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Significance of Soft Skills in Career Development

Mitashree Tripathy

Abstract

Over the years, the world has come closer, and workplaces have developed aggressively because of globalization. It has been critically vital and mandatory to deliver an advanced level of workplace excellence. Fast-paced competition is evident everywhere especially at workplaces. Many business organizations have called for survival of the fittest which is not only essential but also the key constraint today by business organizations. At this explicative point, the question arises is how to stay ahead of competition, concurrent to this speedy development, and how to survive and sustain this competition. Studies argue that employees at workplaces must acquire skill sets besides their domain skills that can intervene in their career growth and help them grow. This paper examines the significance of soft skills at workplaces and typically focuses on selected soft skills like positive attitude, communication skills, maintaining work ethics, teamwork abilities, and time management skills to be surpassingly requisite to enhance career perspectives.

Keywords: soft skills, communication skills, positive attitude, teamwork, strong work ethics, time management skills

1. Introduction

We all might have encountered employees at workplaces who drop in every now and then to their fellow colleagues chamber to gossip, or who absolutely have no sense to dress formally or during occasions, or who have always been pessimistic in their approach toward a solution, or who always communicate aggressively with peers and others depicted through verbal or nonverbal means, or who keep waiting for the deadlines to approach and then begin their work given, or who use unethical means to achieve success faster. These are just the examples of some poor soft skills basically witnessed at workplaces. Thus if we considered the opposite of these examples, we are actually talking about skills and abilities that refer to as soft skills. These skills are essential to focus for both individual and career development. Literature does not provide any concrete definition of soft skills; rather it offers a list of examples of soft skills for the readers so that they can frame their own interpretation. To create an understanding of soft skills, it must first be accepted that soft skills are commonly used interchangeably with life skills, people skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, workplace skills, cultural skills, management skills, and employability skills. “Whatever the name, it is almost essential that you have to communicate or interact in public at some point or the other. Whether it is presenting your project work, interacting with your bosses, clients or teachers, appearing for group discussions or job interviews, or excelling in the real world,

people from all streams need the all important soft skills” [1]. Thus, soft skills can be very much related with personality traits including social and emotional intelligence that directly or indirectly affects our behavior in either developing or decaying relationships. Recent studies claim that soft skills are considered to be one of the most emerging studies in the recent decades and are exceptionally prerequisite chiefly in the domain of workplaces.

2. Literature review

The concept of soft skills originated way back in 1918 when Charles Riborg Mann in a bulletin of *A Study of Engineering Education* issued along with other representatives of Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching mentioned about the first meeting of the Joint Committee of the National Engineering Studies. In the meeting, many engineers were interrogated pertaining to their skills and abilities considered that are potential in ascertaining success in building engineering profession. Further analysis stated that personal qualities like common sense, ethics, self-competence, and emotional intelligence are universally recognized as being equally important to a professional engineer as are technical knowledge and skill.

Later, it was viewed that soft skill as a study is not restricted to only the engineering field. Emerging studies found the relevance of soft skills appeared in various domains like management, IT, education, administration, hospitality, medical, and pharmacy. Trading the application of soft skills at workplaces has gained enough attention, and the need to inculcate these skills into one's personality has become a necessity. “Whether you work in the IT industry or manufacturing industry, whether you work in a family business or a multinational corporation, soft skills are those skills that are absolutely essential for success” [2]. Furthermore, the significance of soft skills in various areas have also emphasized that there are various kinds of soft skills highly vital and valuable at workplaces. Every day, countless meetings, trainings, and business dealings are carried out at workplaces where people from diverse backgrounds work together for a common purpose through execution of ideas and information in the best possible manner. The role of soft skills at this expository situation carries enormous value.

Many authors studying soft skills state that these “are essentially people skills-the non-technical, intangible, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, listener, negotiator, and conflict mediator” [3]. Alex further elucidates that there is another set of skill known as hard skills that are associated with domain skills or technical skills and that they are way different from soft skills. He clarifies that hard skills “are more along the lines of what might appear on one's resume- your education, experience and level of expertise” [3]. In other words hard skills are the technical abilities that are earned through education, training, and practice in the name of a degree. But a degree is simply not enough today to ensure a successful career. Recruiters today are seeking for work-ready candidates possessing a number of skills required specifically for specific job roles. Hence, it is true that since the growing importance of soft skills is largely accepted, “hard skills alone might not be sufficient in order to survive successfully” [4]. But the fact that both hard skills and soft skills complement each other is also not false.

