

## **Academic and employability skills**

Academic skills are those fundamental skills necessary for the preparation of students to be ready for tertiary education and careers. For students to excel academically, the following come to play:<sup>1</sup> All students need foundational academic knowledge, especially in Mathematics and English language Arts, and, in today's economic environment, all high school students need the academic skills necessary to pursue tertiary education without remediation the measure many consider "college readiness." However, to truly be career-ready, students also need to be able to apply academics in context, and some academic skills need more attention and development. For example, employers often cite deficiencies in English and written communications, such as memos, letters and complex technical reports. This supports the idea that most of the written material students will encounter in their careers is informational in nature, such as technical manuals and research articles, and they must be equipped academically to analyze and use these materials. Sometimes, these skills are not emphasized in traditional classroom settings. Workplace deficiencies in mathematics are also commonly noted, with more attention needed on areas such as data analysis and statistics, reasoning, and solving mathematical problems. <sup>2</sup> Students must also be able to apply academic knowledge to authentic situations they may face in their careers, a skill that takes practice and intentional instruction that may need to be channeled to a student's specific career goals. For example, students preparing to be doctors need to be able to calculate and apply ratios, proportions, rates and percentages to determine drug dosages, <sup>3</sup> while construction students need to be able to apply geometrical principles to design and implement building plans.

## **EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS**

Employability is the ability of getting and keeping satisfactory work. Employability skills have often been cited by employers as the skills most critical to workplace success in the 21st-century economy. Employability skills are those knowledge, skills, understandings, achievements and attributes that help people in their choice of career to be successful, which could help the labour market attract more customers.

## **Factors of Employability**

These skills include critical thinking which includes: numeracy and computing skills, adaptability, negotiation, analyzing and problem solving, oral and written communications, value, collaboration and teamwork, creativity, flexibility, leadership, planning as well as organizing, responsibility, professionalism, ethics, and technology use. Numerous groups have worked with business and industry leaders to identify employability skills critical to employee success, including the 1990 U.S. Department of Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills that produced the report "What Work Requires of Schools: A SCANS Report for America 2000," and, more recently, such groups as the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). The report "Critical Skills Needs and Resources for the Changing Workforce,"<sup>4</sup> by SHRM, stated that, "Overall, employers placed the greatest weight on employee adaptability and critical thinking skills. HR (human resource) professionals and employees both reported that adaptability/flexibility and critical thinking/problem-solving skills were of greatest importance now compared with two years ago." In the 2006 report, "Are They Really Ready to Work?"<sup>5</sup> employability skills "dominate rankings of knowledge and skills expected to increase in importance over the next five years." Employers identified critical

thinking/problem solving, information-technology application, teamwork/collaboration, creativity/innovation and diversity as the top five such skills. Students must be provided opportunities to gain these skills and to learn to apply them to real-world life and work situations. Many of these employability skills are also necessary for "college readiness," creating some additional overlap between the two areas.

## **CRITICAL THINKING AS AN EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS**

Critical thinking encompasses a whole lot of skills needed in day to day business. Your degree subject and academic ability may influence one but your skills, values, interest, and personality will go a long way in a chosen career. The world of work is in a state of flux, your employability skills today may involve moving between a number of different job functions and employers, and those jobs and employers are likely to change and develop over time. In this 21<sup>st</sup> century, employers are seeking graduates who are enterprising, resourceful, and adaptable and who, as well as their degree, possess a range of skills which can be used in a wide variety of settings as well as in their careers.

**Written communication Skills:** In any chosen career, one has to be able to express himself/herself clearly in writing and it is a serious demand in every developing country.

**Verbal communication Skills:** Effective verbal communication skills include more than just talking. It encompasses both how you deliver messages and how you receive them. Communication is a soft skill and it is one that is important to every employer. Workers who can convey information clearly and effectively are highly valued by employers. Employees who can interpret messages and act appropriately on the information that they receive have a better chance of excelling on the job. Verbal communication occurs in many different contexts including training sessions, presentations, group meetings, performance appraisals, one-on-one discussions, interviews, disciplinary sessions, sales pitches and consulting engagements.

### **Examples of Verbal Communication Skills.**

- ✓ Advising others regarding an appropriate course of action;
- ✓ Anticipating the concern of others;
- ✓ Calming an agitated customer by recognizing and responding to their complaints;
- ✓ Conveying messages in a constructive manner emphasizing specific, challengeable behaviour
- ✓ Disciplining employees in a direct and respectful manner
- ✓ Emphasizing benefit of a product, service or proposal to persuade an individual or group;
- ✓ Explaining a difficult situation without getting angry;
- ✓ Giving credit to others;
- ✓ Introducing the focus of a topic at the beginning of a presentation or interaction;
- ✓ Receiving criticisms without defensiveness;
- ✓ Selecting language appropriate to the audience;

- ✓ Training others to carry out task/role.

