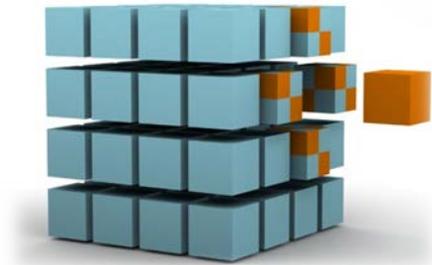


RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF 30 DIFFERENT IMPORTANT SKILLS IN BUSINESS SUCCESS - BY P. GLAUDE FOR ASERET CONGRUENCE LLC

SUMMARY

In August of 2013, clients and partners were invited to complete a survey on the relative importance of 30 different skills. The survey intended to identify the relative value or importance of those competencies for professionals like you. The results point towards “soft skills” such as integrity, listening, positive attitude, emotional intelligence and interpersonal communication as the highest priorities when professionals determine what impacts the success of their teams and corporations.



INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, numerous research groups as well as our own clients have identified communication skills as a key to current and future success in business endeavors. With technology come new challenges and we have been particularly busy building training and development programs in e-detailing and remote session management. In addition, the demand for coaching skills training programs as well as individual coaching has more than doubled in the last 3 years. In all cases, the demand has clearly revolved around communication effectiveness. Because of our work in extremely varied sectors as well as our international exposure, a common question has arisen, which specific communication competencies are most critical and in need of development? While we have a clear idea on the most probable answer, it appears that a survey involving hundreds of professionals like you was necessary to provide a more universally applicable answer.

DESIGN

The primary objective of the survey was to rank all 30 skills (already identified as important) in order of perceived importance in ensuring current and future success in the business environment of respondents from various fields. In order to simplify the questionnaire, we have initially identified 30 communication skills most often mentioned or designated as essential for business success. All 30 skills were previously identified in our 2012 survey titled Communication Skills in Business: A Review of Current Situation and Needs for Development (<http://aseret-uido.com/publications>). In our determination to eliminate bias, we have randomized the list of 30 and then further randomized 18 groups of 5 skills (MAXDEV method). In each group, we asked the respondents to determine a rank between what they perceived as being the most important to the least important. This design allowed each skill to be compared randomly to 4 others and thus generate results that would better indicate the relative importance of each.

A second objective was to determine if the most critical skills were considered Soft, Hard or in-between. Soft skills are typically defined as innate abilities and traits as opposed to Hard skills that need to be learned and their usage measured. Please note that Soft skills can also be learned through training or experience. The MAXDEV method allowed each skill to be compared to others without any bias on their nature (Soft or Hard) thus providing a fair opportunity for each to be evaluated in various groups.

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RESULTS

We reviewed the results in three (3) different manners in order to ensure that the final ranking took different aspects into consideration and provided a fair perspective.

First, each skill was given a score between 1 (most important) and 5 (least important) in their respective groupings. Because every respondent chose a different ranking, each skill was given an average score. Each average score for the 3 different groupings were then averaged to provide an overall ranking score for each skill. The results are given in table 1.

Table 1. Raw scores between 1 and 5 given to each skill by respondents to the survey in 3 different groupings.

