



Soft Skills: Success May Depend on Them

A Primer for Young Adults Seeking Employment

Kris Bertelsen, Senior Economic Education Specialist

GLOSSARY

Labor force: The total number of workers, including both the employed and the unemployed.

Recession: A period of declining real income and rising unemployment; significant decline in general economic activity extending over a period of time.

Unemployment: A condition where people at least 16 years old are without jobs and actively seeking work.

“Nothing ever comes to one that is worth having, except as a result of hard work.”

—Booker T. Washington, Educator and founder of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (Tuskegee University)

Hopefully Booker T. Washington’s words inspire you to do your best in school, but Peggy Klaus has some sage advice as well: “Soft skills get little respect but will make or break your career.” Peggy Klaus is a leadership coach and the author of *The Hard Truth About Soft Skills: Workplace Lessons Smart People Wish They’d Learned Sooner*. To get a glimpse of soft skills—and their importance—imagine the following job interview scenario:

Prospective employer: I see on your resume that your GPA is 3.98.

Job applicant: Yes.

Prospective employer: That’s quite impressive.

Job applicant: Thanks.

Prospective employer: Your background in IT is just what we’re looking for.

Job applicant: Hmm.

Prospective employer: We’re looking for someone who can act as a liaison between the users and the IT department.

Job applicant: Okay.

Prospective employer: So we need someone with great communication skills.

Job applicant: Okay.

Prospective employer: How would you assess your communication skills?

Job applicant: Okay.

Prospective employer: Well, it was nice meeting you. I don’t think our company is the right fit for you.

Job applicant: Okay.

Wow, this applicant has a 3.98 GPA and is skilled in IT. What went wrong? Despite great qualifications, the job applicant didn't get hired. Let's look at the types of skills you need to succeed in the job market.

Academic Skills

You undoubtedly already know that high academic performance is a key skill needed for success. You will be expected to be knowledgeable in a range of subjects—economics, history, science, math, and language arts, among others. In fact, national and state education departments and discipline-specific organizations (e.g., the Council for Economic Education) create content standards that define what students should know in each of these areas. Standards are guidelines for schools to teach literacy, math, and college and career readiness skills consistently across the country.

As a student, you are challenged to demonstrate your academic proficiency in various ways. Examples include standardized exams, ACT or SAT scores, grade point averages, honor rolls, and dean's list recognition (in colleges and universities). These achievements are measures of hard skills that are generally learned in school. These assessments, recognitions, and numerical representations of your ability will put you in the running for scholarships and later employment, but employers look for something more: skills that go beyond academics—known as soft skills. These skills are gaining attention—and importance—because, according to various reports, they are lacking in today's workforce.

What Are Soft Skills—And Why Are They So Important?

Soft skills are your personal traits, characteristics, and interpersonal skills that show how you present yourself and get along with other people. The boxed insert lists the skills you need to make a good first impression and put your best foot forward.

Some of the skills in the boxed insert are self-explanatory. But you may not be familiar with some skills needed to succeed in the job market and future life. About 70 percent of businesses in a recent survey emphasized workplace professionalism as a sought-after skill.¹ So, what is professionalism and how is it assessed? Professionalism is the consistent use of the skills, good judgment, cour-

tesy, honesty, and responsibility expected in the business environment. These qualities and personal attributes are more ambiguous and much less measurable than test scores or grade point averages. A firm handshake and eagerness to learn new things are hard to gauge from an application, but when people lack them, it is glaringly obvious. Soft skills and professionalism often are synonymous. Two recent surveys have determined that workplace professionals should have the qualities and soft skills shown in the boxed insert.^{2,3}

In addition, employers expect prospective employees to (i) speak effectively and communicate with others both orally and in writing and (ii) work well in team situations. Cheryl Wiedmaier of the Arkansas Department of Education hears of such workplace needs frequently from industry representatives. So it is not surprising that some skills, such as communication, appearance, and attendance, are encouraged by most organizations.⁴

What Is Being Done To Help Students Develop Soft Skills?

