

Soft Skills at Work: Complaining can affect productivity, morale

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital
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Do you know a person who is "the complainer?" Maybe a friend or co-worker?

A few years ago I was shopping in a greeting card store when I overheard two discontented employees. As these store clerks started griping about their customers, they were unaware I was in the back card aisle.

After a woman left the store, one of the clerks said, "She reminds me why I wish customers would stay home. They talk too much. I can never get my work done."

Then this clerk abruptly stopped and wondered in a hushed voice if anyone else was in the store.

I didn't know what to do, so decided to remain silent and walk away from both clerks. But I could hear them resume complaining about how much they had to do. This continued until another customer opened the door.

What impression did I have of this store? I'm sure you can guess it was not positive.

People who gripe were on the mind of the Rev. Will Bowen when he wrote the book, "A Complaint Free World: How to Stop Complaining and Start Enjoying the Life You Always Wanted." He asked his congregation to give up complaining, criticizing, gossiping or using sarcasm for 21 days. People who participated were issued purple bracelets as a reminder of their commitment.

If they caught themselves griping, their bracelets were to be put on the opposite wrist and the counting had to begin again. Rev. Bowen said it took him about three months to put together 21 complaint-free days.

Complaining is easy to do and can be hard to stop. Saying, "I'm bored," or "This food tastes awful," comes naturally to most of us. But in the workplace, griping can affect productivity and morale.

A local supervisor spoke candidly about an employee who constantly complains.

"She's talented and good in terms of performance," the supervisor said. "But we can't pay sufficient attention to other employees who would like development because we're always managing how she reacts to everything."

This employee corners upper management and expresses her displeasure about new policies, claiming her co-workers don't like them as well.

The employee's ability to move up in the company is nil. The supervisor told me she is not given responsibility and will never be a manager. In this case, the employee is engaging in a terrible habit that affects her own progress and creates an unpleasant situation for co-workers and supervisors.

But this is not to say that all complaining is bad.

If there is a problem that needs to be addressed, bringing it to the attention of employers and suggesting possible remedies can be helpful. Using a professional tone while describing the difficulty is essential as well. Complaining becomes deadly, however, when no problem exists, it is constant, or morale and productivity are dampened.

Whenever I think of people who gripe incessantly, a young grocery clerk comes to mind. For several years, he helped load bags into my car, telling me weekly how unhappy he was about his part-time status. I never heard a positive comment from him in eight years. It's no wonder that he didn't become a full-time employee.

Complaining takes a toll on employers and co-workers. If you feel such a need - unless it is to solve a problem - do so outside the work environment and only with trusted friends or family members. Better yet, think of something you appreciate for every complaint you make.

There are many soft skills that enhance a person's reputation. Constant complaining is definitely not one of them.

CONNECT! Coalition

Last month, I listed the top soft skills employers prioritized in a CONNECT! survey. Several participants also wrote about other qualities they felt were lacking, yet critical, in today's workplace such as:

- Follow through and actually completing the task that was requested by the time it was asked, without being asked again.
- The willingness to go the extra mile to get the job done, not participating in the "not my job" group.
- As so many workplaces are team-based now, you have to be kind, considerate and caring - it may sound trite, but the phrase "use the good manners your mother taught you" makes a HUGE difference.

- Active listening, willingness to assist fellow employees.
- If someone isn't reliable then they are no good to me. Respecting one's co-workers and clients is also very important.
- Good sense of humor.
- Willingness to ask questions and seek clarification. My one concern has always been having employees who don't ask questions.
- Professionalism in the workplace versus your "day at the beach" or "hanging around with friends," casual attitude, appearance and focus.

Most survey participants said all the skills were essential and it was hard to limit their choices. Their comments reflect just how important soft skills are to employers.

Marcia Hall, founder of Reputation COUNTS, is a workplace behavior trainer and author of "Jumpstart Your Job: 12 Simple Ways to Shift Your Career into High Gear." She is a member of the CONNECT! Coalition, the Anne Arundel County group of organizations dedicated to promoting the importance of essential workplace skills, and can be reached at marcia@reputationcounts.com.

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