SOFT SKILLS STARTER KIT

...& GUIDE

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For support of soft skills work and ongoing commitment to developing soft skills in future workers
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1. Introduction  
   A. Overview of Guide: Main Sections Synopsis + Takeaways  
   B. Why Soft Skills? Importance + Intended Audience  
   C. How to Use + Where to Start  
   D. Disclaimer: More to come  

2. Starter Kit  
   A. A Strategic Developmental Approach  
   B. Assumptions Matter  
   C. Champions, Advocates, and “Accountabilibuddies”  
   D. Steps for Making a Business Case  
   E. Intervention Road Map: Selection and Design  
   F. Bringing It All Together  

3. Guide  
   A. “Soft Skills”...??  
   B. Background & History  
   C. Performance Skills Coalition  

4. References and Resources  
   A. References  
   B. List of Online Resources  

5. Appendix  
   A. Baseline/Theory of Change Worksheet  
   B. Fishbone Diagram Template  
   C. Mind Mapping Template  
   D. Human Performance Technology Process Diagram  
   E. WSHRC 2014 Survey Report: Employer Perspectives on Soft Skills
Excerpt from the speech "Citizenship In A Republic"
delivered at the Sorbonne, in Paris, France April 23, 1910

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt
1 Introduction

“Soft skills get little respect but will make or break your career.”
~ Peggy Klaus, author of The Hard Truth About Soft Skills

In This Section
A. Guide Overview: Main Sections + Takeaways
B. Why Soft Skills? Importance Of + Intended Audience
C. How to Use: Where to Start + Examples
D. Disclaimer: More to come

A. Guide Overview

Section Synopsis: The Starter Kit & Guide is broken into five sections, but the “meat” will be found in Sections 2 and 3. We encourage you to use this Guide as you might a recipe book: flip through, skim, look for things that most fit your needs, and explore the resources and tools offered. The idea is for you to determine where best to start and how to build on your human resources development projects.

1. Introduction - is an overview of what you will find enclosed in The Starter Kit & Guide.
2. The Starter Kit - is about how to identify the need for and build a business case for a soft skills initiative at your organization. It is for human resource and training practitioners who have a solid grounding in what is meant by the term “soft skills” and their effects on organizations. Those with several years of human resources, training, coaching, and/or management experience are likely to find this section a good place to start.

3. The Guide – is for those who are relatively new to “soft skills.” This section offers a little more about soft skills as well as background and history to the initiative. Start here to understanding more about the background and history to this soft skills initiative work.

4. References and Resources - offers list of references as well as links to online resources

5. Appendix - has templates from the Starter Kit plus the 2014 WSHRC Survey Report on Soft Skills.
1 Introduction (continued)

Takeaways and WIIFMs

The Starter Kit & Guide is intended as a place to begin addressing soft skills needs in your organization. We consider that our collective understanding of “non-cognitive” or “soft” skills development is evolving. The following are a few ways the use of the Starter Kit — with the enclosed information, steps, templates, and resources — might benefit your existing and future work:

- help you organize a business case for a soft skills initiative at your organization
- inform your understanding of what “soft skills” are and what HR and other management professionals have stated are important to business success
- offer ideas for utilizing established HR and business metrics to help you establish, track, and improve the effectiveness of interventions
- help you create a process of continual improvement for your soft skills development projects from which to improve performance

The goal of this Starter Kit & Guide

- To offer concrete steps for you to follow
- To provide support to your soft skills development efforts
- To inform and enhance existing projects targeting your organization’s soft skill needs

The Washington State Human Resources Council offers this Starter Kit and Guide as a follow-up to its 2014 soft skills survey report: Employer Perspectives on Soft Skills in hopes that it will assist you in addressing this growing business need.

B. Why Focus On Soft Skills?

Increasingly, managers and executives have voiced concerns about the absence of non-technical skills in their workers. Possession of the soft skills necessary for career success is a no-brainer for most HR management professionals: treat others with respect and courtesy; represent abilities and skills honestly; follow through on assignments and commitments; take accountability for your work and own up to your mistakes; show up on time – better yet, show up, period.

To this point, a 2014 Adecco survey (graph, below) found that “Forty-four percent of the executives we surveyed think Americans are lacking soft skills...”.

Which of the following do you feel BEST defines the “gap” in the U.S. workforce skills gap?

- Lack of soft skills (i.e., communication, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration) 44%
- Lack of technical skills 12%
- Lack of strong leadership skills 22%
- Lack of computer based technology skills 8%
- NA - I do not think there is a skills gap in the U.S. workforce 14%

SOURCE: ADECCO

http://www.cnbc.com/id/101012437#.
1 Introduction (continued)

In the WSHRC survey, ninety-six percent (96%) of respondents said that soft skills were as important or more important than technical skills (graph, below top).

In addition, seventy-one percent (71%) of respondents to the survey said that it was somewhat or extremely difficult to find applicants with requisite soft skills (graph, right bottom).

A few other relevant sources that speak to the importance of soft skills are:

- The Multi-Generational Job Search Study, 2014 stated that “...the top three attributes that companies are currently looking for are: a positive attitude (84%), communication skills (83%) and an ability to work as a team (74%).

- State of St. Louis Workforce Report, 2013: 60% of employers complained that job applicants lack interpersonal and communication skills. Another 93% of employers care more about critical thinking, communication and problem solving skills than an undergraduate’s concentration.

- McDonalds (UK) and Starbucks both launched initiatives in 2015 to develop soft skills in future workers.

The increased focus on this issue — in both direct and indirect ways — is clear evidence of an unmet need in the workplace, one which presents both process and content challenges for human resources (HR), training, and management professionals.
1 Introduction (continued)

C. How to Use The Starter Kit & Guide

Where to Start? It’s not necessary to read The Starter Kit & Guide from front to back to effectively utilize the tools or resources. Skipping around is encouraged as each section will have something different to offer. If you want to jump to the Index to explore Resources or References, please do! If what you need are ideas for how to begin developing a program in your workplace, go directly to the Starter Kit section. And, within that section, you may determine that certain elements are more useful than others. Conversely, just because one section or subsection has no relevance for you, it’s possible that you will find another section highly beneficial.

The bottom line is that this is intended as a workbook of sorts that you can write in, pull from, and refer to as you develop your own soft skills projects. You will, no doubt, find tools and approaches that will work better for your organization than others.

D. Disclaimer & More to Come

No one-size-fits-all, off-the-shelf approach exists for soft skills development. Regional, industrial, organizational, and most of all human diversity, make that a given. That being the case, the idea of framing this work as a Starter Kit & Guide was suggested as a way to offer different professionals who possess different skill and knowledge levels, tools, and expertise to be able to use it as is most appropriate for them and their focus for this work.

“If the only tool in your toolbox is a hammer, then all problems will look like a nail.”
~ Unknown
(though often attributed to Mark Twain)

The old adage, “the more you learn, the less you know” seems apt when discussing soft skills. Startling advances abound in areas that inform education and development. In fact, a renaissance (of sorts) seems to be occurring in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, education, and training. Every day, it seems like a new perspective, research, innovation, or understanding of something related to human development emerges. We ask you to bear in mind that this Starter Kit will not be able to answer all of your questions on the topic of soft skills. It will, however, begin to offer a common language, development framework, and resources from which to begin and grow your work in this area.

Thanks for your interest in this work and we hope you will find this tool useful.
2 Starter Kit

“Begin with the end in mind.”
~ Stephen Covey, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

In This Section

A. What We Mean By Soft Skills

B. Planning and the Process of Continual Improvement (PCI)
   - PDSA Cycle: Action Research Model and Experiential Learning Theory

C. Assumptions Matter - Exercise

D. How to Make a Business Case or, “Where’s the Gap?”
   - PDSA Framework
   - Front End Analysis - 13 Questions
   - Establishing a Baseline & Theory of Change - Worksheet
   - Root Cause Analysis - The 5 Whys
   - Cause and Effect for Desired Outcomes - Fishbone Diagram

E. Champions, Advocates, and “Accountabilibuddies”
   - A Learning Community of Practice Approach
   - Mind Mapping Exercise and Questionnaire

F. Assessing the Need
   - Areas Leading to Actual Performance - Worksheet
   - PDSA Cycle Review
   - Cost-Benefit Analysis

F. Intervention Road Map: Process, Design, and Delivery
   - Top Four Methods for Soft Skills Development (chart)
   - Intervention & Instructional Design: SAM
   - Intervention Selection

G. Wrapping It All Up... For Now
“Channeling emotions toward a productive end is a master aptitude. Whether it be in controlling impulse and putting off gratification, regulating our moods so they facilitate rather than impede thinking, motivating ourselves to persist and try, try again in the face of setbacks, or finding ways to enter flow and so perform more effectively—all bespeak the power of emotion to guide effective effort.”

