

# Must-have skills in the new economy: Elusive 'soft skills' put job hunters ahead of the pack.

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Some of the most highly valued skills in today's economy aren't necessarily taught at colleges or universities.

The hard technical skills are a basic requirement in any given field. But it's the softer, more intangible skills that really set a job seeker apart from the crowd in the marketplace, according to an informal survey of educators and recruiters.

"Regardless of what level in an organization a person is, everybody has to have good relationship-building, interpersonal skills," says Nancy Laughton, managing director of the Western Region for Knightsbridge Human Capital Solutions Ltd. in Vancouver. "So much of how work is done today is based on that human connection and being able to articulate their ideas clearly."

Presentation, communication, listening ability, command of the language, social and personal habits, styles of management, leadership, problem-solving, creativity and optimism rank among the must-have skills in the new economy.

"If employers are doing a good job of recruiting they are going to be looking at the personality style and the soft skills," says Laughton.

Among the skills in greatest demand is the ability to self-manage effectively, in combination with effective interpersonal skills.

"Organizations are leaner and they don't necessarily have as many managers, so they want people that can manage their own routine and projects, but combined with the ability to work in a team," she says.

One of the greatest barriers to honing these skills is human nature. Behaviours are very difficult to change, but ongoing learning and development courses can assist people in becoming more effective in these areas, says Greg Pocherewny, vice president of Robert Half Canada.

"For any position you're looking at, you have to have the required hard skills, but the soft skills complement the hard skills and add value to any company," he says.

Being able to multi-task effectively and take on broader roles is also a key benefit to employers.

"We're seeing more and more roles that are hybrids of traditional disciplines and bridge the gap between specialties, says Pocherewny. "Having the ability to assume a broader range of responsibilities is highly valued by most employers."

Creative thinking is also highly valued. In the past year, many companies have had to get very creative at finding solutions to the economic challenges facing them.

"Challenging times call for creative solutions," says Pocherewny. "Businesses are looking for ways of developing new business and creative ways to increase productivity levels and efficiency within their company."

Denise Baker, assistant dean of the Hari B. Varshney Career Centre at the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business, says networking is another highly valued skill for university graduates heading out into the workforce.

Job hunters must do their research on companies and use effective interpersonal communication skills to get job leads or request information interviews.

“You can't just go to networking events and stand up and say you want a job,” says Baker. “You have to make a connection with someone and that means carrying on a conversation.”

Also, a strong global awareness of different cultures, languages, business protocols and etiquette can also help set you apart in today's global economy, particularly at more senior levels.

As companies expand globally to tap into new sources of revenue, having an understanding of these issues could help open up international job opportunities.

The more technological knowledge a worker has, the better positioned they will be in any career field. “These days, it's almost a given that you have a basic technology proficiency,” says Pocherewny. The more you have, the better your chances for success – even if you're not in an IT field.

Many people are often resistant to change, so learning how to embrace it effectively – whether it's technology or just being flexible to the pace of change – will help put you far ahead of the competition in the job market.

“Organizations are changing so rapidly that being open to change and being able to respond quickly to a new requirement, a new skill, is very important,” says Laughton