

SOFT SKILLS: DEFINITION(S) AND APPROACH(ES)

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Abstract: Soft skills have been hailed as a prerequisite for professional success on a labor market which is increasingly complex, dynamic, and changing. The ability to manage one's internal life and the others' attitudes in a given context, the ability to manage one's time, to plan and set priorities, the ability to think critically, to find solutions to problems and to make correct decisions, or the ability to create good working relationships through networking and team building are just some of the many soft skills that one needs to acquire in order to function efficiently among others at the workplace. The article looks into the general concept of soft skills and envisages tackling some of those which are perceived to be crucial by students themselves and which could be developed during the "English for Professional Communication" seminar.

Keywords: soft skills, emotional intelligence, self-management, teambuilding, conflict management, English for Professional Communication

With the world turned into a global village and professional immigration on constant rise, with the "knowledge society" becoming richer and richer in terms of information, with technology allowing businesses to gather and share expertise faster and more transparently, the world of work itself has become more sophisticated and more demanding than never. While once one's professional abilities would have come down to specific expertise and to the capacity to put theory into practice, current employment trends favor other subtler, more nuanced types of skills which are believed to be almost as important. There has been growing awareness of the fact that, apart from resources and know-how, what makes businesses successful (or not) is the extent to which individuals are able (or not) to work *together* for a common goal. Issues such as emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, awareness of one's preferred working/learning style, good time management, effective networking, negotiation skills, the ability to resolve conflicts,

or public speaking skills are no longer just for those aspiring to leadership positions. They are to be possessed unanimously, from top to bottom, if that type of environment in which creative energies thrive is to be provided: “an ounce of people sensitivity is worth a pound of cure when it comes to daily human interaction and mitigating conflict. By developing these skills, you’ll reduce bad behavior in the office, and your positive approach will be contagious.”(Smith) Attending courses on communication skills and coaching sessions have long become part and parcel of company life and, along with in-house technical training, they are meant to provide the labor market with complex individuals able to handle both the challenges of their chosen domain of expertise and the intricate, often slippery nature of the act of cooperating at the work place. Thus, to take only one example of the many studies on the topic, it seems that “soft skills, those very human interpersonal skills around communication and empathy, contribute £88 billion to the UK economy – a contribution that is expected to rise to £109 billion over the next five years. But the UK is struggling with them, and by 2020 over half a million UK workers will be significantly held back by a lack of such skills” (Medland).

While everybody agrees that soft skills are nice to have around, and they have even become prerequisites for professional success, they have proven hard to deal with in practice at several levels. For one, even the term “soft skills” itself is a very generic term for skills that in different countries have different names: United Kingdom – core skills, key skills, common skills; United States – basic skills, necessary skills, workplace know how; France – transferable skills; Germany – key qualifications; Canada – employability skills; key competencies, employability skills, generic skills (quoted in Osman et al, 50), to mention just a few. Then, apart from a lack of a common denominator, they do not benefit from a very clear definition; we know for sure they are not “hard” skills, namely technical skills, in fact they stand in sharp contrast with the latter, but definitions vary considerably in terms of conceptualization. However, most authors agree on the fact that soft skills have to do with one’s personality and one’s ability to deal successfully with the others. For example: “Soft skills are the intangible, non-technical, personality-specific skills that determine one’s strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator” (Robles, 457). Or, equally: “Soft skills are personal characteristics or qualities an individual possesses which enable him to relate well with people in any organization: be it family, workplace, religious setting, or the society at large” (Durowoju and Onuka, 607).

In the third place, there is hardly any agreement on a common, manageable checklist of soft skills against which to assess current or future employees. I will give just two examples: in his research, Robles has found that the top ten soft skills treasured by business executives are: “integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic” (Robles, 462). In their turn, Chamorro-Premuzic et al. designed a self-report inventory based on items overlapping in various lists of soft skills examined and they decided on the most important ones: “self-management, communicational, interpersonal, team-working skills, the ability to work under pressure, imagination/creativity, critical thinking, willingness to learn, attention to detail, taking responsibility, planning and organizing skills, insight, maturity, professionalism and emotional intelligence”(Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 223).

Finally, soft skills have proven difficult to measure. “Soft skills are intangible, but they are utterly expressive. They are not measured but felt” (Manzar et al, 27). Thus, ways of measuring soft-skills have included self-report surveys, which are not very reliable due to the subjectivity of one’s self-perception, as well as tests meant to have respondents demonstrate the existence of a certain skill rather than just acknowledge they have it (Matteson et al., 82).

