

Skill Up: What Soft Skills do Employers Look For in Job Applicants?

Soft skills tend to come from life experience or as the result of working towards a goal. Unlike academic subjects like Maths, English and Science, a soft skill is something that is developed rather than studied. Although there are steps you can take to improve your soft skills, more often than not, they come with experience.

Soft skills tend to come from life experience

Communication



Communication is one of the most valuable life skills you can have

The one soft skill that every employer looks for is good communication skills. That means being able to give accurate information in a clear and concise way. Although this may sound obvious, communication clearly is tougher than it sounds. Whether we're talking or writing an email, we tend to add in information that isn't always relevant. And by the same measure, we often leave out bits of information that the other person would find important. Having good communication skills is all about adjusting the way you talk and write for your audience. Put yourself in their shoes and ask yourself how they want the information and what do they want to know.

Good manners

This one is obvious, right?

So obvious that it doesn't really need to be on the list.

But here it is all the same. This has been included because having good manners and being polite are two of the best life skills you can have, particularly when speaking with employers. Every job out there will require you to communicate with other people and doing so in a polite way will make things run a whole lot smoother. The relationships that you form at work are extremely important, so it's definitely worthwhile paying attention to the way you treat other people.

Professionalism



Being professional can go a long way towards impressing an employer

As a school leaver, there's a chance that, apart from your work experience placement, you've not had the opportunity of being in a professional environment other than school. For this reason, employers often find younger job applicants a bit too laid back. When applying for jobs, it's important that you show that you have a professional approach to work and that you understand the importance of maintaining high standards.

This goes for the standard of your application form, your CV and your job interviews too.

If you have a job interview, make the effort to look professional and dress the way that employees of that company would dress.

Decision making

A highly sought-after soft skill from an employer's perspective is the ability to make decisions. We make decisions every day of our lives whether we're aware of them or not.

What will I wear today? What will I have for lunch?

Bearing this in mind, we're all capable of making choices when we need to, so make sure you demonstrate this to employers. In a typical working day, you may be faced with dozens of important decisions that will affect your workload and your employer's reputation. You therefore need to show that you're capable of making sensible business decisions that will have a positive impact on the company. Give your potential employer examples of when you've had to make important decisions that affected other people.

Organisation



Being organised is the key to completing tasks on time

Being organised is a great life skill in general but particularly useful in the workplace. In a lot of jobs, you'll be responsible for managing your own workload, which means being organised so that you meet deadlines. The key to having good organisational skills is to have processes in place. In every job, there are always certain tasks that you'll need to do over and over again and having an effective process in place can help you get things done quicker and more effectively. You can demonstrate your organisational skills to an employer by drawing on your experiences of studying for exams.

Commitment

Before someone hires you, they'll want to know that you're going to stick around.

There may be instances at work where you'll be working on long-term projects and you'll need to have the commitment to see them through until the end.

When applying for jobs, make sure that you highlight your commitment to working with the company by showing how you've been committed to projects in the past.

Flexibility



Being flexible could mean working from home or after hours

In the workplace, things don't always run smoothly and when things get turned upside down, employers want to know that they can rely on you to do what is necessary to put things right. And that means being flexible.

Being flexible can often mean going outside your comfort zone in order to be more effective.

When completing an application form or preparing for an interview, make sure you are able to give examples of times that you've had to be flexible for the greater good.

Time management

This is arguably one of the most valuable soft skills you can have as a school leaver. It's also one of the most difficult to attain.

Knowing how much time to set aside for a particular task can be challenging, particularly if the task in question is completely new to you. In most cases, good time management skills come from experience but being organised in the first place and asking for help when needed can go a long way to helping you manage your time better. You may want to mention to an employer how you managed your time while studying for several exams at once.

Ability to work under pressure



Think of examples of times when you've had to cope with pressure

Every job has its own pressures and employers will want to know that you have the life skills to be able to cope when the going gets tough. Despite what people might think, coping with pressure doesn't mean working harder or longer hours. It's about being as resourceful as you can.

This might mean seeking out extra help with a project, or taking some time to recharge your batteries in the middle of a busy day. Try to think of a time at school when you had a lot on your plate. What did you do to help you cope with the pressure and what was the outcome?

Although soft skills aren't always seen as being as important as technical or practical skills, to employers, they definitely are. Having technical ability is one thing, but being able to present information on time and in the correct manner is another.

Start Developing Soft Skills

Time management

Show up for lessons, appointments, meetings and work on time. Stick to scheduled breaks and getting your work done in time to meet your deadlines. This shows that you can take responsibility and manage yourself.

Personal presentation

Dress in an appropriate way for lessons and work by generally being neat and tidy. Your body language is important too. Do you enjoy a good slouch? Ask a friend whether you look bored or interested when you slouch. A teacher or employer will think the same thing as your friend does when they look at you. Personal presentation shows you are self-aware and understand the effect that your appearance and behaviour has on others.

Communication

Be polite and helpful with friends, colleagues and customers on email, in person and on the phone, including speaking up when there's a problem. Just saying a friendly hello to everyone at the start of the day gets the ball rolling with your communication skills!

Team work

Being able to get on with the people you work with and working together to get things done is a vital part of most activities and jobs.

Attitude

Stay positive at school and at work, even when things get a bit challenging. Use your initiative to help people out even when you haven't been asked to. Be honest. Own up if something goes wrong and learn from your mistakes. This shows that you are committed to your work and can take responsibility for what you do.

Confidence

Believe in yourself and all your skills can help you work with people better. Take on difficult new tasks and generally achieve all the things you need to do to be a master of soft skills.