

# Soft Skills At Work: Personal skills can keep workers afloat

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"What are the top three to five soft skills the Anne Arundel Workforce Development Corp. should teach?"

That was the question posed to a group of employers and agencies working with job seekers at two meetings convened by Workforce Development and held at the Northern Anne Arundel County Chamber of Commerce last month.

Employers have long lamented the lack of soft skills in their workers, and when asked in surveys what qualities they want to see demonstrated, the answers are virtually the same each year. What is also clear is that employees, both new and long term, do not understand how important these skills are to their success.

Meeting facilitator Elisabeth H. Sanders-Park, an internationally known author, speaker and president of WorkNet Solutions, defined soft skills as the "dynamics outside of (technical or occupational) abilities that allow a person to get a job, keep a job and advance in their careers."

"These are competencies outside of hard skills," Elisabeth said. "For example, knowing how to manage personal technology or the fleeting art of making eye contact."

Elisabeth relayed that she hears the same comments from employers across the country. The industry or region doesn't matter; businesses essentially want the same things. The lack of soft skills "continues to be problematic," Elisabeth said.

## 'Unwritten rules'

In response to this need, Workforce Development has decided to develop soft skills training curriculum. Kirk Murray, president and CEO of nonprofit agency, told me why they made that decision.

"The role of AAWDC is to work with our clients to make sure that they have the right skill sets - both technical and soft skills - to meet the needs of businesses," he said.

At the two meetings, there were lively discussions about what employers and agency partners find wanting. The first soft skill mentioned in both groups was punctuality.

"Be on time," an employer said.

An agency partner echoed that same thought the next day.

"They need to show up on time. It is not OK to take an extended lunch break and come in when they want."

These comments led to a fascinating discussion about unrealistic expectations many employees hold. For example, some people in the youngest generation, the millennials, wonder why it is important to be in the office while co-workers are not there as well.

Sanders-Park observed that employees need to understand that particular jobs have different expectations.

"This job has these responsibilities. Co-workers may have others," she said. "You may not see person B or C in the chair at 8:00 a.m. This is not their job."

An agency representative agreed: "They need to understand that jobs are different, there are different expectations for different positions. And don't compare your success to other employees."

These viewpoints evolved to a dialogue about workplace culture and the fact that many employees don't grasp what it is or that there are "unwritten rules."

"They don't understand the realities of the workplace," one participant said. "They don't get cause and effect, that, 'My actions may cause me to lose my job.' "

An example of such a lack of comprehension was shared with the group by one of the employers. She said one young worker told his supervisor, "I took it upon myself" to say how something should be done.

"Youth need to understand it's not your job to teach the supervisor," the employer said. "The boss is still in charge."

In addition to punctuality and workplace realities, participants mentioned positive attitude and professionalism including appropriate dress and knowing customer service skills.

"Not understanding what is appropriate when is a huge problem," an employer said. She described a situation where employees are on the phone having personal conversations while customers are waiting.

Commitment, dependability and responsibility for one's own career were cited as well as demonstrating good etiquette, manners and civility.

"I've had job applicants who couldn't look me in the eye," a participant said.

## **Fixing the problem**

The list of skills turned out to be extensive, and just three to five were not identified at the meetings. Those attending saw that not every skill can be taught and that other resources exist in the community for needs such as housing and transportation; these should not be addressed by Workforce Development.

In the coming months, Murray's agency will issue a request for proposal to develop soft skills curriculum for different populations such as youth, displaced or career changers, veterans, welfare to work and ex-offenders.

"What will be unique is that the curriculum will include those soft skills that directly impact work," Sanders-Park said.

In my mind, the best result of the meetings is that Workforce Development will move this important issue beyond the discussion phase to a concerted effort to teach soft skills. Employees of all ages need to know the lack of soft skills affects the ability to both get and keep a job.

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