

Quantity and Quality

A brief introduction to behaviour competences

Sometimes called 'soft skills'



With the support of



Soft Skills is a popular means of describing *behavioral* competencies. These skills are also known as *Interpersonal Skills*, or *people skills*; they include proficiencies such as communication skills, conflict resolution and negotiation, personal effectiveness, creative problem solving, strategic thinking, team building, influencing skills and selling skills.

Essential they related to forms of behaviour of people and are complex – in contrast to the rather than task related skills (e.g. hitting a nail on the head, baking a cake).

Behavioural skills are very personal and to develop require a degree of subtlety of understanding of both general patterns of human behaviour and particular issues relating to each individual whose skills are being examined.

Whilst with a degree of physical effort and training a person may be taught to hit a nail with a hammer, it is not possible through a similar process to encourage a person to be polite, helpful, an effective communicator or a skilled problem solver.

Developing behavioural competences is an educational, rather than 'training' process. The process of development of behaviour may produce results radically different to what is expected, as if the process truly does attend to the person (rather than a fixed and required result), it may uncover aspects of a person's character which have life-changing impact.

Whilst a degree of understanding of behaviour patterns may assist an individual (developing surface abilities such as smiling, asking appropriate questions, carefully honed for an interview), the development of effective behavioural competences ('soft skills') requires in depth and honest assessment of one's own person.

This is an introductory background paper designed to assist the understanding of the rise in the importance of behavioural competencies. The recognition of such competencies as being an important aspect of modern organisational and commercial concerns has only received

recognition during the latter part of the C20th.

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Since the middle of the C20th research into the nature of humanity and its essential social requirement has been relentless. The recognition that organisations require to consider their staff needs is very recent. The term 'Human Resource' appears to have first been used in the early 1960s. The largest European organisation concerned with such people management and development, The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, (<http://www.cipd.co.uk/>) has only had a such a title ('Institute of Personnel Management') since 1946 being originally (1913) the Welfare Workers' Association.

In earlier modern times major advances were made in some very physically large-scale aspects of present life - transport systems (cars, airplanes) construction (bridges, roads, railways, tall buildings), health care (national provision, life saving drugs, surgical practices). Whilst these continue, one marked aspect of late C20th and early C21st is the development of profoundly detailed small-scale systems and increasing understanding of the minutiae of structures and systems. This has included a considerably greater understanding of the manner in which societies operate and of human performance within them.

An aspect of this is the recognition that human beings have a variety of needs that if left unattended prevent effective development. The primacy in all social systems of whatever purpose needs to be the individuals within the system.

In earlier times individuals were required to adjust to external structures. The industrial developments of the C19th usually paid little regard to individual need as they continued with a view of individuals as being malleable elements of a larger whole. Frequently individuals and families were tied into their employment by a series of employer-controlled restrictions (e.g. housing provision). This pattern continued with mass-production processes in which humans were required to perform as machines.

The important changes that have occurred during the late C20th have origins in the radical movements of the C18th and C19th when it was realised that developing individuals *for their own sake* rather than simply to meet an external requirement, actually produced a wider social benefit.

Thus innovators such as Rezső Lábán de Váraljas (Rudolph Laban) studied ways in which individuals can, even in industrial contexts, develop working patterns more suited to their own nature, than simply being required to perform to an externally imposed pattern.

Provision of Free Education For All was a part of this process of understanding that it is individuals, not external social groups (of any type) that need to be the focus of development. Humans are social in nature therefore the relationship between individual and social group is an important part of development.

From these broad understandings has grown the comparatively recent interest in 'Personal Development'.

This can be a narcissistic activity but carefully managed it is a very important aspect of any social group or system.

Growing out of an increasing realisation that individual human development is important and that understanding the process and purposes of individual development is very complex, is an increasing concentration on methods that encourage appropriate development.

Formal education has been required to devise methodologies that allow, in various ways, personal space. Such developments have been gestating and growing for a considerable period of time. Friedrich Fröbel and others had promoted 'child-centred' learning in the mid C19th. The struggle to overcome the restrictions of formal didactic academic learning continues but it is generally accepted that the individual is what matters in the process.

As formal educational institutions have changed so have other social organisations. One very significant marker of this change is the EU. The organisation has replaced the rather intellectual term for its education

programmes 'Socrates' with the more direct 'Life Long learning'.

This reflects a move, which has seen the acceptance of a concept that organisations of all types need to be 'learning organisations'. In other words, education and the 'learning process' has moved out of the classroom and is spread across all aspects of human activity, formal and informal.

Research and consequent debate has produced a series of broadly agreed statements as to what are individual 'needs' - those aspects of life that require attention and development in order for anyone to be reasonably content and purposeful.

