

7 Soft Skills That Give You an Edge in a Turbulent Economy

By Rachel Wagner, December 2008

In a turbulent economy—when pink slips are inevitable in most any industry—executives and business professionals on all levels must look at ways to showcase themselves as a more valuable or “keep-able” employee.

Let’s say technical skill and training is equal in several individuals working in similar positions. If the company was to downsize, how might one person create more ‘value’ to the company over the other? The answer is simple: “soft skills” give you an edge. In fact, research shows that 85% of someone’s success and promotion in a job is due to soft skills and only 15% of their success and promotability is based on technical skills, training, and education.

Here are seven smart ways to buff up your soft skills. Not only will you gain greater levels of respect and credibility among coworkers and clients, but more importantly, you will add value to yourself, and—this increases the value you add to your company.

- 1. Answer emails and phone calls promptly.** Don’t leave people hanging. Try to follow up by the end of the day, or within 24 hours at the latest. Business emails are a reflection of you and your company. They should be treated like a business letter with a greeting, a succinct and to-the-point body, and a closing. Make sure the tone is positive and use proper capitalization, punctuation, and grammar.
- 2. Learn to confidently introduce yourself at business socials and networking events.** This shows the higher ups that you are being out front and representing the organization. Approach a small group—3-4 people—make eye contact, smile, extend your hand, say your name and company name, and ask if you may join them. Build rapport by being interested in them and not just talk about yourself.
- 3. Give a great handshake.** Your handshake speaks before you do. Make sure it’s warm, friendly, and sincere. Give several firm pumps—not a bone crusher and not a fingertip grip. Practice with someone until you get it just right. Shake often—when you meet and when you depart.
- 4. Watch your table manners.** Whether you’re at a sit-down banquet, or lunch with a client, or eating on your feet at a networking event, people notice your manners. This gives an impression of you—and of your company. The higher-ups expect employees to represent the company in a positive manner without making embarrassing dining faux pas. For example, do you know how to finesse the place setting and all the dos and don’ts of taking a client to lunch? Your guest should

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order first, but as host you should put your napkin in your lap first. And piling your hors d'oeuvre plate at a business social is definitely a no-no.

5. **Dress professionally.** Even though society has become more casual, employees must dress appropriately for their work place environment. Dress like your boss or for the position you want. Women should be careful to choose outfits that are not too tight or revealing, especially when bending. Men's clothing should be pressed and shoes shined. Not handy with an iron? Let the dry cleaners help.
6. **Be appreciative.** Use meaningful words of appreciation often and with every level of employee. Saying please and thank-you are small words with big impact. Be specific. "Jim, I really appreciate how you came through with that Smith report on such short notice for today's meeting. Thank you for all your extra effort." Or, "Sue, I'm proud of you for stepping up to help with the Smith account during Bill's absence."
7. **Be a team player.** Recently I saw this quote as part of an email signature. "It is amazing how much you can accomplish when it doesn't matter who gets the credit." This great team-player attitude will take you far in any company.

Of course, there are many more ways to upgrade your soft skills to a higher level than just these seven. But, these provide a doable and powerful way to take action that gives you a competitive edge. You will stand out as a more "keepable" employee in today's challenging economic times.

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