

Soft Skills to Gain a Competitive Edge in the 21st Century Job Market

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ABSTRACT

Today's economy requires members of the workforce to develop two essential categories of skills: hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills refer to job-specific knowledge and technical abilities that enable individuals to perform specific responsibilities effectively. Examples include SAS, R, Python, and other technical, programming, data analysis, project management, and market research techniques. Soft skills, on the other hand, are less tangible and often difficult to measure. They encompass the personal qualities, attributes, and interpersonal traits that shape how individuals interact and collaborate with others in the workplace. Soft skills are typically developed through life experiences and workplace interactions. The encouraging news is that soft skills can be learned and mastering them provides a significant competitive advantage in today's fast-paced and rapidly evolving job market.

INTRODUCTION

Today's economy requires its workforce to acquire two types of skills: hard skills or job-related knowledge and abilities to help us perform specific job responsibilities effectively, and soft skills or personal qualities that help us thrive in the workplace. So, what are examples of hard skills you may ask? Examples include SAS, Python and R programming, data analysis, project management, and market research.

Soft skills on the other hand are not always measurable and consist of non-technical skills that describe the characteristics, attributes, and traits that are often associated with one's personality. Soft skills enable effective and harmonious interaction with others in the workplace and are acquired from the roles and/or experiences one has had. The good news is that soft skills can be learned and, more importantly, provide one with a competitive edge in today's demanding and evolving workplace.

The objective of this paper is to present information about the types of soft skills that are beneficial to gaining a competitive edge (or advantage) in the 21st century job market. Topics include understanding the difference between hard skills and soft skills, examples of soft skills for career growth, the importance of acquiring soft skills, and ways to acquire and/or hone soft skills for competitive advantage.

HARD SKILLS VERSUS SOFT SKILLS

Hard skills represent a person's technical skill set and ability to perform various functional tasks. These types of skills are associated with what has been learned and/or gained through education, specific training, or on the job. In contrast, soft skills are referred to as character traits, people skills, life skills, and interpersonal skills. They are applicable across job titles and industries and are generally associated with how well one interacts with others. The good news is that soft skills can be acquired and can be improved. Enclosed, below, are examples of soft skills.

- **Communication** – the ability to speak and write clearly and concisely.
- **Critical Thinking** – the ability to analyze problems and make informed decisions.
- **Leadership** – the ability to manage difficult situations and people.
- **Teamwork** – the ability to effectively work well with others.
- **Work Ethic** – the ability to manage time, complete tasks, stay organized, and perform job responsibilities.
- **Attitude** – the ability to bring a positive attitude to the workplace.

Soft Skills to Gain a Competitive Edge in the 21st Century Job Market, continued

Category	Soft Skill
Communication	Speaking
	Reading comprehension
	Writing
	Listening
	Conflict resolution
	Negotiating

Critical Thinking	Creativity
	Curiosity
	Innovation
	Logical thinking
	Problem solving
	Resourcefulness
	Thinking outside the box
	Willingness to learn

Leadership	Decision-making
	Delegation
	Dispute resolution
	Inspiring people
	Managing teams
	Mentoring and coaching
	Motivating others
	Supervising

Category	Soft Skill
Teamwork	Collaboration
	Diversity awareness
	Empathy
	Interpersonal skills
	Networking
	Persuasion
	Social skills
	Team building

Work Ethic	Attentiveness
	Dedication
	Dependability
	Meeting deadlines
	Multitasking
	Perseverance
	Reliability
	Results-oriented
	Staying on task
	Time management
	Trainable

Attitude	Confident
	Cooperative
	Courteous
	Enthusiastic
	Friendly
	Patient
	Respectful

ACQUIRING SOFT SKILLS

Because soft skills are somewhat difficult to teach, employers want to be certain that their job applicants already possess the soft skills they will need to be successful performing the duties of their job. If job applicants are lacking in one or more of these soft skills, then as was mentioned earlier – soft skills can be acquired and can be improved. The following table presents each of the main soft skills along with ways to acquire and/or hone their skills.

Soft Skill	Ways to Acquire and/or Hone a Soft Skill
Communication	To be an effective communicator, learn and practice a combination of techniques including non-verbal such as body language and tone of voice; verbal techniques such as public speaking and presentation; and written techniques such as writing papers and storytelling to describe complex scenarios, problems, and their solutions, along with alternatives, to different audiences.
Teamwork	Delegate and distribute duties and responsibilities with stakeholders, team members, and others while respecting another person's point of view and professional experience even during disagreement.
Problem solving	Problem solving skills encompass the development of critical thinking, curiosity, and creativity abilities. Using logical reasoning, rational approaches, and brainstorming strategies along with curiosity and an open-mindedness helps to identify the pros and cons of any situation or problem, with the hope of improved decision-making opportunities.
Leadership	A leader possesses specific qualities which help them stand out, including the ability to inspire, motivate, instill confidence, problem solve, listen, coach, and mentor to align a group, employees, and others to move in the same or a positive direction.
Learn from others	Identify role models you can learn from, build a network of relationships, and observe the traits of others to acquire vital skills to help you successfully interact with others to improve your professional skills.

CONCLUSION

Today's economy requires its workforce to acquire two types of skills: hard skills or job-related knowledge and abilities to help us perform specific job responsibilities effectively, and soft skills or personal qualities that help us thrive in the workplace. This paper presented information about the types of soft skills that are beneficial for gaining a competitive edge (or advantage) in the 21st century job market. Specific topics include understanding the difference between hard skills and soft skills, examples of soft skills for career growth, the importance of acquiring soft skills, and techniques for acquiring and/or honing soft skills for competitive advantage.

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Kirk Paul Lafler is an internationally recognized Enterprise Data Architect, Analytics Consultant, Data Scientist, and Educator who brings deep, cross-disciplinary expertise spanning analytics, data science, SQL, SAS, database systems, Python, application development, and systems thinking. His work is grounded in the intersection of rigorous technical execution and measurable business outcomes. Recognized for distilling complexity into clear, actionable insight, Kirk equips organizations and professionals to build capability and confidence through hands-on, applied leadership and instruction.

Widely respected for his ability to translate complex technical concepts into clear, structured, and approachable learning experiences, Kirk's training courses and presentations consistently resonate with audiences ranging from hands-on practitioners to technical leaders. His sessions are known for combining deep technical insight with real-world examples, best practices, and immediately actionable techniques where his technical content doesn't just explain what to do - it shows how and why, empowering participants with greater confidence, capability, and impact.

As a consultant, Kirk has partnered with organizations across industries to improve analytics capabilities, optimize systems, and enable teams to work more efficiently and confidently. As an educator and author, he is passionate about helping professionals grow their skills, strengthen their problem-solving abilities, and achieve better outcomes through smarter use of data and software.

As the author of several books, including PROC SQL: Beyond the Basics Using SAS, Third Edition (SAS Press, 2019), Kirk is a frequent invited speaker, educator, and keynote presenter at conferences, symposiums, and professional summits worldwide, and a recipient of 29 "Best" awards for contributed papers, hands-on workshops (HOWs), and posters.

Comments and suggestions are encouraged and can be sent to:

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