



Why Soft Skills Matter to Career and College Success

Shon E. Jackson & Brian F. Geiger, The Horizons School

2019 APEC Parent Training and Information Center Annual Conference

APEC, Wetumpka, AL

May 30, 2019



Session Objectives

Learners will:

1. understand importance of soft skills for career, college and living independence
2. identify individual soft skills for remediation
3. review options to enhance soft skills important to college and work success

Hard and Soft Skills

Hard Skills are teachable abilities and skills for job proficiency

- Accurately operating retail register
- Following procedures to assemble finished product
- Correctly repairing broken appliance

Soft skills are people or interpersonal skills

- Communicating a concept
- Working cooperatively with others
- Effectively managing daily schedule
- Adapting to unexpected changes



Case of Susan

Susan is a senior-level coworker who insists her view is correct. She does not consider others' perspectives and becomes defensive when challenged.

- Over time, she becomes isolated at work.
- Supervisors receive complaints about frequent arguments and misunderstandings.
- *What would you do?*

Soft skills help people work and socialize well with others (active communication, empathy, attitude, creativity, networking, problem-solving, critical thinking, conflict management)

Successful employment requires demonstrating these soft skills!



Soft Skills for Employment Success

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) suggests its 300,000+ members evaluate both hard AND soft skills when interviewing candidates for employment.

HR managers evaluate qualifications of job applicants using a 5-point scale:

5 - Exceptional 4 - Above Average 3 - Average

2 - Below Average 1 - Unsatisfactory

Several items relate to soft skills:

1. **Verbal Communication:** Did the candidate demonstrate effective communication skills during the interview?
2. **Team building / Interpersonal Skills:** Did the candidate demonstrate, through his or her answers, good team building / interpersonal skills?
3. **Initiative:** Did the candidate demonstrate, through his or her answers, a high degree of initiative?
4. **Time Management:** Did the candidate demonstrate, through his or her answers, good time management skills?



High-level CEOs Test for Soft Skills

To determine true personalities and respectful communication skills, Sir Richard Branson (Virgin Atlantic) masquerades as an elderly cabbie. Candidates who treated him rudely were dismissed.

Rob Bellenfant, CEO of Technology Advice, challenges candidates to play ping pong against experienced players. The aim is to determine how each responds to difficult challenges.

Walt Bettinger, CEO of Charles Schwab, arranges for wait staff to err when delivering meals during the candidate's luncheon. The goal is to determine how one responds to mistakes.



Remediating Soft Skill Deficits

Soft skills are acquired over time and with practice. These differ from technical training provided for a short period, for instance, steps to correctly scan new inventory in a warehouse.

Consider the soft skill of EFFORT. Employers desire strong work ethic and daily preparedness. As a job trainer you may rate employees' effort using a 3-point scale:

1. arrives to work unprepared (dirty uniform, poor hygiene), offers excuses, requires frequent breaks
2. nearly always prepared, requires occasional reminders, consistently performs tasks initially assigned, but waits before moving to new tasks
3. always arrives on time and fully prepared (career dress, good hygiene and grooming), asks for additional work when initial tasks are complete



Stanley Needs Remediation

You rate Stanley's effort using a 3-point scale, below:

1. arrives to work unprepared (dirty uniform, poor hygiene), offers excuses, requires frequent breaks
2. **nearly always prepared, requires occasional reminders, consistently performs tasks initially assigned, but waits before moving to new tasks**
3. always arrives on time and fully prepared (career dress, good hygiene and grooming), asks for additional work when initial tasks are complete

Level of effort may be enhanced through training and guided practice.

You identified the need for remediation. *What will you do?*

- Schedule with Stanley planned breaks
- Use task lists to understand all steps of required job tasks
- Establish rule to seek supervision when task list is complete



Identify Soft Skills for Remediation

Foster Action Ohio developed a practical self-assessment, *Hard Skills and Soft Skills: Self-Assessment*. [Download as pdf](#) and rate each item using a 4-point scale: *Never, Sometimes, Most of the Time, Always*

For instance, Albert rates his own soft skills as follows:

1. I can work with other people as part of a team. **SOMETIMES**
2. I can adapt to new situation. **SOMETIMES**
3. I know how to create a plan of action. **NEVER**
4. I can self-discipline myself to be patient. **SOMETIMES**

Who is responsible for acting to improve soft skills for job performance?



Identify Your Soft Skills for Remediation

For instance, Albert rates several soft skills as follows:

1. I can work with other people as part of a team. SOMETIMES
2. I can adapt to new situation. SOMETIMES
3. I know how to create a plan of action. NEVER
4. I can self-discipline myself to be patient. SOMETIMES

- Who is responsible for acting to improve soft skills for job performance?
- **It is not reasonable to expect employers to substantially alter the work environment (location, lighting, noise, temperature) or job performance expectations to accommodate an individual's challenges or preferences.**
- Instead, Albert must acquire soft skills through training and practice!

Example of Travis Wilson, job applicant



- What soft skills needed improvement for Travis #1?
- Despite no direct industry experience, how did Travis use soft skills for a positive impression?
- Which candidate would you likely hire (Travis #1 or Travis #2)?

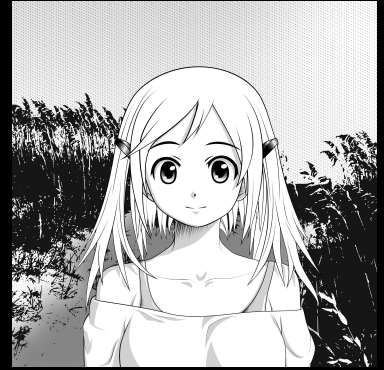
Case of Cheryl

Cheryl is a 22-year old with autism and ADHD. She began her new job at a local bookstore.

