

The Hard Facts about Soft Skills

by Michael Sterling

In today's workplace, your soft skills are as important, maybe more important, than your technical skills.

What are soft skills? They're a cluster of personal qualities that make a person a good employee and co-worker. Solid soft skills are in demand.

Technical skills are often more easily defined, taught and measured, than are soft skills. Some argue that soft skills cannot be taught...one either has them or not. That's absolutely not true. More often than not, those who say that aren't willing or don't know how to teach soft skills.

We all have a mix of talents, and some areas come more easily than others, but soft skills are taught every day in firms everywhere.

From the beginning, technical development and competency (hard skills) is a focus of training and evaluation. Leadership rewards technical expertise and clients pay for it. Technical strength is necessary for long-term career success in public accounting. It's all too easy in public accounting, and other fields with a heavy technical focus, to become professionally "near-sighted."

We all know someone who is very strong technically, but seems to be frequently passed over for promotions, or isn't invited to participate in client meetings, or to lead firm projects. These individuals are suffering with "poor people skills" or soft skills.

There are many definitions of what soft skills are and aren't. Semantics in my opinion. But one thing is crystal clear, ignoring or under valuing soft skill development will stunt your career!

That doesn't mean everyone must be a super star leader of people, it means balance your development, and you'll go further in your career. Firms want employees who are successful in both hard and soft skills.

Seems like a “Catch 22”, right? In a field, such as Public Accounting, where technical wizards reign, how can firms be searching for people with keen soft skills? Most importantly, what soft skills should CPA’s have?

These are my six soft skill categories. Remember, they are interrelated – there is connection and overlap.

1) Emotional Intelligence

- Build Positive Relationships - with clients, management and co-workers
 - Be aware of others and responsive to their needs
 - Show care and empathy for others’ challenges and issues
 - Be collaborative and generous
 - Be Accountable, take responsibility
 - Focus on the big picture and make decisions accordingly
 - Align with firm’s core values

- Self-Management
 - Show motivation and take initiative
 - Be Responsible and accountable
 - Self-restrain and self-correct
 - Manage emotions with balance and grace

2) Communication

- Be clear, concise and customize communications for different audiences.
- Listen with ears and eyes. Pay attention to verbal and non-verbal messaging
- Be honest and fair, character counts
- Confirm understanding
- Be persuasive, engage, influence and be able to simplify complex issues
- Network, collaborate and learn to negotiate

3)Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

- Identify issues by using 2nd/3rd level questions to uncover & understand core concerns
- Be a critical thinker - problem solve independently
- Ask for help as needed while seeking independent solutions
- Offer quality resolutions and follow up to insure outcome
- Take ownership, manage work-flow and delegating
- Excel at time management and multi-tasking
- Be flexible, dependable

4)Teachable/Adaptable

- Be willing to learn, grown and change
- Shift on the fly, adjust and adapt as situations demand
- Be willing to be coached and coach others
- Create and embrace change

5)Professional Toughness

- Show resilience, bend without breaking
- Have strong professional drive, meet challenges head-on and take action
- Be Patient, level-headed
- Roll-up your sleeves, help co-workers

6)Leadership

- Focus on results
- Connect, engage, collaborate and effectively manage others
- Influence and be persuasive
- Lead by example, inspire and develop trust

Let's face it, technical skills are necessary and expected in the accounting world. It's skills such as leadership, communication and listening that make you management and partner material. Today's CPA's success is tied to their ability to master a blend of hard and soft skills.

How do you measure up? Be honest with yourself and be prepared to demonstrate these skills. Include soft skills on your resume and showcase them with strong adjectives and examples during an interview.

Need help?

- Find a Mentor. Strong mentors aren't optional, they're necessary. Seek out someone who excels in an area you'd like to improve. Or, look for a mentor program where career specialists will provide advice and guidance. Check out our Mentor Program which is exclusive to public accounting. We specialize in connecting professionals with seasoned mentors broadening an individuals learning and connections beyond their firm, their city and often even their state.
- Volunteer – Look at community organizations Working with others in different environments can provide valuable soft skills from team building to leadership and public speaking. Become a student of those who model strong soft skills.
- Take a Class - Sign up for a course in Leadership, Communication or Time Management.

Sharpening and showcasing your soft skills will make you more marketable. Employers are searching for individuals who are the right cultural fit for their firm. Remember, it's not enough to simply know how to do a job. You need the right mix of job experience and life-learned experience.