

8.1 WHAT ARE SOFT SKILLS? Soft or social skills (also called non-technical skills) are those personal values and interpersonal skills that determine a person's ability to work well with others in a project team. Soft skills are needed to deal with the external world and to work in a collaborative manner with one's colleagues. These skills include effective communication, leadership, and teamwork skills; demonstrating problem solving abilities, initiative, and motivation skills; displaying honesty and strong work ethics. Soft skills play a vital role for academic and professional success; they help us excel in the workplace and their importance cannot be denied in the emerging information or knowledge society. Soft skills are needed to deal with the external world and to work in a collaborative manner with one's colleagues. 8.1.1

TYPES OF SOFT SKILLS There are various components that comprise soft skills. Some are inborn such as confidence, friendliness and whether or not someone has a sociable nature, while others are skills that can be taught or improved upon, such as developing effective communication, organisation, and social graces. A large number of soft skills are known today.

However, a different set of soft skills is required for a specific type/nature of work. For our purpose these may include the following: • communication skills • listening skills • presentation skills • interpersonal skills • team skills • leadership skills • etiquette • cross-cultural skills • language skills, etc. Some of these are discussed in subsequent paragraphs. **Communication Skills** The ability to communicate ideas to others effectively is an absolute essential requirement for our career building. Speaking clearly and coherently will allow effective verbal communication with others. How we speak is more influential to the person who we are communicating with than what we actually say, so we should be careful about our be used for effective communication in the context of computer/IT mediated communication. **Soft Skills for Effective Communication** 187 body language and tone of our voice when we are talking.

Communication is a two-way process. Listening is therefore an essential skill too. Listening is more than just hearing what is being said. Effective listening encourages others to listen to us and respond to what we say. If communication skills are an area that we feel we could improve on, we should set about identifying ways in which we could develop them. Communication subsumes delegation, listening and presentation. The ability to present comprehensive written ideas will enable us to put forward professional documentation of our thoughts and is a highly regarded skill. If we write so that misinterpretation is minimised we will find that people are far more receptive to our suggestions. Effective communication skills are something every one needs to possess. Verbal communication skill includes a one-to-one interaction, presentation/public speaking ability, and good telephonic skills. Written communication would include program writing, report writing, letter writing and e-mail etiquette, etc. 8.1.2

HOW TO DEVELOP SOFT SKILLS? Developing soft skills needs practice. These are acquired and experienced on the spot. Soft skills cannot be acquired by merely reading textbooks. The soft skills we gain equip us to excel in our academic/professional life and in our personal life. It is a continuous learning process. Development of soft skills has two parts. One part involves developing attitudes and attributes, and the other part involves fine-tuning communication skills to express attitudes, ideas, and thoughts. Perfect integration of ideas and attitudes with

appropriate communication skills in oral, written, and non-verbal areas is necessary for successful work. Attitudes and skills are integral to soft skills. Each one influences and complements the other.

8.1.3 HARD SKILLS VS SOFT SKILLS

Hard skills are technical procedures/tools related to our field. Examples include work place productivity tools (Unit II), computer protocols, etc. These skills are typically easy to observe, quantify and measure. By contrast, “soft skills” are typically hard to observe, quantify and measure. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements. Soft skills are as important, if not more important, than traditional hard skills at our work place.

8.2 COMMUNICATION

We know that communication is to get our message across to others clearly and unambiguously and it is most important for our progress. For this, we must understand what our message is, who the audience is and how it will be perceived. We must also weigh-in the circumstances surrounding our communications, such as the situational and cultural context.

8.2.1 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Effective communication and interpersonal skills are crucial to the success of an academician as they help him in dealing with people at the emotional level. Effective communication and soft skills not only improve relationships, but also improve efficiency. Communicating effectively is characterised by such things as active listening, using self for messages, conflict management, positive body language, and asking the right questions.

8.2.2 COMMUNICATION PROCESS

The process of communication involves effort from both the sender and receiver of the message. Else the process can be fraught with error, with messages often misinterpreted by the recipient. When the error is not detected, it can cause tremendous confusion, wasted effort and missed opportunity. Problems with communication can pop-up at every stage of the process. To be an effective communicator and to get our point across without confusion, our goal should be to lessen the frequency of these problems at each stage. This can be done through clear, concise, accurate, and well-planned communications. The communication process consists of basic components like sender, encoding, channel, decoding, receiver, and feedback and the context.

Sender As the source of the message, we need to be clear about why we are communicating, and what we want to communicate. We also need to be confident that the information we are communicating is useful and accurate.

Encoding This is the process of transferring the information we want to communicate into a form that can be sent and correctly decoded at the other end. One must be careful about cultural issues, mistaken assumptions, missing information, etc.

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Messages are conveyed through channels which may be verbal, including face-to-face meetings, telephone and videoconferencing and written, including letters, e-mails, memos and reports. Different channels have different strengths and weaknesses. For example, it is not effective to give a long list of directions verbally.

Decoding Just as successful encoding is a skill, so is successful decoding (for example, taking the time to read a message carefully, or listen actively). Confusion can arise from errors in encoding as well as decoding. This is particularly the case if the decoder does not have enough knowledge to understand the message.

Receiver Our message is delivered to

individual members of our audience. No doubt, we need to be aware of the actions or reactions we hope our message will get from them. We need to bear in mind, though, that each of these individuals enters into the communication process with his or her own ideas and feelings that will undoubtedly influence their understanding of our message, and thereby, their response. To be a successful communicator, we should consider this before delivering our message, and act appropriately. Feedback Feedback is obtained by monitoring response of the receiver to the message. Our audience will provide us with the feedback, may be in the form of verbal and non-verbal reactions to our communicated message (Figure 8.1). Pay close attention to these feedbacks. These feedbacks are the only things that allow us to be confident that our audience has understood our message. If we find that there has been a misunderstanding, at least we have the opportunity to send the message a second time. Figure 8.1 : An illustration to explain how important feedback is – some illustrations of non-verbal cues reflecting whether the information is well received or not (facial expressions/hand signs/ body gestures) How are you... I am fine... thank you... Heyyyyyyy what are you dooooooing... W