

# Changing nature of skill



QUESTION: EMPLOYERS DEFINITION OF SKILL IS CHANGING AND THE TERM NOW INCREASINLY REFERS TO SOFT SKILLS RATHER THAN TECHNICAL ONES. WHAT IMPLICATIONS DOES THIS CHANGE LEAVE FOR EMPLOYERS, EMPLOYEES AND WIDER SOCIETY. Skill today is a moving target and many people have a general understanding of skill, but defining exactly what is meant by the word is problematic (Dench, 1997). Until the 1970s, skills were managed in technical terms (Payne, 1999). This paper will be looking at certain reasons that led to the change in demand for skills and also the importance of these skills in demand.

It would then go further to discuss the implications of these soft skills for employers, employees and the wider society. What is occurring today is a shift not only in which skills are relevant but also in the use of the word skill itself (Grugulis, 2007). Before going further, it is important to look at a definition of skill. " Skill is a goal directed well organised behaviour that is acquired through practice and performed with economy of effort" (Proctor, Addie and Ehrenstein, 1995). This definition of skill leans towards the hard/technical skill.

Most observers view the educational system as a highly efficient vehicle for creating the skills needed to sustain the growth of the economy (Rumberger, 1981). For decades emphasis was centred on the technical skills necessary within the organisation (Buhler and M, 2001). As the world changes, the skills required of managers has changed, unfortunately these are the skills in short supply today (Buhler and M, 2001). A lot of the qualities and attributes that now feature highly on the list of skills required by employers would not have expected in earlier accounts (Grugulis, 2007).

Skills have expanded widely to add an interesting collection of 'soft' generic transferable social interactional skills (Payne, 1999). A lot of employers seek willingness and better attitude to work. Some examples of soft skills include: Adaptability, communication skills, motivate co-workers, good listening skills, team player, dependability, conscientious, punctuality, honesty, energetic, enterprising, analytical, organized, interpersonal skills, creativity, willingness to change, ethics and value diversity. Workplace today is changing, and workers skills must be up to standard with the prospects of employers (Benedict, Esen and Williams, 008). Organisations as a result of the limited pool of talent able to advance to managerial positions look to recruit the best and brightest people. This makes them adopt more strict recruitment and selection tools to ensure the best person for the job is gotten (Phillip and Hesketh, 2004). This war for talent reflects the larger complexity of managerial roles due to globalization, deregulation and growth in technologies, so companies require managers who can respond to these challenges (Phillip and Hesketh, 2004).

British policy makers have emphasized on the importance of skills for economic competitiveness and motivation of its workforce (Payne, 1999). Psychological employment contract between firms had also changed. Under the old contract workers exchanged loyalty for job security, while the new contract workers exchanged performance for continuous learning and marketability (Sullivan, 1999). Technological change has great impact on the nature of work, the way it is coordinated and skills it requires. It requires new ways to doing things.

New technologies in modern workplaces altered employers demand for skills (Sue and Tan, 2008). For example, with the advent of information technology and spread sheet software, many people have access to numerical information (Dench, 1997). The evolution of computers has created highly skilled jobs for certain people but has also deskilled those whose expertise relied on what went before, leading to redundancy of their skills (Grugulis, 2003). Development of machineries and computers has resulted in the elimination of workers and increasing the productivity of organizations.

These new technologies are very powerful that organizations cannot afford to disregard and workers have to develop competencies to use them (Burke, 2006). Changes in the way work is done and workplaces show that what counts as “ skill” has evolved. In recent years a great deal of emphasise has been placed on soft skills. One major difficulty in this area is a lack of common terminology as we see different vocabularies are used (Dench, 1997) for example these skills are sometimes referred to as personal skills, generic skills, core, transferable, social skills and even personal attributes.

For better understanding, it is necessary to look at a proper definition of soft skills. “ Soft skills are experientially acquired self-, people-and task-related behaviours that complement the use of ‘ hard’ technical knowledge and skills in the workplace, and enables individuals to navigate successfully the requirements, challenges and opportunities of their job role in pursuit of personal, team or organizational goals” (McGurk, 2010). Soft skills are not limited to particular occupations, they are transferable and central to person’s ability to operate in employment (Dench, 1997).

