



Hard Skills Versus Soft Skills – Which Are Most Important?

by Mike Hawkins
mike@alpinelink.com



People's success depends on two broad categories of skills – hard and soft. Hard skills are technical abilities that relate to specific occupational domains such as engineering, marketing, finance, or construction. They are called hard skills because they are specific, tangible, and often observable. Soft skills in comparison are less tangible and not specific to any occupation. They include competencies such as strategic thinking, problem solving, planning, organizing, maintaining self-control, reading others, collaborating, and communicating effectively. They are more fundamentally about how people think than what they do. The application of both soft and hard skills determines people's overall job performance, yet one is widely considered to be more important than the other. Do you know which one it is?

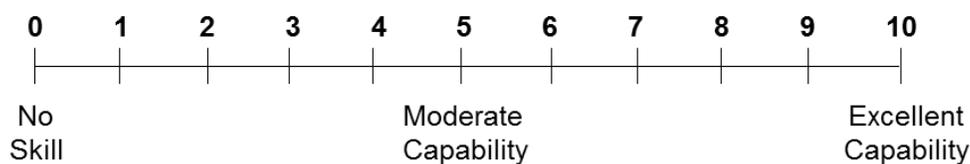
Thinking about yourself, do you find more success through the application of your hard skills or soft skills? In terms of your team, which category contributes more to its success? If you are a hiring manager, on which category do you place more emphasis when interviewing candidates? If you've ever fired someone, on which category did you base your termination decision?

Clearly industry and occupational domain skills are necessary for people to perform their work, but studies find consistently that people's soft skills are the more important ones. Assessments of the impact soft skills have on people's success range as high as 90 percent. People can be masters of their domain, but if they can't collaborate, influence, or communicate effectively, their skills are marginalized. If they can't plan, organize, or manage their time, their skills won't be applied to the extent they could be. Surveys on employee terminations find that most people are fired based on their lack of soft skills with attitude related issues being the primary cause. For this reason, seasoned recruiters emphasize soft skills when interviewing and selecting job applicants.

I've heard a number of managers say that soft-skills are secondary in importance at best. They refer to soft skills with words like fluffy, wimpy, and weak. These managers typically use a controlling and commanding approach to management rather a coaching, encouraging, enabling, or assimilating one. They believe that intangibles which can't be directly measured can't be that important. They are also the managers with low levels of employee engagement, morale, productivity, and collaboration. Great leaders in contrast realize that their success and organization's competitive advantage lies in intangibles such as having a highly engaged team that operates intentionally, thinks strategically, and gives their highest discretionary effort.

Educational curriculums as well as many industry training programs, refresher courses, and certifications have traditionally emphasized hard skills. They focus on building people's technical abilities and knowledge. Only the people who deliberately focus on building their soft-skills through specialized programs, coaching, or other learning resources build the balanced set of soft and hard skills needed to reach the highest levels of performance.

How much attention do you and your team give to developing your soft skills? When you think about any areas you struggle with, how many are related to soft skills? If you are unsure of your soft skill competence, complete the ten-point assessment below. For each one, rate yourself on a scale of 0 – 10 with 10 being excellent:





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1. _____ **Strategic Thinking:** Having a broad and long-term perspective. Identifying relationships and patterns between seemingly unrelated variables. Seeing the unseen. Having a keen sense of timing – e.g. when to take action and when to wait.
2. _____ **Problem Solving:** Using a blend of common sense and analytical reasoning abilities to accurately frame problems, uncover their root causes, evaluate alternatives, and make great decisions on which alternative to implement.
3. _____ **Planning:** Setting goals and breaking them down into milestones, actions, owners, and due dates. Prioritizing activities so that the most important ones receive the attention rather than the most urgent or convenient ones.
4. _____ **Organizing:** Capturing, categorizing, and filing information in a manner that makes it quick to retrieve. Managing workflow without duplicating effort. Leading efficient meetings and productive projects.
5. _____ **Maintaining Self-Control:** Establishing good daily habits. Having the discipline to consistently do what needs to be done and what is right. Staying focused. Avoiding undesirable temptations and destructive behaviors. Managing emotions.
6. _____ **Adaptability:** Learning, improving, and adjusting to keep up with the ever changing environment. Staying current on industry trends and technologies. Adopting proven tools and best practices.
7. _____ **Reading Others:** Accurately assessing and interpreting people characteristics such as attitudes, aptitudes, emotions, preferences, motives, philosophies, and values. Anticipating people's thinking and behaviors.
8. _____ **Collaborating:** Aligning interests with colleagues and partners. Maintaining harmony while engaging in constructive debate. Fostering a climate of community and trustworthiness. Treating others with respect.
9. _____ **Communicating Effectively:** Delivering compelling content. Speaking, writing, and listening in a manner that captures people's attention and motivates them to take action. Showing empathy. Making others feel heard and valued.
10. _____ **Attitude:** Having a positive can-do attitude. Showing gratitude. Focusing on what can be done better in the future rather than dwelling on what wasn't done well in the past. Being humble and likable.

For any soft skill above that you rated yourself low in, set a goal to develop yourself in that area. Create a development roadmap that includes reading books, attending seminars, receiving coaching, practicing, or completing special assignments. Make increasing your soft skills a top priority and you'll quickly enjoy the increase in job performance that comes with it.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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