A. What Do We Mean By “Soft Skills”?  

There are many terms that come to mind when the topic of soft skills arises. Terms like “communication”, “interpersonal skills”, “reliability”, and “work ethic” are most often cited. But still, this doesn’t exactly tell us what “soft skills” are. Herein lies one of the primary challenges in addressing soft skills issues. It’s hard to point to one clear, concise definition. Each term represents an aspect or approach to related body of work that is related to soft skills. Each offers a unique lens, or perspective, on the development of skills that lead to life and occupational success. The most fundamental clarity in terms of a definition seems to be found in the field of personality psychology.

“Success in life depends on personality traits that are not well captured by measures of cognition. Conscientiousness, perseverance, sociability, and curiosity matter. While economists have largely ignored these traits, personality psychologists have studied them over the last century. They have constructed measures of them and provide evidence that these traits predict meaningful life outcomes.”

James Heckman & Tim Kautz, “Hard Evidence on Soft Skills”  
NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH, June 2012

Nobel Laureate, James Heckman, and Tim Kautz, both Economists from the University of Chicago, co-authored a working paper on soft skills (referenced above). Heckman’s recent focus on aspects of human development and lifecycle skill formation are particularly relevant to the question of which character or personality traits most effect life success. He and Kautz draw from the field of social and personality psychology to describe what these “soft” skills are. In the paper, they discuss whether these traits are innate or whether they can be developed in individuals, and at what point in ones lifespan. While still under debate, what is clear is that these traits do correlate to life success in particular areas such as education and the workplace.
The “Big Five” Personality Domains

Personality Psychologists have developed a taxonomy of personality traits that they refer to as “the Big Five”. For simplicity’s sake, I’ve listed the American Psychology Association Dictionary definitions referred to in the table in the Heckman/Kautz paper. (For those of you interested in further exploring these personality domains and related facets, they can be found in Table 3 of the Heckman/Kautz paper, p. 13).

1. **Openness to Experience** - the tendency to be open to new aesthetic, cultural, or intellectual experiences.
2. **Conscientiousness** - the tendency to be organized, responsible, and hardworking.
3. **Extraversion** - an orientation of one’s interests and energies toward the outer world of people and things rather than the inner world of subjective experience; characterized by positive affect and sociability.
4. **Agreeableness** - the tendency to act in a cooperative, unselfish manner.
5. **Emotional Stability** - predictability and consistency in emotional reactions, with absence of rapid mood changes.

*As you review these trait definitions, how do you see them playing out in your workplace? How might they intersect with the soft skills competencies or behaviors your management refers to as most crucial to business success and high performance?*
Anchoring the Personality Trait Definitions in HR Opinions

In the WSHRC 2014 Survey, over two hundred human resources professionals shared how their concepts of soft skills aligned with the terms at left. The results show that “Interpersonal Skills” lead the pack at 88%, with “Emotional Intelligence” and “Social Skills” following at 72% and 66%, respectively.

When asked about the effects soft skills characteristics had on a) hiring and b) disciplinary actions, HR respondents rated “Stays within ethical boundaries” at the top of both lists.

The chart at right shows the synthesized responses. Of the top five rated characteristics, four fall within “Professionalism/Integrity” category which was the most often rated category in the top ten. Three characteristics each in the “Reliability” and “Teamwork/Interpersonal” categories were also represented.

Interestingly, “Communication skills” were only rated 8th for its impact on hiring decisions and 12th as to whether its absence would lead to a disciplinary action.

What underlying character or personality trait do you think leads to an individual being able to perform these behaviors?
2  **Starter Kit (continued)**

**B. Planning and the Process of Continual Improvement**

When was the last time you built something? First, you sketch out what you would like to build and refine it on paper before too much time or resources are expended. Experienced builders say to “measure twice and cut once.”

The analogy is apt since most useful, attractive, and lasting projects require thorough planning. The topics in this section will offer steps for laying down a solid strategy. If you incorporate these concepts and steps, you will be able to create a good plan for building a soft skills program. So first, we’ll review a few concepts to ground your planning efforts.

**Process of Continual Improvement:** One of the primary figures who inspired the rebuilding of the post World War II Japanese economy was W. Edwards Deming. He consulted with the Japanese government, and among other management principles, he instilled the work of his mentor, Walter Shewhart. Called the **PDSA Cycle: Plan + Do + Study + Act**, this process of continual improvement was a building block to what Demings called his **System of Profound Knowledge**, (www.demings.org).

“The cycle begins with the **Plan** step. This involves identifying a goal or purpose, formulating a theory, defining success metrics and putting a plan into action. These activities are followed by the **Do** step, in which the components of the plan are implemented, such as making a product. Next comes the **Study** step, where outcomes are monitored to test the validity of the plan for signs of progress and success, or problems and areas for improvement. The **Act** step closes the cycle, integrating the learning generated by the entire process, which can be used to adjust the goal, change methods or even reformulate a theory altogether. These four steps are repeated over and over as part of a never-ending cycle of continual improvement,” (www.deming.org/theman/theories/pdsacycle).
Two Related PDSA Models: Organizational > Group > Individual

The Action Research Model is often used in organization development contexts. In this framework an initiative to address something is planned and implemented. Then information (data) is via direct observation and reflection. This data provides the basis for decisions and a new cycle of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and decision-making and successive improvement.

Similar to Demings’ PDSA Cycle, the idea is that all efforts devoted to addressing a particular problem are part of an intentional system of improvement. When applied in continual fashion, these steps are not simply iterative, but are progressive.

At the individual and group level there is a similar process in experiential education based on Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory. A more simplified version of this is: Do + Reflect + Apply (National 4-H Cooperative Extension). This process involves a series of sequenced activities. Via levels of successive difficulty or “challenge”, individuals in a group work together to accomplish a goal. Learning occurs via facilitated debriefs in which individuals are asked to reflect on the just-completed experience. Participants are also asked to engage in abstract evaluation of how they might apply new learning, awareness, skills, or behaviors in subsequent activities and/or to real-life situations. Through such “initiatives” (activities) individual and team performance is enhanced.

In essence, this is quite similar to the PDSA Cycle in that planning, doing, studying, and acting (i.e. doing, reflecting, and applying) are done in a developmental iterative fashion. Each of these models is about “moving the needle” (so to speak) and learning and improving in the process.
The work of addressing soft skills is not an exact science, nor is it a formulaic process, completely predictive of outcomes. This work requires a sense of adventure and an attitude of openness to learning and improving over time. Patience and tolerance for “failing forward” are handy as well. Considering all of that, I recommend that the work begin with adopting a curious frame of mind.

Stanford University Professor of Psychology, Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., calls this a “growth mindset”. Adopting a mindset where one embraces the opportunity to try new things for which they may not immediately feel ready or capable will inevitably lead to greater and greater levels of learning, proficiency, and performance. It is closely tied to motivation, resilience, and a sense of self-efficacy.

Assumptions Matter

Assumptions are built on mental shortcuts. In an article entitled, “Leaders Can Overcome Unconscious Bias”, (HR Magazine, Oct. 2015), consultant Eric Peterson was quoted as saying, “Bias happens whenever your past tries to help you predict the future... It’s a mental shortcut to help us interact with the world.” When our assumptions go unexamined this is called confirmation bias. This is when something happens that confirms a held belief for which there is no proof. We all do it. It’s just how our brains are wired.

In regard to soft skills, there are experts who have spent their careers trying to “crack the nut” of soft skills development who continue to discover new things. In order for them to refine and evolve their understanding of the topic, it’s subsets, and related development interventions requires a well-honed ability to continually examine their underlying assumptions and hypotheses.

So, as a starting point, the following page has an exercise for taking a look at your own assumptions in relation to the topic of soft skills.
Exercise: Assumption Check

1) Please take a couple of minutes to complete the following statements

- Soft skills are absolutely crucial in the following work scenarios or situations:
  ____________________________________________________________.

- In order to be reliable, one must:
  ____________________________________________________________.

- Communicating well means that a person is able to:
  ____________________________________________________________.

- Being ethical on the job requires that a person behave in the following manner:
  ____________________________________________________________.

- An example of something I consider to be highly unprofessional is:
  ____________________________________________________________.

2) If appropriate, ask a colleague or friend to do the same. Share your responses.

