be referenced again and again. We don't aim to be an encyclopaedia of soft skills, but we have tried to capture the essence.

This is the culmination of nearly sixty person-years of combined experience the authors have between them—years spent working in international teams in multinational corporations, universities and research establishments—an experience that spans not only India and the USA, but also other countries such as Singapore and the UK. Our book is based on our collective work experience and on the best practices of corporate houses and other organizations, as we inferred them.

We owe a tremendous measure of gratitude to all our present and former colleagues from whom we learnt many things. Some of them were amazing corporate citizens who embodied not only the best in soft skills, but also set themselves as examples for others to follow. We are also grateful to the editorial staff of Pearson Education, especially Ms Anindita Pandey and Ms Sukanya Chakrabarti, for their detail-orientation in the editing process as well as during the final production. We would also like to thank our artist Mr Laxmi Pillai for his lively drawings. And finally, we would like to thank our respective families for their unflinching support during the long days of writing this book.

We hope this book proves to be a veritable source on soft skills.

Gopalswamy Ramesh (gopalswamy\_ramesh@yahoo.com)

Mahadevan Ramesh (mahadevan\_ramesh@hotmail.com)

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—Gopalaswamy Ramesh

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—Mahadevan Ramesh

