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The Softer Side of IT:

Cultivating hard-to-find soft skills
in today's IT workforce

ABSTRACT

Organizations continue to be challenged by the high demand for information technology (IT) professionals and the widening talent shortage for these crucial positions. Adding to this concern is the need to hire IT professionals with not only technical hard skills, but also the soft skills they need to be effective.

In a recent IT skills global survey conducted by Experis across ten major markets, 28 percent of IT leaders indicate that they are seeking employees who can demonstrate communication and collaboration as a skill.¹ They report that these soft skills are scarce in IT professionals and are as important as many critical hard skills. IT professionals who have developed effective communication and collaboration soft skills are better able to understand and convey the business value of IT projects to non-technical stakeholders, earn buy-in and support, collaborate more effectively on teams, attain positive outcomes more quickly, and deliver successful projects.

This white paper explores the impact of the IT soft skill deficit, provides insights into the issue, and offers guidance on how to assess and develop these critical skills, particularly as it relates to communicating effectively and partnering with others. It equips IT leaders with a better understanding of the in-demand soft skills for the IT workforce and the impact of those soft skills on business today. The paper presents recommended actions that IT leaders can take to elevate these skills within their workforce to achieve success as the IT professional continues to evolve.



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¹ The global research was based on information gathered from executives whose responsibilities included hiring decisions for IT employees.

INTRODUCTION: DECODING SOFT SKILLS IN THE IT WORKFORCE



In Experis' IT skills survey, language fluency issues are cited by **15 percent of executives**.

While language barriers are certainly a contributing factor to communication issues within IT teams, greater challenges are also at work. Assessments show that IT professionals tend to be more task-focused and may not prioritize communication and collaboration as highly as they would other skills and attributes. According to InfoWorld, they are "fiercely intelligent, stubbornly logical, and disturbingly anti-social".² In many organizations, **IT professionals are traditionally rewarded for their technical skills and accomplishments rather than for their communication and collaboration skills**, which deemphasizes the value of these skills and can steer them away from developing these skills.²⁻⁶

Communication and collaboration are skills that are more essential than ever before due to evolving roles and responsibilities of IT personnel.

In its brief history, the IT profession's responsibilities have expanded from back-end system operations to include front-end experiences that require more cross-functional communication with departments such as administration and marketing.²⁻⁶ According to Mary Shacklett in an article on TechRepublic.com, "The ability to read, write, and speak clearly and effectively will never go out of style – especially in IT. IT project annals are filled with failed projects that were good ideas but poorly communicated".⁷

Communication and collaboration skills are increasingly vital within IT workforces and warrant greater prioritization.

In addition, factors that further drive the criticality of communication and collaboration skills in IT professionals include:

- IT team composition is often complex and can be composed of multi-cultural permanent and contingent employees speaking different of languages, compelling IT professionals to be acutely aware of cultural differences.
- IT projects are typically critical to the organization and have tight deadlines that favour a task-oriented approach, challenging IT professionals to collaborate under pressure and communicate with utmost clarity.
- As technology evolves, organizations focus training budgets on advancing the hard skills IT professionals need to perform their job, further diluting the importance of developing soft skills.²⁻⁶
- Based on advancements in the dynamics of IT professionals, the need for communication and collaboration – both with internal colleagues and external clients and partners – is higher than ever.

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SOLVING COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION DEFICITS

In order to evolve, businesses are discovering they need to create an environment that motivates individuals to change their behavior. To fill the communication and collaboration skills deficit within IT workforces, a collaborative culture is needed. Creating and fostering this type of culture typically is the role of the leader – and the leader needs to master new skills to do this effectively.

Developing a Culture of Collaboration

Leadership drives the culture of a company. **Creation of a truly collaborative environment within IT professionals is primarily the IT leader's responsibility.** Collaborative environments can help IT leaders recruit, retain, and motivate employees. In addition, collaborative cultures can help to increase productivity, bring new products and services to market faster, increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, and improve an organization's bottom line.²

Collaboration and communication are intrinsically connected. Requiring more sophisticated communication skills of IT professionals can help an organization succeed in creating a collaborative culture. To help develop this culture, IT leaders should emphasize the importance of soft skills, regularly demonstrate the principles of collaboration, and reward those who successfully showcase those skills, including ownership, alignment, full responsibility, self-accountability, mutual respect, integrity, and trust.⁸

Collaboration skills you should look for:



Many global leaders have been working to develop collaborative work environments for years, and they see the benefits to their business.

“Collaboration is huge at GE right now,” explains Aaron Moede, IT Risk Lead at GE Healthcare. “We’re trying to take our IT talent and make a smarter, business savvy workforce, and a big part of that is collaboration across functional business counterparts.”