The Learning Organisation is, therefore one which assists in providing for these needs and in 'growing' its personnel.

Such an organisation will encourage its members to increase their own self-understanding and their ability to relate effectively with others.

Any reasonably serious institution will provide opportunities for people to develop key skills and behavioural competencies. These are especially important issues for those in formal education. The key skills (e.g. numeracy, literacy) can have a direct bearing on developing other professionally related skills (e.g. a builder needs to be able to measure), behavioural competencies (also known as interpersonal or people skills) are those sometimes referred to as 'soft skills'. These, being 'behavioural' are important in many aspects of life, especially social situations. They include, for example communication, personal effectiveness, creative problem solving, ability to work in a team. Possession of such skills will increase a person's aptitude and ability to make a positive contribution with others and in varied social situations.

Organisations and The Individual

There has been a major shift in the relationship between these two aspects of human life. Whilst the past may have required individuals to have made major adjustments to 'fit' into an established structure, the opposite is increasingly common. Organisations need to recognise that they exist

because of a perceived need amongst groups of individuals. Commercial organisations need to persuade people to buy their product by appealing to a 'need' (which the organisation may even try and create!). Organisations that have traditionally simply demanded loyalty (often by some form of physical or psychic threat) can no longer succeed in a context where people are increasingly aware of (and able to decide) their own needs. This is one reason for the dramatic decline in organised religion in Western Society.

So it can be with commercial organisations. In order to develop, recruit and retain high quality staff they need to ensure that they provide more than simply a 'pay packet'. They need to become 'holistic' in their view of their function and provide for a wide range of needs.

This requirement works in both directions.

A company, whilst recognising that its existence arises from the satisfaction of a perceived need or provision of a 'good', has to ensure that it has engaged people who are committed to its overall purposes: people who will become effective members of the organisation. The company also has to provide varied opportunities for its staff.

The way this is achieved will vary dramatically and will, in a very successful organisation, encourage the development of the 'soft skills' of its workforce in order to draw them into the process of developing the company. A confident dynamic company will attempt to identify potential in those who sometimes appear lacking in many skills.

An individual wishing to target a specific profession will work to develop the skills (soft and hard) that may increase their chances of gaining employment. Whilst hard skills (such as being able to lay a certain number of bricks accurately) can be measured and therefore improved by specific training programmes, 'soft skills' are not quantifiable. There is no specific measure for such competencies as 'enthusiasm'. Further, it is comparatively easy to appear competent in areas such as communication or enthusiasm for a brief period of examination but later to be discovered to be uninterested in or incapable of using such a skill. Soft skills cannot be delivered through a simple 'training package' as they occur gradually,

learned and improved through real experience - hence their linking to the term 'personal development'.

Companies wishing to enhance behavioural competences in their staff will need to provide active learning situations that provide opportunities for skill development. Such situations (e.g. a weekend developing 'team building skills', development days engaged in structured role play) often produce results quite different from the original intention.

It is recognised that most learning within an organisation is incidental, rather than the product of formal training.

A confident and dynamic company will be aware that when engaging in educational processes (as when attempting to develop behavioural competencies) it is creating 'open-ended' situations.

A company may use 'training' processes for the development of certain skills. Training has, at the start, a fixed goal (learning to e.g.: cook pasta, build a bridge) and a clear series of pre-determined stages through which the trainee passes in order to develop the skill.

When a company engages with behavioural issues such a deterministic approach is impossible. There are too many unforeseeable variables. The company that is a dynamic learning institution will recognise that it is the very variables that, when managed appropriately, provide the learning process for both the individuals concerned and the company. Effective management of the variables in an educational process is what makes the whole process exciting and potentially profoundly profitable (in every sense).

The key issue for those seeking employment is to be aware of what are their specific personal strengths (e.g. being good at personal time management, enthusiastic, ability to listen effectively) and to ensure that these are demonstrated to potential employers. Applicants may also usefully demonstrate skills simply by requiring the employer to outline the ways in which their company will work to further enhance the skills and abilities of their work force.

One reason that emphasis is placed (by many governmental agencies) on

SOFTSKILLS

Improving professional competence and management ability

the development of entrepreneurship and small and medium sized companies is that within such organisations there can be greater flexibility & opportunities for inter-personal reaction and personal development. They better represent (than the Old Style Gargantuan Companies) a New Age of self-expression, self-development, creative, high level international creative communication... the age that is twittering its unpredictable way into the future.

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There are many sites that attempt to define & list 'soft skills' here is one easily accessible site

<http://jobs.aol.com/articles/2009/01/26/top-10-soft-skills-for-job-hunters/>