

SOFT SKILLS – THE PEARL WITHIN THE SHELL-COVER

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ABSTRACT

Technical and job-related skills are a must, but they are not sufficient when it comes to finding a job or progressing up the ladder. Another very important factor in this regard is that nowadays the traditional style of leadership has already got out of track. So, now professional managers expect their employees to have something extra – an X-factor. That X-factor is now called Soft Skills. But when the professionals and students are asked what these soft skills actually are; when they are asked to mention the name of some soft skills, it has often been noticed that they do not have clear idea about it. So, this paper would explore the different aspects of soft skills and help the individuals find out the pearl of Soft Skills from the shell-cover of their ignorance or unclear knowledge. An intensive survey has been conducted to reach to this conclusion.

The result of the survey shows that almost 56% people think that Soft Skills means having good Communication Skills and having good personality. But Communication Skills and good personality are just two examples of 60 kinds of Soft Skills. This paper would result in understanding different types of soft skills, so that people may be capable of finding out the pearl from that shell-cover which often remains unnoticed in the crowd of so many other shell-covers. This paper is also about setting up a new definition of Soft Skills.

KEYWORDS: Soft Skills, Shell-Cover, Personality, Communication, Unnoticed

INTRODUCTION

Few years ago it was normal to have a line at the top of a CV just stating a professional objective. What we see now is a marked shift. Most companies now are less interested in the early stages of a hiring process at least. Technical and job-related skills are a must, but nowadays they are not sufficient when it comes to finding a job or progressing up the ladder. Hiring managers are more focused on the needs of the organization. Now it is all about what a candidate does well and usually followed by the question “how quickly?” So, now professional managers expect their employees to have something extra – an X-factor. That X-factor is now called Soft Skills. But when the professionals and students are asked what these soft skills actually are; when they are asked to mention the name of some soft skills, it has often been observed that they do not have clear idea about it. Many think that Soft Skills is just good communication skills and having a good personality. But Communication Skills and good personality are just two examples of 60 kinds of Soft Skills. To understand concept of Soft Skills clearer, this paper has strived to define Soft skills in an altogether new way, so that people may be capable of finding out the pearl from that shell-cover which often remains unnoticed in the crowd of so many other shell-covers.

The Concept of Soft Skills

As per the definition given by Wikipedia, Soft Skills is a term often associated with a person's "EQ" (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness and optimism that characterize relationship with other people. So, in short, Soft Skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interaction, job performance and career prospects. As per the definition given by Globe Fist Management Solutions, Chennai, Soft skills are variously viewed as communication skills, interpersonal skills, and the ability to work with others, and so on. A more complex definition is "a range of abilities including work ethic, courtesy, sensitivity, communication skills, ability to accept and learn from criticism, ability to handle client relationships, networking, creativity, ability to motivate yourself and lead others, time management, leadership and interpersonal skills." (K. Alex, 2012) "Soft Skills are essentially people skills – the non-technical, intangible, personality specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, listener, negotiator, and conflict mediator." Thus, there are thousands kinds of definitions of Soft Skills. But from all the definitions, one thing is very clear about Soft skills and that is, "Soft Skills is the ability required and expected from persons for finding a suitable job, its maintenance and promotion." In this context, it is to be mentioned that as everything has its opposite – day-night, dull-exciting, hell-heaven – similarly Soft Skills have also its opposite and that is called Hard Skills.

The Concept of Hard Skills

Hard skills are more along the lines of what might appear on one's resume – your education, expertise, and level of expertise. According to Investopedia, Hard Skills are specific, teachable abilities that can be defined and measured. Examples of Hard Skills include job skills like typing, writing, math, reading and the ability to use software programs; in business, Hard Skills most often refer to accounting and financial modeling. Hard Skills are skills that people learn to do well. Some people may not be able to learn all the hard skills because they learn something better than others. In this context, it is to be clearly understood that Soft Skills complement Hard skills. But at the same time, Hard Skills cannot be replaced with Soft Skills.

Soft Skills v/s Hard Skills

Soft Skills and Hard Skills are like two wings of a bird, without any of which a bird cannot soar into the sky. Soft Skills are the inner qualities of an individual, and Hard Skills are the application of those qualities. That is why, Soft Skills complement Hard skills. But at the same time, Hard Skills cannot be replaced with Soft Skills.