	score 1	score 2	score 3	average	rank
Ability to understand others	2.52	2.15	2.65	2.44	9
Adaptability to people and circumstances	2.14	2.45	2.7	2.43	8
Analytical skills	3.51	3.3	3.42	3.41	22
Asking relevant questions	3.02	2.42	2.08	2.51	10
Budget management	4.41	4.6	4.6	4.54	29
Business knowledge/acumen	3.2	3.15	2.6	2.98	17
Coaching and leadership	2.27	2.67	2.35	2.43	7
Commitment and follow-up	2.73	2.65	3.1	2.83	14
Communication/interpersonal	2.05	2.15	2.5	2.23	4
Cooperation and Customer focus	2.66	2.73	2.85	2.75	11
Dialogue	3.83	3.85	3.2	3.63	23
Emotional Intelligence	2.57	2.15	2	2.24	5
Event coordination/management	4.49	4.8	4.38	4.56	30
Expertise in the field of work	2.9	3	2.38	2.76	12
Hiring and recruitment	4.18	4.1	4	4.09	28
Initiative	3.1	2.77	3.2	3.02	18
Integrity	1.51	1.48	1.73	1.57	1
Listening	1.68	2.15	2.2	2.01	2
Negotiation and mediation	3	3.27	2.6	2.96	16
Networking	3.5	3.83	3.6	3.64	24
Openness (being non-judgmental)	3.49	2.95	3.08	3.17	21
Planning and organization	2.8	2.8	3.05	2.88	15
Positive attitude	1.95	2.3	2.2	2.15	3
Presentation skills	4.02	3.85	3.58	3.82	26
Problem solving	2.88	2.77	3.67	3.11	19
Project management	3.91	3.67	3.7	3.76	25
Strategic thinking	2.32	2.1	2.52	2.31	6
Teamwork	2.56	2.75	3.1	2.80	13
Time management	2.93	3.02	3.4	3.12	20
Usage of data and technology	3.85	4.1	3.58	3.84	27

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A second analysis counted the number of times each skill was given a score of 1 or 2 minus the number of times each skill was also given a score of 4 or 5. This provided another perspective on the ranking. Results are compiled in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Ranking in accordance to number of times a skill was scored 1 or 2 vs. times they were scored 4 or 5.

	number of times 1 or 2	Total 1-2	number of times 4 or 5	Total 4-5	Difference	Rank
Ability to understand others	21, 26, 20	67	11, 5, 11	27	40	8
Adaptability to people and circumstances	28, 23, 17	68	7, 7, 8	22	46	7
Analytical skills	10, 12, 10	32	36, 19, 21	76	-44	23
Asking relevant questions	17, 20, 30	67	17, 6, 4	27	40	8
Budget management	1, 2, 3	6	35, 36, 35	106	-100	29
Business knowledge/acumen	15, 11, 22	48	21, 19, 12	52	6	16
Coaching and leadership	28, 17, 24	69	9, 14, 9	32	37	10
Commitment and follow-up	19, 18, 17	54	11, 9, 20	40	14	13
Communication/interpersonal	30, 27, 24	71	1, 11, 12	24	47	6
Cooperation and Customer focus	18, 18, 16	52	12, 15, 15	42	10	14
Dialogue	8, 11, 9	28	28, 26, 11	65	-37	22
Emotional Intelligence	22, 28, 30	80	11, 8, 5	24	56	3
Event coordination/management	0, 0, 1	1	39, 38, 35	112	-111	30
Expertise in the field of work	19, 16, 22	57	16, 15, 8	39	18	12
Hiring and recruitment	6, 6, 6	18	32, 22, 29	83	-65	28
Initiative	12, 14, 12	38	16, 8, 15	39	-1	18
Integrity	35, 34, 34	103	2, 3, 4	9	94	1
Listening	35, 30, 27	92	2, 5, 6	13	79	2
Negotiation and mediation	16, 12, 19	47	13, 22, 9	44	3	17
Networking	11, 7, 8	26	24, 27, 27	78	-52	24
Openness (being non-judgmental)	12, 16, 16	48	23, 14, 17	52	-4	19
Planning and organization	18, 15, 18	51	13, 10, 19	42	9	15
Positive attitude	29, 24, 24	77	5, 6, 11	22	55	4
Presentation skills	8, 6, 9	23	31, 25, 21	77	-54	25
Problem solving	15, 17, 6	38	11, 15, 23	49	-11	20
Project management	9, 8, 8	25	30, 26, 23	79	-54	25
Strategic thinking	26, 28, 21	75	11, 3, 10	24	51	5
Teamwork	20, 14, 12	46	6, 5, 14	25	21	11
Time management	10, 16, 8	34	10, 20, 20	50	-16	21
Usage of data and technology	7, 4, 8	19	30, 29, 24	83	-64	27

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Finally, in order to even further discriminate between skills most often ranked as most important compared to the number of times they were ranked as 5, we counted the number of times each skill obtained a 5 and subtracted the number of times it received a 1. Results are in Table 3.