**Flexibility Skills:** Flexibility means adapting successfully to changing situations and environment. Being flexible when it comes to work is worth a lot. Employees who approach their job with a [flexible mindset](#) are typically more highly valued by employers. Flexibility on the job includes the willingness and ability to readily respond to changing circumstances and expectations.

### **Why Employers Value Flexible Employees**

Workers with an orientation towards flexibility never say, "It is not my job" or "Do I have to?" when they are asked to take on a new assignment. Flexible employees modify their approach to tasks based on the preferences of stakeholders and the unique demands of each situation.

For employers, having employees willing to step outside their job description means they can get more accomplished with workers who are able to take on more responsibilities, do different tasks, and do more at work. It also means, that the employer doesn't have to persuade employees to take on more work. Flexible employees are willing to do whatever is necessary to get the task accomplished or the job done.

### **Why Employees Value Flexible Managers**

Flexibility skills are also relevant to the approach **management** takes to handling employees. Flexible managers treat employees as individuals and make an effort to accommodate personal styles and needs.

Managers who are flexible provide workers with greater latitude about the way they accomplish goals. They assess the needs of employees and provide feedback, guidance, and recognition individually to optimize performance.

**Persuasion Skills:** Persuasion in the workplace entails convincing others to follow a course of action, to agree to a commitment, or to purchase a product or service. Employers value persuasive skills because they impact so many aspects of the workplace.

Persuasive skills are used to influence many different stakeholders including customers, co-workers, bosses, business partners, subordinates, donors, funding sources, judges, juries, consumers, voters, and prospective employees.

## **NEGOTIATION AS AN EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS**

Negotiation is a means by which many people settle problems. It is also a process which many companies, individuals compromise issues avoiding argument and disputes in case any disagreement, people understandably seem to achieve the best possible outcome for their post. According to Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2010), negotiation is a formal discussion between people who are trying to reach an agreement. In any disagreement, individuals understandably aim to achieve the best possible outcome for their position (or perhaps an organization they represent). However, the principles of fairness, seeking mutual benefit and maintaining a relationship leads to a successful outcome.

Specific forms of negotiation are used in many situations: international affairs, the legal system, government, industrial disputes/domestic relationships as examples. However, general negotiation skills can be learned and applied in a wide range of activities. Negotiation skills can benefit in resolving any differences that arise between you and others.

## **Stages of Negotiation**

In order to achieve a desirable outcome, it may be useful to follow a structured approach to negotiation. For example, in a work situation a meeting may need to be arranged in which all parties involved can come together. The process of negotiation includes the following stages:

1. **Preparation:** Before any negotiation takes place, a decision needs to be taken as to when and where a meeting will take place to discuss the problem and who will attend. Setting a limited time-scale can also be helpful to prevent the disagreement continuing.

This stage involves ensuring all the pertinent facts of the situation are known in order to clarify your own position. In the work example above, this would include knowing the 'rules' of your organization, to whom help is given, when help is not felt appropriate and the grounds for such refusals. Your organization may well have policies to which you can refer in preparation for the negotiation.

2. **Discussion:** During this stage, individuals or members of each side put forward the case as they see it, that is, their understanding of the situation.

Key skills during this stage include [questioning](#), [listening](#) and [clarifying](#).

Sometimes it is helpful to take notes during the discussion stage to record all points put forward in case there is need for further clarification. It is extremely important to listen, as when disagreement takes place it is easy to make the mistake of saying too much and listening too little. Each side should have an equal opportunity to present their case.

3. **Clarifying Goals:** From the discussion, the goals, interests and viewpoints of both sides of the disagreement need to be clarified. It is helpful to list these factors in order of priority. Through this clarification it is often possible to identify or establish some common ground. Clarification is an essential part of the negotiation process, without it misunderstandings are likely to occur which may cause problems and barriers to reaching a beneficial outcome.

4. **Negotiate Towards a Win-Win Outcome:** This is a 'win-win' outcome where both sides are benefitted and no one is cheated. Their discussions, and inputs are of paramount importance for the progress of the organization. A win-win outcome is usually the best result. Although this may not always be possible, through negotiation, it should be the ultimate goal.

Suggestions of alternative strategies and compromises need to be considered at this point. Compromises are often positive alternatives which can often achieve greater benefit for all concerned compared to holding to the original positions.

5. **Agreement:** Agreement can be achieved once understanding of both sides' viewpoints and interests have been considered. It is essential for everybody involved to keep an open mind in order to achieve an acceptable solution. Any agreement needs to be made perfectly clear so that both sides know what has been decided.

6. **Implementing a Course of Action:** From the agreement, a course of action has to be implemented to carry through the decision.

### **Failure to Agree**

**If the process of negotiation breaks down and agreement cannot be reached, then re-scheduling a further meeting is called for. This avoids all parties becoming embroiled in heated discussion or argument, which not only wastes time but can also damage future relationships.**

At the subsequent meeting, the stages of negotiation should be repeated. Any new ideas or interests should be taken into account and the situation looked at afresh. At this stage it may also be helpful to look at other alternative solutions and/or bring in another person to mediate.