According to the researchers of Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada, Hard Skills are usually related to professional knowledge, tools, or techniques that allow us to work within our profession. On the other hand, Soft skills are the complete collection of our social, communication and self-management behaviors. These are the skills that enable us to work effectively and "fit in" at the workplace. Soft skills have more to do with who we are than what we know. But Hard skills have more to do with what we know than what we are.

Hard Skills are typically easy to observe, quantify and measure. They are also easy to train, because most of the time the skill sets are brand new to the learner and no unlearning is involved. By contrast, Soft Skills are typically hard to observe, quantify and measure. People skills are needed for everyday life as much as they are needed for work. They have to do with how people relate to each other: communicating, listening, engaging in dialogue, giving feedback, cooperating as a team member, solving problems contributing in meetings and resolving conflict.

So, from the above discussion, it is clear that one must have perfectly balanced blending of Soft Skills and Hard Skills to be a successful professional. In this context, it should again be mentioned that Soft Skills complement hard skills. But at the same time, Hard Skills cannot be replaced with Soft Skills.

Importance of Soft Skills

Soft skills are very important

- To handle interpersonal relations
- To take appropriate decisions
- To communicate effectively
- To have good impression and impact to gain professional development

Apart from this, according to a survey, “Soft skills are very important in business. It is essential to be technically sound, but one should also have the ability to convey the idea to the masses in the simplest possible manner.” Another report says, “Planning is necessary, but execution is also equally important, and it takes soft skills to execute any idea because it involves dealing with people directly”.

Thus, Soft Skills really play a major role in one’s success in life, especially in profession. Dr. K. Alex says, “They help one to excel in the workplace and their importance cannot be denied in this age of information and knowledge. Soft Skills in the highly competitive corporate world will help you stand out in a crowd of regular job seekers with ordinary skills and talent.”

Soft Skills are essentially social skills. Studies prove that socially acceptable profile and skills are necessary to make a good employee. The ever-changing impact of technology and the style of management pay so much attention to Soft Skills, because they really play a very important role for the success of an organization. Organizations, particularly those dealing with customers face to face, are generally more prosperous if they train their employees to use these skills. These skills are also important for those organizations which do not deal with customers directly, to maintain interpersonal relationship among its employees.

Studies by Stanford Research Institute and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation among Fortune 500 CEOs found that 75% of the long term job success depends on people skills and only 25% on technical skills. The annual rankings of MBA colleges often place communication and interpersonal skills as the most critical skills needed for success in the corporate world. Noted academic Prof. Henry Mintzberg while speaking on the importance of soft skills for MBAs, refers to the crucial "soft" skills - leadership, teamwork, communication, and the ability to think “outside the box” of a discipline - that separate the best from the rest in the management world.

Companies in the IT, BPO, KPO, Biotech, and Pharmaceuticals industries have found that their people need soft skills to work effectively in cross-functional or project teams, local teams or global teams. But in this context, it should also be remembered that Soft skills cannot be taught, but it can be developed through proper training. The importance of Soft Skills can be understood from the Pyramid Image beside. It is even more important than academic knowledge and technical knowledge.



Figure 1: (Pyramid Image) →

Types of Soft skills

The Smyth County Industry Council, a governing body based in the US, conducted a survey recently. The result of the survey was called the Workforce Profile. They found that there are at least 60 soft skills sought by the employers. A few of them are Motivational skills, Reporting to work on time, Personal energy, Willingness to be a good worker and go beyond the traditional eight-hour day, Communication skills etc. But it is clear that nobody can have all the Soft Skills at once. Behavioral training experts say there are at least six soft skills that are required for every hard-nosed professional. They are Interpersonal skills, Team spirit, Social grace, Business etiquette, Negotiation skills, and Time management.

Survey about Soft Skills

So, from the detailed study of Soft Skills, it is evident that Soft Skills are people skills. That means that everyone has soft skills. Therefore, everyone should be aware of these Soft skills, so that they can identify these skills within themselves and can nurture them for their own improvement, not only in their professional fields, but also in their social and personal field. Soft Skills are essentially social skills. Studies prove that socially acceptable profile and skills are necessary to make a good employee. One must have perfectly balanced blending of Soft Skills and Hard Skills to be a successful professional.