GE is adopting a holistic approach to developing soft skills within its workforce, which includes integrating collaboration into training, performance appraisals, and compensation. The company has also created specialized collaborative opportunities to develop the collaboration skills of its leaders. Routinely, executives select senior leaders from each business and from different geographies to participate in prioritizing and resolving a major issue impacting one of the companies. The leaders are challenged to team up with other leaders in the organization to solve issues across different business functions. “It’s considered a real honor to be asked to participate in one these collaborative sessions,” says Moede. “When you get this opportunity, you’re essentially being told you’re at the top of your game.”

“...emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won't make a great leader.”

Establish Effective IT Leadership to Drive Change

Although IT leaders are often promoted for their keen technical skills, the complexity of their leadership roles also requires them to hone their business, collaborative, and communication skills.

“Employers are telling us they need more than strong technical competencies from their IT talent. They expect top IT professionals to also be skilled communicators and strong collaborators,” says ManpowerGroup's Ram Chandrashekar, Executive Vice President of Operational Excellence and IT, and President of Asia Pacific Middle East. “This is a definite shift from 10 years ago even and one that needs to be championed from within the organization. IT leaders must assume ownership of prioritizing and valuing soft skills within their teams and evaluating where communication and collaboration deficits exist to direct skills development appropriately.”

Leaders have much to gain when they master the management of individual and group differences within their organization. Managing conflict appropriately can lead to innovation and greater shared ownership within a team.

Emotional Intelligence in Leaders

Workforce collaboration – in IT or any workforce – calls upon leaders to possess a high degree of emotional intelligence. Simply put, emotional intelligence is the capacity to recognize, understand, and manage one's emotions, as well as the emotions of others, in order to successfully build relationships. Rutgers psychologist Daniel Goleman says, “My research, along with other recent studies, clearly shows that emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership. Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won't make a great leader”.⁹ According to Right Management, **organizations need managers who are more interpersonally aware, not out of social benevolence, but because it is essential to attracting and retaining quality talent.**¹⁰ As expected, emotional intelligence is especially critical in global business, to navigate the communication and collaboration complexities that accompany cultural differences.

A PROCESS-DRIVEN APPROACH TO IMPROVING COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION SKILLS

Leaders need to understand the communication and collaboration framework needs for their mixed workforce. Once the organizational culture is aligned, leaders can begin to work with employees to develop and enhance their communication and collaboration skills.

For IT positions, it is important to determine the most critical behaviors, skills and abilities required for communication, collaboration, and interpersonal skills by creating a success profile/competency model for specific roles. There are various levels of communication skills and collaboration skills – not everyone is expected to be

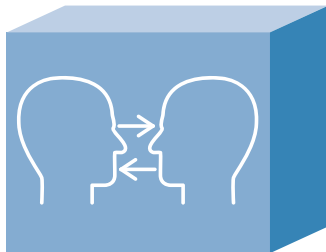
experts in these skills or be operating at the highest performance levels. This profile will outline requirements for successful performance in the role and provide a common language and framework for all hiring, performance management and developmental activities.

Consider these general categories when understanding your organizational needs:

Communication Skills

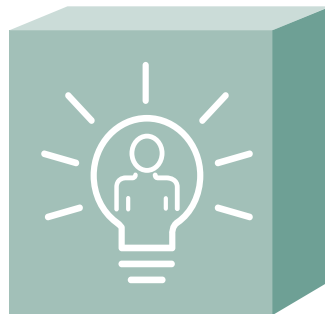
Basic

- Uses appropriate grammar and vocabulary
- Verbally expresses messages clearly and concisely



Intermediate

- Brings ideas and messages to life that connect with the target audience
- Projects credibility and confidence under difficult or adverse conditions



Advanced

- Actively listens
- Generates enthusiasm in a group through verbal communication
- Coaches others to communicate more effectively



Collaboration Skills

Basic

- Cultural acumen and ability to work with diverse team
- Team player
- Self-control
- Respect of rules and others
- Openness to change



Intermediate

- Trust in others
- Consideration for others
- Decision making
- Adaptability



Advanced

- Resilience
- Critical mind



When identifying communication and collaboration skill levels for each position:

- Assess the role's current needs for interaction
- Anticipate the future path of the employee
- Include all groups in the process, including permanent employees, consultants and contingent workers.

PRACTICAL ADVICE: EXECUTING ON SOFT SKILLS NEEDS

Assessment

Assessing an applicant's soft skills requires an effective toolset. Using the skills framework described in the previous section, the required soft skills competencies can be incorporated into the detailed job description for open roles of both contingent and permanent staff.

