

Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success

Youth in Transition

DRIVING CHANGE – CREATING OPPORTUNITY

By inspiring youth to achieve greatness, preparing them to succeed, and opening a path to university, they will become confident and self-sufficient adults.

OVERVIEW

Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success, is a curriculum focused on teaching "soft" or workforce readiness skills to youth. Created for youth development professionals as an introduction to workplace interpersonal and professional skills, the curriculum is targeted for youth ages 14 to 21 in both in-school and out-of-school environments. The basic structure of the program is comprised of modular, hands-on, field trips, engaging activities that focus on six key skill areas: communication, enthusiasm and attitude, teamwork, networking, problem solving and critical thinking, and professionalism.

INTRODUCTION



According to the Every Promise, Every Child: Turning Failure into Action report, a large percentage of young people preparing to enter the workforce over the next two decades are significantly lacking in the “soft” or applied skills — such as teamwork, decision-making, and communication — that will help them become effective employees and managers. In addition, in a Job Outlook survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges &

Employers (NACE), the top characteristics looked for in new hires by 276 employer respondents were all soft skills: communication ability, a strong work ethic, initiative, interpersonal skills, and teamwork. Lastly, the Indiana Business Research Center (IBRC) found that while credentials (degrees and certificates) are important, it is the development of soft skills (those that are more social than technical) that is critical to developing a strong, vibrant workforce.

Interestingly, research also suggests that soft skills are not just important for first-time employees. According to a poll released by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), many workplace soft skills have become more important for the experienced professional. These skills include critical thinking/problem solving, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, teamwork/collaboration, and adaptability/flexibility.



To further explore this important issue, ODEP convened a group of distinguished U.S. businesses. During the discussion, participating companies identified the following competencies as key to the success of young workers: Communication; Networking; Enthusiasm and Attitude; Teamwork; Problem Solving and Critical Thinking; and Professionalism. It was at this meeting that the leaders at ODEP thought materials should be made available to youth service professionals to assist them as they prepare all youth, including youth with disabilities, for employment.

Soft skills cannot be taught in a vacuum nor can they be acquired simply because the goal of a lesson plan indicates it shall be so. Rather, they must be introduced, developed, refined, practiced, and reinforced. Onix-Intercambio Cultural Foundation is committed to providing resources regarding soft skills in a way that is useful, creative, field trips, hands-on and fundamentally beneficial for all types of youth programs, and thus, all types of learners.

ACTIVITY LAYOUT

These activities were created for all youth, regardless of disability or differences in learning style, and as such have been designed with an inclusive spirit and a structure supporting universal design for learning. Each exercise consists of an activity designed to get young people thinking about, practicing, and discussing skills important for career and personal success – soft skills. Additionally, these activities are not weighed down with instructional methodology or specific teaching strategies, since it is the youth service professional who knows his/her audience best, and what might work well for one group of youth participants may clearly not work well for another. As a facilitator, you are encouraged to modify these activities in any way that better meets the needs and interests of your particular group.

All activities are structured as follows:

This is the basic purpose of the activity – plain and simple – and is intended to be a brief description for the instructor.



Time: A suggested time frame is offered for planning purposes. Of course, as activities are altered or modified for various reasons, times may invariably change.



Materials: A list of suggested materials for the activity is provided. The goal of the basic activity is to keep materials to a minimum.



Directions: Directions, including sample scripts, are offered for convenience. You are encouraged to adapt or modify these activities to better resonate with your particular audience, as these activities offer an opportunity to tackle some difficult issues and conversations.



Conclusion: The conclusion is a guide to engage participants in a thoughtful conversation. The goal of this dialogue is to encourage independent ideas and reasoning.



Journaling Activity: Journaling questions are offered as a way to incorporate personal reflection using an individualized means of expression. Participants should be encouraged to choose a form of journaling that feels right for them, while also being supported to “test the waters” with a technique that might stretch a traditional comfort zone.