3) Discuss the following questions with your friend or colleague

- How are your responses the same? How are they different?
- Were there any surprises that you identified in your responses?
- To what do you attribute the sameness, difference, or surprises in your responses?
- Is there anything you are curious about in regards to your or your partners thoughts about soft skills?

4) Jot down any other thoughts that come to mind about your responses.
Making a Business Case or, “Where’s the Gap?”

Addressing soft skills needs requires resources: human and financial. Human resources initiatives are not always well-tied to returns on investment, so scrutiny and skepticism should be expected. Therefore, any development efforts must be anchored to a well-defined and articulated business case. It’s true that many in leadership see connections between the bottom line and soft skills, yet staff development efforts must be well analyzed, proposed, designed, and implemented.

Before we do this, taking a look at an overall process model for designing interventions will be useful. The one most utilized in training and development contexts is called the ADDIE Model.

**The ADDIE Model**

Oftentimes this model is depicted in linear fashion. This graphic correlates well with the Process of Continual Improvement (PCI), or PSDA Cycle. Each step is fairly self-explanatory in terms of addressing performance issues, but we’ll spend some time walking through the Analysis phase as this is where the groundwork for building your business case occurs.

First, it’s important to state that the ADDIE Model is most often used after a performance problem has been identified and an “intervention” (of some sort) has been green-lighted. It’s used as an instructional design framework. It is being used in this case as a way to frame our overall process without adding too much additional complexity.
Many in management immediately jump to training as the intervention called for to address performance issues. However, prior to designing an intervention, a Gap Analysis or Needs/Cause Analysis is recommended. In many cases, training is not the called-for action. So, for the purposes of keeping things simple here, we will assume that the Analysis Phase in the ADDIE Model will include Gap and Needs/Cause Analyses. To accomplish this, next we will review several tools.

Making a Business Case

Needs Analysis: The truth is that most of us are more comfortable counting things that are quantifiable than those that are more qualitative in nature. Soft skills, personality traits, emotional intelligence, and the like, may clearly be thought of as a problem at your workplace, but many shy away from addressing things unless you can point to data and/or evidence-based practices for your initiative. To that end, part of building a business case is about being willing to start somewhere. You are constructing your own process of continual improvement (PCI) and will strive for establishing your own evidence-base from which to address your particular soft skills issues.

On pages 21-22 is a worksheet for roughing out the behaviors and/or traits you suspect are associated with well-established human resources cost areas. The reverse side of the worksheet is a place for you to begin formulating a hypotheses about what you have captured on the worksheet. This is where you will begin to a) craft a “theory of change” from which you will be able to refine and construct a plan to address the soft skills issues you’ve identified. From this, you will have more credibility when making your case for an initiative.

Before we go to the Baseline Worksheet, we’ll look at a model for conducting a Front-End Analysis.

When you start filling out the subsequent worksheet, I ask you to suspend any skepticism that may pop up for you. And, for the time being at least, use this as a brainstorming tool. The important thing here isn’t to be perfect or exact, but to begin thinking through and documenting some of the ways in which soft skills deficits might be costing your organization.
### 13 Questions for Front-End Analysis

Joe Harless, who came up with the term “Front-End Analysis”, developed the following **13 questions** to ask in regards to a potential performance improvement area. This would be a good exercise to use with your LCOP (or on your own) as you lay the groundwork for making a business case and recommended strategy for addressing the problem. (For more information about Harless’s process, go to: [http://hpt2014.weebly.com/front-end-analysis.html](http://hpt2014.weebly.com/front-end-analysis.html) at the Online HPT Manual website).

#### Harless’s 13 Questions for Front-End Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>EXPANDED</th>
<th>ANSWERS/NOTES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Do we have a problem?</td>
<td>Based on what evidence?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Do we have a performance problem?</td>
<td>A performance problem is: Someone is not doing something he/she is expected to do Someone is doing something the he/she should not be doing A prediction of should/should not in the future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 How will we know when the problem is solved?</td>
<td>When indicators from the first question are the exception.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 What is the performance problem?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Should we allocate resources to solve it?</td>
<td>Do the benefits of solving the problem outweigh the costs?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 What are the possible causes of the problem?</td>
<td>Lack of data, tools, incentives, knowledge, capacity, motives?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 What evidence bears on each possibility?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 What is the probable cause?</td>
<td>Based on questions 6 and 7, what is the probable cause of the problem?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 What general solution type is indicated?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 What are the alternate subclasses of solution?</td>
<td>What else could be done to solve the problem?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 What are the costs, effects, and development times of each solution?</td>
<td>Research the costs of each solution.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 What are the constraints?</td>
<td>Research the constraints of each solution.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 What are the overall goals?</td>
<td>What goals would management like to adopt?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Joe Harless, 1970
Worksheet: Establishing a Baseline

How would you say the following categories could be attributed to soft skills issues at your organization? Take a moment to recall a situation or incident that occurred at your company in the past year/quarter/month. For the areas below, briefly list or describe the behaviors that you think may have contributed (directly or indirectly) to a loss in those areas (write in a category more appropriate for your organization if it’s not listed).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Describe/List Contributing Behavior(s) to Situation or Incident</th>
<th>Approx Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lost Production</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnover</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft &amp; Fraud</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost Customers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grievances</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:____________</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Other:____________</td>
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<td>Other:____________</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Soft Skill Behaviors most often mentioned above:  TOTAL: ______________
Worksheet: Establishing a Theory of Change

1) Write a hypothesis statement re: what you have written in the worksheet on the reverse side. For example, you might say: I estimate that 4 out of 5 incidents listed could be attributed to ___________________ skills issues. This has cost my company approximately $____________ in the past ________________ (period of time).

2) Given your hypothesis, what theory do you have about the situation? For example, you might have noticed a number of losses that you think are communication skills related. If so, what kind of communication do you think is at issue? (Written? Verbal? Nonverbal?) How do you think this has contributed to the incidents? Now write your theory in the affirmative: If my organization were to improve communication skills in the following ways, I estimate that we could reduce the following costs by __________% over the next year/quarter/month. Don’t worry too much about being accurate at this point. REMEMBER: This is simply about beginning to formulate a theory. From this, you will be able to start gathering more firm data from which to refine your theory.

You are establishing a framework/plan from which you will begin testing via the PDSA Cycle.
2  **Starter Kit (continued)**

**Root Cause Analysis - The “5 Whys”**

>This tool is widely used. The description below is taken directly from the Online HPT Manual website at: [http://hpt2014.weebly.com/front-end-analysis.html](http://hpt2014.weebly.com/front-end-analysis.html). There is an example and video regarding the 5 Whys tool at the site if you are interested in learning more about this tool.

Now that you have a problem statement/hypothesis/theory of change, it will be useful to drill down on what you think is causing it.

Follow the steps below to see what you come up with.

**PROCESS**

By repeatedly asking the question “Why” (five is a good rule of thumb), practitioners can peel away the layers of symptoms which can lead to the root cause of a problem. Often, the root cause is not evident at the surface level and it takes digging to get to it. The following process can be used to determine the root cause of a situation:

- Write down the problem statement.
- Ask "Why" the problem happens and write the answer down below the problem.
- Continue to exhaust possible causes for the problem until the team reaches consensus that the root cause has been identified.

**ADVANTAGES**

- Help identify the root cause of a problem
- Simple to use, does not require statistical analysis
- Identifies explicit processes

**DISADVANTAGES**

- Assumes there is only one root cause for each problem
- Not repeatable
- Based on deduction, not observation

An EXAMPLE can be found at [http://hpt2014.weebly.com/front-end-analysis.html](http://hpt2014.weebly.com/front-end-analysis.html).
Ishikawa’s Fishbone Diagram Tool

This tool is also widely used in analyzing the cause(s) leading to particular performance indicators. For more information about this tool, go to the Online HPT Manual website at: http://hpt2014.weebly.com/ishikawadiagram.html.

In the previous step in your Root Cause Analysis, you asked 5 Whys to drill down on what might be causing performance issues in a particular area. The Fishbone Diagram tool is another useful tool for determining factors that are contributing to problems.