Now, with a view to test the awareness of the people of soft skills, a survey was conducted. 100 people were taken in the survey. The participants are mainly the engineering students and teachers as well as responsible administrators working in the corporate sector, such as Global Institute of Management and Technology (GIMT), Texas A&M University, Saroj Mohan Institute of Technology, Techno India (SMIT), Dr. B.R. Ambedker College, Adamas Institute of Technology, Modern Institute of Technology, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Cognizant Technology Solution (CTS), Badkulla United Academy, Gobrapota Netaji Hish School, Krishnagar Government College and so on. Three questions were asked to the participants. All the participants were also requested to give their personal opinion about it, without searching any book or internet.

- What is the **definition of Soft Skills, according to you?**
- Do you think that it is necessary for everyone to have Soft Skills?
- Name some Soft Skills.

**Table 1: A Structured Interview Session was Conducted with all the Participants.
The Following is the Details of the Survey**

Sl. No.	Name & Designation	Definition of Soft Skills	Necessity?	Examples
1	Prof. (Dr.) Ashok Kumar Majumder, Principal, GIMT WB, India	Professional and social activities to focus as knowledge about science, technology and engineering.	Yes	Value spectrum of a good life, Integrated personality, Moral & ethical value etc.
2	Mr. Sourav Kundu, Sr. Operations Executive, TCS, Saltlake, Kolkata, WB, India	Associated with Personality traits, social graces, communication, personal habits, interaction.	Yes	Team spirit, Flexibility, Communication, Problem solving skills, Creative thinking etc.
3	Mr. Aniruddha Roy, Assistant Professor, AS&H Dept., GIMT WB, India Aniruddha.rick@yahoo.com	It may be defined as Listening, speaking skills and proper body language.	Yes	Communication Skills
4	Dr. Nasreen Khan Head, AS&H Dept. GIMT WB, India nasreen.khan10@gmail.com	Associated with good communication skill, good personality & proper etiquette.	Yes	Good Communication Skills, Pleasant personality, Body language etc.
5	Mr. Tapan Mukhopadhyay Assistant Professor, ECE Dept., SMIT Hooghly, India tapanmukx@gmail.com	Personal development of an individual through good presentation of one's own self.	Yes	Body Language Etiquette, Presentation Skill Dressing sense
6	Mr. Abhishek Mukherjee Assistant Professor, ECE Dept., SMIT, Hooghly, India. abhinadia@gmail.com	One's uniqueness in doing anything.	Yes	Uniqueness.
7	Mr. Supriyo Roy Assistant Professor, ECE Dept., SMIT Hooghly, India Supriyo.tech@gmail.com	Being dedicated for the organization and knowing all about how the organization runs.	Yes	Dedication, Honesty, Positive attitude, Pleasant personality.
8	Mr. Ayan Das Assistant Teacher (Chemistry) Gobrapota Netaji High School WB, India	Proper personality to face the real world.	Yes	Can't mention.

Table 1: Contd.,

9	Mr. Sadhan Kumar Roy Assistant Teacher (English) Shaktinagar High School WB, India	Associated with English communication with the proper understanding of the impulse of the person who is being spoken to, in short, identifying people.	Yes	Effective English Communication
10	Mr. Bholanath Saha Guest Lecturer Dr. B.R. Ambedker College WB. India	Going for self-inspection.	Yes	Positive & negative aspects.
11	Mr. Swapan Chowdhury Assistant Teacher (English) Badkulla United Academy, WB, India Chowdhury140982@gmail.com	It's about keeping up patience for the right moment to come and to be successful in life.	Yes	Good time management, Patience.
12	Mr. Aritra Ghosh Research Assistant Computer Science Department Texas A & M University, USA aritra.tech@gmail.com	Interpersonal and broadly applicable attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects.	Yes, even a dumb person has soft skills.	Positive Attitude, Good Communication Skills, Time Management Abilities, Problem-Solving Skills.
13	Dr. Rupak Bhattacharyya HOD & Associate Professor, Department of Mathematics Adamas Institute of Technology, Kolkata, India rupakmath@gmail.com	Delicate features that augment a person's communication performances and professional and personal developments.	Yes	Communication skills, Team building, Influencing skill, Opposite of backbiting.
14	Mr. Nrisingho Prasad Sarkar Accountant, Kalyani court (Sub-division) Kalyani, WB, India. onlynir@gmail.com	The skills which make my work easier to do.	Yes	Math, Using techniques, Common sense.
15	Mr. Manas Moulic Assistant Professor (English) GIMT, WB, India manaseng82@gmail.com	Finer issues of human behaviour. It is the way we carry and present ourselves. It could be learnt and be a conscious effort of an individual.	Yes	Art of silence, Art of communication Proxemics, Supra-segmental features of language and its views.
16	Miss. Labanya Ray Mukhrjee Assistant Professor (English) GIMT, WB, India labanya.kly@gmail.com	The main requirement of any individual to get success in professional life as well as personal life.	Yes	Etiquette, Grooming, Communication Skill.
17	Mr. Samrat Kar Ex Assistant Professor (English) GIMT, WB, India samrat_om679@gmail.com	Most important requirement of future career advancement. It's all about development of personality.	Yes	Agility, Emotional balance or 'EQ', Performance-oriented approach, Mental & physical strength, grooming.