THROUGH THE LENS OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING



The activities in this program are career development “warm-ups” for youth. Certainly, they may be used as the basis for planning lessons focusing on more extensive career and workforce development pursuits. The directions and extension activities have been specifically designed and created through a lens of universal design for learning. According to CAST (previously known as the Center for Applied Special Technology), universal design for

learning is: a framework for designing educational environments that enable all learners to gain knowledge, skills, and enthusiasm for learning. This is accomplished by simultaneously reducing barriers to the curriculum while providing rich supports for learning.

As most youth development professionals recognize, young people come to pre-employment and employment training programs with a very wide variety of skills, talents, interests, and needs. For many youth, the typical classroom curriculum – which includes goals, instructional methods, classroom materials, and assessments – is cluttered with barriers and roadblocks, providing little support or opportunities to succeed

for a wide range of learners. Rather than make extraordinary adjustments for particular students, universal design for learning lessens this conundrum.

As we work through these activities, we incorporate some of the following strategies, which support universal design for learning:

- Seek opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning through multiple modalities (e.g., written, oral, graphic representations, and multi-media representations).
- Create opportunities for students to complete “do-overs” based on our feedback
- We encourage the use of technology to enhance learning (access to multi-media materials) and performance (e.g., spell check and word prediction software).
- Encouraging students to play an active role and present their own thoughts and opinions throughout the activities.
- Providing feedback to individual students in multiple forms (for example, face-to-face, email, online chat, telephone, etc.).
- Providing opportunities for students to contact us to ask questions.
- Promote a strengths-based learning process.

Providing variety of instruction not only will address various learning styles, but also can help learners become more flexible in their learning. While most learners do have a preferred style of learning, this does not mean they are strictly dependent on that style to learn. By exposing young people to a wide variety of learning styles and methods, you will enable them to become more flexible learners. Providing a variety of activities and access to learning will enable students of all ability levels to succeed.

OUR INCLUSIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

Get young people “doing” in addition to listening. Whether it is a group exercise, using a role play activity, or an individual paper and pencil exercise such as journaling or drawing, creating lessons that engage different learning styles and engage young people in a variety of ways allows everyone to access the curriculum.

Repetition, repetition, repetition. It often takes repeated exposure to something before we remember it. We take extra time to reinforce earlier topics in the context of the new ideas being discussed will help young people retain the important lessons and skills needed to be successfully employed. Being creative in the ways we repeat concepts or emphasize a point: when the concept is considered again, offer it from a different point of view or when the concept is demonstrated again, use a different exercise.

Excitement is contagious. Demonstrating honesty, authenticity, and excitement for working with youth can often inspire the same qualities within the youth themselves as they engage with this curriculum.

Presume competence and instill confidence. Providing young people with confidence and an opportunity to succeed is one of the best gifts we can give. Have high expectations for all youth and help them to realize their potential as we support them to become independent decision-makers for their future.

Regardless of any barrier to employment the activities in this program, coupled with the strategies and spirit of universal design for learning (and a sprinkle of creativity), are intended to help all youth prepare for career and personal success through the development of soft skills.



CONTENT

Soft Skill #1: Communication



The activities in this section will not only help participants practice and recognize how they provide information to others, but also help them consider how others may prefer to receive information. It is important to reinforce with participants that communication skills involve give and take — and they can, indeed, be learned and strengthened over time.

Communication skills are important to everyone - they are how we give and receive information and convey our ideas and opinions with those around us.

Communication comes in many forms:

- verbal (sounds, language, and tone of voice)
- aural (listening and hearing)
- non-verbal (facial expressions, body language, and posture)
- written (journals, emails, blogs, and text messages)
- visual (signs, symbols, and pictures)

It is important to develop a variety of skills for both communicating TO others and learning how to interpret the information received FROM others. Knowing our audience and understanding how they need to receive information is equally important as knowing ourselves.

To an employer, good communication skills are essential. In fact, employers consistently rank good communication skills at the top of the list for potential employees.

One of the challenges in the workplace is learning the specific communication styles of others and how and when to share your ideas or concerns. Though some supervisors may specifically ask for your opinion, others may assume if there is something important they need to know, you will bring it to their attention – or if there is something you are unsure about, you will ask. Knowing how to listen carefully and when to ask for help is important. If an employee and a supervisor learn to communicate well (in whatever method that works), there is a greater likelihood of job retention and promotion.

