

Soft-Skills Predict Professional Success

By Barry Blesser @2009

www.blesser.net

As an engineer working in the broadcast industry, you probably acquired your initial knowledge of the profession while taking classes at school. And during your first job, you received on the job training from senior engineers who were passing along their knowledge and experience. The skills thus acquired might well have included some of the following: circuit theory, network communications, computer programming, studio-transmitter links, acoustic equalization of studios, sound editing, equipment calibration, and so on. For those of us who have been in the engineering profession for a decade or more, the list of acquired skills is indeed large.

These technical skills are valuable, especially when they are in limited supply and when they produce results that have value to society. In contrast to a veteran engineer with years of training and experience, beginning engineers have very few hard skills. As they continue in their profession, and if they are wise, they continue to add to their collection of hard skills. Unfortunately for engineers in the 21st century, hard skills rapidly become obsolete and engineers must continuously acquire new skills if they want to stay relevant and employed.

Analogous skills exist among business executives, such as reading a balance sheet, optimizing profits, managing liquidity, choosing investments, setting policies and optimizing market penetration. Accountants, lawyers, scientists, athletes, actors, teachers, doctors, salesmen and marketers also have a corresponding collection of skills that they use. Each profession has its own set of “hard” skills that are unique to that profession.

The Other Set of Skills

From the title of this article you might suspect that there exists a corresponding set of “soft” skills that are not specific to any one profession. Soft skills are a collection of methods and techniques by which you can influence the behavior of others in a way that enhance your enlightened self-interest. Soft skills enable the building of alliances with the appropriate amount of trust. Soft skills reveal the degree to which agendas align or conflict. Negotiation techniques are a soft skill. Conflict resolution is a soft skill. Disambiguating language is a soft skill. Motivating co-workers is a soft skill.

Soft skills enable us to function at the highest level when dealing with people and organizations. Effective leaders have a tool box of soft skills that induces others to want to follow them. Soft skills are the difference between a meeting that is a waste of time and one that is highly proactive. Soft skills minimize political sniping in an organization. Soft skills make for good marriages, thriving children and supportive colleagues. Successful politicians have good soft skills even if they have weak hard skills. With inadequate soft skills, hard skills are rarely sufficient by themselves to produce

professional success. Some managers, especially if older, only have soft skills. But the most productive professionals have an equal balance of hard and soft skills.

Unless an engineer lives in the northernmost woods of Maine, he will be interacting with many people in complex groups. Nevertheless, many (most) engineers wish that could they could be left alone to be productive with their technical skills. Because they lack the necessary soft skills to optimize their relationships with others, engineers avoid situations requiring those skills. In fact, many engineers selected that profession just because its focuses on a “hard” reality. As a consequence, many engineers find themselves at the bottom of the political, social and financial food chain. The lack of soft skill has a real cost. Dilbert cartoons are parodies of degenerate soft skill.

Are You Smarter than a Chimpanzee?

As a side note, the modern theory of evolution indicates that survival of a species is based on the gene pool of the group not that of individuals. Human beings evolved as social animals. In their collection of articles, Richard Byne and Andrew Whiten convincingly show that all primate species possess *Machiavellian Intelligence*, which is also known as political intelligence or social intelligence. Are your soft skills as good as those of the average chimpanzee? If not, maybe it is time to enhance them.

Many years ago, I came across a brilliant mathematician whom I had first met in high school decades earlier. As a teenager, I envied his mathematical ability to see elegant solutions where I was clueless. He had a highly specific type of intelligence that he used to solve tough problems but only when presented in mathematical language. When we met again years later, he had been sitting at the same desk for decades having become a grouchy old man in a depressive funk because his isolated life went nowhere. Hard skills are necessary but not sufficient to produce a rewarding life.

Many engineers, including myself during my early years as an engineer, treated hard skill as king and correspondingly viewed soft skills as unneeded fluff for those with an interest in the (useless and unproductive) liberal arts. While engineers are forced to take humanities courses in high school and college, most of us considered those courses to be a necessary evil, only serving the function of fulfilling the requirements to graduate. I never could figure out why knowing the history of the civil war would make me a better engineer. Similarly, I found reading Moby Dick, speaking French, recognizing a Rembrandt painting, explaining Plato and memorizing a Walt Whitman poem to be a waste of time. Nobody every convinced me that this kind of education would do anything useful other than allowing me to appear “educated” at a social gathering of snobs.

That was my attitude then. But something happened to me during the last two decades of my 45 year career. I discovered the value of soft skills, not as taught in school, but in real life. Without realizing it, I was beginning to use soft skills to advance my consulting business. These skills really do make a difference.

More recently, in addition to using them, I have been teaching them to the staff of my clients. In one particular company, after spreading soft skills throughout the company, its culture and economic success dramatically changed for the better. Everyone was happier, profitability was better, and staff turnover was zero. The staff became equally proficient at using hard and soft skills. They were simply enjoying themselves more. Many individuals reported that also found soft skills extremely useful in their personal life. Unlike hard skills, soft skills are readily transferable from one context to another.

Soft skills are everywhere and you only need to look for them. Many of my previous Last Word Articles in fact explored specific soft skills, without giving them that label. Some of us actually learned soft skills from our parents if we were lucky enough to have had parents who understood the value of “street smarts,” which is another label for soft skills. In his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman argued that this kind of intelligence is the best predictor of success, which contrasts to such metrics as receiving high grades in school or having advanced degrees. Emotional illiteracy has a professional and life cost.

Yet for all their value, soft skills are rarely taught in school even though humanities courses were intended to illustrate them. Such courses simple do a very bad job of teaching what the average chimpanzee intuitively understands. Moreover, while there are books that also argue for the value of soft skills, they do not teach them. I have yet to find the book *Soft Skills for Dummies*, which I may someday write. In the mean time, from time to time, I will continue to discuss in these Last Word articles those soft skills that are relevant to broadcast engineers. And you might read Daniel Goleman’s book *Social Intelligence*.

To conclude my introduction, hard and soft skills are not mutually exclusive but complements. In combination, hard and soft skills are infinitely more productive than either alone. And soft skills never become obsolete because people remain people.