

WHY SOFT SKILLS ARE ESSENTIAL TO CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Companies continue to undergo massive change as new technologies, a geographically diverse workforce and an influx of younger workers are all disrupting the way business is done.

It takes a new breed of manager to thrive in this environment, one with a balance of “hard” skills – which are specific abilities such as software engineering and accounting – and “soft” skills. While hard skills can be easy to come by in most fields, many experts say there is a “soft skills gap” that is causing underlying problems for companies, which can truly impact their bottom line.

Soft skills, such as performance management, critical thinking, building personal relationships and collaboration are less tangible than hard skills, but are crucial to an organization’s productivity, as well as an individual’s career advancement and unlocking their potential. In addition, technological advancements have enabled workers to be more connected and collaborative than ever before, even when they are dispersed around the world. In turn, this is putting more pressure on leaders to work within teams and across departments in face-to-face and virtual or digital mediums.

Soft skills allow business leaders to work effectively with colleagues, motivate and manage direct reports and solve complex problems. The soft skills gap is real – 73 percent of organizations surveyed for Brandon Hall Group’s 2014 Performance Management Study said development of employees’ strengths, rather than evaluating their weaknesses, is critical to effective performance management. But 82 percent said their managers were only somewhat effective, or not at all effective, in providing strengths-based development planning and feedback.

“Almost every individual will have some sort of gap in their soft skills repertoire,” said Dr. Jon Outland, System Division Chair of Business at Herzing University. “Even if they’ve been working for 15 years, there are always skills that can be improved, especially when considering how fast technology changes things.”

When workers and managers have well-developed soft skills that contribute to a productive and pleasant workplace, turnover is lower, retaining talent is easier and promoting within is possible. However, in the last year, 84 percent of HR professionals reported soft skills shortages in job applicants, according to the New Talent Landscape: Recruiting Difficulty and Skills Shortages research report by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

The report cited skills shortages in critical thinking, problem-solving, professionalism, work ethic, leadership, written communications and teamwork/collaboration.

Soft skills also come into play for leaders who are building common ground among employees while breaking down cultural and generational stereotypes. Millennials are now the largest group in the American workforce and leaders need to make a concerted effort to understand their career and workplace expectations.

“The Millennials are pushing organizations just as Gen Xers and Boomers did and it’s good for organizations to have to pay attention to these things,” said Jennifer Deal, author of *What Millennials Want from Work: How to Maximize Engagement in Today’s Workforce*, in a MarketWatch interview. Job Number: HERZ-012 2 When soft skills are ignored, recruitment, training and performance suffer. According to a Gallup report: Employees who work for poor managers are less engaged and can negatively affect a company’s key performance indicators including customer ratings, profitability, productivity and turnover rates.

That’s why providing opportunities for professional growth through training programs and higher education can build critical soft skills and is one of the best investments a business can make, according to a 2016 Employee Benefits research report by SHRM.

Educational benefits improve performance management among leaders, increase productivity, build employee satisfaction and can be a recruitment tool. Education also provides a bottom-line benefit, as proven in a study that showed a 129-percent return on investment through the Cigna Corporation Education Reimbursement Program.

Investing in employees’ tuition “isn’t a benefit cost, but rather a valuable investment that positively impacts organizations’ bottom line,” said Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of Lumina Foundation, in an announcement of the release of the Cigna study. “That should entice more C-suite leaders to embrace this approach.”

For more information, visit
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