If one of the identified problems in your Baseline Worksheet (page 21) is that your company’s customer satisfaction surveys are not high enough, an aspirational goal would be that they be raised to 95% approval ratings. Your hypothesis might be that poor soft skills are the culprit. On this diagram, you can brainstorm the soft skill categories that you think are most likely to lead to increased customer satisfaction. Then, for each category, you can determine the drivers/causes that you think will improve that area. Ask yourself, what will it take for employees to accomplish each? In the example above, if courtesy leads to higher customer satisfaction, and verbal and nonverbal acknowledgement lead to more courteous behavior, what are the behaviors that drive verbal and nonverbal courteous behaviors? Write those on the arrow lines leading to those drivers, or causes. This will give you a clearer view of the causes which you feel will effect your outcome.
Worksheet: Identifying Drivers That Lead to Desired Outcomes

Ishikawa (Fishbone) Diagram Tool - for this tool, frame the Desired Outcome in aspirational terms, rather than as a problem statement. Fill out behavior driver categories that lead to the outcome. For each behavior category, begin to establish individual causes, and causes that lead to that cause.
Champions, Advocates, and Accountabilibuddies

This work in organizations cannot be done effectively in a vacuum. Nonetheless, finding well-placed champions, advocates and “accountabilibuddies” will make your soft skills initiative more likely to get off the ground. Next, we’ll discuss collective efforts, which can be done prior, simultaneous, or subsequent to the steps we’ve identified so far.

Examples of what a Champion, Advocate, or Accountabilibuddy (CAA) might contribute:

- Help you identify and gather pertinent and useful information (data)
- Talk to others throughout your organization and help build support
- Provide thought– and action-partnership as you develop your initiative
- Can co-present a proposal to decision-makers
- Create accountability for moving the work forward

South Park, while hilarious to some and distasteful to others, hit home with the term “accountabilibuddy”. In soft skills work in organizations, one of the first things on your list will be to identify one or more champions, advocates, and/or accountabilibuddies for the work. Then you can start collectively working on soft skills topics with them. By doing so you can develop a process of being “accountabilibuddyable” with one another. Just keep in mind that this might look different to different individuals in an organization, depending on various positions or roles. Still, once you begin interacting with a colleague regarding soft skills, your work has begun.

One recommended approach is a Learning Community of Practice (LCOP) which can be as informal and ad hoc as you like. The idea is to build a coalition whose collective aim is to learn about and address a particular topic or issue, (in this case, soft skills issues at your organization).

The questionnaire and mind map on the following pages will help you identify individuals at your organization who might be good champions, advocates, or accountabilibuddies to help build the initiative and to think through how to begin working with them.
Champions, Advocates, and Accountabilibuddies (continued)

**Mind Mapping:** Identifying individuals at your company who might be interested, willing, and able to participate in building a soft skills initiative can be easily done through drawing a mind map. Think of those you already know who have mentioned that soft skills are an issue. Who are they? What position do they hold at your organization? Do they have any special expertise or areas of influence that will add to the effort? Do they have the bandwidth to devote to an initiative? Identify individuals and write them below. Then pinpoint areas if overlap as well as diversity of influence and expertise.

![Example Mind Map - Identifying Potential CAAs](image)

Next, make a list of who you think might be best to reach out to about getting together to discuss soft skills issues at your company. I recommend starting with those you’ve identified who you think are likely to a) want to work with you on a soft skills project, b) reach out to others at some point, and c) have the time and inclination to participate.

I recommend keeping it small at first. This could start as a simple conversation over coffee or a small group who grabs lunch together. In line with how to build a business case and the importance of the PDSA Cycle is how to balance the bandwidth needs of any interested employees with their desire/need to address soft skills issues at your company.
2  

**Starter Kit (continued)**

**Champions, Advocates, and Accountabili-buddies (continued)**

---

**Questionnaire - Working with Champions, Advocates, & Accountabilibuddies (CAAs)**

To start with, write down answers to the following questions:

1) Think of at least one person who you think really seems to “get it” when you mention the topic of soft skills. *(Draw a mind map of a few folks at your organization if it helps. See example on the following page).*

2) Why do you think they “get it”?  

3) Does this person have particular areas of expertise or influence in your organization? If so, what are those areas of expertise?  

4) In what ways are they influential? Is it positional or do they possess particular skills (or both)?  

5) How would you describe your relationship with this person?  

6) Think through what you might say if you talked to the person more intentionally about soft skills. Write down a few talking points.  

7) Approach the person(s) about the idea of developing a soft skills initiative or coalition at your organization.  

8) If interested, set a time to meet and discuss ideas. At the meeting, you can:
   - Brainstorm your interests re: building a soft skills initiative at your organization  
   - Ask what one thing they’d like to see change related to soft skills?  
   - Share an article or information (to motivate or inspire more interest or ideas)  
   - Ask if they are interested in meeting again. If so, schedule another meeting.  
   - Before ending, ask each person for an action item they plan to accomplish for next time.  

9) Follow up with your CAAs and do it all again. As you continue to meet, follow the PDSA cycle to keep things focused, moving forward, and evolving toward more concrete plans and deliverables. Plan > Do > Study > Act. And keep it simple.
Champions, Advocates, and Accountabilibuddies (continued)

A FEW THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND AS YOU BEGIN TO WORK WITH OTHERS:

1. Keep things simple, especially at first.

2. YOU are the constant in the work, so will be the one to convene, facilitate, document, etc.

3. Utilize the PDSA Cycle as a development framework as you continue to meet. Focus on what you learn and accomplish between and during each meeting. Documenting progress is an absolute must to keep your team engaged and also to build a case for your initiative.

4. Cultivating champions and tangible movement toward a goal that is hard to define takes time and patience at first. Discussions may start informally or emerge from a seemingly unrelated conversation. You may run into resistance as you cultivate deeper and more concrete commitment to the effort.

5. Be available to other colleagues when discussions regarding soft skills and more interest in tangible efforts occur. You are not just there to influence, but to be present to hearing and addressing your team’s opinions, frustrations, and objections.
Assessing the Need

The primary point of assessing need or opportunity is to find out the **difference between Actual and Desired Performance.** This is what will help you establish a solid business case. After all, if there is no “gap” then, in essence, there is no evidence of a problem. This **Gap Analysis** builds on the work you did in answering Harless’s 13 Questions during the Front-End Analysis stage (p. 20), on your work on the Baseline and Theory of Change Worksheet (pages 21-22), and on the soft skill drivers that would lead to your desired outcome on the Fishbone Diagram (p. 25).

Starting with any broader organizational goals and critical issues you’ve identified, you can now drill down on the intervention categories that contribute to Actual Performance.

So let’s review what you’ve accomplished so far:

1. Examined your own assumptions about soft skills
2. Established a rough baseline related to common HR-related costs and their connections to soft skills issues
3. Established a hypothesis and theory of change in regards to your baseline
4. Written down answers to the 5 Whys in regards to your theory of change
5. Examined what soft skill behaviors would drive the desired effect
6. Have identified and possibly begun to meet with an individual or group interested in addressing soft skills issues at your workplace

Now you are ready to begin the collective work of planning your strategy. According to the Human Performance Technology Model, the following areas lead to **“Actual Performance”**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORKPLACE</th>
<th>WORK</th>
<th>WORKER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resources (WP:R)</td>
<td>Procedure (WK:P)</td>
<td>Skill, Capacity (WKR:SC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools (WP:T)</td>
<td>Responsibilities (WK:R)</td>
<td>Motivation (WKR:M)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder (WP:S)</td>
<td>Ergonomics (WK:E)</td>
<td>Expectations (WKR:E)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competition (WP:C)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Compare the areas on this table with the information you’ve assembled. **How do these Workplace, Work, and Worker areas relate to those behaviors that you think will lead to desired outcomes?** Return to your Baseline Worksheet (p. 21) and Fishbone Diagram (p. 25), and write the abbreviated labels (above table) next to the causes/drivers identified on your diagram. Count up how many of each Actual Performance area is represented on your diagram. On the table on the following page, write the number next to the corresponding area. Note anything you’d like to remember about those areas.
### Starter Kit (continued)

#### Assessing the Need (continued)

**Areas Leading to Actual Performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORKPLACE</th>
<th>NBR LISTED ON</th>
<th>NOTES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization (WP:O)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resources (WP:R)</td>
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<td>Tools (WP:T)</td>
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<td>Stakeholder (WP:S)</td>
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<td>Competition (WP:C)</td>
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<td>Work Flow (WK:WF)</td>
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<td>Ergonomics (WK:E)</td>
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<td>Knowledge (WKR:K)</td>
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<td>Skill, Capacity (WKR:SC)</td>
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<td>Expectations (WKR:E)</td>
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In the box below, detail how the information above relates to your initial *theory of change*.
2 Starter Kit (continued)

Making A Business Case (continued)

Overview of the Whole PDSA Cycle

Now that you’ve identified some areas where you hypothesize (or know for a fact) are costing your organization money, the next step is to begin to gather real data and validate or refute your hypothesis. Returning to the PDSA Cycle, a simplified version might look like:

