

Welcome to the JSPAC's E-seminar on Soft skills. This E-seminar is written for the student or new employee.

Soft skills are workplace behaviors that all employers demand, but some employees lack, and many students don't fully understand! In order to be successful in *any* career – soft skills are as crucial to master as how to perform the tasks of the job. Soft skills are the social and communication skills that allow a person to interact successfully with bosses, co-workers, and customers.



According to the California Career Resource Network's Succeed at Work¹, there are five equally important facets of career success: 1) acting "self-employed," 2) successful strategies for starting a new job, 3) learning the ethics and responsibilities of the workplace, 4) living a balanced life, and 5) enjoying your current position! Most of the items included have little to do with actual work skills!

Indeed, according to the California Career Café², 85% of your career success has to do with soft skills – not how well you can fix the computer or create a spreadsheet! Employers can train a good employee to complete automotive repairs easier than they can train a great automotive technician to get to work on time, to talk politely to customers, or to maintain a positive outlook. The California Career Café has a "People Skills" page that lists the top ten attributes employers are looking for. They are looking for employees who are: good communicators, collaborators, positive, good listeners, resilient, dedicated, organized, effective writers, problem solvers, and leaders! Below we will integrate these two resources, however, both are available online at the addresses listed here and in the companion PDF available at www.jspac.org/eseminars.

There are many reasons that students and employees may need a tutorial or a refresher in soft skills. Some students are new to the country while some have had no role models. However, regardless of our experience, all of us can improve our soft skills. It's an ongoing process!



If you are still in school, take this opportunity to try to get a paid or unpaid internship so you have the opportunity to become comfortable with workplace expectations. If this isn't an option, ask a trusted teacher, counselor, or other professional to become your mentor. A mentor will offer guidance and opinions in a safe and trusting environment. Finally, if no mentor is available, observe how your teachers behave at work, or ask questions of neighbors or friends who have successful jobs. This allows you to practice or at least see soft skills in action.

The first Facet of soft skills as identified in "Succeed at Work" is **act self-employed**.

In earlier times, it was expected that you would get a job, work your way up the career ladder with that company, and retire after 25 years. That is seldom the case today because the work place is changing so rapidly. This means that each of us is in charge of our own career! We are each the sole-owner of "Me, Inc." In order to get the job, survive economic slow-downs and the inevitable layoffs, and rise to the top: YOU are responsible for the success of your career.

¹ http://www.californiacareers.info/downloads/Succeed_at_Work.pdf

² <http://www.cacareercafe.com/people-skills/>

Ways to have a successful “Me, Inc.” include:

1. Know how to please customers. This takes a commitment to positive communication at all times. It helps to think of everyone as a customer: your boss, your colleagues, and, of course, the actual customers.
2. Take the initiative and do your best – this includes learning new skills, staying aware of new companies or opportunities, offering to complete tasks that “aren’t your responsibility” or picking up extra shifts as needed.
3. Take every opportunity to learn a new task, process, or facet of the company, and stay current on technological advances. This makes you a more valuable employee as well as more hireable in the event of a job loss.
4. Always use manners that are respectful. Don’t swear, yell, gossip, or smoke where customers can see you.

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Facet #2 is **learn strategies to be successful when starting a new job**

Beginning a new job is stressful for almost everyone. It’s okay to be anxious; it’s part of the process. As you begin a new job, there may be an orientation, a probationary period, new “jargon” or language specific to the profession, new equipment, tasks, and skills to master, and a whole new host of duties expectations and policies. Remember that it can take several months to a year to become truly comfortable at your new job.

Ways to be the most successful right out of the gate include:

- Listening! This is critical in the early days on a job. Listening to your employers and co-workers is important. Show your employer, right from the start, that you can work alone or in collaboration with others. Employers want to know that you can listen, understand and apply what you’ve been shown.
- Doing your best! This starts before you punch a time clock! Arrive well rested, in uniform or appropriately dressed, and prepared.

Facet #3 is **Be an Excellent Employee by learning the ethics and responsibilities of the workplace.**

Being an excellent employee means being an employee that a boss can count on. From being reliable to being effective, from collaboration to leadership! Showing an employer that she can count on you is a requirement for keeping your job! Specifics to being an excellent employee include:

- Pride in your work - Remember that every job or task is important. Regardless of if you are on the custodial staff or a computer-networking technician, both tasks are necessary to keep the doors open and the customers happy.
- Attention to attendance and appearance - It is imperative that you are prepared and on time for each and every shift. If you *must* miss a shift or be tardy, call as soon as you can. Speak to your boss, not a co-worker. Do not text or email about an absence.
 - Reasons that are acceptable to miss work include: illness, an ill child, an accident on the way to work, death of a family member or *close* friend.
 - Unacceptable reasons for missing work include: car issues (get a bus); watching