Table 3. Difference between the times a skill was ranked as a 1 vs. times the same skill was ranked as 5.

	Times #1	Times #5	Difference	Rank
Ability to understand others	37	7	30	8
Adaptability to people and circumstances	28	4	24	9
Analytical skills	16	32	-16	22
Asking relevant questions	31	11	20	11
Budget management	4	91	-87	30
Business knowledge/acumen	21	15	6	14
Coaching and leadership	42	8	34	6
Commitment and follow-up	23	14	9	13
Communication/interpersonal	46	10	36	5
Cooperation and Customer focus	27	6	21	10
Dialogue	2	40	-38	25
Emotional Intelligence	48	11	37	4
Event coordination/management	1	78	-77	29
Expertise in the field of work	35	25	10	12
Hiring and recruitment	9	69	-60	28
Initiative	14	16	-2	19
Integrity	84	5	79	1
Listening	44	3	41	3
Negotiation and mediation	20	18	2	16
Networking	13	41	-28	23
Openness (being non-judgmental)	15	26	-11	21
Planning and organization	15	13	2	16
Positive attitude	53	5	48	2
Presentation skills	8	53	-45	27
Problem solving	18	20	-2	19
Project management	5	47	-42	26
Strategic thinking	41	7	34	6
Teamwork	9	6	3	15
Time management	10	8	2	16
Usage of data and technology	9	45	-36	24

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A final ranking was determined based on the average of the 3 rankings obtained. See Table 4. It is only after obtaining this final ranking that we identified the nature of each skill and obtained the final indicator (our second objective) on the relative importance given to Soft skills vs. Hard skills.

Table 4. Ranking summary, final score and soft/hard nature of each skill.

	Comp. #1 Ranking from average scores	Comp. #2 Ranking from differential (1/2 vs 4/5)	Comp. #3 Ranking differential 1 to 5	Average Ranking	Soft (S), Soft and Hard (SH), Hard (H) skill
Integrity	1	1	1	1	S
Listening	2	2	3	2	S
Positive attitude	3	4	2	3	S
Emotional Intelligence	5	3	4	4	S
Communication/interpersonal	4	6	5	5	S
Strategic thinking	6	5	6	6	SH
Coaching and leadership	7	10	6	8	SH
Adaptability to people and circumstances	8	7	9	8	S
Ability to understand others	9	8	8	8	S
Asking relevant questions	10	8	11	10	SH
Cooperation and Customer focus	11	14	10	12	S
Expertise in the field of work	12	12	12	12	H
Teamwork	13	11	15	13	S
Commitment and follow-up	14	13	13	13	SH
Planning and organization	15	15	16	15	H
Business knowledge/acumen	17	16	14	16	H
Negotiation and mediation	16	17	16	16	H
Initiative	18	18	19	18	S
Time management	20	21	16	19	H
Problem solving	19	20	19	19	SH
Openness (being non-judgmental)	21	19	21	20	S
Analytical skills	22	23	22	22	H
Dialogue	23	22	25	23	S
Networking	24	24	23	24	SH
Project management	25	25	26	25	H
Presentation skills	26	25	27	26	SH
Usage of data and technology	27	27	24	26	H
Hiring and recruitment	28	28	28	28	SH
Budget management	29	29	30	29	H
Event coordination/management	30	30	29	30	H

CONCLUSION

It is important to first remember that all 30 addressed in skills in this survey have been previously identified as important and in fact critical to success in today's business world. The objectives of this supplemental survey were to compare the relative importance of these skills when compared to each other as well as the relative value of what we usually identify as soft and hard skills.