Table 1: Contd.,

18	Mr. Subinto Mondal Teacher iLEAP (Pathfinder) subintomondal@yahoo.com	Satisfying others with honesty.	Yes	Honesty, Truthfulness, Helpfulness.
19	Mrs. Sutapa Bannerjee Field Manager Rosevalley Entertainment	It's all about convincing people and helping the organization to achieve its goal.	Yes	Communication skill, Public speaking skills, Problem solving ability.
20	Mr. Raktim Mishra Area Sales Head Vinayak Autotrade Pvt. Ltd. raktim.vinayakauto@gmail.com	Smartly presenting oneself through effective communication and expressing leadership quality.	Yes	Smartness, Good Communication skill, Convincing power, Good personality.
21	Mr. Tamal Sarkar System Engineer TCS, Kolkata, WB, India	The skill which is required by me most in my group discussion & presentation sessions.	Yes	Group discussion, Communication skills, Presentation skills, Willingness for participation.
22	Mr. Debojyoti Mitra Sales Executive MIS mitradebajoti16@gmail.com	Skills required for promotion in the company.	Yes	Good personality, Communication skills, Convincing power.
23	Mr. Dipankar Saha Sales Executive MTS.	Public speaking skills and convincing people to fill up the sales target.	Yes	Speaking power, Reasonability.
24	Mrs. Anindita Saha (Nandi) Office Assistant GIMT, WB. India	Understanding people and understanding one's own self.	Yes	Can't mention.
25	Mrs. Sutapa Roy Nandi Senior Office Assistant GIMT, WB. India ksutaparoy@gmail.com	Personality traits, social graces, communication, personal habits, interaction.	Yes	Effective Communication, Pleasant Personality, Etiquette, All social graces.
26	Miss. Anamika Saha Student, Shimurali Sachinandan College of Education WB. India only.anamikasaha@gmail.com	Being Communicative and acceptable to others.	Yes	Good personality, Communication skills
27	Mr. Subhojit Chakroborty Postal Assistant Krishnagar head Post Office subhajit.post@gmail.com	Behaving with others effectively and grooming	Yes	Politeness Good behaviour Attention to clients
28	Mr. Kingsuk Das Assistant Teacher Chakdivnagar GSSP School, WB. India kingsukdas1990@gmail.com	Human resource power that improves human being and protects him from many unwanted situations.	Yes	Reading facial expression, Honesty,
29	Miss. Tanusree Pal Assistant Teacher Ghurni Panchberia GSSP School	Required by all for being a good human being.	Yes	Honesty should be the main and only example according to me.