Matteson et al. point out that the clarification of the concept of soft skills should start with the distinction between skills and related concepts, because “the conceptualization of soft skills becomes diluted with traits and dispositions, behavior and knowledge sets” (Matteson et al, 77). The problem underlying this confusion is two-fold: firstly, “the lack of construct clarity hinders the development of a solid knowledge base on soft skills. Without clear and consistent application of the concept of soft skills, including measurement reliability and validity, it is impossible to accurately connect research findings across studies” (Matteson et al., 81); secondly, “including dispositions in soft skills shifts the focus from *what* someone can do, to *how* someone is, which can lead to problems with accurately evaluating an employee’s performance” (Matteson et al., 81). Therefore, starting from their idea, I agree with the fact that any attempt at putting order into the concept of soft skills should first envisage a classification of the most popular items to be found on the list of soft skills according to criteria such as: *what* a person can *do*, *what* s/he *believes* in, *how* they *are*, all these resulting in *how* a person will *behave* in a certain context. Thus, organizing skills into groups will help with the organization of

different strategies needed for the acquisition of different soft skills, and a sort of hierarchy in terms of how easily they can be developed and internalized will emerge.

Given the haziness which surrounds the concept, there is no wonder then that soft skills are even harder to deal with in the classroom, as they raise a series of questions such as: with whom does the responsibility for soft skills development lie and in what proportion (students' responsibility/ teachers' responsibility /joint responsibility/assessment driven development (Osman et al., 55)), that is, should we address soft skills in a formal, conscious way (theory, examples, activities) or is soft skills development through incidental learning enough/more effective?; secondly, what skills should be taught (what do students feel they lack ? what do corporate executives say that fresh graduates lack ? what soft skills are needed in a certain domain ?), thirdly, how to teach them, and finally, how to assess them.

Since I believe that the responsibility of the students' development of soft skills lies with both teachers and students themselves and that soft skills are to be acquired inherently and incidentally as well as consciously and formally, for the purpose of this article the question I address is: which of the many items on the list(s) put forth by specialized literature should one strive to instill in one's students in the limited amount of time one has at one's disposal as a teacher of "English for Professional Communication"? The seminar taught at the Polytechnic University of Bucharest already touches upon some of the skills to be found on the lists above, inasmuch as it focuses on topics such as: intercultural communication, elements of the employment file, company life, professional written correspondence, oral presentation skills, telephoning skills. The seminar gives students the opportunity to get familiar with theories, concepts, protocols and patterns of behavior that can make accommodation with their future professional life easier. Indeed, plenty of opportunities of raising awareness are provided: the awareness that different attitudes are shaped by one's cultural background, that envisaging one's ideal work place already sets a path to walk on, that every company is to be considered a "culture" in its own right with its own rules and unwritten codes of behavior to be observed, that clarity, conciseness and courtesy will make one's cover letter stand out, that thinking about one's values, skills and traits may result in adaptive, improved behaviors, that projecting a complex image about one's self during an interview will make one get faster on the employer's shortlist. However, given the complexity of the process of getting and retaining a job, there is obvious need for more.

Therefore, while I acknowledge the fact that the most important opinion with respect to the most sought-after soft skills is the employers', I also believe that one valid way to start approaching this topic is in the classroom, by asking the students themselves what skills they think they lack; the very fact that they are made to think about this question is in itself a good exercise of self-awareness. After having been briefly introduced to the topic of soft skills, a total of fifty first year students in Computer Science, Electronics and Mechanics were asked to rank the top three soft skills that they think they need to improve throughout their studies and at the beginning of their career in order to be successful engineers at the workplace. Time management, team building and the ability to work under pressure (in this order) proved to be the most popular ones, which is understandable, since they already deal with tight deadlines as students. Their answers also included: cultural intelligence, decision making, public speaking, networking, active listening, ability to prioritize tasks, patience, creativity, ability to search for information efficiently, ability to learn efficiently, motivation to begin work/focus on work, anger management, adaptability, critical observation, as well as familiarization with "some kind of social psychology", "vivid imagination", the ability to "sell [their] abilities." Items such as "some kind of social psychology", "vivid imagination" and even patience are very slippery and vague terms, indeed; still, others such as team building, active listening or time management are definitely skills which can be approached during the seminar, especially since these concepts benefit from extensive research which can be passed on to students under the form of manageable chunks of theoretical information, backed by practical examples. In addition, it is useful to make students understand how these concepts relate to one another and how development of one is very likely to lead to the development of another – for example when we have to deal with the ability to work under pressure we may start from narrowing down the discussion: what kind of pressure are we talking about? is it the pressure of dealing with tight deadlines? Then the ability to prioritize and to manage one's time is at stake here. Is it the pressure of having to work with others? Then sensitivity to differences in terms of personality and cultural backgrounds needs to be developed, as well as active listening. Is it the pressure of having to learn something new in a very short amount of time? Then the ability to find quicker routes to knowledge is at stake (maybe we need to identify and appropriately approach that colleague who is more knowledgeable than us, an action which could also, indirectly, entail the skill of networking).

In conclusion, although the concept of soft skills is still to be refined in terms of definitions, classifications, effective ways to enhance and measure them, it is essential to take it into consideration when preparing for one's future career. While indeed soft skills are in general acquired inherently through life experiences and direct observation of others and their way of dealing with the world, students could benefit from more formal ways of raising awareness of certain aspects related to them, and the seminar "English for Professional Communication" could be a start.

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