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## FINDING WORK

# Soft Skills

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## INTRODUCTION

Employers are looking for those with the skills to do the job. They need people who can accurately complete the duties of the position, whether that means maintaining a database, operating machinery, writing computer code, administering medication or building a bridge. These skills are often referred to as hard skills, or knowing how to do something. Employers are also looking for people who can work well with others, have a positive attitude, know how to communicate effectively and are dependable, reliable, and professional. In fact, many employers say these types of skills, called soft skills, are as or more important than hard skills.

In this publication we will explore soft skills and why they are important in getting a job. We'll also touch on how they can help you keep a job and advance in a career.

## ABOUT SOFT SKILLS

Soft skills, sometimes referred to as personal effectiveness competencies, are key to success. These are what we possess as individuals and bring to any job situation. They cut across any occupation to complement technical training we may have and tie it all together to help us be a dependable, effective employee.

Soft skills include:

- Interpersonal Skills
- Integrity
- Professionalism
- Initiative
- Dependability and Reliability
- Adaptability and Flexibility
- Lifelong Learning
- Communication Skills
- Teamwork

## SOFT SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT

Being able to do the technical aspects of a job is just one part of being a good employee, and those skills can often be learned on site. It's the soft skills that make a difference.

Almost every job requires interaction with co-workers and supervisors, and many jobs require interaction with customers. Positive communication is key. Being reliable and dependable is important in any occupation. Professionalism is an asset to any employer. Initiative is a highly desirable trait all around.

Now consider when an employee is not demonstrating positive behaviors. Imagine the consequences when an employee has consistently negative interactions with co-workers, supervisors and the public. How valuable is an employee who is not reliable or dependable? Someone who is unprofessional in dress or speech or behavior is a liability to an employer. An employee who never takes initiative won't advance very far.

Notice that in the comparison above, nothing was mentioned about the person's ability to do the technical aspects of the job. Who would you hire? Strive to be that kind of employee.

Now let's consider how soft skills can help in various parts of the job search.

## GETTING A JOB

The purpose of the application, cover letter, resume and interview is to demonstrate to the employer that you will be a good employee. Practicing soft skills effectively before you're hired will help do just that. Consider the following:

- **Reputation:** Developing a professional persona doesn't just happen at work. We constantly communicate things about ourselves so be sure you're communicating the right message.
  - **Social Media:** Employers can look for your public profiles on social media so don't post anything you wouldn't want a prospective (or current) employer to see. It doesn't mean you can't have personal beliefs, opinions, or interests. Limit what the public can see to avoid controversial topics. And, let's face it, it's just not a good idea to post some things anywhere.
  - **Email:** Set up an email just for job searches, resumes, applications and professional communication. Use a professional address such as your first and last name (first.last). Avoid cute, funny or controversial email addresses. Don't use your current work email address either as that shows you may be looking for a job on company time.
  - **Voicemail:** Similar to your email address, set up a professional sounding voicemail on the number used on your resume or application. An otherwise professional persona can be undermined when an employer hears your voice, possibly for the first time, with an abrupt or unfriendly message. After your voicemail is set up, make sure it isn't full so a potential employer can leave a message.
- **Interpersonal Communication:** Interpersonal communication includes what is written and spoken, as well as nonverbal communication.
  - **Written communications** include answers on a job application, your cover letter, resume and email correspondence.
    - The words themselves should be professional and appropriate. Avoid overly familiar terms, acronyms, jargon, abbreviations and slang, and do not use emojis.
    - Avoid typos at all costs. Mistakes happen but this is the time to take the extra effort to get it right. Employers expect these initial interactions to represent your best efforts.
    - When completing an application, type it if you have the option.
    - A note about email: In this day of quick communication brought on largely by texting and messages sent through various apps, it's important to realize that written communication has become very informal. Don't think of emailing an employer like texting a friend. An email to a potential employer should have the same level of professionalism as your formal cover letter.
  - **Verbal communication** is what you speak on the telephone (including voicemail) and during face to face interactions, such as a job interview.
    - Language should be professional and appropriate.
    - As above, don't be overly familiar with the other individual(s) involved.
    - Avoid slang or what may be considered controversial language.

