A COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO

SOFT SKILLS TRAINING

Improving How Employees Approach Their Jobs
& Work With Each Other

ej4

Executive Summary:

Both professional athletes and business professionals will agree; how a team operates as a unit is often more important than the individual talent levels of the team members.

If the only determining factors for success were hard skills and qualifications, then assembling a group of employees would be easy.

Managers wouldn't have to consider their staff members' personalities, attitudes, or their ability to collaborate with one another when **putting a team together**. However, coworkers don't always communicate effectively with each other or perform to the best of their abilities.

And this is where soft skills come into play!

These professional soft skills, like communication and collaboration, are difficult to measure. Yet having a strong set of soft skills can help any employee achieve career success – reaching business goals, and enjoying the process along the way. Since employees start with different abilities, businesses can offer soft skills training resources that can improve how employees approach their jobs and work with each other.

In this guide, we'll explain everything there is to know about soft skills including:

What soft skills are

How they differ from hard skills

What businesses can do to promote soft skills

How businesses benefit from implementing effective soft skills training

Let's get started!

What are Soft Skills?

"Soft skills are sets of abilities that reflect how well a person gets along with others around them and how well they're able to identify and address problems."

Simple enough, right?

In fact, soft skills are difficult to define, measure, and organize because, as their name suggests, they're not hard or tangible and many are related to each other.

Take a look at the list below and see if you can think of a way to measure these commonly desired soft skills:

Reflect on your own skills using the list below.
What are your strongest and weakest soft skills?

- Accountability
- Active Listening
- Coaching
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Creativity
- Crisis Management
- Critical Thinking
- Customer Service
- Decision Making
- Emotional Intelligence
- Feedback
- Goal Setting
- Leadership
- Managerial Courage
- Mentoring
- Multitasking
- Negotiating
- Organization
- Problem Solving
- Project Management
- Stress Management
- Time Management
- Unconscious Bias

While the list above serves as a good overview, there is no definitive list of soft skills, and soft skills tend to overlap with each other. But the one constant at **the heart of soft skills training is communication**.

It's easy to take for granted that professionals understand how to communicate with each other effectively. But if you've ever zoned out during a coworker's 90-minute PowerPoint presentation or misinterpreted the tone of an email, then you know this isn't the case.

Solid communication involves more than just responding to messages or giving presentations.

It calls for active listening, high levels of comprehension, and reading social cues and body language. Soft skills highlight the difference between listening to what someone has to say, as opposed to merely hearing them speak; the difference between making a brief, well thought out statement and launching into a rambling monologue.

Professionals use soft skills every day - most of the time without consciously thinking about them.

Check out a few examples below:

When an employee puts their phone away so that they can focus on what their coworker is saying, they're using active listening.

When someone owns their mistake, they are demonstrating accountability.

When you make your "To-Do" list each day, you are planning and prioritizing.

"These skills don't always come naturally but they can be taught. No one is completely devoid of soft skills and no one is perfectly adept at using soft skills either. Everyone has room to improve."

Soft Skills vs Hard Skills

"Where hard skills end, soft skills begin."

In order to achieve success in any venture, a professional has to possess both soft and hard skills. Hard skills are traits that can be measured and dissected easily because they operate on a binary scale. Either someone can write Javascript code or they can't; either they can balance an account properly or they can't. These hard skills help people get their foot in the door because they let employers know a person has the required abilities to perform a job on a base level.

In fact, studies indicate that soft skills account for roughly **85% of a person's success** over the course of their career. And employers rightly value employees with soft skills, **74% of hiring managers** rate a candidate's listening skills above all other abilities when they begin the interview process.

85%
of successes in a person's career are attributed to their soft skills

74%
of hiring managers rate listening skills as the top priority for interviews

Some may believe that hard skills are the only "teachable" skills, but this just isn't true. It is possible to train and hone soft skills, and professionals can take courses on leadership just as they would for computer programming.

Leadership, like any other soft skill, is not a genetic trait or a birthright, but some people are born leaders. You can see it on the playground with children at recess. For those people who are not natural leaders, the ability can be improved through training, hard work and focus.

"Everyone from Warren Bennis to Vince Lombardi agrees on this note: leaders are made, not born."

Soft Skills Training Best Practices

It's true that certain individuals may have a propensity to excel at activities like diffusing conflict or public speaking. Yet, even if you're terrified of public speaking now, as many of us are, you can become a better public speaker through soft skills training and practice. Plus, people with strong soft skills can bolster them further through training.

The problem is that companies don't always have the tools to facilitate that kind of growth. A few common problems business leaders encounter when implementing soft skills training include:

Lack of relevant educational content

Limited access to capable instructors

Failure to access soft skills needs

Top-heavy educational investment

Insufficient time to implement training

No training reinforcement

Since soft skills relate to both personal growth and business progress, they're essential to a company's success on a granular and macro level.