Table 1: Contd.,

30	Miss Debolina Bits Assistant Professor (Mathematics) GIMT, WB, India debolina.bit@gmail.com	The skills which are used repeatedly in our daily work, in our habit, and even in our absence of mind.	Yes	Language proficiency, Some particular acceptable habits, Speaking skills.
31	Mr. Ratnadip Dey Programming Analyst, CTS, Kolkata, WB, India ratnadip87@gmail.com	Term associated with professionals and referring to the qualities such as optimism, social graces etc.	Yes	Communication skills, Optimism, Professional habits, Social graces.
32	Mr. Asis Chakrabarty Registrar, GIMT, WB, India asis231969@gmail.com	An inherent ability of a human being, through which a person can make himself marketable.	Yes	Convincing power, Confidence, Communication skills.
33	Mr. Indranil Banerjee Marketing Manager Modern Institute of Technology WB, India.	It's a combination of communication, attitude, smartness, personality, presentation, eye contact etc. It's multi-dimensional	Yes	Good personality, Good attitude, Eye contact.
34	Ananya Basu Student, GIMT abose57@hotmail.com	It's a Way of behavior. It helps individuals to develop their interpersonal relationships.	Yes	Communication Skills, Business etiquette. Good manners.
35	Ankit Sikder Student, GIMT	These skills are abstract, which make growth better.	Yes	Good personality, Positive attitude, Smartness.
36	Shankar Sutrodhar Student, GIMT	Soft skills is common sense.	Yes	Don't know
37	Mrinmoy Bandopadhyay Student, GIMT	Skills that make our work easier, help us to gain knowledge, develop our personality and teach us how to work in a team.	Yes	Argument, Communication skills.
38	Debnath Mondal Student, GIMT	Skills that give us values in life.	Yes	Behaviour, Body language, Personality.

So, among the 100 participants, the above 38 participants gave somehow right concepts of soft skills, although it is noticeable that each of the participants defined and explained soft skills in his/ her own way. But from everyone's contribution, no specific concept of Soft Skills can be reached. Of the rest 62, 56 participants understand Soft skills only as having English Communication power and good personality. The rest 6 participants have commented that they have no idea of Soft Skills.

The Result of the Survey

So, as the result of the survey shows, 38% people have defined Soft Skills from their own point of view. 51% people have opined that they understand Soft Skills only as having good English Communication power and good personality. 6% participants have said that they just know the name of Soft Skills but don't know anything about it. But the note of interest in this survey is that almost all the participants hold English Communication power and good personality as the common characteristic of Soft Skills. Another thing is remarkable here that from everyone's contribution, no specific concept or definition of Soft Skills can be achieved. This proves that almost all the people have quite unclear idea of Soft Skills. The result of the survey has been graphically presented in the following diagram:

38%	=	Concrete ideas of Soft Skills
56%	=	Partial idea of Soft Skills
6%	=	No idea of Soft Skills.

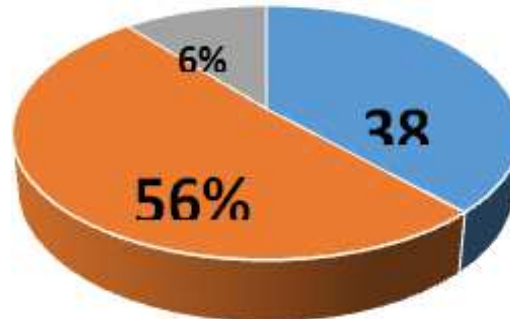


Figure 2

CONCLUSIONS

The survey shows that although nobody has any doubt about the necessity of Soft skills, but most of the people are not conscious about what soft skills actually are. Even many Soft skills training experts think that Soft skills are just English communication skills and having good personality, which is no doubt wrong. Communication Skills and good personality are just two examples of 60 kinds of Soft Skills. So, there is lack of awareness among most of the people. In this context, we must remember what Peggy Klaus, adviser, author, leadership and communication expert said about Soft Skills, “Soft Skills get little respect, but will make or break your career.” There is also the lack of clear idea about Soft Skills among the people. Perhaps people are quite confused about the definition of Soft Skills. We should first need to understand that Soft skills are essentially not those skills which are soft in nature. These are the people skills. So, all the people (of any profession) undoubtedly have soft skills. But what might be an appropriate and easily understandable definition of soft skills, which should never be bookish. To define Soft skills, I would like to be quite symbolic and compare Soft skills to the pearl within any shell-cover. So, to me, Soft skills are like the pearl within a shell-cover. What happens if we find a shell-cover on the sea shore? We just look into it to see whether there is pearl in it or not. If there is a pearl, we preserve it; otherwise we just throw it away. Similarly, Soft Skills is like the pearl within our personality. Our personality or character is the shell-cover, whereas pearl is the epitome of all our qualities and skills, which may be called as Soft Skills altogether.

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