Soft Skill #2: Enthusiasm & Attitude



The activities in this section seek to teach participants about the importance of enthusiasm and a positive attitude in the workplace. Participants will hear strategies for turning negative thinking into positive thinking and displaying and discussing enthusiasm during an interview and on the job.

What is the difference between “You’re hired!” and “Thank you for your interest, but...”? In a word: enthusiasm. Enthusiasm can mean the difference in not just getting a job, but succeeding in a job and even advancing in your career. A positive and enthusiastic attitude is a critical component of workplace success.

When employers look at prospective candidates, beyond skills, experience, and training, they look for those who demonstrate enthusiasm – those they believe will complete assigned tasks in an upbeat and cooperative manner. All other things being equal, a candidate who can demonstrate a positive attitude and eagerness to tackle the job will have an advantage over one who displays an attitude viewed by the employer as negative or disinterested. In fact, many employers would rather provide job skills training to an enthusiastic but inexperienced worker than hire someone with perfect qualifications but a less than-positive attitude. Managers sometimes worry that this type of person will not get along with supervisors and co-workers, treat customers disrespectfully, and not put much effort into his or her work.

On the other hand, employees who are viewed as enthusiastic are known to provide good customer service, resolve interpersonal conflict effectively, and work productively with others.

There are many ways in which an individual might demonstrate enthusiasm in the workplace. For example, in a job interview, he or she might smile, sit up straight, make eye contact, and discuss training and work experiences in an upbeat manner. Once hired into a position, an enthusiastic employee will typically show up on time, show interest in his or her job, and demonstrate a willingness to listen, learn, and try new things. In customer service settings, an enthusiastic employee will approach customers proactively and offer assistance or seek out tasks and projects when there is down time. This positive attitude helps employees go above and beyond to get along with co-workers and managers – even difficult ones – and respond to constructive criticism with maturity and willingness to improve. Overall, an employee with enthusiasm comes across as someone who wants to be at work and who is willing to do what it takes to get the job done.

Soft Skill #3: Teamwork



The activities in this section seek to teach participants about the importance of teamwork to workplace success and the specific role each individual on a team may play. Participants will learn about positive teamwork behavior and discover how their own conduct can impact others on a team.

Teamwork is an essential part of workplace success. Like a basketball team working together to set up the perfect shot, every team member has a specific role to play in accomplishing tasks on the job. Although it may seem as if one player scored the basket, that basket was made possible by many people’s planning, coordination, and cooperation to get that player the ball. Employers look for people who not only know how to work well with others, but who understand that not every player on the team can or will be the one who gets the ball. When everyone in the workplace works together to accomplish goals, everyone achieves more.

When employees work together to accomplish a goal, everyone benefits. Employers might expect to “see” this in action in different ways. For example, team members in the workplace plan ahead and work cooperatively to assign tasks, assess progress, and deliver on time. They have professional discussions during which differing approaches and opinions might be shared and assessed in a respectful manner. Even when certain employees end up with tasks that were not their first choices, jobs get done with limited complaints because it is in the spirit of teamwork and with the overall goal in mind. A leader or manager may often serve as the teamwork facilitator. In this case, team members participate respectfully in discussion, carry out assigned tasks, and defer to the leader in the best interest of the goal. Consensus is wonderful, but not always possible, and an assigned leader will often support and facilitate the decision-making necessary for quality teamwork to exist.

Soft Skill #4: Networking



The activities in this section focus on the process of networking and its relevance and importance to career development. Participants will learn about taking initiative and overcoming fear, informational interviewing, as well as potential guidelines to consider when using social networks, texting, and email for networking purposes.