Education officials promote the integration of knowledge and soft skills from the beginning and throughout a student's education, so that students are college-ready and career-ready.⁵ Schools, employers, and government agencies work to improve soft skills in schools and the workplace. Classroom activities, for example, can help students develop the most important soft skills—those skills previously mentioned plus enthusiasm and attitude, networking, problem solving, and critical thinking.⁶

Are there other ways you can learn soft skills? The characteristics and skills listed previously are a great place to start. You can practice these skills at home and at school. For example, use the feedback and correction you receive from adults as a learning tool to make improvements. If a parent provides constructive criticism and advice on grass mowing, make the corrections and do it better. If your language arts teacher provides comments on your first draft of a paper, take advantage of the feedback and make revisions. This not only produces a nicer lawn—and a better paper—but it also allows you to practice essential workplace skills. Prospective employers will be paying attention, so practice being honest, arriving on time, and being focused and attentive. By the way, learning when it is—and is not—appropriate to use electronic devices in the workplace is increasingly important. Be

Desirable Professional Qualities and Soft Skills

- Interpersonal skills including civility
- Appropriate appearance
- Punctuality and regular attendance
- Communication skills
- Honesty
- Focus/attentiveness
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Leadership
- Professionalism
- Strong work ethic
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Flexibility
- Preparation for work

SOURCE: Center for Professional Excellence (see note 3, p. 11) and Wiedmaier (see note 2).

sure to silence your phone and turn off any other devices during interviews so you can actively participate in the discussion. You don't want to lose a job because you are reading texts or email.⁷

Develop Your Soft Skills Now

Don't underestimate the importance of your ability to work well with other people.⁸ The boxed insert mentions civility as a necessary soft skill. Civility is being cordial and respectful of other people, which is especially important because much work today is done in a team environment. In addition, workplace diversity has gained growing emphasis in the workplace.⁹

Group projects in school replicate real-life projects and can help you in areas such as teamwork and respect for others.¹⁰ Clubs and organizations help develop soft skills through activities and competitions. Having an adult mentor in the business community or in school is a great way to learn valuable skills. Some companies offer, or even assign, a veteran employee to assist newly hired workers. In addition to mentorship, volunteer opportunities in the community or churches allow you to interact with adults and develop these essential skills.

School work allows you to learn soft skills and hone them with practice. Developing a strong work ethic includes

How To *Not* Get Hired

What kind of qualities can keep you from getting hired? Remember the importance of soft skills and personal characteristics as you prepare for interviews.

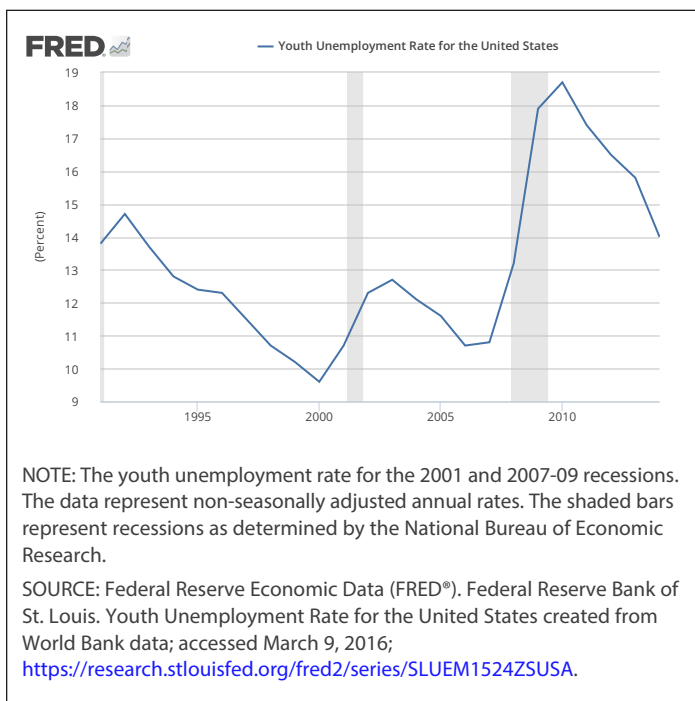
Candidate with...	Percent of employers who would not hire the candidate
Poor personal hygiene	90.8
Inappropriate attire	74.8
Facial piercings other than ears	74.3
Inappropriate footwear	70.8
Visible tattoos	60.6
Unnatural hair color	39.2

SOURCE: Center for Professional Excellence (see note 3, p. 12).

completing homework assignments on time, doing your best, and practicing and working hard in activities and sports. These good habits will prepare you for college and the workplace. Practicing these skills now also better prepares you for your current classes. Being well equipped to enter the **labor force** is one of the goals of education. So, try to gain as much experience as you can now.

