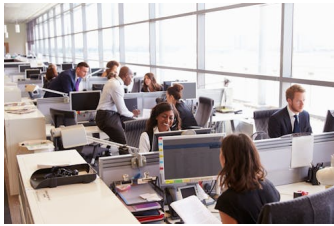


Lack of workers with 'soft skills' demands a shift in teaching

Written by The Conversation



A shift to open-plan offices means interpersonal and influencing skills are more important than ever. shutterstock

[Surveys](#) of the key skills employers seek in graduates continue to place so-called “soft skills” – like verbal and written communication skills, the ability to work collaboratively in teams and to influence others – in the top ten. But a [2016 report](#) found that other skills – such as critical thinking, problem-solving, attention to detail, and writing – top the list of missing skills among job-seekers.

These skills [are rated](#) as being important across all jobs and industries. And employees not having these skills costs businesses thousands of dollars per year.

In the first major review in two decades, the New South Wales Higher School Certificate syllabus is [set to focus](#) on ensuring students are more work-ready. The changes will put an emphasis on depth and rigour across key subject areas including English, maths, the sciences and history.

Developing these skills in young people will require not only a shift in subject matter, but also a change in how students are taught. Only [one in ten](#) Australian teachers have recently participated in professional development to help students develop generic, transferable skills for future work.

The change of emphasis in the English curriculum appears well-placed given the importance of communication skills – and that current graduates are seen to lack these.

How important are these skills?

A US survey [has found](#) miscommunication costs businesses with up to 100 staff an average of US\$420,000 per year. Even more staggeringly, in [another study](#), 400 businesses with at least 100,000 employees each claimed that inadequate communication cost an average of US\$62.4 million per company per year.

[A study](#) of science recruiters found 60% of respondents rated the ability to work collaboratively as most important, followed by adaptability (45%) and interpersonal relationship building (41%). Most respondents felt that applicants were lacking in these skills, particularly in critical thinking.

Notably, this study showed that employers considered soft skills as important as academic ability. Yet both current and potential employees are [often reported](#) as being “deficient” in these same skills.

It may appear that these core communication skill requirements of employers have not changed much over time. But the emphasis on collaborative work has altered dramatically. A [Harvard Business Review study](#) found that the time managers and employees spend on collaborative activities has increased by more than 50% in the past 20 years.

Modern workplace environments reflect this shift. Open-plan workplaces [designed](#) to increase interaction and collaboration are the norm. So, in addition to the job’s requirements, workplace design means these interpersonal and influencing skills are more important than ever.

In the past, you could escape difficult personalities and noisy co-workers by shutting the office door. The design of the modern workplace, coupled with the increased requirement to collaborate across teams and divisions, underscores the importance of increasing the soft-skill capacity of current and future employees.

What do employers want?

Employers are specifically recruiting for [social capital skills](#) – that is, employees who have well-developed influencing skills – to assist in building networks and the employer’s brand.

Where these roles were once seen as the domain of senior managers and marketing teams, the requirement for these influencing skills now extends across organisations.

As a result of these changes, the approach to developing soft skills is being examined. A [2016](#)

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[report](#)

from a joint federal government and OECD workshop underscored the importance of developing adaptability in young people, as well as enterprise skills that can be applied across a wide range of contexts.

Similarly, a [report](#) by the Foundation for Young Australians suggests that future jobs will demand transferable enterprise skills such as communication, critical thinking and presentation skills 70% more than jobs of the past.

Demand for these critical thinking skills [has risen 158%](#) in early-career job ads in the last three years alone. And early-career job ads requiring presentation skills pay an average of A\$8,853 more than those that don't.

Universities have [come in for criticism](#) from industry and corporate recruiters who argue that master of business administration programs need to be relevant and do more to develop leadership, communication and soft skills.

More needs to be done with educators, industry and government working together to ensure young people will be equipped with the skills they need for future jobs.

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