

# Soft Skills to Excel in any Environment

By Mary L. Wagner, Esq.

**T**o get a job, and keep that job, you must have a repertoire of hard skills, *aka*, those technical skills that we all think of when polishing up our resumes. Things such as typing ability, proficiency in Microsoft® Word™ and Excel™, ability to write and research, knowledge in a particular area and other skills. The hard skills necessary will change depending on the nature of the job, size of the firm, and area of law. Hard skills are also things that any number of people can be trained to do. It is your soft skills that will set you apart and allow you to thrive in any employment situation.

What are these “soft” skills? Soft skills are personal qualities and abilities related to your ability to work with others and your approach towards life and work. They include a number of things like: communication, conflict resolution, creative thinking, attitude, work ethic, dedication, teamwork, problem solving, adaptability, flexibility, professionalism, time management, and ability to accept feedback. They are just as important, if not more important than hard skills, but much more difficult to measure and teach. Like hard skills, they require practice and development. But with that development, you will be able to adapt to and be successful in a multitude of environments.

For me, my practice path has led me through a variety of positions and employment environments. I started my career by clerking at the Tennessee Court of Appeals. I worked closely with my judge in a small office consisting of a total of three people. My work focused mainly on research and writing. I worked in any area of civil law



imaginable. One day I might be addressing the division of tractors in a divorce and the next day considering constitutional law and federal preemption issues in a multi-million dollar products liability case. My interactions were almost exclusively with my judge and his assistant.

From there I went to work for a regional law firm. We had six offices across three states and more than one hundred attorneys. We primarily handled defense matters for personal injury and workers’ compensation cases. Many of the cases were strikingly similar. At times, it seemed we only changed the names and numbers. We had a multitude of support staff. Each partner had a paralegal and an assistant. Every associate had an assistant that he or she shared with two or three other associates. In this position, I worked mainly with other attorneys and rarely with clients.

In my current position, I work in a small firm of less than 10 attorneys. There

are only three partners. Partners manage his or her team to their liking. The partners’ styles vary across a broad spectrum. On one end, there is the partner who can work more hours than I knew existed in a day. She arrives at the office no later than 7:30 a.m. each day with more energy than the Energizer Bunny. She takes work home daily and works every weekend. She moves quickly through cases with attention to detail compared to none other. She demands excellence and wanted it yesterday. She focuses exclusively on domestic cases. On the other end of the spectrum is the partner who is equally successful but has a much more laid back approach. He arrives daily at 9:30 a.m. He too moves through his cases, but with a more holistic approach. His cases range from minor criminal charges to the multi-million dollar divorce and the million dollar personal injury defense. Neither partner’s practice method is better than the other. But I am sure you can imagine the work environment

for their staffs varies greatly. We all work with the court, other attorneys and clients on a daily basis.

As you can see, my areas of practices and employment atmospheres have varied widely. Each required a different set of technical skills than the others. It was my soft skills that enabled me to be successful in each environment and adapt to the changing circumstances. While there are many different soft skills used daily, three stand out: flexibility and adaptability, work ethic, and being a team player

## 1. Flexibility and Adaptability

We've all had that day when we arrive at work with our day planned out and not a minute to spare. Then a client emergency occurs or the court calls and your entire plan is thrown in the trash. To be effective, you must be able to quickly change course. To continue to grow as a professional you need the ability to adapt to changes. Sometimes these will be quick daily changes. Other times they will be gradual changes to the business.

Your change may be related to adapting work output depending on the supervisor assigning the project. One attorney may want items filed one way, while the other wants something completely different. There is no logic to the madness, just sheer personal preference. But your willingness to be flexible with the systems will go a long way. Your flexibility may even allow you to offer some constructive suggestions to your team as you learn from the positives and negatives of each.

You must meet these curves and changes as welcome challenges. Always strive to welcome the stress and frustration of a change with positivity. Confront changes, even if last minute, head on with a can-do attitude.

## 2. Work Ethic

No, I don't mean being willing to work 24/7 and 7 days a week. That works for some and that's fine. But it is not for everyone.

It means being dedicated to your work. Consistently strive for excellence. Produce quality work product that your team knows they can rely upon. Your team wants to know that you are dependable. Employers want to know that you are committed to the team goal and need little supervision or motivation to produce quality work. This is a willingness to be self-directed. You will know you have successfully demonstrated your work ethic when your boss cites a case in court that he has not yet read. In doing so, he is solely relying upon your review and analysis. It is your work ethic that provides that level of confidence.

You may also find that not only does strong work ethic allow you to excel as a professional, but also it will provide that flexibility that you may need from others when things go haywire.

## 3. Being a Team Player

We all have different roles in the office. There are still various levels of superiority. But we all play a role in accomplishing our goal. This means sometimes you will be a leader and sometimes you will be a follower. One day you may be helping keep the partner you work for on track and the next you may be training a new member of the support staff. Regardless, you work with others across the organization to achieve a common goal.

Clerking in the appellate court provides the best example of team work. While it is the judge ultimately responsible for the written decision and whose name goes on the public record, it took the entire team to research and craft that opinion. While we all knew the decision belonged to the judge, we all felt the same sense of responsibility to do a good job and work together. Sometimes being a good team player may mean questioning, albeit respectfully, your superior. I know, can you imagine telling an appellate court judge that he was wrong? A good supervisor

though will recognize the importance of your critique and watchful eye, and value your input.

There are many skills that go into being a good team player: working cooperatively; contributing to groups with ideas, suggestions, and effort; communication (giving and receiving); sense of responsibility; healthy respect for different opinions, customs and individual preferences, and the ability to participate in group decision-making. Whether you are in a management position or supporting position, you should work to develop these skills. Not only will it allow you to excel in any workplace, but also it will enable you to grow and develop professionally.

Soft skills are skills that you will continue to develop through your career. They need practice, thought and study just as much as technical skills. They are often overlooked in professional development though because they are more difficult to train and measure. With the right attitude and some practice, you can continue to grow your soft skill set and excel in any environment.

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