As a starting point, the following best practices can provide valuable guidance during the interview process and on-boarding phase.



Basic	Intermediate	Advanced
Assess the language level of Candidates via video. A few questions lets you know how well they understand, respond and engage in a conversation.	Make sure to involve other functions in the process. This is the best way to assess if the individual can convey technical concepts to non-technical people. Ask about exposure to diverse cultures.	Administer personality assessments – there are many available, so choose the appropriate assessment for the IT role. Use a behavior-based interview guide.

Don't forget other aspects of the interview process can provide valuable information about the applicant's interpersonal skills, such as:

- Eye contact and body language.
- Clear articulation.
- Integrity/work ethic – did the applicant respond to communications promptly, follow up on any additional requests, and arrive to the interview on time?
- Comfort level in the interview.

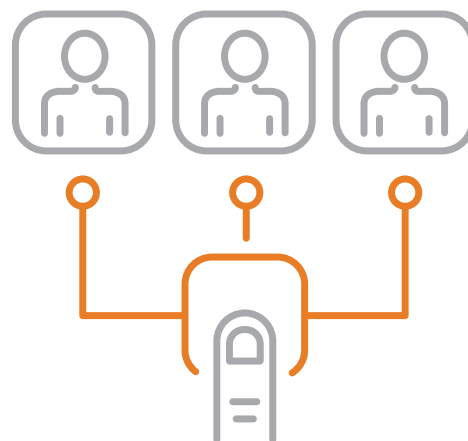
PRACTICAL ADVICE: EXECUTING ON SOFT SKILLS NEEDS

DEVELOPMENT

The good news is that communication and collaboration are coachable skills that can be taught to IT professionals. What's expected from leaders:

- Emphasize the importance of soft skills to their teams.
- Demonstrate what ideal communication and collaboration skills look like.
- Set expectations for effective communication and collaboration.
- Hold IT professionals accountable for meeting expectations around soft skills.
- Provide specific, actionable feedback and coaching to IT professionals.
- Illustrate the impact of soft skills on goals/team.

IT leaders can consider the following best practices to promote development of communication and collaboration skills within their workforce, starting with a worker's first day on the job and throughout their career.



Basic	Intermediate	Advanced
<p>No matter whether contingent or permanent, local or remote, introduce new comers to the team on the first day.</p> <p>Conduct frequent, informal pulse checks to help acclimation to company culture and observe verbal and written communication skills.</p>	<p>Bring soft skills into career conversations. List and share performance expectations from the very beginning.</p> <p>Bring people together outside of their comfort zone through special activities and opportunities for cross-functional team-building workshops.</p>	<p>Create a 90-day on-boarding plan, followed by performance reviews.</p> <p>Provide assessment and individual, actionable feedback on improvement areas to promote insight into the strengths and potential implications of their communication style and collaboration skill.</p> <p>Share assessment notes with other leaders to facilitate assimilation.</p>

Additional strategies may also be required to assist in the development of communication and collaboration skills within the IT workforce.

- For example, remote IT professionals can hone their skills by relying more on video chats or conference calls and less on email exchanges. Encouraging remote workers to attend team building workshops enables them to practice professional interpersonal skills and develop relationships with teammates that facilitate collaboration.
- Another useful approach is to establish guidelines for effective communication between different time zones. Propose meeting times when both the IT professional and other team members (or the person they are trying to help) are available and have the focused time needed to complete the work.
- One of the more challenging requirements for IT professionals is communicating with co-workers or customers who are frustrated because they are experiencing technical problems. A high volume of these types of stressful interactions may lead to communication avoidance – or at least the desire to not answer the phone or open an email. Providing positive feedback can help facilitate their desire to communicate.



CONCLUSION

The challenges identified in this paper can be overcome by implementing the right strategy. A deficit of communication and collaboration skills within an IT workforce can negatively impact business. This is why IT leaders need to enhance these skills by assessing and developing their IT professionals' soft skills.

The key to advancing these skills within the IT workforce is to:

- Understand how **communication and collaboration are important to achieving business goals.**
- **Develop a culture of collaboration** within the organization.
- **Elevate the leaders' communication and collaboration skills,** as well as emotional intelligence.
- Understand the **organization's communication and collaboration needs for each role.**
- Take action by **assessing and developing communication and collaboration skills within the IT workforce,** starting with the hiring phase.

Ultimately, teams benefit when all team members are equipped with communication and collaboration skills. Understanding and developing the soft skills of IT team members creates a more effective cross-functional dynamic, leading to the success of the entire team and most importantly, the success of the organization.

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