Optimum workplace productivity depends on everyone at an office possessing useful soft skills and complementing each other accordingly.

Think about the composition of any successful team for reference. A speedy shortstop has talents that a hard-slugging first basemen lacks – and vice-versa. Or to move away from sports, Captain Kirk is emotional and courageous, while Mr. Spock is calculating and measured.

However, their differences aren't liabilities, they're advantages because they work together well; they have chemistry.

Good chemistry is the result of soft skills like empathy, active listening, and collaboration. To improve office productivity, you can improve your employee's soft skills with training!

Whether you have an existing soft skills training program you want to improve, or you're ready to bring a new focus on soft skills at your company, these steps can work to boost your team's soft skills:

Hire Motivated Employees

In your hiring process, look for potential candidates who display a willingness to learn. Since it's very difficult to teach someone a skill they don't want to learn, you can get a headstart by simply hiring candidates who already have a good attitude and who naturally take to training sessions.

And you won't be alone in this effort! During the **hiring process at Google**, the number one attribute they look for is "learning ability" because it overlaps with the other soft skills they want a new hire to have. Even our Vice President of Operations, Kathy Irish, says she "hires for attitude and aptitude."

Find Compelling Learning Material

Do any of the presenters in your training videos feature shoulder pads reminiscent of the original "Dynasty" TV show from the 80's? What does outdated content say to your learners?

While effective learning material is typically diverse in order to reach different types of learners, diverse learning material isn't always compelling.

When you're evaluating learning material, try to find a balance of diverse and compelling lessons by looking for the following:

Thoughtful visuals and creative graphics	**Conversational instructors who are relatable to the learners**
Consistent quality of each course, student materials, and exams	**Fresh and updated content to each soft skill training topic**

You want to be sure your learners aren't turned off or uninspired by the lack of current content!

Include a Wide Range of Relevant Topics

Diverse, rich training content is an asset for any growing business. The more relevant content a business can offer its team members, the more opportunities they have to grow and learn. For example, leadership training could include teaching each of the DISC personalities, succession planning, and how to handle mistakes.

Additionally, there can be two different sides to the same topic. Managers need to apply soft skills in a different manner than employees. There are differences when working with Millennials vs. members of Generation Z and training can address those differences.

Assess Training Needs

Soft skills tend to be lumped together, but the reality is that they can refer to very different abilities. An employee may have certain well-developed traits like the ability and willingness to collaborate, but they may be lacking in others like organization and time management.

"It's important for businesses to determine which soft skills they want their team members to prioritize – and to figure out how best to maximize their training efforts."

For example, a business can assess a need for more efficient project management by reviewing the number of initiatives that launched on time and on budget. For the initiatives that were late or over budget, the team members associated with the project may need training on assertiveness to drive a timeline or training on negotiating to secure better pricing!

Businesses may also determine their employees' needs and strengths through formal assessments in the training area.

Formal assessments, unlike personal observations or interviews, are objective, and they can provide concrete, measurable data that managers can reference over time.

The nature of the business and its long-term goals, along with the needs of each individual employee, should influence soft skills training methods and topics. Not all employees will need the same soft skill training depending on their natural abilities and past experience.

Create a Learning Culture

Did you know you already have a learning culture at your company? Whether you realize it or not, it's there!

A learning culture is a set of organizational values, processes, and practices centered around education and learning. A positive learning culture is one that encourages employees, and the organization as a whole, to continuously learn and add new skills.

What's the difference? In a training culture, performance problems are addressed through mandatory training. Management dictates what you can take and when you can take it. In a learning culture, employees are more involved in self-driven learning that will positively impact business outcomes and personal productivity. They don't view knowledge as power, but instead, encourage employees to seek out learning opportunities anytime they want to.

Training Culture

- Mandatory training is used to address performance problems

- Management dictates timing

VS

Learning Culture

- Training is available at any time and encouraged by management

- Employees dictate timing

So how do you build a positive learning culture? Inundating team members with tons of content isn't (on its own) going to lead to a better learning culture. Rather, managers can help foster a better learning environment by:

Prioritizing it and making it a part of their long-term plans

Getting support from management

Encouraging and explaining the benefits of self-directed learning

Offering employees the chance to view content outside of the office

Being consistent in their approach

Keep in mind that **each learning culture** will differ based on the needs, personalities, and goals of both the company and its employees. For instance, some businesses have very regimented ideals and principles that they want their employees to embrace, and their learning culture will reflect that. Meanwhile, others encourage a more free-form method for employee learning, and, as a result, the learning culture will be quite different (though not better or worse).

The benefits of building a successful culture are numerous, but a few include boosted employee morale, reduced turnover rate, and improved workplace atmosphere.
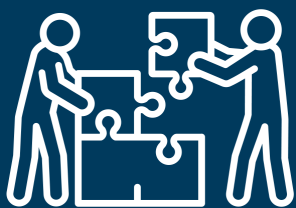
A successful learning culture can boost employee morale, reduce turnover rate, & improve the workplace environment.

