

Adecco



The Importance of Soft Skills in a Digital World

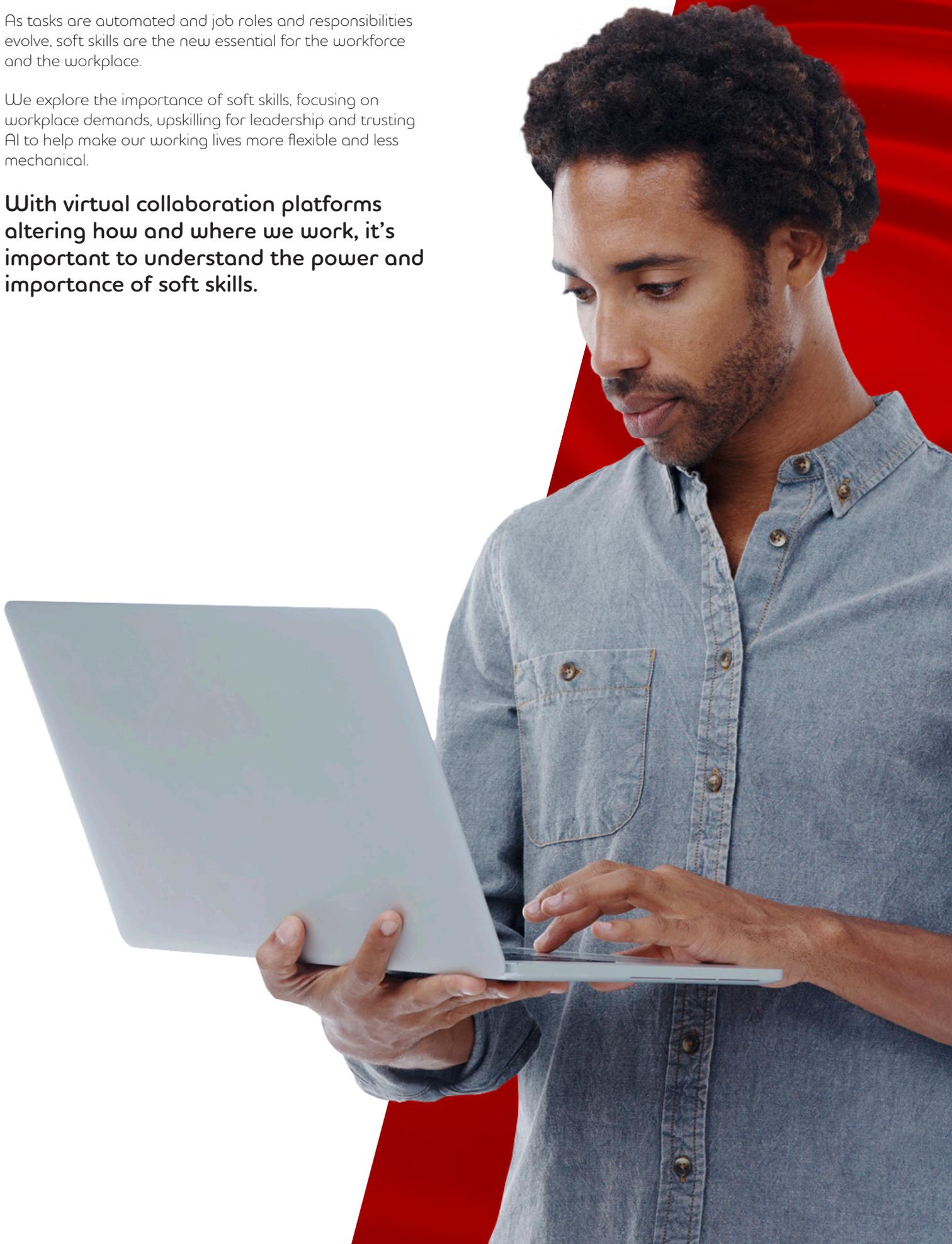


Summary

As tasks are automated and job roles and responsibilities evolve, soft skills are the new essential for the workforce and the workplace.

We explore the importance of soft skills, focusing on workplace demands, upskilling for leadership and trusting AI to help make our working lives more flexible and less mechanical.

With virtual collaboration platforms altering how and where we work, it's important to understand the power and importance of soft skills.



Chapter 1:

The New Workplace Demands an Update to Old Work Skills

Last year, the World Economic Forum published a Global Challenge Insight Report titled, "The Future of Jobs Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution."

"The accelerating pace of technological, demographic and socio-economic disruption is transforming industries and business models, changing the skills that employers need and shortening the shelf-life of employees' existing skill sets in the process," the authors wrote.