- Cheryl likes the setting and opportunity to interact with others. She has learned to organize and stock inventory, greet customers and direct them to specific locations based on readers' preferences.
- Cheryl finds it difficult to listen before speaking and often dominates conversation while sharing her own interest in manga.
- She doesn't notice when customers appear rushed or uncomfortable.

Cheryl will benefit from job coaching, learning to identify specific behaviors for change.

- Strategies may include video modeling, structured role playing using scripts, recognizing and responding to verbal and nonverbal communication, and positive reinforcement for desired customer service practices





Planning for Successful Transition to Work and College

- *How do soft skills enable successful transition to career or college?*
- *Why is person-centered planning essential?*
- *When should families encourage self-determination?*
- *What are reasonable accommodations for disabilities?*

Transition Challenges for Career or College

- 1.** Lack of disability awareness
- 2.** Inaccurately estimating individual abilities
- 3.** Desire to “fit in”, be typical
- 4.** Over-helping, limiting personal choices and opportunities for trial and error learning
- 5.** End of therapeutic services (OT, PT, SLP, behavioral health) upon high school graduation

- *What happens when others underestimate your abilities? Over-estimate?*
- *Are you active in planning your future? (college vs. employment)*
- *Advocate for yourself instead of letting others decide for you!*

SELF-DETERMINATION MEANS...



- **Know and believe in yourself, develop future plans and goals**
- **Self regulation to complete needed daily tasks**
- **Identify needed supports (people, services, accommodations)**
- **Adopt a Can Do Approach!**

Are YOU Self-Determined?

DO MORE

- Practice independent decision making
- Identify personal strengths, preferences
- Seek guidance to pursue interests
- Practice soft skills for life success
- Learn about your disability, rights and responsibilities

DO LESS

Wait and allow others to set goals for you

Make excuses or blame others when you do not achieve

Defer to parent's or teacher's priorities for your future

Nate and Classmates Practice Self-Determination

You have to persevere and you have to do it, you can't be a passive participant in life -- Michael

The most important secret for success for me is perseverance. I never give up -- Brian

Taking Charge 2: Two Stories of Success and Self-Determination



Supporting Soft Skill Development

FAMILY

- Model soft skills with frequent role-plays and community practice
- Seek social skills groups promoting inclusion
- Cognitive behavior training to connect thoughts, feelings and actions
- Choose prevocational training that includes soft AND hard skills

PROGRAM

- Train soft skills in practical situations
- Promote person-centered planning and self-determination
- Provide specific feedback, guiding improved performance
- Structure job shadows, internships and supported employment placements

Requesting Accommodations

1. Tell campus ADA Officer or employer you are living with a disability, chronic health condition or injury
2. Describe the challenge in college or your workplace

You and the ADA Officer or workplace manager will identify together an effective accommodation solution

Reasonable Accommodations in the Workplace

Examples include

- making existing facilities accessible
- job restructuring; part-time or modified work schedules
- acquiring or modifying equipment
- changing tests, training materials or policies
- offering quiet break room with limited stimulation
- providing qualified readers or interpreters
- reassignment to a vacant position

Program Resources

The Horizons School provides a community-based educational program promoting successful transition to career, college and independent living for young adults with learning disabilities, autism spectrum and developmental disorders, <https://horizonsschool.org>

The Exceptional Foundation enhances the quality of life for individuals of all ages with developmental challenges by providing social and recreational activities designed to promote healthy living, supportive social relationships, improve functional skills, and foster community involvement, <https://www.exceptionalfoundation.org/>

Glenwood Autism and Behavioral Health Center provides an array of services which are devoted to supporting and treating children and adults impacted by autism spectrum disorder and children with severe emotional and behavioral disorders, <https://glenwood.org/>

Program Resources

The Arc of Central Alabama serves people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families through comprehensive and quality programming, advocacy efforts, education, and awareness,,

<https://www.arcofcentralalabama.org/>

Disability Rights and Resources empowers people with disabilities to fully participate in the community -

<https://drradvocates.org/>

Independent Rights and Resources, (MCIL) encourages people with disabilities to support one another in reaching their own independent living goals, <http://www.independentrandr.org/>

The Regional Autism Network collaborates with the entities named in Alabama Autism Act 2009-295 and other stakeholders to establish a long-term plan for a system of care for individuals with ASD and their families,

<http://www.autism.alabama.gov/Regional-Autism-Network.html>

Program Resources

The Learning Tree, Inc. exists to provide a warm and loving environment with individualized, empirically validated services and supports to persons with significant educational, medical, and behavioral challenges,

<http://learning-tree.org/about-us/>

Triumph Services provides independent living skills, employment, social skills training, and counseling for individuals with developmental disabilities - <https://triumphservices.org/>

United Ability provides innovative services connecting people with disabilities to their communities and empowering individuals to live full and meaningful lives, <https://www.unitedability.org/about/mission-vision/>

UAB Civitan Sparks Autism Spectrum Disorders Clinic -

<https://www.uab.edu/civitansparks/autism-spectrum-disorders/peers>

For more information, contact
Horizons School
205-322-6606, <https://horizonsschool.org>

Dr. Brian F. Geiger, Executive Director
Mr. Shon E. Jackson, Transition and
Admissions Coordinator

