

# Soft skills to help your career hit the big time

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## You'd be hard-pressed to find professional skills that matter more than these.

You've got a reputation for being the best coder/editor/mechanic/whatever, but it amounts to little if you don't work well with others. Some of the most important professional skills for workers and employers alike simply can't be taught in a classroom or measured on paper. These traits are called soft skills and they're more crucial to your job search and overall career than you think.

## What are soft skills?

Unlike hard skills, which can be proven and measured, soft skills are intangible and difficult to quantify. Some examples of soft skills include analytical thinking, verbal and written communication, and leadership.

Research from the Society for Human Resource Management found that [employers actually care more about soft skills](#) than they do technical abilities like reading comprehension and mathematics.

One reason soft skills are so revered is that they help facilitate human connections. "Soft skills are key to building relationships, gaining visibility, and creating more opportunities for advancement," says Kathy Robinson, founder of Boston career-coaching firm TurningPoint.

Basically, you can be the best at what you do, but if your soft skills aren't cutting it, you're limiting your chances of career success. Read on to learn which soft skills are critical to have firmly under your belt and what steps you can take to acquire them.

## Soft skills for your career

### 1. Communication

**Why you need it:** Both [written and verbal communication skills](#) are of utmost importance in the workplace because they set the tone for how people perceive you. They also improve your chances of [building relationships with co-workers](#). Communication skills boost your performance because they help you to extract clear expectations from your manager so that you can deliver excellent work.

**Why employers look for it:** Workers are more productive when they know how to communicate with their peers, says Robinson. If you can clearly express the who, what, when, where, why, and how of a project, you'll be a hot ticket.

**How to gain it:** One way to hone your communication and [presentation skills](#) is to join Toastmasters, a national organization that offers public speaking workshops.

### 2. Teamwork

**Why you need it:** A company's success is rarely dependent on one person doing something all by him/herself. Success is the result of many people working toward a common goal. When employees can synthesize their varied talents, everyone wins. (Bonus: Having friends at work can also [boost your job satisfaction](#), a [Gallup poll](#) found.)

**Why employers look for it:** Employers look to team players to help build a [friendly office culture](#), which helps retain employees and, in turn attracts top talent. Furthermore, being able to collaborate well with your co-workers

strengthens the quality of your work.

**How to gain it:** To generate goodwill, lend a hand when you see a co-worker in need. (“Hey, I know you have a ton on your plate. How can I help?”) Another way to build rapport is to cover for a colleague while she’s on vacation, says business etiquette and career coach Karen Litzinger.

### 3. Adaptability

**Why you need it:** Things don’t always go as planned, and instead of digging in your heels, you need to be able to pivot and find alternate solutions. “Successful leaders are the ones who know how to be flexible when problems arise,” says Robinson.

**Why employers look for it:** “The speed of change in any given workplace is so rapid,” says Joel Garfinkle, executive coach and author of *Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level*. Consequently, employers need workers who can adapt to industry shifts and keep the company current.

**How to gain it:** Push yourself to be an early adopter of change. “For example, adapting to technology without mourning what used to be true yesterday is crucial for people to be seen as someone who is capable of meeting new challenges,” says Garfinkle. Inquire about training sessions and offer to teach your co-workers what you learn.

### 4. Problem solving

**Why you need it:** When something goes wrong, you can either complain or take action. Tip: It’s the latter that will get you noticed. Knowing how to think on your feet can make you indispensable to an employer.

**Why employers look for it:** Nothing is a given. Companies rely on problem solvers—a.k.a. their top performers—to navigate unexpected challenges.

**How to gain it:** “Always approach your boss with a solution, not a problem,” says Robinson. So when an issue crops up, sit down and think through how you’re going to address it *before* bringing it to your boss’ attention.

### 5. Critical observation

**Why you need it:** Data doesn’t mean much if you don’t know how to interpret it. Is there a pattern emerging? What else should you be looking for? Being a critical observer can help make you a better worker all around.

**Why employers look for it:** Companies need critical thinkers—people who bring a fresh perspective and offer intuitive solutions and ideas to help the company get a leg up on the competition or improve internal processes.

**How to gain it:** To be a critical observer, you need to be able to analyze information and put it to use. One tactic is to try to identify patterns of behavior at work. For example, does your boss actually read the weekly sales reports? What was her reaction to bad news in the staff meeting? What’s the best time of day to approach your manager with a question? By observing how people respond to the constant flow of information you can better understand the critical aspects of improving business operations.

### 6. Conflict resolution

**Why you need it:** “Any time you put more than one person into an organization, there is going to be conflict,” says Robinson. “It’s human nature.” Therefore, being able to [resolve issues with co-workers](#) will help you maintain relationships with peers and work more effectively.

**Why employers want it:** Being able to constructively work through disagreements with people is a sure indicator of maturity—as well as leadership potential. Someone like this helps to promote a healthy, collaborative workplace.

**How to gain it:** The best way to resolve disagreements between co-workers is to address issues directly but delicately. So, when [stepping in as a mediator](#), let both parties air their grievances in a judgment-free environment and then work together to find a solution.

## 7. Leadership

**Why you need it:** Having confidence and a clear vision can help influence your co-workers and get them on board with your ideas now and in the future. Displaying such [leadership skills](#) helps you gain visibility within an organization, which can lead to more opportunities for promotions or salary bumps.

**Why employers want it:** Bosses and managers are always looking for employees with leadership potential because those workers will one day be taking over the reins and building on the company's legacy.

**How to gain it:** Being a leader isn't merely about getting people to do what you want. Leadership means inspiring and helping others reach their full potential. One way to do that is to [become the internship supervisor](#), which gives you the opportunity to manage people, learn how to motivate a team, and take on more responsibility.