Soft skills are in fact healthy supporters of communication and performance. They are recognized as connectors that build the gap and bridge relationships among the people at the workplace, leading to better productivity and performance. Soft skills reduce the gaps across various departments in an organization, thus promoting effective communication and performance. Globalization has augmented

the changing environment at workplaces that significantly stipulate soft skills; otherwise surviving and sustaining would remain just a distant dream far from reality.

Although there are many business guides like *Simplifiable* that distinguishes around 87 soft skills under various other subskills like leadership, communication, personal skills, interpersonal skills, and many more, this paper deals with the study of selected soft skills which are critical and must have by the employees at workplaces to develop their career.

3. Soft skills at workplaces

Soft skills are familiar terms in the everyday life, in preserving interpersonal relationships, in shaping activities, and in building strategies for success; its insinuation is predominantly found at workplaces. However, for many leaders at the workplace, soft skills are believed to be unnecessary as they follow a common belief that when people are paid for their work, gratitude does not carry any stance. They fail to understand that lack of appreciation and gratitude signifies lack of skills in an employee and that lack of skills results to lack of motivation to develop personality and career at the workplace. To grow professionally in one's related field and also professionally, it is very much essential to create healthy workplace relationships with peers, clients, customers, and others who are associated with the workplace. Career development can be blocked by the lack of ability to gel up with people. Employees might be at the peak of their careers, but if they show lack of essential soft skills, they may very much land on to the bottom from where they had begun. Incorporating soft skills at the workplace helps employees discover what they lack and own, their strengths and weaknesses, and how they can use it to deal with those infinite challenges and accomplish achievements that come their way during career advancement. Soft skills thus offer essential factors to influence success to the employees in reaching their career plateau. It would also be apt to mention here that a healthy mindset is very much essential to gain influence in growing. Cultivated by emotional balance, the healthy mindset is in fact the key motivator to either progress or procrastinate in career advancement. "Happiness and emotional balance influence your career. Balanced people get more things done in higher quality. If you are lacking emotional balance, most of career strategies may not work for you" [5]. Studies conducted by "National Business Survey" from the Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counseling (CERIC) on 500 employers based on the requirement of soft skills at workplaces suggest a number of soft skills on the basis of occupation and profession and conclude that positive attitude, communication skills, teamwork skills, and strong work ethics are few among the many skills that employers consider important [6]. This paper studies in detail and describes the aspects of selected soft skills for career development. This paper includes positive attitude, communication skills, maintaining strong work ethics, teamwork, and time management skills to ensure a successful career development.

4. Positive attitude

Positive attitude toward work recognizes an employee's attitude toward work. It lets the employee hold a higher degree of competence and distinction toward work. Positive attitude in other words is an expression that seeks personal fulfillment through reflecting and determining accomplishments. "A positive attitude is one of the most important factors that influence a person's success" [7]. As it is positive

attitude that determines how committed and diligent an employee is toward work, an employer would see this as helpful in career augmentation. Executed by positive thinking, positive attitude develops enthusiasm, willingness to learn, and as a result greater appreciation of results at work. This is contagious as it influences and spreads positive energy for igniting a winning spirit for all the members in a team in particular and organization as a whole. Although knowledge and talent are essential factors to succeed, attitude interlinks both factors and enhances connectivity both with people and work. Positive thinking “begins with having confidence in oneself. Confidence reinforces ability, doubles energy, buttresses mental faculties, and increases power” [8].

The beneficial impact of displaying positive attitude at the workplace has innumerable advantages of uplifting new possibilities and opportunities in terms of power and position. The right attitude consistently creates big differences, generating fine relationships which further generate better work culture and achieving goals. Right attitude is an attitude that tends to “focus on the positive, are willing to work as part of a team, and strive to be a *can do* person” [9]. A positive-spirited environment constructs high morale and result-driven teamwork. Feeling positive and confident on both positive and negative thoughts occupy a similar space in mind. Thinking negative would result in negative feelings with obviously negative results. But practicing positive thoughts will develop a strong sense of competence that regardless of what difficulties may arise, one will be able to defeat them. Hence it is entirely on the thoughts that control attitude.