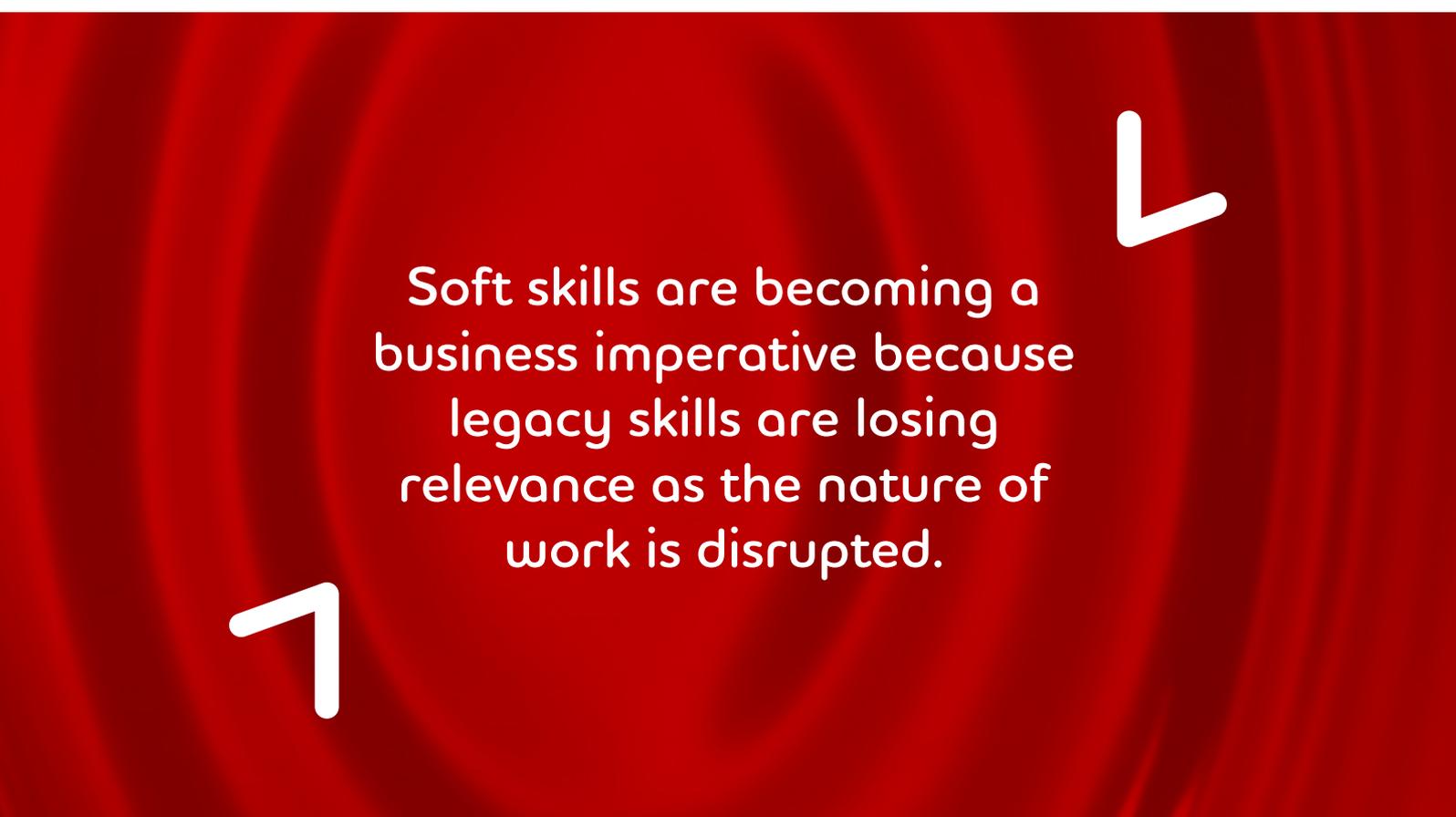
"For example, technological disruptions such as robotics and machine learning—rather than completely replacing existing occupations and job categories—are likely to substitute specific tasks previously carried out as part of these jobs, freeing workers up to focus on new tasks and leading to rapidly changing core skill sets in these occupations."

Professionals will need more than freedom to take on their new responsibilities, and studies suggest that neither employees nor employers have prepared adequately for the shift that is already underway. Findings of the Workforce 2020 study conducted by Oxford Economics and SAP underscore the depth of the divide. The report, based on a survey of more than 2,700 executives and 2,700 employees in 27 countries, found that according to more than 50 percent of executive respondents, "Problems with talent and key skills are affecting business

performance." At the same time, half of employees said they do not expect their current skills to be adequate just three years from now. Anxieties in that regard are heightened by the fact that, according to both executives and employees, only half work at companies that have "a culture of continuous learning."

