

Acquiring social skills - the key to professional success

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Social skills, often also referred to as “soft skills” or “people skills”, are personal skills and abilities. Besides technical knowledge, they are crucial success factors at work. Or, in other words: technical expertise alone is not enough. For the requirements placed on employees and managers also change, especially in times of transition and globalization.

The demand for employees with social skills is high among companies. Especially in the race for survival in the market, no company can afford to dispense with quality in customer care and service, and lag behind in differentiating itself from the competition through these. To do so, companies need employees with excellent social skills.

However, social skills rarely feature in the syllabi of schools and colleges. Many companies have noticed this lacuna and organize training measures in the area of social skills and competencies. It is not for nothing that the field of “People Skills” training has been a growth segment in the training and advanced training sector.

What does this involve?

Social skills can be classified into the following categories:

- General social skills: Emotional intelligence, flexibility, commitment, ability to handle stress, willingness to learn, readiness to perform, openness, analytical thinking, creativity
- Self-management skills: Personal responsibility, self-confidence, discipline, ability to criticize oneself, self-management
- General skills in dealing with others: Respect for others, mutual regard, tolerance, empathy, ability to give and take criticism, communication skills, team capabilities
- Special skills in dealing with others: Managerial skills, negotiation skills, selling and marketing skills, presentation skills, intercultural skills

Can skills and competencies be acquired?

Whether social skills can also be acquired at a later stage in life is usually a matter of controversy: some feel that social skills cannot be acquired, or can be learned to a very limited extent only. Of course, every human being is born with specific traits and strengths. Specific traits of character get reinforced or repressed during childhood.

However, every person is capable of developing further. If we define social skills as the sum of skills and competencies, the limitations and possibilities facing each individual become clear.

Ability is the name given to a set of conditions that are inborn, or even acquired through external circumstances and influences. Many abilities, such as analytical thinking, creativity and communication skills, need not be acquired explicitly. Every individual possesses these to a greater or lesser degree, and these can be improved and refined over time.

Skills on the other hand are acquired only through practice and training. This includes, for instance, presentation skills, sales and marketing skills and management techniques. Given a certain level of basic ability, acquiring a skill becomes easier.

For instance, a person with musical talent will be able to learn the piano with greater ease than someone who is less talented musically. In principle, anyone can learn to play the piano, but a person lacking musical ability is definitely not going to make a career as an internationally celebrated concert pianist.

Similarly, empathy for certain target groups, for instance, is a natural ability whereas creating a user manual for this target group is a skill that can be acquired. Anyone who learns to recognize the individual authoring and redaction steps and puts these to practice repeatedly can learn to create a manual. Persons with a greater capacity to empathize will be able to do this better, because they will be able to get into the situation much faster and recognize the special requirements. Nevertheless, the competency of a technical writer can be acquired to a very large extent.

Thus, certain abilities make it easier to acquire certain skills. However, ability can be honed further through training, while skills can be learnt. Hence, anyone can add to and enhance his or her social competencies through training.

Scope for improvement

Different professions require different social skills as pre-requisites. Depending on the requirements profile, abilities such as talent for organization, leadership abilities or communication skills are given different weightages. Therefore, the first step is the analysis. The basic operating principle here is to improve the strengths and reduce the weaknesses. Here, it is useful to obtain feedback from others, so as to have a different perspective and not just one's idea of oneself.

Another possibility is to use personality tests, for instance. These can be used to determine how a person perceives himself and his abilities and skills. While choosing a test, it is important to make sure that neither behavior nor preferences are evaluated, since there is no good or bad profile. However, specific profiles are better suited to specific areas of work, thereby increasing the chances of being successful and satisfied in a certain job. There are tests that can be completed within fifteen minutes. However, these tests should be analyzed, as far as possible, with a qualified expert.

Recommended steps

Every employee should be aware of the following:

- What abilities are particularly important for the given area of work? What is mentioned, for instance, in the job announcement or job description? What is my own estimate?
- Where do my own skills and abilities in this area rank?
- Where is there need for improvement?

If a technical writer is also responsible for others in a team, then he should conduct an analysis for every individual member of the team:

- What are the abilities required by the employee for his area of work?
- How does the manager rate his abilities in these areas?
- How does the employee rate himself?
- Are there any gaps or mismatches between the requirements profiles for social skills, the manager's rating and the employee's self-assessment?
- Where is there need for improvement?

