

Soft Skills at Work: Though often neglected, 'soft skills' are essential in the workplace

By MARCIA HALL, For The Capital

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Editor's note: Soft Skills at Work is a new column that will appear monthly, defining soft skills in more detail and offering practical tips to develop these skills. The activities of CONNECT!, a coalition of organizations in Anne Arundel County, also will be described.

I can't teach you how to be a nice guy and have the desire to do the work.

Employers throughout the county have likely thought or uttered this statement countless times over the years. While the emphasis has been on academic achievement for decades, the need for training in "soft skills" is coming to the forefront, particularly because of the global economy.

What are soft skills, and why are they so important in the workplace? Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation Secretary Thomas Perez calls them "indispensable" because they are the skills that really determine a person's success.

They include work ethic, attitude, getting along with others and other personal attributes. Soft skills complement the technical or "hard" skills, but their importance is often undervalued and training in them is limited at best.

And an increasing number of studies talk about the lack of proficiency with soft skills in the workplace.

In a report from The Conference Board on Oct. 2, 2006, it was determined that, "Nearly three-quarters of survey participants (70 percent) cite deficiencies among incoming high school graduates in 'applied' (soft) skills,' such as professionalism, and work ethic."

The Conference Board, along with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and the Society for Human Resource Management, issued The

Workforce Readiness Report Card that concluded, "Applied skills on all educational levels trump knowledge and skills, such as reading comprehension and mathematics."

According to a survey reported on [HR.com](https://www.hr.com), "Two-thirds of North American HR managers would rather hire someone with strong soft skills and weak technical abilities."

Jason Groves, assistant vice president of government affairs with Verizon, talked about his views from the employer's perspective.

"I believe soft skills are the foundation upon which everything else is built," Mr. Groves said. "But many people assume they already know them; they take them for granted. In that sense, they are more difficult to teach."

While soft skills are critically important to a person's success on the job, many students do not understand that they need to demonstrate these behaviors in the workplace.

Businesspeople assume that new employees will know how to act, and are dismayed when their workers are late, have a poor attitude or produce substandard work.

A supervisor told me that a young employee went to the dentist at 1 p.m. and then decided it was OK to go home afterward. This worker did not know that he should go back to work.

What are the skills employers want to see demonstrated? It comes down to everyday behaviors, such as:

- Be positive and friendly.
- Dress appropriately.
- Come on time.
- Do what you say you will do.
- Admit your mistakes.
- Ask questions when you don't know how to do a task.
- Be adaptable.
- Exceed expectations and take the initiative.

Conversations with employers and the results of the studies show that the importance of soft skills is not being stressed enough or stated in a way that can be easily understood by students. For example, many high school and college students do not know that they should smile and make eye contact when talking to people. They do not comprehend that being unfriendly can hurt their careers and affect how the company they work for is perceived.

In an effort to bring attention to soft skills, a coalition of organizations in Anne Arundel County, called CONNECT!, has been formed. Currently, the groups include the Anne Arundel County Public Schools, the Anne Arundel County Public Library, Leadership Anne Arundel, Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corp., 21st Century Education Foundation, Woodland Job Corps, several area chambers of commerce, and the South Anne Arundel Rotary Club.

Other organizations are being invited to join to increase awareness that demonstrating soft skills and appropriate workplace behavior lead to increased opportunity for the individual while moving a business forward.

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

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