



Well-honed 'soft skills' could save your job

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In a turbulent economy — when pink slips are inevitable in most any industry — executives and business professionals must look for ways to showcase themselves as more valuable or "keep-able" employees.

Let's say technical skill and training is equal in several individuals working in similar positions. If the company were to downsize, how might one employee be of more "value" to the company over another?

The answer is simple: "soft skills" give you an edge. In fact, research shows that 85 percent of someone's success and promotion in a job is due to soft skills and only 15 percent of 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 empower yourself with more confidence and polish, but these essential habits also create greater respect among co-workers and with clients.

- Watch your table manners. Whether at a sit-down banquet, 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 an 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? In fact, did you know that your guest should order first, but as host you should put your napkin in your lap first? And piling your hors d'oeuvres plate at a business social is definitely a no-no.

- Dress professionally. Even though society has become more casual, employees must project an appropriate business image when dressing for the work place. Dress like your boss or for the position you want. Women should be careful to choose outfits that are not too tight or revealing. Men's clothing should be pressed, with shoes shined. Not handy with an iron? Let the dry cleaner help.
- Be appreciative. Use words of appreciation often and with every level of employee. Saying please and thank-you are small words with big impact. And be specific: "Sue, I'm proud of you for stepping up to help with the Smith account during Bill's absence."
- Answer e-mails 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 most.

Business e-mails are a reflection of you and your company and indicate your credibility. 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. Be mindful about sending too many jokes, forwards and replies to all.

- Learn to 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 — three or four people — make eye contact, smile, extend your hand, say your name and company name, and ask if you may join them. Build rapport and relationships by being interested in others and not just talking about yourself.
- 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 — and always stand.
- Be a team player. No matter what level of position you hold, have an attitude of serving others. Recently I saw this quote as part of an e-mail 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.

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