

Why we should stop using 'soft' skills

Knowing what skills you have now, and may need in the future, is an important part of managing your career. In a rapidly changing world, people of all ages need to understand what skills will enable them to adapt and succeed in whatever context the future brings.

There is a wealth of information available to help gain this knowledge, but care is needed in how these skills are described and grouped. Skill terms used include employability, 21st century, transferable, STEM, technical/non-technical, and soft/hard. With such a confusing range of terms it is not surprising that people have difficulty working out what skills they have and may need.

Two words are particularly unhelpful: 'soft' and 'hard'. Their use is widespread as any Internet search shows. While 'soft' skills may seem like a convenient shorthand, the term is out-of-date, confusing, inaccurate, and gender-biased. It's time for career development practitioners, researchers, teachers, trainers, educators, employers and parents to stop using this incorrect and misleading term.

The term 'soft' skills is out-of-date and confusing

What skills are categorised as 'soft' is a moveable, confusing feast, covering a diverse mix of important skills. Likely adopted in the 20th century, the term is used unquestioningly. Research identifying critical skills for the 21st century points to increasing complexity from digital technology and automation. This complexity will likely place greater demands on people to work together in new ways to solve complex social problems. Such demands warrant skill terms that are current, clear, and respect their significance. 'Soft' skills does not fit this bill.

The term 'soft' skills is inaccurate

Typically, 'soft' is used to refer to communication and interpersonal skills. This usage implies these skills are light-weight. Yet communication covers a wide range of demanding abilities that aid working together. These abilities include building rapport, questioning to build understanding, influencing, negotiating, networking, persuading, coaching, educating and mediating, all heavy-weight skills that have a huge impact in the workplace.



'Soft' skills are often labelled as non-technical. Technical skills are described as specialised, practical, requiring specific training. Suggesting communication and interpersonal skills are non-technical implies, inaccurately, that they require little effort and no special knowledge. However, many occupations are based substantially on the use of sophisticated interpersonal skills: nursing, teaching, pharmacy, training, aged care, to name a few. Demonstrating these skills takes dedicated training and years of practice, backed by knowledge and research. There is nothing soft about this!

So-called 'soft' skills are falsely contrasted with equally inaccurate 'hard' skills on the basis that the latter are observable, learnable and measurable, qualities claimed, inaccurately, as not shared by 'soft' skills. The boundaries between jobs and industries are blurring. For example, many work situations need the application of both STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) and interpersonal skills. Success in a science career often requires developing fruitful collaborations, cultivating friendships with colleagues, mentoring students, and effectively communicating work at conferences and seminars. We do people a major disservice by using the flawed, 'hard'/'soft' skills distinction.

The term 'soft' skills is gender-biased

Career decision-making is a highly complex interaction of ideas and influences from multiple sources. Research confirms that children form gender-based ideas about careers early in life, and that the media feeds ideas about what work is suitable/unsuitable for women and men. So-called 'soft' skills are not the preserve of girls and women. They are not female or feminine skills. Nor are they 'touchy-feely', less demanding than other skills. Everyone needs to build communication and interpersonal skills, regardless of career choice.

Alternatives to using 'soft' skills

If job seekers are to understand what skills are in demand, career development practitioners, researchers, teachers, trainers, educators, employers and parents need to stop using 'soft', as well as 'hard' skills.

Alternatives are:

- When discussing specific skills, use specific skill words, like communication skills, problem solving skills.
- When grouping skills that relate to communication and interpersonal skills, use social skills.
- When grouping several specific, career-critical skills, use employability or transferable skills.

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