

Personal skills that are in demand

Each one of us has a set of ‘personal’ skills and personality characteristics that either limit or enhance our job opportunities and career prospects. When we are seeking a new job, or looking for a promotion, our chances depend very much on how well our personal and ‘technical’ skills match the needs of the position (and on how well we ‘market’ these skills, etc.).

So, in this era of ‘disruption’, as whole industries struggle for survival, and companies strive to reinvent themselves to cope with rapidly changing markets, are there any particular **personal skills** that employers seek more than others? Data from a number of surveys conducted by universities, career organisations, recruitment agencies and business councils over the past five years shows a common demand for several **personal skills** [See Note1].

Even when employers are targeting different levels of staff (i.e. entry level, supervisor, mid and senior-level management), the list of ‘in demand’ **personal skills** remains consistent, although the order of importance may vary. Those of us who can demonstrate that we possess such skills should be well placed when it comes to job-seeking and/or promotion. From these surveys the top seven ‘in demand’ **personal skills** are:

1. Communication
2. Problem Solving
3. Interpersonal Relations
4. Planning and Organising
5. Learning
6. Interview
7. Leadership

Note: Each of the above actually consists of a number of more specific skills; for that reason, I consider them to be **‘skill sets’**.



Based on a range of employer surveys over the past five years, these seven are the most in demand **skill sets** for job applicants to display.



Having a ‘skill’ means that we are able do something well. Developing a skill usually involves practice. When we are able to consistently produce a quality result, we are demonstrating that we have converted the skill into a competency. Achieving competence requires a combination of knowledge, skill, and attitude.

Soft skills are in the mix

An interesting aspect of these **skill sets** is that many involve what are known as ‘soft skills’. The term ‘soft skills’ is both much used, and (imho) much abused. A skill is “*an ability, usually developed through practice, to do something well*”. The meaning of ‘soft skills’ is about ‘*interacting with others*’, however the common usage of the term very often takes in things such as attitudes, habits, emotions, etc. These are not skills, they are actually characteristics of our personality - part of who we are.

Soft skills are distinguished from ‘hard skills’ because the latter tend to be based on consistent ‘rules’ and can be readily learned from study. By comparison, soft skills are largely driven by our personality and are usually developed as a result of our experiences. Hard skills can generally be clearly defined and measured, whereas soft skills are not so easy to quantify.

One of the features of soft skills is that they are also ‘transferable’. Once learned, they can be applied in other (future) jobs – which is why employers seek them. Many soft skills can also be applied outside of work, e.g. in sport, in voluntary positions, and in our home lives. Indeed, soft skills are used in many areas of our lives.

Inside the seven personal skill sets

Let’s now probe deeper into the seven **personal skill sets**. In the following tables I have labelled the component skills as either “Hard” or “Soft”, based on the extent to which that skill depends on the use of ‘rules’. For example, written communication depends on rules for spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc., whereas verbal communication can be quite effective with less adherence to such rules.

Note: the lists of component skills below are not necessarily complete for any particular **skill set**.

1. Communication Skills	Hard / Soft
verbal communication	Soft
written communication	Hard
non-verbal communication	Soft
listening	Soft
questioning	Soft
explanation	Soft
presentations	Soft

Verbal communication is one of the most valued of the **personal skills**, followed closely by listening. Non-verbal communication involves both managing our own 'messages' and reading those from others. All of the communication skills are highly important for mid and senior-level managerial positions.

2. Problem Solving Skills	Hard / Soft
analytical thinking	Hard
critical thinking	Hard
lateral thinking	Hard
creative thinking	Soft
reasoning	Hard
decision making	Hard

Problem solving is highly valued, particularly in managerial positions. Problem solvers are likely to be in demand at all levels of the organisation.

3. Interpersonal Relations Skills	Hard / Soft
understanding others	Soft
adaptability	Soft
collaboration	Soft
networking	Soft
negotiation	Soft
motivation	Soft

Interpersonal relations are also highly valued, most particularly in team environments. In the modern workplace, effective leadership (at any level) is unlikely without sound **interpersonal skills**.

4. Planning and Organising Skills	Hard / Soft
planning	Hard
coordinating and scheduling	Hard
time management	Hard
<i>problem solving</i>	Hard

Planning and organising skills become important as people move through the various levels of the organisation (supervisor, mid and senior-level management). Planning and organising also includes all parts of *problem solving*.

5. Learning Skills	Hard / Soft
information literacy	Hard
note taking	Hard
learning styles	Soft
memorisation techniques	Soft
attention	Soft
unlearning	Soft

While not all employers rate learning skills highly, those who do recognise that learning plays a vital part in an individual's development. The ability to quickly learn new skills will be of high value to those employers.

6. Interview Skills	Hard / Soft
personal presentation	Soft
self promotion	Soft
preparation	Hard
<i>communication</i>	Soft

Interview skills are included because many employers rate this as a top factor for success for job seekers (i.e. preparing to market their abilities); interview skills also include all parts of *communication*.