All skills ranked as top 5 (table 5 in green) have something to do with effective and comfortable relations with others. It can be argued that all five skills tend to inspire trust, confidence and an ability to foster a productive dialogue or exchange. All 5 skills received a significant majority of 1 or 2 ranking throughout the survey.

Whereas the next 5 (table 4 in blue) also have a direct influence on the quality of the interaction between two people or groups of people, the skills seem to coalesce with regards to productivity and effectiveness. Coaching/leadership as well as strategic thinking also indicate a need or focus on forward thinking and development as a contributor to success.

The next 5 (ranked 12 to 15 in table 4) also have to do with productivity and somewhat emphasize the need to work in groups (teamwork, cooperation and commitment). Commitment and Planning also contribute to the previous comment on the necessity for individuals to view and invest in the future in order to support success.

The determination of a skill being considered "soft" or "hard" is usually straightforward and relatively immune to debate. It is not always the case for skills identified as a "mix" of soft and hard. Our determination comes from an exercise that we have conducted hundreds of times over the last 15 years whereas we ask participants to list traits and competencies necessary in their field and brainstorming on the Soft/Hard nature of competencies or on the fact that each traits is either linked to Attitude (often a soft skill) or a Learned Skill (hard skill). In all cases, participants tend to identify certain traits or skills as a combination. Those are the ones we also identified here. Numerous articles, books, training programs and studies have observed or determined that Soft Skills seem to have a higher impact on success than Hard skills. Reasons for this are numerous. Let us identify a few in order to attempt reasoning for the results obtained in the current survey. First, the fact that soft skills are much more difficult to train and develop is often a key reason for their positioning as more important. Something that is rare or difficult to acquire is often considered more valuable. A second explanation resides in human nature. As a student and teacher of decision making processes, I am constantly reminded that in spite of a solid and logical structure associated to the process of making decisions, emotions more often than not take a predominant role in the final decision. Because emotions are involved, skills associated to understanding, relating and connecting with people have a tremendous impact on the manner with which we are able to influence decisions of all kinds. A third explanation finds it base on the universal acceptance that certain people "simply have it" compared to others, whatever the sector of activity. Those people are often more successful than others, in spite of their comparative lack of formal training, credentials and other "measurable" parameters. While innate skills or abilities are not necessarily a recipe for success, they regularly provide an edge over less naturally talented people. Better results

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or impact based on more elusive skills tends to increase once again the value of the so defines “soft’ competencies. Finally, traits like positive attitude, integrity, listening, determination, drive and others of the same family have shown to significantly enhance people’s ability to thrive but also and most importantly, their ability to learn and develop other skills, either soft or hard.

In our opinion, it is very interesting to see “Expertise in the field of work” appear at position #12 as the first Hard skill in the overall ranking. It seems to confirm a trend indicating that expertise is more and more in demand. Technology has certainly played a role in this tendency over the last 10 years or so. It is also important to realize that time constraints, legislation, competitive challenges and other productivity factors have influenced the need for increased expertise. We see this phenomenon very clearly in governance where Boards are increasingly populated with experts.

The interpretation of results can obviously be subjected to various perspectives and points of views. Our intent is to provide a big picture view and make raw data available for each to analyze the results with their own filter or situational perspective. For example, one may decide that skills ranked 6 to 10 are in fact, part of the Expertise in their field of work, hence changing the perceived rank for expertise. In other cases, skills may be grouped or determined as interchangeable which in turn, may explain some rankings. An example of this is Dialogue. It ranks number 23 overall. However, that may be the result of being in the same grouping as Adaptability and Asking relevant questions in one instance and then in the same group as Listening and Emotional intelligence which are necessary to create a dialogue.

However we look at specific results, one element stands out. Soft skills and attitude continue to be considered more important to success than hard skills. And while there may be a number of different ways to interpret the raw data, increased energy and resources need to be invested in the development and refinement of competencies that facilitate productivity through people interactions.