5. Communication skills

Career development begins with good communication skills. The ability to communicate is one among the many steps to succeed in a career. Without sufficient skills to communicate, it becomes difficult to gain, hold, or enlarge interpersonal relationships especially at workplaces. Communication is the very lifeline of workplaces that involves a large number of people associated both internally and externally with an organization. Communication binds them all. Studies believe “there is considerable evidence to suggest that those who lack a range of well-developed communication skills find it difficult to advance their careers” [10]. Good communication delivers messages with clarity and responsibility to the receiver without any distortion or confusion. Hence, it is of utmost importance that the message transmitted must be efficiently spoken and fittingly listened and comprehended. Besides speaking and listening, reading and writing too are essential components of communication skills.

Communication cultivates motivation. Researches claim “communication should be regarded as a transaction in which participants create meaning together in an atmosphere of trust” [11]. Communication should be such that clarifies instructions, suggestions, ideas, information, and persuasions, keeping in view that the receiver understands it. When communication is clear, employees get to know what is to be done and what more can be done to improve their performance. The goals get stimulated by desired behavior through motivation. In fact, “because motivation theory is so difficult to implement, more and more companies are seeing that the link between motivation and performance improvement is communication” [12]. Communication also happens to be the main procedure to encourage and assess decision-making. Viable communication, henceforth, is a craftsmanship and thus should be incorporated at working environments for fine outcomes and achievements of objectives. Effective communication generally corrects mistake if any and provides predominant holding among everybody in the working

environment and resolves clashes. Studies recommend that more than encoding, decoding the correct message is of prime significance to proceed with the communication procedure.

Besides verbal method, communication can also take place nonverbally that is without words. According to Susanne Jones, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Minnesota, “about 65 to 75 percent of all communication is nonverbal in nature” [13] which is why “non verbal communication forms an essential component in building successful interactions with people. One of the distinct features of non verbal communication is that it is preeminent than verbal communication” [14].

Body language like posture, gesture, facial expression, and appearance while interacting or not interacting becomes largely pivotal during communication especially at workplaces. Let us take, for example, if someone tends to avoid eye contact or maintains physical distance, it may clearly signify avoidance. However, it may not as well be true. There is a possibility that he/she may be an introvert. Hence in this situation the case is highly misjudged. Apart from body language, paralinguistic features like pitch, voice, tone, and pace also matter. A rough tone may indicate rudeness or arrogance even though not intending to. A soft voice indicates politeness, while a deep voice suggests dominance and so on.

Apart from nonverbal aspects that form an essential part of communication, another essential component is assertiveness that is the result of a positive flow in our thought process to communicate well with others. Assertiveness is being responsible. Sources claim that “assertive people take responsibility for expressing their opinions, and make every effort to communicate successfully even when their ideas or wishes are in conflict with the ideas of others” [15]. In fact, communication appears miniscule but is in fact a herculean task just as it has been ascertained that “taking responsibility for each other’s communication is a big task which embodies many aspects like emotions, moods, interpersonal skills and many more into its circumference. Communication becomes spontaneous and the quality and mode alter at one point. Assertiveness holds consistency and never allows any fissure in communication” [16].

6. Maintaining strong work ethics

Understanding ethics at the most radical level means following workplace rules that further signifies “working hard, following healthy and safety rules, maintaining a clean and orderly work area and being punctual and reliable” [17]. It is of prime importance to maintain a greater level of ethics in order to grow professionally. There are instances where many people imply unethical means to get success. However, success earned through unethical means is short-lived. Being honest; stabilizing integrity, loyalty, and trust; and practicing mutual respect add value to workplace relationships and help in effective decision-making process during crucial times. Hence, ethics are mostly based on virtues and virtue ethics focused primarily on virtues or the goodness or the rightness of things, ideas, concepts, theories, or principles [18].

Strong work ethics makes workplaces act within persistent goals, set as professional standards for behavior concerned with the welfare of the organization and also of the society. Hence, abiding by the ethical codes encourages efficient work, inspires everyone to maintain self-control, motivates employees to remain loyal to their organization, and improves quality of work. Career advancement largely depends on ascertaining core values and moving ahead to work toward a cooperative and respected culture.

