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MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Soft skills can give you an edge at work

Technical know-how alone is not enough to get you ahead on your career path

By NATION Correspondent

Can you identify individuals in your work place who just seem to flow in their jobs? They look natural, and are the boss's favourites. Everyone likes them.

The reason to this will probably be that they have perfected their soft skills. Otherwise known as emotional intelligence, soft skills are the non-technical skills, abilities, and traits that workers need to function in a specific employment environment. They can make a difference between an employee who can do the job and one who does it well. As a matter of fact it has been proven through research by human resource experts that technical skills contribute to only 15 per cent of a person's performance on his or her job. The bulk, 35 per cent comes from soft skills.

"Previously, only top management needed these skills, but now it cuts across employees," says Joyce Thairo, director and chief operating officer of Raiser Resource Group, a human resource training firm.

She says soft skills help an employee to be all-rounded and more marketable.

While hard skills include an employee's education, experience and training, soft skills are not tangible and are learned over the years. They include things like leadership, written and verbal communication, problem solving, work ethic, motivation, negotiation skills, change management, interpersonal and teamwork skills and creativity.

Perfect skills

You can perfect these through practising them at work, while a lot of literature is also available both in the media and online to utilise. Human resource consultants also offer good programs too and many companies are hiring training for their employees to improve on some of these areas.

With technological changes happening everyday Ms Thairo says employees need to be more open and adoptive to change. "There is nothing as constant as change. That is why this skill is so vital," she said.

Soft skills are not taught in a classroom although some business school programs are now incorporating training in emotional intelligence to give their students a competitive edge.

Ms Thairo says there has been a realisation that demonstrating these core competences contribute towards management success.

"Management skills are not just for managers, everyone must manage themselves - and even their bosses. This leads to success in your job," said Ms Thairo. She insists that soft skills need to be cultivated and even demonstrated right from the be-



Having extra skills such as developing relationships at work and an ability to work in a team will make you well rounded and more marketable.

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ginning of one's career.

Apart from experience and the educational background, managers are looking for these other critical skills too. According to Ms Thairo, integrity is key among them, and managers can tell if an employee is honest from their curriculum vitae and during the job interview. Inconsistencies, gaps and contradictions will sell you out as a dishonest person. So for instance pick a response like - I haven't done that so far but I am a quick learner, instead of a lie.

"If you get a job dishonestly, it often leads you to problems in performance," she said. One is also required to show a performance drive and problem solving skills, that they have what it takes to give

results. Problem-solving skills tend to be the sign of a creative individual with critical thinking and analytical abilities who can develop solutions, not just identify problems. Those with good problem-solving skills use their initiative in accomplishing tasks and resolving issues and often feel comfortable 'thinking outside the box' or taking risks.

Attitude is another quick seller. Many organisations these days hire people based on their attitude - which experts say account to 90 per cent of one's performance.

Confidence

Other soft skills include positive image, or self-esteem. You are a reflection of your employer, and if you have confidence in yourself, you will want to try things that drive you - and your employer to success.

If you want to improve your chances of career success, experts advise learning top among them communication, teamwork and project management skills.

Communication skills go beyond just the ability to hold a conversation with another person.

While it is important to be concise and coherent when expressing an idea, it is equally important to be able to listen carefully and understand the return message. "People are moving from being technical to multifaceted individuals," said Ms Thairo. "This country is taking a cultural shift that goes into measurements (eg performance contracts) not whether the boss likes you or not."