While on the other hand technical skills also referred to as hard skills are job related or more closely related to the actual task being performed. They are skills acquired through training and education or learned on the job (Litecky, Arnett and Prabhakar, 2004). Today employers crave managers with critical soft generic skills, and these skills have come to play a very crucial role in management position today (Buhler and M, 2001). “ Companies spend billions of dollars on training and identification of soft skills, and the method to develop the skills will help maximize these dollars” (Weber et al. 2009). Human Resource representatives place great deal of importance on the face to face interviews, questions regarding previous work experience in customer service; the ability to be trained and employees who are willing to exceed customer’s expectation and find solutions (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). Many successful service companies emphasize on the importance of developing customer-friendly values, a positive environment and interpersonal skills to match (Cook and Macaulay, 1997).

Richard Branson who is the CEO of Virgin Airways emphasizes on the importance of making customers feel comfortable while providing a friendly and warm environment as well as a helping hand and reassuring presence (Cook and Macaulay, 1997). Companies that put in lots of energy and time to understand networking and cooperative relationships greatly improve their chances of making successful organizational changes (Cross, Parise and Weiss, 2007). Cordial relationships are very vital to organizations, and the need for proper communication.

Communication which is very critical is required horizontally and vertically within organizations and externally with clients/customers. Effective

communication enables interpersonal acceptance, enhances teamwork and team motivation (Azin et al. , 2010). IT staff who can work well with others successfully complete projects compared to those who lack social graces but possessed top technical skills (O'Brien, 1999) However, having looked at the changing nature of skill, the reasons and importance, this paper goes further to look at the implications this change has for employees, employers and the wider society. Too much emphasis on soft skills as led to a marginalization of technical skills in the wider society (Grugulis, 2007). Today, a lot of training is taking place in order for employees to develop their soft skills. American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) vision 2011 project recently added soft skills as a core competency that all accountants should have. Employers today focus greatly on soft skills compared to technical skills (Dixon et al. , 2010). IBM stresses communications and social skills among its internal support staff, and this shows that communication skills have become more important than technical skills on a lot of help desks (O'Brien, 1999).

Most job descriptions today require candidates that possess good communication skills, customer service skills and an enthusiasm for team work as the ideal candidate for the job (O'Brien, 1999). Education and Training is taking place for younger people to enable them become more employable. Organizations go the extra mile to work hand-in-hand with Universities and colleges to ensure these institutions develop and train students with the skills that are most crucial to the workplace (Beard, Schwieger and Suvendran, 2008). These skills frequently turn out to be ' soft skills'.

Training courses to get the unemployed back to work, focus entirely on soft skills, successfully depriving workers of an opportunity of acquiring technical skills, thereby trapping them in poorly paid jobs (Lafer, 2004). Organizations cannot do well without technical skills, so a concentration on soft skills will pose as a big problem for organizations. Many managers wonder if they should put emphasis on the “hard” or the “soft” aspects (Cook and Macaulay, 1997). In customer service, customers are turned off by staff who don't know the right answers to their question, which leaves you asking- “what's a smile got to do with it?” (Cook and Macaulay, 1997). People require solutions to their problem, and sometimes soft skills cannot provide these answers which would be a problem for the wider society. Technical skills are believed to be easily learned through proper training and education (Lundberg and Mossberg, 2008), but actually technical skills are not so easy to learn. A mechanic for example skilled at detecting faults in a car cannot simply become a medical doctor, simply because both professions involve detecting problems (Payne, 1999). This tells us that technical skills are not easily trainable as well.

Teaching soft skills can put a burden on university's resources, because training students to carryout one-to-one interviews is very expensive (Thilmany, 2009). Soft generic skills such as dealing with people, detecting problems or knowledge of how an employee's organisation works presents more problems as these skills are very important but unbelievably hard to measure (Grugulis, 2003). Also when recruiting, because these skills are difficult to detect interviewers may end up recruiting the wrong people for

the job. There are two categories of job seekers, they are the players and purist.

The players see employability as a positional game, they use career information and social contacts to 'decode' the winning formulae and act as if they are competent enough for the job (Phillip and Hesketh, 2004). On the other hand the purist views employability as competitive advantage and work is viewed as an expression of self (Phillip and Hesketh, 2004). The purist is the genuine candidate, but the player might end up being recruited. This could pose as a big problem for employers who desire the best fit for the job. Soft skills could promote discrimination and job stereotype.

Grugulis and Vincent (2009: 599) explain that "when it is an individual's character that is being judged, evaluations based on gender and race are far more likely". Women in the IT sector mostly work as data base analysts and data administrators, system testing technicians, or web designers and developers (Jubas and Butterwick, 2008) but are hardly found in jobs like system analysis or computing programming (Habtu, 2003: 7). Women and men although may engage in social intuitive learning but such roles are gendered as feminine and are adopted more by females (Jubas and Butterwick, 2008).

