

: Are soft skills important in a digital business?

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Some observers claim the increasing use of Artificial Intelligence and Decision Automation will create more soft skills jobs in transformed organizations. Also, a recent ManpowerGroup (2019) survey report found that 87% of employers plan to increase or maintain headcount as a result of automation. The ManpowerGroup report had seven recommendations including Bet on soft skills: "Organizations should fine-tune talent strategies to account for the fact that human skills are harder to develop than technical skills". Perhaps more jobs will involve "soft skills". The problem is determining what the term means. Managers must define what specific skills are needed for a specific job -- both hard and soft.

A 2018 study by LinkedIn found that 57 percent of business leaders say soft skills are more important than hard skills, especially for digital transformation. The term "soft skills" seems to have no clearly articulated, consensus definition and the term is perhaps inherently ambiguous and even changing or "squishy". In general, it is important to specify the knowledge and skill requirements for a job, and then evaluate job candidates on their proficiency at skills and potential and aptitude. Every job is not the same in terms of hard or soft skills requirements. A blanket specification that IT staff or analytics practitioners or systems analysts need better soft skills is a vague, hard to interpret requirement.

What are the "soft skills"? Petrone (2018) using a combination of LinkedIn data and survey results identified four critical soft skills: 1. Leadership, 2. Communication, 3. Collaboration, and 4. Time Management. Smartsheet in a staff blog post identified 6 soft skills needed to drive digital transformation, including 1. Critical Thinking, 2. Complex Communication, 3. Creativity, 4. Collaboration, 5. Flexibility and Adaptability, and 6. Productivity and Accountability. Some of the Smartsheet "soft skills" don't seem to be "skills".

The requirement that a prospective hire must have outstanding soft skills can mean almost anything. But you might ask: don't all employees need to know how to communicate and don't they need decision making and people skills, and also need to have empathy for other employees? Yes, but do you know how to measure those skills? A response like "When I interview someone I know right away if they have the soft skills to fit in" is unacceptable. Are the soft skills of a traditional business setting the soft skills of digital business? Do soft skills help a person conduct analyses and make better data-based decisions? Must a person have a high emotional IQ to have outstanding soft skills?

A scan of the blogs and job sites on the Internet suggests soft skills generally refers to "personal

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attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people" or are the "interpersonal (people) skills". The ubiquitous Wikipedia explains "Soft skills are a combination of people skills, social skills, communication skills, character traits, attitudes, career attribute, social intelligence and emotional intelligence quotients among others that enable people to navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals with complementing hard skills. The Collins English Dictionary (2012) defines the term "soft skills" as "desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include common sense, the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude."

Martinez (2018) reports that in the 1960s "the U.S. Army coined the name soft skills to refer to abilities other than those involved in working with machines." She cites Silber and Foshay (2009) for that historical anecdote. Further Martinez notes "One of the problems with this type of skills is that they are difficult to categorize."

There are multiple lists of soft skills. Are all the skills equally important? Are soft skills an either/or phenomenon or is proficiency more a continuum of skill development from average, through, good, excellent and outstanding? Can soft skills be taught and learned? Can we measure the level of competency a person exhibits of a soft skill?

Richard Cannane, Global Training & Development Manager at Trafigura, argues soft skills are very important in the era of digital transformation. He explains "Soft skills training relates to such aspects as interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence and language capabilities. For full effect, they need to be linked to a company's competencies to ensure that there is a structured strategy to their introduction and embedding."

Soft skills are fuzzy and even fluid and "squishy". In some ways, the focus on soft skills is reminiscent of the concerns in the 1960s and 1970s about improving interpersonal relationship skills and communication skills. The "solution" to the problem was T-groups or training groups. These groups were sometimes referred to as sensitivity-training group, human relations training groups, or encounter groups. These encounter approaches were focused on improving soft skills. People were encouraged to share their thoughts and emotions and have others get in touch with their feelings.

Improving a person's nebulous "soft skills" is challenging and some might argue impossible. Higginbottom (2017) reviewed a Capgemini survey that showed "soft digital skills such as customer-centricity and a passion for learning are most in demand by organizations. However, the greatest gap in soft digital skills was comfort with ambiguity and collaboration." She quotes Claudia Crummenerl, head of executive leadership and change at Capgemini, who believes that firms are overlooking soft skills such as flexibility, ability to learn and encouraging entrepreneurial spirit. Crummenerl argues "Often companies mistakenly think such skills are less important for innovation

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as technical talent. Yet having soft skills is crucially important for taking and implementing decisions. Part of the issue is that nobody has yet grasped what digital culture means."

Skills are needed to perform jobs. Some skills can be acquired on the job, others are the result of prior experiences, practice and education. Skills can be enhanced and skill training and practice with feedback and mentoring can often improve "soft skills". No one is born a leader, a communicator or a great decision maker. Cognitive abilities and personality predispositions are important to success, but life experiences also shape a person and the skills one brings to an organization.

Some think the greatest need is for hard skills retraining as people become "technologically unemployed" when artificial intelligence makes many jobs obsolete, cf. Ahmed, 2018. New generalized hard skills are increasingly important. Data analysis, critical thinking, knowing how to search and find data in a data-filled world have been nice skills to have in recent years, but they are crucial in a digital business and should now be prerequisites to hiring and promotion. The concept of "soft skills" must be revisited and must be better understood. If soft skills truly are extremely important to the success of digital businesses, cf., Bloom (2018), then hiring managers and compensation specialist must clearly know and specify what skills are sought.

Is decision making a hard skill or a soft skill? No matter how it is categorized decision making is a key skill for people working in organizations and for life management in general. Being decisive and an effective decision maker is particularly important if you want to be a leader. The ability to make "the right" decision with available information is a vital skill. Managers make many decisions, including: who to hire, what supplier to use, how to market a product, what product to sell, what programs to spend more on and which to spend less on, or what tactics or strategy to pursue. Decision making is often challenging and that is why we develop decision support.

Digital business changes the way people interact and behave. Businesses are rapidly becoming digital businesses. Entrepreneurs and managers are blurring the digital and physical worlds. Communication skills in a digital business are much more than face-to-face talking and formal presentations. Interpersonal skills may involve interacting remotely using Skype or Zoom with an impersonal, delayed interaction. Team members may never meet physically. Trust changes in digital business. Data takes on new importance in digital transformation. Facts become both more and less important depending upon decision making attitudes and beliefs.

A digital business is a highly connected and integrated symbiosis of people and technology that performs business functions. Employees of a digital business must first and foremost be thinkers and doers. Digital technology and the Internet are creating a digital culture that is strongly influencing the way we interact, behave, think, and communicate. As in any business, the right mix of job skills is a prerequisite for exceptional job performance.

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