Reinforce the Training

Quiz time!

Do you know the capital of New Hampshire?

How about the first element on the periodic table? Or who invented the cotton gin?

It's likely that even if you don't know the answers to these questions now, you did at one time. (By the way, they are: Concord, hydrogen, and Eli Whitney.)

That's because schools reinforce lessons through homework and assignments. In the same way, effective soft skills training reinforces the lessons introduced during lessons and lectures.

Follow-up emails, quizzes, and recap videos all act to refresh employees and keep important information top of mind, well after training sessions have concluded.

Checking in with an email, a quiz, or a recap video after training concludes can help keep important information top of mind.

Further Soft Skills Training Considerations

Setting up a functioning soft skills training program is complex if you're going the DIY route, building a program from scratch. Thankfully the process can be made much easier by partnering with an eLearning company who has soft skills training programs ready to roll out.

No matter which approach you plan on taking, there are a few further considerations managers should be aware of before they start making big decisions in regard to their training tactics.

Adult Learning Theory

One big question business leaders looking to introduce soft skills training must ask themselves is: how do they plan to expose their team to educational material?

"Put simply, adults do not learn the same way that children do, but a lot of educational content is written or designed as if they did."

Adult learning theory provides guidelines for companies looking to boost soft skills development within their organization. It stipulates that because adults learn differently from children, the learning process must be tailored to their specifications.

Adult learners have different backgrounds and experiences, and L&D leaders need to account for factors like these when implementing soft skills training.

Tailor your corporate training programs to take advantage of qualities adult learners have — like their eagerness to learn relevant material, their need to connect with experience, and their motivation to improve themselves.

Changing Behavior

Developing soft skills is about changing behavior. The problem here for businesses is that human behavior is nuanced.

Getting team members to communicate with each other in a more productive way isn't a simple matter of incentivizing that communication, or alternatively, punishing failure to do so. You can't put an employee in "time out" for not communicating with their coworkers.

Rather, managers can leverage blended learning to promote changes in behavior over a period of time. Blended learning combines digital and online learning with face-to-face instructor-led classes. This enables learners to have some control over their learning path, and gives them the ability to move ahead at their own pace.

To really change behavior, employees can watch a series of videos on their own prior to the class, and then discuss the content and roleplay situations that apply to their position during the instructor-led training.

Working through a problem or situation you're currently facing in a roleplay scenario can actually help you determine how to handle the situation at hand.

Videos can also be used as training reinforcement after the class to support the transfer of knowledge from short-term memory to long-term memory and change behavior.

Use blended learning, combining digital and online learning with face-to-face classes

Discuss the content and use roleplay scenarios that apply to their position after training

Offer videos after training so employees can jog their memories whenever they need to

Benefits of Soft Skills Training

Drama is great for TV shows and movies, but it's the last thing managers or directors can afford to deal with in the workplace. Still, many conflicts stem from communication breakdowns or misunderstandings.

Soft skills training seeks to eliminate these damaging miscommunications and ensure that a team operates at its most efficient and amicable level.

Soft skills training can mean the difference between:

Assertive action vs aggressive action	**Persistence vs pestering**
Constructive criticism vs condemnation	**Creativity vs chaos**
Leadership vs bullying	**Fulfilling communication vs frustrating interactions**

The benefits of an effective soft skills training program are numerous. Soft skills can influence everything from the way employees communicate with customers to the way they solve problems internally. It's not an overstatement to suggest that improved soft skills training can influence nearly every aspect of a business operation in a positive way.

One final note, it is possible to focus too heavily on a certain soft skill, or, to attempt to promote a certain soft skill too heavily within one group.

Some companies spend an inordinate amount of their training budget on senior management or executive positions. Yet, professionals at all levels will benefit from soft skills training. Soft skills training allows pros to become better communicators and better employees. In the end, soft skills training is an essential pursuit for both businesses and professionals.

Conclusion

ej4 can offer businesses a wide array of training videos that encompass virtually every soft skills topic you could imagine. From choosing the right business attire, to managing stressful situations, ej4 is dedicated to providing the most comprehensive and useful eLearning resources for forward-thinking professionals.

Check out a list of additional topics **here**, or, to speak with one of our dedicated team members, **contact us today.**

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About ej4

Since 2004, ej4 has delivered the unexpected in the eLearning industry. Our unique style of microlearning videos combines instructional design with adult learning theories and is delivered via contemporary video design. Our modern learning management system is simple, intuitive, and mobile so employees have the freedom to learn anywhere, anytime.

If you are interested in seeing how the principles play out in some actual content, you can **sign up for a free 15-day trial of Thinkzoom**, our Learning Management System.

You can **contact us** for a demo as well. We'd love to hear from you.

People Grow Business. We Grow People.