

What are Soft Skills?

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Whereas hard skills are the tangible and technical skills easily demonstrated by a candidate's qualifications and specific professional experiences, **soft skills** is a term used by employers to refer to the more intangible and non-technical abilities that are sought from candidates.

Soft skills are sometimes referred to as **transferable skills** or **professional skills**. As this term implies, these are skills that are less specialised, less rooted in specific vocations, and more aligned with the general disposition and personality of a candidate. Examples of important soft skills are communication, teamwork and problem solving.

Soft skills relate to your attitudes and your intuitions. As soft skills are less referable to your qualifications and more personality-driven, it is important to consider what your soft skills are and how you might show evidence of them before you apply for a job. This is particularly true of the recruitment process for graduate programmes, where transferable skills and potential often take precedence over professional experience. Being able to demonstrate your soft skills equates to demonstrating great potential to succeed and progress in the career of your choice.

Why do Soft Skills Matter?

Soft skills are the difference between adequate candidates and ideal candidates. In most competitive job markets, recruitment criteria do not stop at technical ability and specialist knowledge. Particularly with graduate schemes, recruiters will be looking for people who can become leaders, and leadership, itself, depends on several key soft skills.

An instructive example of the difference made by soft skills is a medical doctor. A doctor is required to have an extensive repertoire of hard skills, especially the ability to diagnose and prescribe treatments for an array of ailments. But a doctor who does not have the soft skills of emotional intelligence, trustworthiness and approachability is not likely to be very highly regarded by their patients. Similarly, a salesperson who may have an unrivalled and exhaustive knowledge of their market will find it difficult to close a deal and retain their clients if they lack the soft skills of interpersonal skills and negotiation.

Soft skills are not just important when facing external customers and clients. They are equally important when it comes to *interacting with colleagues*. Soft skills relate to how you work with others (whereas hard skills relate to you, in isolation, as an individual). Employers value soft skills because they enable people to function and thrive in teams and in organisations as a whole. A productive and healthy work environment depends on soft skills. After all, the workplace is an interpersonal space, where relationships must be built and fostered, perspectives must be exchanged, and occasionally conflicts must be resolved.

What are the Key Soft Skills?

This section is an extensive, but not exhaustive, guide to what should be considered as some of the key soft skills.

Communication

As a soft skill, **communication** is not about multiple syllables or rousing speeches. Able communicators can adjust their tone and style according to their audience, comprehend and act efficiently on instructions, and explain complex issues to colleagues and clients alike. Communication is also an important aspect of leadership, since leaders must be able to delegate clearly and comprehensibly.

Self-Motivation

Having the **positive attitude** and the **initiative** to work well without round-the-clock supervision is a vital soft skill for any employee. Not only does it demonstrate reliability and commitment, but it shows that you can fit efficiently into an organisational structure without the need for constant oversight.

Leadership

Leadership is a soft skill you can show even if you're not directly managing others. Leadership can be thought of as a collection of various other soft skills, such as a general positive attitude and outlook, the ability to communicate effectively, and an aptitude for both self-motivating and motivating others.

Responsibility

Self-awareness is a seldom talked about but highly valued soft skill; knowing when to accept responsibility for any mistakes you have made demonstrates a healthy level of humility, and a willingness to learn and progress.

Teamwork

Like leadership, good **teamwork** involves a combination of other soft skills. Working in a team towards a common goal requires the intuition and interpersonal acumen to know when to be a leader, and when to be a listener. Good team players are perceptive, as well as receptive to the needs and responsibilities of others.

Problem Solving

Problem solving does not just require analytical, creative and critical skills, but a particular mindset: those who can approach a problem with a cool and level head will often reach a solution more efficiently than those who cannot. This is a soft skill which can often rely on strong teamwork too. Problems need not

always be solved alone. The ability to know who can help you reach a solution, and how they can do it, can be a great advantage.

Decisiveness

Knowing the distinction between **decisiveness** and recklessness implies a soft skill in itself. Decisiveness combines a number of different abilities: the ability to put things into perspective, to weigh up the options, to assess all relevant information and, crucially, to anticipate the consequences, good and bad.

Ability to Work Under Pressure and Time Management

Many jobs come with demanding deadlines and occasionally high stakes. Recruiters prize candidates who show a decisive attitude, an unfaltering ability to think clearly, and a capacity to compartmentalise and set stress aside. **Time management** is closely related to the ability to work under pressure, as well as within tight deadlines. Employees who manage their time well are able to efficiently prioritise tasks and organise their diaries, while adopting an attitude which allows them to take on new tasks and deadlines.

Flexibility

Naturally, people can be wary of leaving the comfort zone formed by their repertoire of hard skills. **Flexibility** is an important soft skill, inasmuch as it demonstrates an ability and willingness to acquire new hard skills, and an open-mindedness to new tasks and new challenges. Employers often seek candidates who can show a willing and upbeat attitude, since many jobs come with the possibility of secondments.

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

This is another of those soft skills which employers look for in potential leaders. To be an adept negotiator is to know how to be persuasive and exert influence, while sensitively seeking a solution which will benefit all parties. Similarly, **conflict resolution** depends on strong interpersonal skills and the ability to establish a rapport with colleagues and clients alike.