**PLAN**
- Step 1: Propose links between soft skills and performance issues
- Step 2: Where possible, tie performance issues to losses
- Step 3: Write out initial hypothesis and theory of change
- Step 4: Identify gaps, causes, and drivers

**DO**
- Step 3: Gather real data in real time
- Step 4: Share and/or gather info/data from CAAs

**STUDY**
- Step 5: Analyze the data gathered (try to keep it as simple as possible to start)
- Step 6: Discuss the information with CAAs or learning community of practice
  - Are there any new links between soft skills and performance issues?
  - Are there any links you would challenge?
  - What one action might you propose given the information gathered?
- Step 7: Determine action steps and establish a timeline

**ACT**
- Step 8: Examine your theory of change; revise as needed
- Step 9: Continue to gather information per what was determined with LCOP
- Step 10: Continue the process

After you and/or your Learning Community of Practice (LCOP) feels confident that you have enough solid data to support your hypothesis or theory of change about soft skills performance issues, you have a decision to make regarding your next step:

*Do you make your business case now, or do you determine an intervention that you would like to propose first?*
To start with, consider the following statistics regarding company losses:


- **Turnover**: And much harder to quantify, there are turnover losses due to manager or leadership soft skills deficits. Gallup reports that 50% of employees leave supervisors, not organizations. [http://fortune.com/2015/04/02/quit-reasons/](http://fortune.com/2015/04/02/quit-reasons/)


- **Theft**: The U.S Chamber of Commerce estimates that theft by employees costs American companies $20 billion to $40 billion a year. To pay for it, every man and woman working in America today contributes more than $400 per year. [https://businesspracticalknowledge.wordpress.com/legal-security/employee-theft/](https://businesspracticalknowledge.wordpress.com/legal-security/employee-theft/)

With those data as a backdrop, (among others):

1) Consider the costs you estimated on the Baseline Worksheet (p. 21).

2) Think about the types of soft skills and personality traits you identified that will drive a particular outcome on the Fishbone Diagram (p. 25).

3) Lastly, look at top skill areas leading to Actual Performance (p. 31) at your organization.

In order to make a concise and compelling case for any initiative and/or intervention you propose, it will be necessary to pull this information together in a way that will make the most sense to your decision-makers. While there are definitely universal metrics, there are many that are unique to your organization.

Next, we’ll look at how those costs affect your company’s ability to perform on an organizational level by comparing the three areas of information listed at left.

*On the following page, take the information you’ve gathered and fill out the worksheet.*
Cost-Benefit Analysis

Fill out the box below with the information you've gathered. The information in the first two columns (A & B), below are referenced on the previous page. For the third column, (C), below, if you have looked into types of interventions/costs to address some of your identified soft skills deficits, you can go to the following pages to gain more information about types of interventions. In column D, this is a the subtotal from B & C. The next column, E, is the value proposition you made on the Theory of Change worksheet on p. 22. Lastly, column F is the difference between column D and E. This is a ROUGH estimate of how any investment in your soft skills development initiative would potentially be offset by a reduction in HR costs or added revenue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A) PERFORMANCE AREAS (Fishbone Diagrams + Performance Areas Wksht)</th>
<th>B) HR COSTS (Baseline Wksht: Type + Cost)</th>
<th>C) INTERVENTIONS (Type + Cost)</th>
<th>D) SUBTOTAL</th>
<th>E) VALUE PROPOSITION (Thy of Change Wksht: If/Then = $ Saved or Earned)</th>
<th>F) BALANCE</th>
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**PLEASE NOTE:** In no way will the information you’ve assembled in this table be ready for presenting to decision-makers after one cycle through these process tools.

Each time you go through this, you will think of something else to include, and will find and gather more reliable and integral data within your organization. You will also refine your Hypothesis and Theory of Change. Lastly, you will likely revise this table and these tools to fit your own organizational needs.

It is recommended that you do the PDSA Cycle at least 3-5 times with your LCOP team before presenting your business case. This will give you much more confidence that your data and case are solid.
Before recommending an appropriate intervention, it’s important to determine what type of intervention might be called for. In the WSHRC Soft Skills Report, the majority of respondents reported that Coaching had the greatest effect on soft skills development and performance, followed by Training and Development.

Another important factor to consider is that 80% of respondents reported spending 10 hours or less developing soft skills in employees with 56% who spent less than five hours per week.

Taking this disparate information into account could be a useful start to determining what’s really do-able at your organization. For example, think about the skills you determined would lead to Actual Performance on pages 30-31. Of the areas most represented on your table, how many do you think could effectively be addressed by coaching or training programs?

In the instance above, while coaching was deemed to be the most effective, a vast majority of HR professionals reported spending less than 25% of their time on soft skills issues. This might fall under the category of Work: Responsibilities. It could also be Workplace: Organization. The fact is that sometimes an organization’s structure or culture runs counter to what is happening on the ground. Identifying a “gap” such as this is really useful in gathering further information from which to determine the best option(s) for addressing the performance deficit.

Depending on your organizational mission/goals in relation to the data you’ve collected, one course of action or method might be more appropriate than another. You might also find that a combination of methods for addressing soft skills might be the best course of action.
2 Starter Kit (continued)

Intervention Road Map: Design

Two Design Processes to Consider

The two models for development of interventions are both based on PDSA Cycles. We already reviewed the ADDIE Model (below), but a more recent model that is gaining widespread use is the SAM Model.

**SAM: Successive Approximation Model**

SAM is much more conducive to dynamic and performance-focused instructional design solutions than the ADDIE Model. The SAM model allows for faster and less costly design, development, and rollout because the basic premise is as a process of continual improvement. The need to “perfect” a product prior to roll-out is mitigated via an iterative approach to intervention design. This approach is collaborative and per the referenced article, (found at url below graphic), “SAM is an agile e-learning development process built specifically for the creation of performance-driven learning”.


What about ADDIE?

At this point, it’s much less important which model you use than it is that you start with a collaborative approach toward gathering information, then designing, testing, evaluating, and improving — all with continual improvement as the objective.

It’s true that the interventions you recommend will be more effective when appropriately tied to a desired outcome. For example, a coach skills training for supervisors and managers might have significant up-front costs, since most coaching skills are developed via an experiential approach. This requires an instructor who can provide real-time feedback and skills development support. Nonetheless, the cognitive concepts utilized in coaching can easily be learned from a book or an online tutorial. This is a blended learning solution that could reduce costs without affecting training effectiveness.
In terms of types of interventions to consider, the HPT/HPI Model lists the following in the section entitled “Intervention, Selection, Design and Development”.

- Learning
- Performance Support
- Job Analysis/Work Design
- Personnel Development
- Human Resources Development
- Organizational Communication
- Organizational Design & Development
- Financial Systems
- Other

Of those on the list, which fit best with the following (from survey, p. 35):

- Coaching
- Training and Development
- Performance Evaluations
- Recognition, Rewards, & Incentives
- Onboarding Process
- Meetings
- Employee Handbook

A few other types of interventions are:

- Job Aids
- Manuals
- Games (facilitated group or online)

Think back a few pages to the Cost-Benefit Analysis you did on page 34. List your top five performance areas to address, below. In the second column write down the skills you are trying to address in that area. In the third column, given what you know right now, write down the type of intervention you think will be most effective in affecting the desired outcome you have detailed in the fishbone diagram exercise, (p. 25). (Plug this information into the column C on the table on page 34).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERFORMANCE AREAS TO ADDRESS</th>
<th>SKILL DEVELOPMENT AREA TO ADDRESS</th>
<th>TYPE OF INTERVENTION FOR PERF. AREA &amp; SKILL</th>
<th>COST ESTIMATE FOR INTERVENTION</th>
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</table>
2 Starter Kit (continued)

Wrapping It Up... For Now

The one overarching theme to this work is this: the work of addressing soft skills requires an approach that seeks to improve via successive attempts to address a problem. This Process of Continual Improvement utilizes the PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) Cycle. The models reviewed here — Action Research, Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model, ADDIE, and SAM — are all based on the premise that to improve — be it at the organizational or individual level — requires stages of planning, activity, analysis, (i.e. observation, reflection, data-gathering), and applying what was learned to a new cycle. Improvement is a dynamic and always-moving process whose aim is better and better performance over time. In short: FAILING FORWARD.

The tools presented were primarily drawn from the field of Human Performance Technology (or, Human Performance Improvement, as it is referred to in some circles). The idea behind HPT/HPI is to improve individual and collective performance while keeping it in line with organizational goals. The models and tools in this approach are much more rigorous than what was presented here. Nonetheless, this Process of Continual Improvement lends itself well to undertaking to address soft skills issues.