Within this changing dynamic, there is a growing demand for soft skills not only for their intrinsic value, but also because they give employees a basis for learning and gaining command of new responsibilities.

59 percent of hiring managers said soft skills are difficult to find in job applicants.



Soft skills are becoming a business imperative because legacy skills are losing relevance as the nature of work is disrupted.

Chapter 2:

Soft Skills Training is a Platform for Leadership Development

"As workplace demands evolve, leaders will be recognized for their ability to cultivate soft skills throughout the enterprise," says Alain Dehaze, Chief Executive Officer of The Adecco Group. "In this context, leadership will reflect merit and success in reaching performance targets rather than titles or positions on the organizational chart. This is in keeping with another trend in business, the flattening of traditional hierarchies and creation of opportunities for more people to take charge and help drive the company forward. And we will see this in blue-collar industry as much as in white-collar corporations."

At an institutional level, soft skills development programs therefore create an opportunity to identify and cultivate formal and informal leaders throughout the organization. Those with a natural inclination to be communicative, encourage team-building, foster creativity in problem-solving, and facilitate adaptability in pursuit of superior solutions will emerge as role models. They'll be in a position to lead by example and bring out the best in colleagues who struggle more in developing those skills.

Business forecasters are predicting that, very soon, workforces will be split between those highly skilled individuals able to carry out technology-related jobs and charismatic, innovative individuals, whose charm will make others want to do business with them.

Another complementary trend is the move among successful companies to give their employees more creative freedom and increased opportunities to explore innovative ideas. Chander sees this as providing indirect support of soft skills development because it "loosens the commercial constraints that we put on other people and encourages greater cooperation within the company itself."

To that end, she urges employers not to put the onus of soft skills development entirely on employees, but to recognize the role that corporate culture plays in empowering them to realize their full potential in these areas. The embrace and promotion of that culture must come from the top down and must clearly establish the organization's standards and expectations. "As a leader, your minimum standards become their maximum standards," she says.

Another area of organisational initiative is in skills definition and identification. Deming encourages companies to put an explicit focus on the soft skills they need, screen employees for those abilities, and implement a development strategy for those members of the staff who fall short of expectations. He believes soft skills or social skills assessments conducted by psychologists can be useful in this regard.

When LinkedIn surveyed 291 hiring managers in the United States, it found that 59 percent said soft skills are "difficult" to find in job applicants. The problem is serious enough that 58 percent of respondents said soft skills deficiencies in the pool of candidates are "limiting their company's productivity." In August 2016, Guy Berger, Ph.D., an economist, published findings of an analysis of soft skills listed on the LinkedIn profiles of people who had listed a new employer within a year of the study. His review identified communication, organisation, teamwork, consistent punctuality, critical thinking, social skills, creativity, interpersonal communication, adaptability, and a friendly personality as the ten soft skills most in demand among employers.

Organisations that find a way to identify, recognize, and reward these often unsung heroes can create a significant competitive advantage by motivating more members of the team to emulate these colleagues' conduct. The key, as in any corporate culture initiative, is to show—not just tell—employees the kinds of contributions and behaviors most valued by the company and to make the recognition meaningful to those who have earned it.

Top 10 Soft Skills:

1. Communication
2. Organisation
3. Teamwork
4. Consistent Punctuality
5. Critical Thinking
6. Social Skills
7. Creativity
8. Interpersonal Communication
9. Adaptability
10. Friendly Personality

Chapter 3:

Examining Perceptions, Using Persuasion, Seeking Partnership

"The principles of persuasion, getting people around to your way of thinking, depend largely on your ability to connect with them on an individual level as opposed to a rationally built and maintained argument," says Linda Chander, director of Sydney based Enskills Learning & Development.

A refined sense (or at least awareness) of empathy is a cornerstone of soft skills development.

That can require a significant shift in mindset and practice for people who are accustomed to getting ahead professionally by demonstrating how intelligent they are. The danger is that they will be seen as trying to appear not just knowledgeable, but smarter than the colleagues or partners they're trying to engage. Conversely, exercising soft skills encourages all parties to recognize commonality, feel a sense of rapport, and arrive at agreement on decisions and actions.

When everyone in a business setting has worked toward optimizing soft skills, they create an environment that encourages interdependence and fosters a sense of trust in project partners. Deming therefore sees soft skills development as a kind of capacity building that has diverse applications and is able to deliver far-reaching individual and team benefits.