Women most of the time ended up with lower paying jobs and tended to earn less than their male colleagues (Woodfield, 2000: 18), and males were promoted quicker than women. Soft skills such as interpersonal, communication, organizational skills are seen as feminine qualities which lacks a definition and reliability (Jubas and Butterwick, 2008). Women are



seen to be natural care givers, and so jobs that require these roles are normally given to women, which at the end of the day turn out to be low skilled. Women roles in hotels are normally limited to room cleaning and reception roles emphasizing gender stereotyping (Burns, 1997).

Soft skills aided the recognition of women skills, but did nothing to increase their value (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009). This is a problem for female employees in various organizations. Demand on skills vary from one employer to the other (Grugulis, 2007) and skills as it is known is an elusive concept, and the demand for soft skills has contributed to its complexity (Payne, 1999). Some personal attributes and behaviours people possess are seen as skills, and this puts employees as well as the wider society in a difficult situation.

Traits such as discipline, loyalty and even punctuality are not skills that a person lacks or possesses, they are determined by the level of commitment one decides to offer or keep back resulting from the conditions of work offered (Lafer, 2004). Lafer (2004: 118) argues that behavioural skills indicate the fact that there are not enough job openings in well paid technical occupations to accommodate the full population that training policy aims to serve. The power by soft skills is a lot more delicate and exists greatly in the eye of the beholder advantaging workers when it is acknowledged by employers and not otherwise (Grugulis, 2007).

Employees get rewarded for the skills that are valued more and these skills do not have the power to produce (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009). In conclusion, Employees are feeling the importance of adaptability and

flexibility in the workplace (Benedict, Esen and Williams, 2008). Soft skills are encouraged in workplaces, because these skills are seen as a mechanism through which performance can be improved. Emphasis is placed on flexibility and customer focus and most managers today are chosen based on their basic soft skills (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009).

There is some sort of doubt about if these so-called soft skills are actually skills or simply personal attributes. But in actuality these attributes, personal qualities and competencies as skills has gained a lot of prevalence that it is unlikely that this special practice in rebranding will be reversed (Grugulis, 2007). Skills and jobs are projected in ways that contribute stereotypical assumptions about workers such that it is difficult to disentangle the gender, race or class of the individual carrying out the job from the attribute they are assumed to have (Grugulis, 2007).

The demand for soft skills have implications for women since they are represented more in unskilled than highly skilled jobs and have benefited from public sector employment (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009). A simple acknowledgement and labelling of these skills is not enough, it is important that these skills are greatly valued, but most times that is never the case (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009). An emphasis on soft skills does not mean that technical skills are not important because it has been discovered that a high level of technical competences is required in a lot of jobs (Dench, 1997). The way technical skills are acquired is also important, and some employers look for technical skills acquired through educational systems and experience, while others look for general education and essential level of ability (Dench, 1997). It is also unlikely that the present emphasis on soft skills will decline

because these skills are essential at influencing the effectiveness with which an individual is able to operate in a workplace (Dench, 1997).

A proper balance of both technical and soft personal skills is very essential for individuals, as it would go a long way in helping to carryout tasks in organizations and also when the need to change jobs or career is required. Abilities and attitudes would help people adjust to new demands and deal with change (Dench, 1997). References Azin, S. , Gale, A. , Lawlor-Wright, T. , Kirkham, R. , Khan, A. and Alam, M. (2010) ' The Importance of soft skills in complex projects', Business And Economic-Management, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 387-401, Available: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/367342443?accountid=17193> [30 November 2011]. Beard, D. , Schwieger, D. and Suvendran, K. (2008) ' Intergrating Soft skills Assessment through University, College and Programmatic Efforts at an AACBS Accredited Institution', Computers-Electronic Data Processing, Education-Computer Applications, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 229-240, Available: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/200136054?accountid=1719> [20 November 2011]. Benedict, A. , Esen, E. and Williams, S. (2008) ' Critical Skills Needs and Resources for Changing workforce', SHRM/The Wall Street Journal, June, pp. -34. Buhler, D. B. and M, P. (2001) ' The growing importance of soft skill in the workplace', Managing in the new millineum, vol. 62, no. 6, June, pp. 13-15. Burke, R. J. (2006) ' The changing nature of work and organization: Implications for human resource management', The New world of Work and Organization, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 86-94. Burns, P. M. (1997) ' Hard-skills, Soft-skills: Undervaluing Hospitality's " Service with a Smile"', Progress in Tourism and Hospitality Research, vol. 3, no. 3, September, pp. 239-248. Callaghan, G.

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