Some Job Interview Tips

Ongoing surveys and research indicate that nearly all soft skills are relevant to the interview and employment process, but the significant impact of personal appearance cannot be overstated.¹¹ Whether you believe it is fair or not, personal appearance matters to future employers. So what should you focus on with respect to your appearance? See "How To *Not* Get Hired" for a list of characteristics that can make or break getting hired; some are obvious and others not. Take personal hygiene, for example—be sure to shower and brush your teeth. Most employers frown on facial piercings other than your ears and consider them unprofessional.¹² Other items on the list aren't quite as obvious. For example, inappropriate footwear could be as simple as wearing tennis shoes to a formal office job interview—or more pronounced—



wearing heels so high that they make normal walking difficult. Inappropriate attire could mean wearing revealing clothing. These problems are easily preventable. Remember, the people interviewing and likely hiring will be older and have a different perspective than your friends and classmates. By asking a parent, teacher, or trusted adult for input, you will be ready for your interview.

The United States recently went through the Great Recession (December 2007 to June 2009). During **recessions** it can be difficult for young people to get jobs and experience. As the figure shows, the unemployment rate for young people (15 to 24 years of age) increased from 10.7 percent to 18.7 percent during the recent recession. Higher **unemployment** means greater competition for available positions, so how do you make yourself stand out from the crowd? The answer may be soft skills. Making a good impression at an interview will increase your likelihood of a callback.

Soft Skills On the Job

Let's say you have just landed a job. How do you keep it? According to a recent survey of business leaders, 57.9 percent of respondents said attendance and punctuality are the primary reasons employees get fired, and 45.5 percent said that the next reason for termination is poor-quality work.¹³ Remember, you have time to develop desirable habits now—attend school regularly, be on time, and do good work.

You probably won't see questions about soft skills on a standardized test, but they may be as important in finding and keeping a job as how much you know and what you can do (your hard skills). Opportunities to develop soft skills while you are in school will help make you a good job prospect and a better future employee. ■

Notes

¹ Casner-Lotto, Jill; Rosenblum, Elyse and Wright, Mary. *The Ill-Prepared U.S. Workforce: Exploring the Challenges of Employer-Provided Workforce Readiness Training*. New York: Conference Board, 2009; https://www.shrm.org/Research/SurveyFindings/Articles/Documents/BED-09Workforce_RR.pdf.

² Wiedmaier, Cheryl. "Relationship Between Soft Skills and Technology," in K. Virginia Hemby and Robert E. Grubb, eds., *Recent and Projected Technology Trends Affecting Business Education*. Reston, VA: National Business Education Association, 2015, pp. 226-44.

³ Center for Professional Excellence. "2013 National Professionalism Survey: Workplace Report." January 2013; <http://www.ycp.edu/media/york-website/cpe/York-College-Professionalism-in-the-Workplace-Study-2013.pdf>.

⁴ Association for Career and Technical Education, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium and Partnership for 21st Century Skills. "Up to the Challenge: The Role of Career and Technical Education and 21st Century Skills in College and Career Readiness." 2010; http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/CTE_Oct2010.pdf.

⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy. 2012. "Skills to Pay the Bills: Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success." 2012; <http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/softskills.pdf>.

⁶ See note 3.

⁷ See note 3.

⁸ See note 3.

⁹ P21 Partnership for 21st Century Learning. "P21 Framework Definitions." May 2015; http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/docs/P21_Framework_Definitions_New_Logo_2015.pdf.

¹⁰ See note 9.

¹¹ See note 3.

¹² See note 3.

¹³ See note 3.