Like intelligence, soft skills can be used to achieve many aims, from critiquing others' ideas constructively to communicating in a manner that is persuasive and encourages people to come together in pursuit of a shared goal.



How to Make Your Work Less Robotic & More Soft Skilled Based

Accept artificial intelligence is coming, and staying. Concentrate on upskilling your soft skills.

If we can educate the positive impact and numerous opportunities that AI has the potential to create, people would be far less fearful of the future and we can let them worry about the mundane tasks in our day to day job.

Robots don't understand how to diagnose a problem, or to subsequently work out what the appropriate process should be; in other words, they can't deal with unique problems. That's where humans really come into their own and why as humans we need to concentrate on developing these skills even further, and leave the mechanical, automotive, mundane tasks to AI.

Among the challenges with AI, are soft skills training and development and cultivating these capabilities in professionals who traditionally did not need them and who may even have been drawn to careers that did not require them. As accounting, finance, and technology become more automated, for example, there's less room in the workplace for people who aren't adept at verbal communication and hoped to find refuge in calculations or code. Likewise, employees who say they work best independently will need to learn to contribute within teams in the new culture of collaboration.

Training in soft skills comes into play when someone is planning a presentation or negotiation, for example. What are audience members likely to ask during the question and answer session following the presentation? Which negotiating points are likely to face opposition, and how can anticipating those objections aid in developing ways to reach common ground?

"The old adage was that you hire for attitude and train for skills," says Stephan Howeg, The Adecco Group's Global Chief Marketing and Communications Officer. "Now that most people will need to continuously update their skills throughout their careers, attitude and mindset are more important than ever. Soft skills have value in themselves and are a good barometer of job candidates' facility for adapting to change and contributing to the organisational agility that is essential to success in today's market."

Let's become more creative, innovative, persuasive, empathetic and develop an awesome work attitude than ever before. Let's leave the mechanical tasks to robots and concentrate on having better soft skills.



Recommendations for Clients:

Soft skills are a powerful tool for strengthening relationships and managing change. At the same time, employees and organisations need to recognize the need to both exercise and control these skills—to use them wisely and in moderation. Chander stresses the importance of distinguishing between taking others' opinions and perspectives into account and being accommodating to the point of failing to stand firm on core convictions and commitments.

Being equipped with exemplary soft skills should not prevent any professional from being passionate and taking firm positions. Rather, being adept at communication, persuasion, and personal interaction strengthens the ability to advocate effectively for that position and make that passion infectious. And when everyone on a team approaches strategy development, problem-solving, decision-making, and execution of action plans from that position, the result is a conclusion reached in an environment of mutual respect, interdependence, and confidence.

So if it's human capabilities, soft skills and creative thinking that AI simply cannot master, this is where we need to upskill staff and business.

For employers, this means educating yourself about how to guide your workers through any such advances; offer them the means by which to learn new skills, so they're

better prepared for a digital era; investigate new ways of working that afford your people greater flexibility – so they're poised to recognise the positive aspects of technology, rather than living in fear of the negative.

For employees, job seekers, and those who are yet to enter the world of work, it's about equipping yourself with both digital literacy and soft skills.

For employees, job seekers, and those who are yet to enter the world of work, it's about equipping yourself with both digital literacy and soft skills; being open to change, so employers don't write you off as immovable and stuck in your ways; learning as much as you can about the ways that Artificial Intelligence stands to impact our lives. Show that your value is still both relevant, and entirely irreplaceable.



While there may not be unanimous agreement about the way we define soft skills or their parameters, there is consensus that employees must demonstrate some combination of these skills to be assets in today's workplace and to be equipped for continued productivity throughout their careers.



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The Brookings Institution

Seven Facts on Noncognitive Skills from Education to the Labor Market
The Hamilton Project

The Soft Skills of Great Digital Organizations
Harvard Business Review

Hard Measurement of Soft Skills
The World Bank Development Impact Blog

Indiana Wesleyan University and CPA Center of Excellence launch international partnership to boost soft skills
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AccountingWeb.com

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Associations Now

19 soft skills every leader needs to be successful
The Australian Financial Review

Study shows MBA students want to learn soft skills, but not self-awareness
The Australian Financial Review

What's more important: Technical ability or soft skills?
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Chief Learning Officer

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Computer Weekly

Soft Skills: An IT Career Must-Have
Datamation.com

5 Soft Skills You Need to Master for Workplace Success
Inc.com

Why soft skills are important for every employee
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VentureBeat.com

Why There's Nothing "Soft" About Soft Skills
U.S. News & World Report

Hunting for Soft Skills, Companies Scoop Up English Majors
The Wall Street Journal