- Don't talk too much. If you know this is a tendency of yours, pay attention and limit the amount of time you're speaking as compared with others.
- **Nonverbal communication** is how things are said with body language including tone of voice, posture and eye contact.
  - Realize that how something is said sends a much stronger message than the words themselves. Consider the following nonverbal communication to show you are open, engaged and interested in the position.
  - Sit up straight and lean forward slightly. Good posture makes a good impression, and leaning forward shows you're engaged and interested. Avoid slouching.
  - Keep your hands under control. It's ok to use your hands when you talk but don't overdo it. Don't fidget, pick your nails, tap or pull on papers. Open palms, when done naturally, demonstrate an open personality. Don't sit with your arms crossed.
  - Make eye contact when speaking or listening. It shows engagement and interest. Avoiding eye contact communicates a lack of confidence or something to hide. Be sure not to stare or you risk making the other person feel uncomfortable.
  - Tone of voice, volume and pauses are natural parts of speaking. Use them to send the message you're trying to send. A warm, friendly tone communicates that you are a pleasant person. It can also express confidence. Unexpressive monotone answers communicate that you're not that interested in the job.
- **Dress:** Dress like you want the job. This is your chance to make an in-person first impression and convey a professional appearance.
  - Wear neat, clean, wrinkle-free clothing to an interview or any interaction with an employer. This applies to virtual interviews as well.
  - Avoid informal attire such as t-shirts, shorts, flip-flops or other similar clothing.
  - If in doubt, dress more conservatively. Remember, employers expect to see the best version of you as you are seeking employment. For men, a long-sleeved dress shirt, dress pants and nice shoes with a blazer is a good choice. A suit may be appropriate depending on the position. For women, a business suit is also appropriate for higher-level positions. A knee-length skirt with corresponding top and optional jacket are also appropriate. Interview clothing doesn't have to be overly expensive to look nice and help you make a good impression.
- **Preparation:** Take the initiative to learn about the job you're applying for and the organization as a whole. Use this information in your cover letter, interview and interactions.
  - In addition to learning more about the job, this demonstrates that you are resourceful and capable.
  - You can find most of what you need by researching the employer's website.
  - Prepare some thoughtful questions ahead of time. This shows you are interested and want to know about the job. It's also a signal to the interviewer that you know some of the unspoken rules needed to be successful.
- **References:** Choose your references wisely. This is one more opportunity to demonstrate that you are a thoughtful, capable individual so make the most of it.
  - Professional references are preferred, and be sure to include supervisors who can speak about your work. It's a red flag when only peers are listed with no supervisors included. (It is customary not to use your current employer until a job offer is made.)
  - Be sure the people you list as references are themselves professional and will make a good impression. They should be able to speak to your abilities, including your professionalism, dependability, initiative and positive attitude.
  - Thinking ahead, work on developing these traits now so references can speak positively about you in the future.

## KEEPING A JOB

Many of the points above will also help you be a good employee once you get the job. The difference is you now have to deliver on the positive impression given during the application phase. This is your chance to demonstrate that you are a good employee who is an asset to the organization. Consider the following:

- **Think teamwork:** Whatever the job, you are likely to be part of a team. This could mean working directly with others or being part of a unit or division where someone else will fill your role on the next shift. Working well with others is vital.
  - Fulfill your obligations and commitments while supporting the work of others on the team.
  - Be an active member. Contribute your ideas but don't dominate. Value the contributions of others.
  - Put the goals of the team and organization above your own. This doesn't mean you won't have your own life and career goals. It means, while at work, your time and energy are focused on supporting the organization's mission and vision. After all, that's why you were hired.
  - Treat others the way you want to be treated. Show respect, help others and, if applicable, leave your work station or area ready for the next person.
- **Communicate, communicate, communicate:** The same written, verbal and nonverbal skills discussed earlier apply once you're on the job as well. There are some additional considerations.
  - Whatever is in an email becomes part of the written record. Don't put anything in an email you wouldn't want your supervisor to see.
  - Use discretion. There's no need to share everything you learn at work. In fact, there are many times when it's appropriate not to share, especially if it's sensitive information or a human resource issue. Don't engage in gossip or negativity.
  - With prolonged interaction with individuals in the workplace, there may be occasional conflict. Be professional at all times with your communication.
- **Be a solid employee:** Prove to be dependable and reliable by doing what you say you will do.
  - If it turns out that you won't finish a task on time communicate with your supervisor and team early and find a solution.
  - Don't say you'll do something publicly and not follow through. This sometimes happens because a person is overly enthusiastic and wants to make a contribution. It can also happen when someone is interested in impressing others. Make a real impression by delivering on your commitments.

## ADVANCING YOUR CAREER

A career is a series of jobs in a similar field worked over a period of time. Ideally each job will have increasing responsibilities, seniority and pay. A job is one particular role within an organization. Building on everything above, soft skills will help you advance in your career. They show the employer that you are a committed, trustworthy, reliable employee who is seeking the good of the organization and willing to work hard to get the job done. A few additional points to consider are:

- **Go above and beyond:** Don't just do the job, take the initiative to do more than what is asked or expected.
  - Exceed expectations to show you have the employer's interest in mind.
  - A few words of caution here: Don't take on extra work and end up not being able to deliver on your own obligations. Also, stick to your role and go above and beyond within that role and sphere.
- **Keep learning:** To be the best employee you can be both now and in the future you need to develop a deep understanding of your work.

- Take initiative to become an expert in your role. This isn't only for scientific fields.
- Learn everything you can about the product or services you're offering to customers.
- Study trends and projections for the future to develop an understanding of the field.
- Develop other skills that will help you advance such as time management, public speaking and leadership.

## **CONCLUSION**

To be the best employee you can be, take time to learn more about soft skills and commit to developing them personally and professionally.

Are you a SNAP recipient interested in finding a job that can help you be self-sufficient? If so, contact us. UT Extension offers Skill Up Tennessee, a program designed to help eligible SNAP participants gain the skills, training, work or experience that will increase their ability to obtain regular employment.

To find out more about this program check out [skillup.tennessee.edu](http://skillup.tennessee.edu)

*Skill Up Tennessee is UT Extension's SNAP Employment and Training program. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) is a partnership between the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and states to provide training and employment services to eligible SNAP participants. Skill Up Tennessee is offered through a partnership with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development.*

## REFERENCES

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