This Starter Kit and Guide — having as it’s focus the various PDSA/PCI models discussed here — will likely see improvements before too long. To that end, please feel free to send questions, thoughts and ideas.

For more information about Performance Skills Coalition meetings or projects, go to their LinkedIn page at: https://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=3849993
For most of the workforce, it is not clear what “soft skills” are. It is a... well... a little squishy and hard to put a finger on. We may hold in our minds an idea of what makes it clear to us, but as soon as we talk with someone else, our clarity is apt to break down. Even when there is clear common understanding of the behaviors deserving of the moniker, we find that there are many ideas for how to support and develop these behaviors in employees. In order to drill down on this, many try to understand the cause of the problem.

There are a great number of assertions in professional circles about why so many workers today are unable or unwilling to “act accordingly”. Some say it’s due to those entering the world of work without basic knowledge of expected behaviors. Others say it’s an issue of incredibly fast-changing societal norms, especially in regard to how individuals communicate and socialize with one another (aka. technology). Some say this has translated into a collision of cultural values within the workplace, making norms and expectations more fluid and harder to codify. For still others, soft skills deficits are related to an education system that no longer teaches, adheres to, or fosters behavioral or character standards in students.

But regardless of what you may think, the topic is gaining momentum of late, with many looking for solutions.
3 The Guide

Background Work on Soft Skills

In 2008, an ad hoc coalition of professionals began meeting to share and explore best practices re: soft skills development and resources that lead to success in the workplace. The Performance Skills Coalition (PSC) as it is now called – a collective of employers, educators and community based organization staff – has since issued or collaborated on four primary bodies of work.

As a result, the founding group of ten human resource and training professionals agreed on crucial workplace skills and competencies in four category areas: reliability, responsiveness, courtesy, and competency. Skills such as timeliness, attendance, communication, accountability, customer service, and the ability to quickly learn and integrate new skills were identified.

What employers mean by “Performance Skills” (Soft or Success Skills)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Responsiveness</th>
<th>Courtesy</th>
<th>Competence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attendance: regular &amp; on time</td>
<td>Good Communication: listens actively</td>
<td>Gets along w/ others</td>
<td>Possesses adequate technical skills &amp; knowledge necessary to perform job requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivers: turns in work on time</td>
<td>Sets realistic goals &amp; objectives</td>
<td>Performs well in a team</td>
<td>Possesses ability to quickly acquire new skills &amp; knowledge appropriate to changing needs of job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication: re: expectations, deadlines, and setbacks</td>
<td>Accurately assesses own &amp; others capabilities &amp; needs</td>
<td>Behaves respectfully toward others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependable: does what says will do; follows through</td>
<td>Follows through</td>
<td>Manages stress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Efficiently acquires &amp; applies new information, knowledge, &amp; skills necessary for job</td>
<td>Positively resolves conflict in timely manner</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Acknowledges others in positive &amp; appropriate manner</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Displays appropriate etiquette &amp; manners in variety of settings</td>
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</table>

In 2009, the coalition reached out to the Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) to advocate for soft skills training at all 34 community and technical colleges throughout the state. The State Board brought together leadership from four colleges in the Seattle area to discuss their current practices and the efficacy of each. As a result, the State Board also convened a summer institute for faculty that would train instructors how to better integrate soft skills development into their classes, regardless of subject. Lastly, the PSC and SBCTC partnered with the Association of Washington Business Institute (AWBI) in efforts to advocate with the business and education community for soft skills development and training. This collective became known as the Performance Skills Coalition, a learning community of practice (LCOP).
3 The Guide

Background Work on Soft Skills (continued)

In 2010, the coalition undertook the challenge of issuing a “menu of qualities” to recommend to employers, educators, and community based organizations from which programs and trainings to meet their organizational needs could be developed. The objective of the project was to expand the group’s knowledge via broader research and to validate and/or revise the identified soft skills for which they had originally advocated. Eventually, five sources were synthesized and issued in what was called “The Menu of Performance Skills Areas necessary for success in the workplace”. Included with these skills was a corresponding chart of qualities/skills necessary to perform well in each competency areas. The contention was that these qualities were foundational to the defined necessary performance skill areas. The underlying qualities originated largely from Daniel Goleman’s emotional intelligence work and were taken from his book, Social Intelligence, (2005). The methods by which the various skill areas and qualities were determined were by individual research, which were then vetted by the group.

This “menu of qualities” and the foundation laid by the PSC led to the adoption of a research project in 2012 by Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI). SJI sought to assemble relevant and cutting-edge research on the topic of soft skills and to obtain feedback from employers and community college staff and educators regarding soft skills. This report, “The Importance of Soft Skills in Entry-Level Employment and Post-secondary Success”, (Jan. 2013), found that “more than 75% of employers surveyed said that soft skills were as important as – or more important than – technical skills...” In addition, the top soft skills reported by employers from a compilation of research were:

Building on the information presented in the SJI report, the Performance Skills Coalition turned its attention to how soft skills could most effectively be developed in individuals. In 2013, the group honed in on delivery guidelines and cross-walked the top skill areas identified in the SJI report with the foundational attributes and emotional intelligence skills from the “menu of qualities” (pages 42-43).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Soft Skills reported by employers from compilation of research</th>
<th>Soft Skills categories used in SJI research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking / problem Solving</td>
<td>Problem Solving / Adaptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork / Interpersonal</td>
<td>Teamwork / Interpersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism / Work ethic</td>
<td>Professionalism / Integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-management / Self-direction</td>
<td>Self-Direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude / enthusiasm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifelong Learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity / Innovation</td>
<td>Creativity / Innovation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Menu of Performance Skill Areas necessary for success in the workplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diversity</th>
<th>Honesty/Integrity</th>
<th>Professionalism</th>
<th>Creativity/Innovation</th>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Adaptable/Flexible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Understands &amp; respects the cultural values of others; is able to communicate respectful.</td>
<td>Delivers what was promised &amp;/or takes responsibility for inability to do so.</td>
<td>Demonstrates respect for self &amp; others</td>
<td>Initiates ideas that aim to solve problems</td>
<td>Anticipates next appropriate steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Appreciates the value of different perspectives</td>
<td>Understands &amp; stays within ethical boundaries of self &amp; organization.</td>
<td>Reaches out to assist others</td>
<td>Is able to see &amp; communicate a vision</td>
<td>Looks to proactive-ly identify &amp; solve problems before they arise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Adapts well to other groups, cultures &amp; environments</td>
<td>Accountable for actions</td>
<td>Works well with other</td>
<td>Not afraid to try new things; keeps thinking/trying despite failure</td>
<td>Is able to take appropriate action without asking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Gets along well with others</td>
<td>Assesses own capabilities well</td>
<td>Reads a situation or culture for what is appropriate behavior in different contexts; acts accordingly.</td>
<td>Imaginative &amp; able to look outside current situation or solutions</td>
<td>Curious, inquisitive, &amp; resilient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Organizational; social responsibility-focused</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Qualities/skills necessary to perform well in the particular competency areas (above)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diversity</th>
<th>Honesty/Integrity</th>
<th>Professionalism</th>
<th>Creativity/Innovation</th>
<th>Initiative</th>
<th>Adaptable/Flexible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Empathy; curiosity; ability to communicate; non-verbal awareness</td>
<td>Accurate self-assessment; ability to communicate; trustworthiness</td>
<td>Empathy; curiosity; ability to communicate; non-verbal awareness</td>
<td>Curiosity; self-confidence; ability to communicate; ability to analyze &amp; critically evaluate a situation</td>
<td>Curiosity; self-control; critical thinker; sequential organizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Empathy; curiosity;</td>
<td>Self-control, trustworthiness, conscientiousness</td>
<td>Ability to observe, empathy, compassion, curiosity, willingness to help</td>
<td>Ability to observe; curiosity; ability to analyze &amp; critically evaluate a situation</td>
<td>Curiosity; enjoys challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Curiosity;</td>
<td>Humility, self-confidence, accurate self-assessment; ability to communicate; trustworthiness</td>
<td>Humility, self-confidence, accurate self-assessment; ability to communicate; trustworthiness</td>
<td>Self-confidence; ability to analyze &amp; critically evaluate a situation</td>
<td>Is able to read social cues &amp; critically evaluate situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Interpersonal skills: communication, non-verbal awareness, boundaries,</td>
<td>Accurate self-assessment; emotional awareness</td>
<td>Ability to observe, curiosity, self-control; ability to suspend judgment</td>
<td>Able to think beyond what is; possesses a sense of wonder; tolerates uncertainty; optimism</td>
<td>Curious, inquisitive, &amp; resilient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Curious, inquisitive, &amp; resilient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Performance Skills Coalition, 2011
3  The Guide

Notes Re: How to Read Menu of Qualities Chart:

1. Under the column entitled “Diversity” (top chart) in row “A”, it says: “Understands & respects the cultural values of others; is able to communicate respect.”