Note: I have added "**Management**" to the next set because the terms 'leadership' and 'management' are often used interchangeably, e.g. as highlighted in this graphic title from a [July 2014 HBR article](#):

WHAT **LEADERSHIP SKILLS** DO YOU NEED MOST?
 These **competencies** were voted the most important for all **management** positions.

7. Leadership and Management Skills	Hard / Soft
self management	Soft
strategic thinking	Hard
delivering results	Soft
leading others	Soft
mentoring and coaching	Soft
supervision	Soft
delegation	Soft
facilitation	Soft
conflict resolution	Soft
leading change	Soft
<i>communication</i>	Soft
<i>problem solving</i>	Hard
<i>interpersonal relations</i>	Soft
<i>planning and organising</i>	Hard

For mid and senior-level managerial positions, Leadership and Management skills take on increased importance. Even at entry level, leadership skills can be invaluable. This **skill set** includes *communication, problem solving, interpersonal relations*, and also *planning and organising*.

Skill is about WHAT to do
Competence is about HOW to do it

Competence is measured by the RESULT
..... not by the process

While the terms 'skill' and 'competence' are often treated as having the same meaning, one is about the PROCESS (i.e. knowing what to do), while the other is about the RESULT (i.e. knowing how to do it). A person may have the necessary skill to do something well, but only when they can consistently deliver a quality result can they claim to have achieved competence.

From skills to competencies

Employers seek people who will be able to do a job effectively – someone who displays competence. It's actually a common practice for the terms 'skills' and 'competencies' to be used interchangeably (as highlighted in the earlier HBR graphic title example). However, imho, the two have distinctly different meanings. Skills are about **'what' to do**, whereas competencies are about **'how' to do it**.

A competency is an ability to consistently produce or deliver a quality result. Competence is measured by the result, not by the process. Competence comes from a combination of *knowledge, skill, and attitude*:

- **knowledge** enables us to know *what* to do, and *why*,
- **skill** enables us to do it, and
- **attitude** enables us to bring everything together to do it properly.



Competence begins with knowledge; practice enables us to develop our skill; with further practice and the right attitude we can convert our skill into competence.

In some organisations, competencies are used to describe job requirements and also performance standards. For example, **Written communication**: *Able to present written ideas and information using easy-to-understand language suitable for international readers.* A particular job

will involve many competencies, some of which will be personal and some technical.

Developing our personal skills

While employers may place a high value on these in demand **skill sets**, soft ('transferable') skills are also a key to enabling you and me to change jobs and also careers. For this reason, some employers can be reluctant to train workers in soft skills – once trained, workers may use their newly acquired 'transferable' skills to find opportunities elsewhere.

Should we have any 'gaps' in our inventory of **personal skills**, there can be a definite challenge when it comes to acquiring or developing those that are missing. Soft skills in particular are rarely taught in mainstream education institutions (secondary schools, universities, and polytechnics), although this is changing. Similarly, a number of the **personal skills** that I have rated as 'hard' are also not taught to any great extent in mainstream education. This leaves it to us to fill the 'gap' ourselves – we must take charge of our own learning and development.

Simplistically, the learning process involves information being converted into knowledge, with practice leading to development of skills. The 'rules' behind most hard skills can be learned by study, as can the theory behind many soft skills. However, practice is then needed to develop and maintain all skills. In the case of soft skills, the best practice involves interaction with other people.

Many of us will probably experience most of our soft skills development 'on the job'. The seven 'in demand' **skill sets** involve over 40 specific **personal skills**. Some job roles may cause us to exercise many of these **personal skills**, other roles may not be so demanding. For that reason, developing and maintaining some of these skills may require us to make special, conscious efforts. We should also note that what we learn inside the culture of one particular workplace may not exactly suit the culture of another.

Worth a look

Our free nuggets for this Post are:

[The crucial skill new hires lack](#) from BBC Generation Work [August 2013] – this short post takes a look at the skills 'gap' faced by many graduates as they enter the workforce (approx 4-min read)

[Do you have the skills to succeed at work?](#) from BBC Career Coach [28 October 2013] – this short post offers some insights about the need to be continuously improving our **personal skills** inventory (approx 3 min read)

Coming next: What drives employee loyalty?

Note 1. Sources include:

LinkedIn (2014)
 CareerBuilder (2014)
 Beyond.com (2014)
 Canadian Council of Chief Executives (2014)
 Graduate Management Admission Council (2014)
 National Association for Colleges and Employers (2014, 2013, 2012)
 University of Kent (2013)
 International Data Corporation survey (2013)
 Career Advisory Board (2011)
 Graduate Careers Australia (2010)
 Indeed.com (2010)

Footnote:

I have used an example from the Harvard Business Review to illustrate how even 'the best' of publications can mix and mash their terms. This apparent lack of attention to detail is, imho, a reflection on the underlying quality of an author's work. Unfortunately, this sort of effort is all too common on the internet. As a consequence, you and I must take care to evaluate the reliability of every piece of information that we take in. That said, the common usage of 'soft skills' frequently includes as many 'non skills' as it does 'true skills'. While I definitely don't agree with this usage, it is a reality!

<http://freezapnuggets.com/wordpress/?p=1139>