

Employer Expectations: Hard and Soft Skills

"I think we have to appreciate that we're alive for only a limited period of time, and we'll spend most of our lives working."

Victor Kiam, Chairman, Remington Products

Career success (or lack of it) affects nearly every part of your life: family, income, self-esteem, who you associate with, where you live, your level of happiness, what you learn, your energy level, your health, and maybe even the length of your life.

Some students think, "All I need for success at work is the special knowledge of my chosen career." All that nurses need, they believe, are good nursing skills. All that accountants need are good accounting skills. All that lawyers need are good legal skills. These skills are called hard skills, the knowledge needed to perform a particular job. Hard skills include knowing where to insert an intravenous feeding tube, how to write an effective business plan, and what the current inheritance laws are. These are the skills you'll be taught in courses in your major field of study. They are essential to qualify for a job. Without them you won't even get an interview.

But, most people who've been in the work world a while will tell you this: Hard skills are necessary to get a job but often insufficient to keep it or advance. That's because nearly all employees have the hard skills necessary to do the job for which they're hired. True, some may perform these skills a little better or a little worse than others, but one estimate suggests that only 15 percent of workers who lose their jobs are fired because they can't do their job. That's why career success is often determined by soft skills. As one career specialist put it, "Having hard skills gets you hired; lacking soft skills gets you fired."

A United States government study agrees that soft skills are essential to job success. In the early 1990's, the Secretary of Labor asked a blue-ribbon panel to determine what it takes to be successful in the modern employment world. This panel published a report called the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). The SCANS report presents a set of foundation skills and workplace competencies deemed essential for work world success today.

No one familiar with today's work world will find many surprises in the report, especially in the foundation skills. The report calls for employees to develop the same soft skills that are asked for in employment ads, that employers look for in reference letters and job interviews, and that supervisors assess in periodic evaluations of their work force.

The SCANS report identifies the following soft skills as necessary for work and career success:

- * taking responsibility
- * making effective decisions
- * setting goals
- * managing time
- * prioritizing tasks
- * persevering
- * giving strong efforts
- * working well in teams
- * communicating effectively
- * having empathy
- * knowing how to learn
- * exhibiting self-control
- * believing in one's own self worth

Learning these skills will help you succeed in your first career after college. And, because soft skills are portable (unlike most hard skills), you can take them with you in the likely event that you later change careers. Most career specialists say the average worker today can expect to change careers at least once during his or her lifetime. In fact, some 25 percent of workers in the United States today are in occupations that did not even exist a few decades ago. If a physical therapist decides to change careers and work for an internet company, he needs to master a whole new set of hard skills. But the soft skills he's mastered are the same ones that will help him shine in his new career.

So, as you're learning these soft skills, keep asking yourself, "How can I use these skills to stay on course to achieving my greatest potential at work as well as in college?" Be assured, (these soft skills) can make all the difference between success and failure in your career.