2. In the corresponding box in the chart below, “Diversity: A” it says: “Empathy; curiosity; ability to communicate; non-verbal awareness”

3. In order to “understand and respect the cultural values of others”, and to be “able to communicate respect”, one must possess the qualities of “empathy, curiosity, be able to communicate, and possess non-verbal awareness.”

References:

- **Performance Skills Coalition Chart** (SJI Workforce Champions Group, 2008) – key performance skill areas and competencies employers require.

- **Emotional Competence Framework** – from Social Intelligence, by Daniel Goleman, (BantamDell, 2006).

- **Quality Education Chart of Traditional Education (academic subjects taught in traditional curricula) vs. Non-Traditional Education (thought patterns for a successful career) -- from The Pacific Institute presentation to WA Community Colleges.**

- Page 8, [University of South Carolina & the SC Workforce Investment Board](https://www.scwib.org), (list of critical soft skills for entry into the workplace).

- Page 10, “The Ill-Prepared U.S. Workforce”, (list of “high need” skills in workplace).

- **Social & Emotional Learning in Project-Based Learning** – article by Thom Markham, on Edutopia.org.
4 References and Resources

References


4 References and Resources

References (continued)


Resources

Links to Additional Information

- National Soft Skills Association: www.nssa.org
- Association for Talent Development: www.atd.org
- International Society for Performance Improvement: www.ispi.org
- Daniel Goleman—Emotional Intelligence (on LinkedIn)
- Brett W. Roberts, Ph.D.—Personality & Social Psychologist, Univ. of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- Social Emotional Learning:
  - www.casel.org
  - www.edutopia.org
- Character Education: www.character.org
  - The 11 Principles of Effective Character Education
- Executive Functioning & Self Regulation: http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/
- 28 Soft Skills - https://bemycareercoach.com/soft-skills/list-soft-skills.html
## Appendix

### Worksheet: Establishing a Baseline

*How would you say the following categories could be attributed to soft skills issues at your organization?* Take a moment to recall a situation or incident that occurred at your company in the past year/quarter/month. For the areas below, briefly list or describe the behaviors that you think may have contributed (directly or indirectly) to a loss in those areas (write in a category more appropriate for your organization if it’s not listed).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Describe/List Contributing Behavior(s) to Situation or Incident</th>
<th>Approx Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lost Production</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnover</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft &amp; Fraud</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost Customers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grievances</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: ________________</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: ________________</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: ________________</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: ________________</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Soft Skill Behaviors most often mentioned above: TOTAL: ________________

________________________________________
Worksheet: Establishing a Theory of Change

1) Write a hypothesis statement re: what you have written in the worksheet on the reverse side. For example, you might say: I estimate that 4 out of 5 incidents listed could be attributed to ____________________ skills issues. This has cost my company approximately $__________ in the past ________________ (period of time).

2) Given your hypothesis, what theory do you have about the situation? For example, you might have noticed a number of losses that you think are communication skills related. If so, what kind of communication do you think is at issue? (Written? Verbal? Nonverbal?) How do you think this has contributed to the incidents? Now write your theory in the affirmative: If my organization were to improve communication skills in the following ways, I estimate that we could reduce the following costs by ___________% over the next year/quarter/month. Don’t worry too much about being accurate at this point. REMEMBER: This is simply about beginning to formulate a theory. From this, you will be able to start gathering more firm data from which to refine your theory.

You are establishing a framework/plan from which you will begin testing via the PDSA Cycle.
Appendix

Fishbone Diagram

Effect

Causes

WSHRC
Appendix

Mind Map - Identifying Potential CAAs/LCOPs

YOU

Colleague #1

Areas of Influence

Colleague #2

Areas of Influence

Areas of Expertise

Areas of Expertise

Areas of Expertise

Areas of Expertise
Human Performance Technology (HPT) Model

**Performance Analysis**
- Operational Analysis (Vision, Mission, Values, Goals & Strategies)

**Cause Analysis**
- Lack of Environmental Support
  - Data, Information and Feedback
  - Environment, Support, Resources, and Tools
  - Consequences, Incentives, and Rewards
- Lack of Repertory of Behavior
  - Skills and Knowledge
  - Individual Capacity
  - Motivation and Expectations

**Intervention Selection and Design**
- Performance Support (Instructional and Non-instructional)
- Job Analysis / Work Design
- Personal Development
- Human Resources Development
- Organizational Communications
- Organizational Design and Development
- Financial Systems

**Intervention Implementation and Change**
- Change Management
- Process Consulting
- Employee Development
- Communication, Networking, and Alliance Building

**Environmental Analysis**
- Organizational Environment (Stakeholders & Competition)
- Work Environment (Resources, Tools, Human Resources, Policies)
- Work (Work Flow, Procedures, Responsibilities, & Ergonomics)
- Worker (Knowledge, Skill, Motivation, Expectations, & Capacity)

**Actual State of Workforce Performance**

**Gap**

**Evaluation**
- Formative
  - Performance Analysis
  - Cause Analysis
  - Selection / Design of Interventions
- Summative
  - Immediate reaction
  - Immediate Competence
- Confirmative
  - Continuing Competence (Job Transfer)
  - Continuing Effectiveness (Organizational Impact)
  - Return on Investment

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HPT model is from page 3 of *Fundamentals of Performance Technology*
**EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVES ON SOFT SKILLS**  
**SOFT SKILLS SURVEY REPORT**

**Introduction**

In 2014, the **Washington State Human Resource Council** launched a Workforce Readiness initiative to gauge employers’ perceptions on soft skills. In partnership with the **Performance Skills Coalition** and **Seattle Jobs Initiative**, we designed and conducted a statewide survey of employers. As the Dilbert comic strip depicts below, social awareness and communication is a hot topic. Soft skills in the workplace is a top issue among human resource and business professionals and the survey was undertaken with the intent to discover common threads in how organizations define this term, whether and how soft skills are valued, means of assessment, training and development methods, and their effect on overall business performance. The goal is that the findings from this survey will assist businesses in developing effective workplace strategies for increasing soft skills in the workplace.

90% reported that soft skills were more important or as important as technical skills.

**Summary of Findings**

**WHO & WHERE:** The vast majority of survey respondents came from the west side of the state. Washington Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) chapter member distribution at the end of 2014 was 76% for the eleven western Washington chapters and 24% for the six chapters on the east side of the state. Overall SHRM membership is closely aligned with population distribution at 78% residing on the west side of the state and 22% residing on the east side of the state, (Washington OFM, 2011). Nonetheless, the statewide distribution of survey responses were 25% less than member distribution on the east side of the state at 9%. Nine of the top ten cities represented by survey respondent firms were in the greater Puget Sound area. The greatest concentration of eastern Washington respondents came from Wenatchee, with five respondents.
**Summary of Findings (continued)**

**INDUSTRY DIVERSITY:** Industry response was diverse with eleven industries represented. Professional, Technical and Business Services accounted for the largest number of responses at 19%, with Healthcare and Social Services following second at 15%. Government and ManufacturingS tied for third at 14%. Wholesale Trade represented the smallest number of responses at 3% of the total. Business size was evenly split, with 44% of responses representing firms of over 501 employees and 56% from less than 500 employees (figure 3). The largest number of responses by firm size category came from those companies with 101-500, which accounted for 34% of responses to the survey overall.

![Industry Composition of Survey Respondents](image)

**Figure 2** - Highlights industries represented by businesses participating in the survey.

Overall, businesses were evenly split between smaller firms (generally speaking, those with 500 employees or less) and larger employers, (figure 3). Firms with 101 to 500 employees comprised the greatest subset of respondents with a total count of 70. The next largest group was those with over 5,000 employees. Those sized 51 to 100 employees were the least represented, accounting for only 6% of the sample. Overwhelmingly, human resource professionals were the individuals replying on behalf of organizations (87%).