- other people's children; a family argument; no babysitter (have a backup plan and a back up to the backup); a hangover; etc....
- Remember that missing all or part of a shift impacts everyone – your co-workers have to pick up the slack, your boss has to rearrange the schedule, the company loses productivity, and you lose pay, goodwill, and maybe your job!
 - It is important that you look professional. Remember to dress for the job you want, not the job you have. If you want to be the boss, dress like the boss. You can do this even if you are required to wear a uniform. Make sure it's clean and pressed, be conservative in the jewelry and accessories you wear, cover all body art, avoid excessive perfume or cologne, and keep your hair color and style as conservative as the boss keeps hers or his.
- Integrity – When you take a job you are agreeing to work towards the best interests of both yourself and the company. This means being honest and discreet as well as following rules, regulations, and laws. There are obvious ways we show integrity like not lying, stealing materials or supplies, or cheating on your time card. And then there are the more subtle ways like not using company equipment for personal reasons and not using drugs or alcohol at times that will interfere with work.
 - Positive Attitude – A positive attitude makes it easier for co-workers, customers, and your boss to work with you. A negative attitude can show up in body language and lack of effort. A positive attitude will enhance your relationship with your boss, increase your productivity, and allow for greater advancement opportunities. Having a bad attitude will make the day feel much longer *and* limit your opportunities!
 - Maximum Effort – Employees who are dedicated to their jobs rise to the top! One way to show your dedication is to put forth maximum effort – go the extra mile. Leave your home life at home, socialize after work, be physically ready to work, and put in a full days effort every day. Maximum effort requires that you concentrate on the task at hand, don't give up, and don't cut corners.
 - Productivity and Organization – Being organized increases your productivity. So:
 - Prioritize your work – do what is most important first.
 - Plan ahead so that you can accomplish all you have been assigned.
 - Gather all the tools or materials together.
 - Take notes for next time.
 - Do similar tasks together, and
 - Clean and organize your workstation daily.
 - Ask for help if required. Asking for necessary tools, additional training, etc. will show your manager or boss that you are making an effort to become more productive and organized.
 - Customer Service – Customer service is the lifeblood of *every* business. It is important that you make a point of giving excellent service to all customers – those who are internal (boss and co-workers) and external (the public or other businesses). Components of excellent customer services include: greeting customers, helping customers swiftly, answering the phone politely and promptly returning missed calls, responding appropriately to upset customers, and stopping conversations with co-workers when a customer is present.

- Communication – Good communication is essential to any relationship. Communication requires you to listen closely, speak clearly and respectfully, and write effectively.
 - When it's a stressful conversation, speak clearly and only for yourself. Be positive and don't just complain. Avoid extreme language like "always" or "never."
 - In writing, plan ahead, be logical and brief, stay on topic, use language that is appropriate for your readers, and proof read your finished product. Don't publish or turn in your writing until the next day after you have re-read it and made any necessary clarifications and edits.
 - Reading is a part of *every* job! To get the most out of your reading, skim the text first, take notes on issues that are important or that need clarification, figure out the main points of what you are reading, and then read the text again for full comprehension.
- Team Player – Unless you work for and by yourself – being a team player is essential! Team players clean up after themselves, restock supplies, return tools to assigned places, and return borrowed items promptly and in good working order. Team players take initiative, communicate, are responsible, learn from others, and are solution orientated.
 - Employers like to see an employee take the initiative in solving a problem. Even if the solution is not perfect, giving input, offering suggestions, and trying new ideas, are all part of collaboration and teamwork. This indicates that the employee is dedicated to the job, is thinking for her or himself, and can be trusted to work independently as well as provide leadership.
 - In solving a problem, analyze and define the problem, develop a few different solutions, select and try the best one, and evaluate the outcome before making necessary adjustments.
- Continuous Learning – To be an excellent employee and to work your way up the career ladder, you must be committed to being on top of your job in terms of new technologies or better tools. Taking additional courses, reading articles and books related to your job, and asking for additional training can accomplish this. An added bonus is that it makes your job more interesting, you're more hireable if you need to get another job, and you become better able to direct your own work.

Facet #4 is **Living a Balanced Life**

It is important to us all to have a balanced work-home life. If your home life is stressful, it can impact your work. It is helpful to know that according to Kelly McGonigal³ of Stanford University a little stress can be beneficial. However, letting stress impact your job or career is unwise and unnecessary. Ways to keep stress beneficial include:

- Time Management – it is important that you manage your time to get the most out of life. Set your priorities for both your personal and your work life. Use time management tools like a calendar and a daily task list. Most cell phones have task lists and calendars as well as the ability to set alarms and reminders.

³ http://new.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend

- Maintaining good physical, mental, and emotional health – Maintaining good health requires effort. At work, it is important to follow directions when using machinery, use safety measures while dealing with heavy equipment or materials, and switch from standing to sitting frequently during the day. Continually learning new tasks keeps you mentally fit as does taking regular breaks, and leaving work at work. Your happiness at work effects your emotional health – so if you don't enjoy your job, perhaps you should put in the effort to train for new skills and or to find a new job. Sometimes its just the wrong fit – the tasks are enjoyable but the personalities don't mesh. At home, eat well, exercise, and engage with family and friends often while still taking time for you.

The Final Facet, Facet #5 is **Enjoy your current job**

Every job has parts that are interesting and parts that are tedious. It is up to you to make the work that you do interesting and beneficial to you and your employer. You're in charge! There are ways you can make an entry-level position better. Remember, we all started at the bottom! A few ways to do this include:

- Improve your relationships with your employer and co-workers by not complaining, take responsibility for mistakes and apologize if necessary, be respectful, and work hard. Schedule a meeting before or after your shift to talk with your boss about additional opportunities and new tasks, how you can improve, and to let them know the skills you have that are being underutilized or that you have recently acquired. During this meeting, be respectful and polite – don't put your boss on the defensive. Don't over-inflate your abilities and don't let fear stop you from being honest. Being scared of talking to the boss is natural – but it's not deadly!
- Improve your self-esteem and self-efficacy. See the JSPAC E-seminar on internal barriers to learn more about these topics. Don't get stuck in a victim role – remember, you're in control.
- Finally, be grateful for opportunities, paychecks, benefits, etc. If you are still not earning enough to support yourself or family, remember it's the beginning of a job, not the end!

Ok, we know that is a lot of information. We understand that there is a lot to learn when you are entering or re-entering the workforce. You don't need to learn it all in one sitting. You can watch this E-seminar many times. Talk to your teachers and mentors. If you don't have a mentor, get one! There is little else as beneficial as having someone on your side who has walked the road you are on at an earlier time in their lives. Visit the California Career Café to discover more about yourself, your skills, your personality, and techniques for learning more!