“It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” This common When it comes to finding a job, you’ve got to network! According to Cornell University’s Career Center, 80% of available jobs are not advertised. These jobs are often referred to as the “hidden job market.” expression is the basis for understanding the importance of networking as a strategy for career development and exploration. Everyone has a network, even if you don’t realize it, and when it comes to job searching, this network may be just as important as your skills and experience. A personal network is that group of people with whom you interact every day – family, friends, parents of friends, friends of friends,

neighbors, teachers, bosses, and co-workers. With these people, information and experiences are exchanged for both social and potential professional reasons. Networking occurs every time you participate in a school or social event, volunteer in the community, visit with members of your religious group, talk with neighbors, strike up a conversation with someone at the store, or connect with friends online.

Though networking is an important skill, and one that can certainly be taught, it rarely is. Therefore the activities in this section focus on the process of networking and its relevance and importance to career development. Participants will learn about taking initiative and overcoming fear (which is quite common), informational interviewing, as well as potential guidelines to consider when using social networks, texting, and email for networking purposes.



The activities in this section seek to teach participants about the importance of teamwork to workplace success and the specific role each individual on a team may play. Participants will learn about positive teamwork behavior and discover how their own conduct can impact others on a team. The section also discusses possible obstacles to teams working successfully and offers the opportunity to build constructive strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Soft Skill #5: Problem Solving & Critical Thinking



The activities in this section focus on learning how to solve problems in a variety of ways in the workplace. Participants will hear about how to properly tell the difference among criticism, praise, and feedback and reacting appropriately. The section will also review strategies for making ethical decisions, solving problems on a team with others, and learning how to take into account others' perceptions when assessing actions or statements in the workplace.

Everyone experiences problems from time to time. Some of our problems are big and complicated, while others may be more easily solved. There is no shortage of challenges and issues that can arise on the job. Whether in an office or on a construction site, experiencing difficulties with the tasks at hand or with coworkers, the workplace presents ongoing challenges on a daily basis. Whether these problems are large or small, they need to be dealt with constructively and fairly. Having the necessary skills to identify solutions to problems is one of the skills that employers look for in employees.

Problem solving and critical thinking refers to the ability to use knowledge, facts, and data to effectively solve problems. This doesn't mean you need to have an immediate answer, it means you have to be able to think on your feet, assess problems and find solutions. The ability to develop a well thought out solution within a reasonable time frame, however, is a skill that employers value greatly.

Employers want employees who can work through problems on their own or as an effective member of a team. Ideal employees can think critically and creatively, share thoughts and opinions, use good judgment, and make decisions. As a new employee, you may question why an organization follows certain steps to complete a task. It may seem to you that one of the steps could be eliminated saving time, effort, and money. But you may be hesitant to voice your opinion. Don't be; employers are usually appreciative when new employees are able to offer insight and fresh perspective into better and more efficient ways of doing things. It is important to remember, however, that as someone new to the organization, you may not always have the full picture, and thus there may be factors you are unaware of that dictate that things be done in a particular way. Another important thing to remember is that when you are tasked with solving a problem, you don't always need to answer immediately.

Soft Skill #6: Professionalism



The activities in this section focus on each of the five individual soft skills presented in this publication (communication, enthusiasm/attitude, teamwork, networking, and problem solving/critical thinking), but in a broader framework. This is because professionalism, is not one skill but the blending and integration of a variety of skills.

Throughout our working lives, most of us will have many different jobs, each requiring a different level or set of skills. No matter the industry – from customer service to an office job to construction and the trades – all of these jobs have one thing in common: in order to succeed and move ahead, you need to demonstrate professionalism. Professionalism does not mean wearing a suit or carrying a briefcase; rather, it means conducting oneself with responsibility, integrity, accountability, and excellence. It means communicating effectively and appropriately and always finding a way to be productive.

There are few things an employer values more than employees who carry out their duties in a professional manner. Professionalism isn't one thing; it's a combination of qualities. A professional employee arrives on time for work and manages time effectively. Professional workers take responsibility for their own behavior and work effectively with others. High quality work standards, honesty, and integrity are also part of the package. Professional employees look clean and neat and dress appropriately for the job. Communicating effectively and appropriately for the workplace is also an essential part of professionalism.



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More information and for the program schedule please write to: onix@onix.org.ar

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