![Firm Size of Respondents](image)

**Figure 3**

- 34% of respondents were from firms with 101 to 500 employees.
- 20% were from firms with 501 to 1,000 employees.
- 16% were from firms with 1,001 to 5,000 employees.
- 16% were from firms with over 5,000 employees.
**Summary of Findings (continued)**

**DEFINITIONS:** Employer definitions and descriptions of “soft skills” were aligned with well-established definitions by training and development organizations as well as with those of the Performance Skills Coalition and Seattle Jobs Initiative, (see Appendix A). Responses indicated strong alignment with “interpersonal skills” (88%), “emotional intelligence” (72%), and “social skills” (66%), (figure 4), and that these terms closely align with respondents’ understanding of “soft skills”.

---

**IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS:** Overall, company respondents placed great importance on soft skills with 90% reporting that that soft skills were “more important than technical skills” or “as important as technical skills”, (figure 5). The remaining 10% responding to this question said that soft skills were “important, but less than technical skills”. No one responded that soft skills were “not essential” to their organizations. Of the 17% indicating that soft skills were “more important than technical skills”, more than a third came from Professional, Technical and Business Services, and little over a quarter came from the Education sector. One fifth of Manufacturing reported that soft skills were “less important than technical skills”.

---

**FINDING CANDIDATES WITH SOFT SKILLS:** A large majority of respondents said that finding candidates with needed soft skills was “extremely challenging” or “somewhat challenging”, (figure 6). Industries who reported the most difficulty in finding candidates with soft skills were Finance (85%), Government (80%), and Manufacturing (78%). Given the fact that Manufacturing respondents placed the lowest premium on soft skills, it is ironic that Manufacturers represented the highest rate (30%) who reported extreme difficulty in finding candidates with requisite soft skills.
Definitions of Soft Skills

When asked for their personal definition of soft skills, employers offered a surprising amount of consensus across industries as well with certain keywords that arose time and again. For the most part, responses centered around the ability of employees to navigate the workplace, interact with both coworkers and customers, and be prepared for work on a daily basis. Below are the most cited definitions in our survey.

1. INTERPERSONAL/EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE; TEAM BUILDING/TEAMWORK: Interpersonal skills were the overwhelming leader for respondents in defining soft skills. Employers seek individuals who are able to effectively interact with their coworkers and outsiders. Soft skills not only allow individuals to build relationships, represent the face of an organization, but also display socially acceptable behavior in the workplace.

Furthermore, employers highlighted the importance of emotional intelligence. This was defined as an ability to empathize with others, read body language and tone, and be able to understand the subtext of a conversation. This also encompasses the ability to control oneself emotionally in the workplace and with all levels of management. This includes refraining from harassment and being respectful of any cultural differences that exist among coworkers.

“Emotional intelligence that enables a candidate to interact professionally with all levels within a company. Ability to build professional relationships with coworkers, vendor and business partners. Aware of societal norms and values. Ability to build respect, credibility, and positive reputation.”

2. COMMUNICATION: Most employers surveyed cite communication as an essential component to soft skills. The ability to effectively communicate on behalf of one’s organization through both verbal and written means is paramount. Beyond that, employers believe workers with soft skills demonstrate an affinity toward teamwork, a collaborative nature that facilitates interaction, and an ability to listen and process what individuals are saying.

“The ability to perform the position requirements using effective communication and interpersonal skills to partner, plan and execute against the mission and values of the organization. Effective teamwork, managing through others, collaboration, being politically savvy and managing up are included in the definition of soft skills.”

3. SELF-MANAGEMENT: Employees with soft-skills have a sense of work ethic and professionalism that includes an ability to prepare for and execute their work on a daily basis, set and meet deadlines, and hold themselves accountable for their work. Employers expressed a belief that this quality creates a motivated employee who is engaged and can use critical thinking to solve issues that arise for an organization.

“Work ethic, ability to consistently show up on time and be ready for work….Drug free…Ability to get along with others…and be appropriate in the workplace.”

4. INTANGIBLE NATURE OF SOFT SKILLS: Respondents frequently cited “soft skills” as an intangible quality individuals possess that is not easily taught. While employers seek out candidates with soft skills, they prefer to not have to train their employees in these competencies; many feel that training for soft skills is ineffective. This sentiment was often expressed and is best represented by the following response:

“Soft skills are rooted in emotional intelligence that greatly complements hard skills/standard job qualifications. While soft skills can be cultivated, it is more dependent upon one’s personality, temperament, etc., and is in general more difficult to learn than hard skills.”

After being asked to define “soft skills” in their own words, respondents were presented with a set of terms and asked to identify those most closely aligned with their concept of the term. These include interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, social skills, self-management skills, personality traits, and executive function abilities. Employers were allowed to select all that apply.
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In contrast to the importance of soft skills overall was the number of respondents (35%) who reported that “less than 10%” of employees were fired due to soft skill issues. The next closest reported number was 19% of respondents who stated that “50-60%” were fired due to soft skill issues. Only 6% said that “90% and above” were fired due to soft skills, (figure 8).

**ASSESSMENT IN SELECTION PROCESS:** The top four methods for assessing soft skills during the hiring process were “conduct in interviews” (87%), “behavioral-based questions” (81%), “reference checks” (77%), and “scenario questions” (72%). The next highest method chosen was “background checks” at 51%, followed distantly by “personality tests”, and “Google or social media reviews” at 16% and 10%, respectively. In addition, employers indicated twelve different assessment tools used in hiring processes. So, while personality tests were not used broadly by employers, there was quite a diversity of those tools used in this regard (figure 9).

**WHOSE ROLE AND HOW TO DEVELOP:** Selecting all that apply, 95% of respondents said that employees themselves are most responsible for developing their soft skills, with 76% of respondents feeling that it is the employers role to do so, and 66% feeling it is the education system’s role. This coincides with the finding that organizations shy away from soft skills training, and expect employees to enter the workplace with such skills already in hand. This finding underscores the importance of candidates’ developing soft skills prior to employment as few resources will be spent once on the job, (figure 10).
Summary of Findings (continued)

Of the soft skill issues that arise on the job, three quarters are addressed individually. This is consistent with the vast majority of employers who reported that “coaching” had “great effect” (44%) or “some effect” (50%) on soft skills development and performance. Conversely, 80% of human resources respondents report spending 10 hours or less developing soft skills in employees and a disturbing 56% who spend less than five hours per week.

Implications for Human Resource Professionals

Conclusions that can be drawn from this survey are illuminated as much from identified gaps between responses as from the weight of particular responses themselves. Answers to several related, yet distinct, questions offer some compelling topics:

1. How do we find and adequately assess whether or not job candidates possess the appropriate soft skills?
2. Once hired, what is the responsibility of both employers and employees to develop the requisite soft skills necessary?
3. What are the most effective strategies for training and developing employees to perform and behave in ways that are crucial to organization productivity?
4. What systemic and/or organizational challenges are evident in a) how we have worked to accomplish these objectives to date, and b) how we can better address these objectives in the future?
Implications for Human Resource Professionals (continued)

Interestingly, while placing such importance on soft skills, professionals are not able to spend much time addressing issues that arise as a result of soft skill deficiencies. Additionally, few report having fired individuals as a result of soft skill issues, of which “interpersonal and communication skills” (top identified skills) were not likely to lead to disciplinary action. Considering that a majority of professionals spend less than 5 hours each week addressing soft skill deficiencies gives one pause. Also concerning is that a minority of organizations proactively address these crucial skill needs.

Most concerning is that a majority of professionals spend less than five hours each week addressing soft skill deficiencies ...

Also that a minority of employers report proactively addressing

There is no arguing that, in order for organizations to thrive and be as productive as possible, the topic of soft skills assessment and development must be addressed. Customers, coworkers, and business viability require this. For most human resources and training professionals this simply validates what many have been talking about, blogging about, strategizing about, and working on for years. The disconnects revealed in this survey offer several opportunities for further investigation.

It seems from this sample that human resource and business professionals agree on what are the essential competencies and characteristics of soft skills. They also agree on the overall importance of these skills to organizations. Still, it is clear from responses that more work is needed to identify a) how best to develop essential soft skills in employees via proactive training and one-on-one coaching and b) how to develop a talent pipeline that brings candidates to our doors with crucial soft skills already in tact.

WSHRC 2015 Workforce Readiness Initiative

We are continuing our collaboration with the Performance Skills Coalition in 2015. We are co-developing a “toolkit” and recommended guidelines for soft skills development programs for HR, training and workforce professionals.

For more information about Performance Skills Coalition meetings or projects, go to their LinkedIn page at:

https://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=3849993

Or contact Linda Rider, WSHRC Workforce Readiness Director at liri62@gmail.com