In addition to this, one should also consider if help from outside is necessary, such as assistance from a training company.

Acquiring social skills

- **Techniques and methods** for acquiring skills. Anyone who knows and understands how communication processes take place and what disturbances can affect it can change his or her own communicative behavior. Anyone who is aware of the various stages of a work process will know what each stage is about. And those who keep applying these insights repeatedly can work with greater success.
- **Changing the thought processes:** An important means of expanding social competencies lies in changing one's thought processes. Through positive thinking and by visualizing goals, it is possible to enhance one's social skills. For instance, many people are afraid of speaking in front of a large group of people. A person who conjures up a convincing appearance repeatedly in his mind will be able to overcome this fear.
- **Practice, practice and more practice!** What percentage of the technical expertise that is acquired by a technical writer over the course of his education does he really need in day-to-day work? And what percentage of his personal skills did he have to acquire through hard work even as his career took shape? The same applies to skills such as reading, writing or driving, which all of us take for granted, but have had to learn and practice. Similarly, personal barriers in other areas can be overcome through the knowledge of the proper methods and high level of motivation.

Another point that makes practice so important is a result of the scientifically determined "curve of forgetting". The curve was the result of research conducted by the psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus, who lived between 1850 and 1909. The curve shows that a person quickly forgets

what he has learnt, if it is not repeated or applied. Thus, after two days, we will have forgotten more than 70 percent of what we have learned. For the subject matter to remain fixed in the long-term memory, regular and continuous repetition of the training contents is necessary.

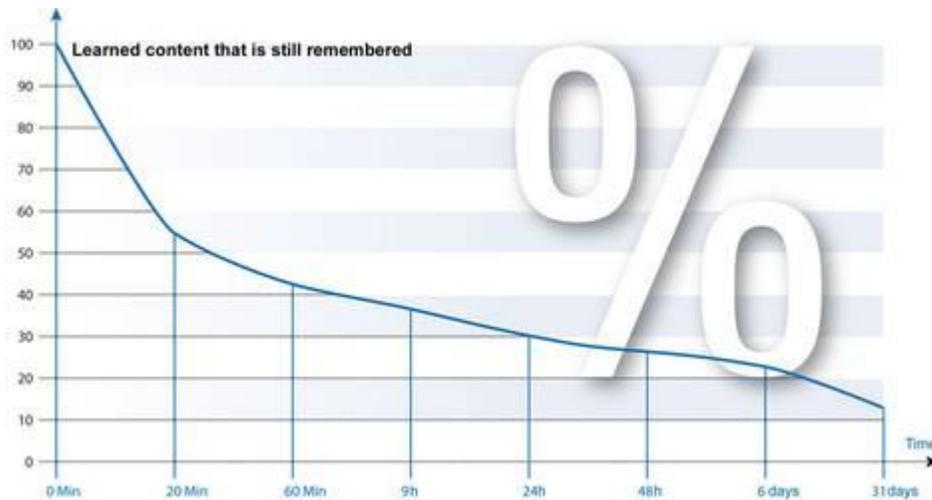


Fig.: The subject matter needs to be refreshed regularly. Otherwise, people tend to forget more than 70 percent of the matter in a very short time, as shown by Hermann Ebbinghaus's curve of forgetting.

What is the use of “people skills” in day-to-day life?

Improving one's social competencies and skills does not just impact one's professional life. It also comes with benefits in the personal arena. Thus, our communication skills not only shape our relationships with colleagues, supervisors and staff, but even affect our relationships with our family and friends. The importance of social skills extends to all situations in life, for greater success, happiness and security at work, within the family and in our social circle.

Summary

The importance of social skills is often not recognized correctly. It is a topic that is considered only too rarely, even in training departments. But it is a competitive advantage to the employer and the employee, especially in the fast changing global economic scenario. Hence, in the future, business and education sectors should make it their concern to support prospective new recruits with encouragement for or greater emphasis on these skills in preparing them for the job market. If social skills were not already part of the actual education, they can be acquired later as well. While doing so, the accent should be on carrying out a correct analysis, and providing sustained support - if necessary, even through external partners. In any case, engaging with this topic is a worthwhile exercise.