7. Teamwork

An efficient team is an asset to an organization. In fact, “effective team has the ability to take more complex tasks and smoothes the progress of communication by providing better space for open discussion and cooperation among team members further maximizing the productivity of not only the team but also of the organization as a whole” [19]. Teamwork is working with people by offering the best of attitude, knowledge, and skills to other members of a team. While at the workplace, a team becomes an important place as it is a mixed bag of varying cultural backgrounds, varying perceptions, and differing ideas and opinions, but still it tends to bind its constituents together to work for a common purpose. While trying to fit in a team is a challenging task for many, it is also one of the inescapable situations at the workplace. What is even a more challenging task is failing to use team members effectively that “one can end career by ignoring the need for team development and camaraderie” [20]. Further, each member in a team is responsible to be able to carry, coordinate, and cooperate their duties along with others because teamwork is not a group skill rather a responsibility of each individual. Authors assertively state “team work is about cooperating with co-workers” [21]. Apparently, being a good team leader or team member both can have enormous benefits for career advancement. Better job performance by the team would lead to better job performance of the whole organization, and “the more competitive the organization, the better the chances are for job security, career advancement, salary increments, and bonuses for employees” [22].

8. Time management

Managing time has become one of the most important soft skills for career success and advancement. One needs to accept, grow, and go with it. There is so much to do at work like meeting deadlines, achieving targets, delivering results, and finishing assignments, all within a time period. Hence one has to manage time to create competence and efficacy in a way that maximizes profit, minimizes stress and frustration, and makes achieve targets more easily. In order to make a career growth, one has to sincerely make growth happen. “Good, effective time management is a core skill, a career skill that we all need both to make us able to perform in a current job and to enhance our career prospects” [23]. Time management involves some great techniques that enable one to utilize time effectively and perform well in career success. Tracy surmises that knowing the value of something facilitates good time managing capability. He provides example of the executives who experience stress and get annoyed with the work given to them or with their performance. However, there are executives of other kind who “put their whole heart into their work because it is a reflection of their values, seldom experience stress or burn out of any kind” [24]. With values, there emerges an intention and that keeps the employees motivated; there is a continuous flow of energy, activeness, eagerness, and innovation in doing work, and the work flows automatically within the time frame.

Effective time management enables to make good decisions and increases job satisfaction. Hence in order to practice good time management skills and to experience paramount adequacy during career growth, business organizations strictly emphasize on effective time management ability that is a way to develop and use processes and tools for maximum efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity. It involves mastery of a set of skills like setting goals and planning and also its effective use of time to achieve desired results. The main objective of time management

is to enable an individual in remaining absorbed on the activities that are important first and that matter more than other things or activities, thus helping an individual being “aware of how to use time as one resource in organizing, prioritizing, and succeeding in a business in the context of all the competing activities of start-ups and new ventures” [25].

9. Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to study in detail few among the many soft skills and their significance in career development. Inculcating soft skills has become the need of the hour for working better, maximizing job performance, and improving one's career. Developing soft skills help turn adversities into opportunities that further lead to career success. Although goals may be seen harder to achieve in the beginning, through soft skills discussed in the paper, one may try to gradually overcome barriers that are responsible for career downfall. Through changing one's personality and perceptions toward work, people, and situations, one may be able to stand out from the crowd to grow in his/her success. A positive attitude, good communication skills, strong work ethics, and teamwork and time management skills, however, are not the only skills that soft skills restrict to. The present paper manifests the significance of selected soft skills in advancing a career and succeeding in this highly competitive world. The paper in a way proposes ways and manners for employees at workplaces to value the need to think positive, communicate well, rely on core values and ethics, work in team, and manage time to deal with difficult people and situations, ultimately giving them a roadmap to do well in their career. Mastering soft skills in this highly competitive world will not only help an employee stand out from the crowd but also augment wonders on relationships, job performances, and career advancement.

Author details

Mitashree Tripathy
FMS, Sri Sri University, Odisha, India

*Address all correspondence to: mitashreetripathy84@gmail.com

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