

5.2.13: Skills for a Career

Learning Objectives

- List specific skills that will be necessary for your career path

If you lived and worked in colonial times in the United States, what skills would you need to be gainfully employed? What kind of person would your employer want you to be? And how different would your skills and aptitudes be then compared with today?



Many industries that developed during the 1600s–1700s, such as health care, publishing, manufacturing, construction, finance, and farming, are still with us today. And the professional abilities, aptitudes, and values required in those industries are many of the same ones employers seek today.

For example, in the health care field then, just like today, employers looked for professionals with scientific acumen, active listening skills, a service orientation, oral comprehension abilities, and teamwork skills. And in the financial field then, just like today, employers looked for economics and accounting skills, mathematical reasoning skills, clerical and administrative skills, and deductive reasoning.

Why is it that with the passage of time and all the changes in the work world, some skills remain unchanged (or little changed)?

The answer might lie in the fact there are two main types of skills that employers look for: hard skills and soft skills.

- **Hard skills** are concrete or objective abilities that you learn and perhaps have mastered. They are skills you can objectively claim, like using a computer, speaking a foreign language, or operating a machine. You might earn a certificate, a college degree, or other credentials that attest to your hard-skill competencies. Obviously, because of changes in technology, the hard skills required by industries today are vastly different from those required centuries ago.
- **Soft skills**, on the other hand, are subjective skills that have changed very little over time. Such skills might pertain to the way you relate to people, or the way you think, or the ways in which you behave—for example, listening attentively, working well in groups, and speaking clearly. Soft skills are sometimes also called “transferable skills” because you can easily transfer them from job to job or profession to profession without much training. Indeed, if you had a time machine, you could likely transfer your soft skills from one time period to another! Though it is important to remember that while soft skills are broadly consistent even from centuries ago, the specific execution of them requires continuous learning and recalibrating—especially as the workplace diversifies.

What Employers Want in an Employee

Employers want individuals who have the necessary hard and soft skills to do the job well and adapt to changes in the workplace. Soft skills may be especially in demand today because employers are generally equipped to train new employees in a hard skill—by training them to use new computer software, for instance—but it’s much more difficult to teach an employee a soft skill such as developing rapport with coworkers or knowing how to manage conflict. An employer might rather hire an inexperienced worker who can pay close attention to details than an experienced worker who might cause problems on a work team.

In this section, we look at ways of identifying and building particular hard and soft skills that will be necessary for your career path. We also explain how to use your time and resources wisely to acquire critical skills for your career goals.

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