

Employability Skills

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Input from industry clearly shows that without a solid mastery of foundation or employability skills employees cannot succeed in the highly competitive environment of today’s technology companies. Employers often say that: “Technical skills may get you the job, but foundation skills will make you a valued employee and will significantly increase career advancement.”

Even though many training and educational programs concentrate primarily on technical skills and knowledge, employer’s concerns often focus on foundation skills rather than on technical skills. Employers are looking for people who display the right attitude, who display good customer service skills, and who exercise effective communication skills. When considering prospective employees for a new position, employers often ask: “Do they have good work ethics? Are they good team players? Do they like to learn? Can they show initiative and make good decisions?”

What are employability skills? Employability skills are referred to as foundation, “soft” or process skills, are skills that support a civil respectful and efficient workplace.

Employability skills include the following:

- **Communication Skills.** Effective information flow throughout the organization is a critical element to organizational success. Communication with team members, supervisors, and subordinates, customers and clients, and between different groups needs to be timely and appropriate. Some jobs rely more heavily on written communication, while others on verbal communication. Electronic communication (email) is rapidly becoming ubiquitous, bringing a new set of rules and practices to business communication. Communication in high technology organizations takes on many forms- from informal to formal presentations, from technical logs to complex reports and proposals. No matter the form, communication is the key to individual and team effectiveness.
- **Organizational Skills.** As employees are asked to handle more parallel tasks with increased levels of complexity, good organizational skills become very important. Depending on the job, the complexity of the organizational task may vary from scheduling to prioritizing multiple tasks or requests, to planning and tracking complex and capital-intensive projects involving many people and teams. Regardless of the size of the project, the ability to identify and define tasks, to track milestones, to recognize when a project timeline is running into problems, and to take appropriate action is crucial to ongoing success in technical jobs.

- **Team Contribution and Leadership.** Most organizations are relying increasingly on teams to accomplish projects. This is particularly true in high-tech environments where the success of projects depends on the contribution of many individuals with varied expertise. The ability to work with team members with different backgrounds and diverse communication styles is highly valued and rewarded in most environments. In many organizations, flexible or “flat” organizational structures require employees to take on different team roles, from listeners, to active contributors to team leaders. The ability to read the team needs as a whole and the needs of individual team members, and to adjust one’s role to increase team effectiveness is a critical factor to the success of the team process.
- **Professionalism.** Dealing with problematic employee issues, attitudes and behaviors consumes much time in any organization, and can be very detrimental to overall morale. Employees with good work ethics, who show up on time, who understand and follow company procedures, and who relate to coworkers and customers with respect are those more often selected for positions with increased levels of responsibilities and rewards. On the other hand, lack of professionalism can often lead to declining morale, dissatisfied customers or clients, and ultimately to an employee’s dismissal.
- **Critical Thinking and Decision Making.** As organizations become leaner in management, employees are expected to assume increased responsibilities. Employee’s ability to correctly analyze situations, understand tradeoffs, make good recommendations and make the right choices is often rewarded with increased freedom to self-manage, and with the opportunity to engage in more interesting and challenging projects. Deciding when to take action, when to delegate, and when to elevate certain issues to a higher decision level are skills that promote trust and respect supervisors and coworkers.
- **Customer Relations.** Customers can take many faces. Internal customers can be the department down the hall of an offshore division. External customers can be suppliers, clients, or end users. The ability to solicit and listen to company feedback and to effectively address company issues and concerns is required to qualify for certain positions, such as technical support jobs. Customer interaction skills are necessary in all jobs whether or not the job description formally includes “customer relations.”
- **Self-Directed and Continuous Learning.** In the high technology industry, and in particular in the information technology environment, technologies and practices change rapidly and sometimes radically. To keep up with the technology changes employees need to continuously engage in self-assessment against the technological landscape of skills and knowledge, and take proactive steps toward enrolling in continuous training. However, it is often seen as the employee’s responsibility to identify gaps in knowledge and take actions to fill these gaps.

How can one learn foundation skills? Most professional/technical and academic programs include some requirement for the practice of foundation skills. However, many lack the emphasis that employers would like to see. Being aware of the importance of such skills can help students and employees enroll in programs that emphasize the use, practice and coaching of foundation skills in the learning process, class activities and projects.

Educators must be aware of the importance of these skills to the long-term success of graduates, and provide ample opportunity for holistic and contextual practice as well as authentic assessment.

Work-based learning is one of the most available form of training, yet often the most overlooked. Participating in special projects and cross-functional activities often enables employees to exercise organizational and communication skills that will benefit their overall performance and effectiveness. Community involvement can be another way to develop foundation skills in a low-pressure environment.

No matter how or where effective interpersonal, organizational, professional and learning skills are developed, the mastery of such skills will significantly impact the ability to successfully move within and between careers. These skills will provide a wider choice of projects and responsibilities, resulting in more job satisfaction and increased opportunity for advancement.

This does not imply that technical skills are not important; however, technical expertise alone does not guarantee success. Employees' technical skills are critical and are expected to match the required level for the job. However, someone with a solid foundation of learning abilities and technical abilities can easily acquire further technical training to refine and enhance their expertise. Foundation skills on the other hand, often take longer to acquire and master, and changes in attitude are often even more difficult. Many supervisors do not feel adequately prepared to coach employees on their interpersonal skills. As a result they rely heavily on schools to provide solid training in the foundation skills area, and put a large emphasis in recruiting employees who already display proficiency in such skills. Schools are often the ideal place for students to learn to integrate foundation skills with technical knowledge, since they can provide low risk contextual learning opportunities.

Many technical graduates are "produced" each year. However, the primary critical factor to job effectiveness and career mobility in today's environment is to develop, demonstrate and sustain proficiency in both technical and employability skills.