

MANAGING IN CHALLENGING TIMES



Why “soft skills” are beneficial to managers.

BY ALLAN WALKER

Do challenging economic times require a “soft” response? The answer is yes, according to an increasing number of practice administrators. The ability to see beneath the surface to discover, develop, and use an employee’s “soft skills” is a talent that all practice administrators should hone.

NEVER DISCOUNT SOFT SKILLS

Practice administrators should never discount the importance of soft skills—that blend of personal qualities, attitudes, habits, and social behaviors that makes someone a good employee and easy to work with. While today’s managers have access to a job market overflowing with eager applicants, the ever-changing impact of technology and workplace dynamics is giving hard-skills-only employees an increasingly shorter shelf life. Certain positions continue to require more technical, traditional skills than others. However, successful practices see the advantages of using recruiting and development strategies that help them identify qualified workers who also possess a strong set of complementary soft skills.

To help build a strong, compatible team, identify, hire, develop, and reward workers who possess these important soft skills:

Strong work ethic. Self-motivation, passion, and dedication to getting the job done, no matter what, are prized individual characteristics. Employees who are conscientious and adamant about doing the best work possible need to be identified, encouraged, and rewarded. Today’s fast-paced, multitasking work environment requires employees who have a combination of drive and common sense that allows them to fulfill their roles and responsibilities with minimal babysitting.

Sense of team. Today’s economically mandated do-more-with-less philosophy requires that employees embrace a total team approach. Lean (and, perhaps, getting leaner) practices can no longer tolerate a “that’s-not-my-job” attitude. All workers need to see the big picture while being able to accomplish even the smallest tasks. Increasingly, employees are being cross-trained to cover for one another when someone is on vacation or ill or when a position is not filled after an employee leaves.

Effective interpersonal skills. Everyone’s professional life suffers when coworkers cannot connect. Having the social skills necessary to become closer to colleagues is essential to the overall happiness and productivity of a practice. Workers with strong interpersonal skills: smile a lot, pay attention to

SOFT SKILLS

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others, communicate clearly, are active listeners, help resolve conflicts, are appreciative, do not complain much, and see the humorous side of things. It’s helpful to note that interpersonal skills can be improved, so there is hope for staff members who lack some of these important skills.

Desire to learn. The craving to participate in continuing education—be it of the daily, on-the-job learning-through-experience format or more formal away-from-the-office offerings—is important both personally and professionally. The best employees always want to be better, know more, pitch in when needed, and do a good job. While top workers may feel they are valuable employees today, they always seem to want to enhance the value they bring to the practice. Practice administrators should willingly meet this growth/value proposition by making sure learning opportunities are readily available and encouraged.

Sense of commitment. On the outside, workers with a strong sense of commitment are dependable, have good attendance records, and report to work on time. On the inside, these workers usually have an established set of meaningful personal values, principles, and beliefs that they bring into the work environment. While committed workers are passionate and loyal, it is essential that management clearly demonstrate its own commitment through respectful leadership, thoughtful rules and regulations, and steady support.

Positive attitude. A positive, cooperative attitude goes a long way in a group setting. Positive people are contagious—in

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a good way. Those who tend to see “the bright side” and have a “glass half-full” mentality can energize an office and bring other teams members along for the ride. Employees who project confidence and a sense of can-do generally care deeply about the company and their coworkers. They rarely involve themselves in company “politics” because their main goal is to help the company succeed and to share in that success.

Flexibility and adaptability. Workers confident enough to be flexible and adapt to unexpected challenges are worth their weight in gold in a busy practice. Flexible employees generally understand and follow directions well and embrace change without missing a beat. Open to new ideas and ways of doing things, these workers are able to visualize goals and objectives—and how to achieve them.

Confidence. While over-confidence can be a turnoff, a healthy, balanced level of self confidence is a fair indicator of positive self-esteem. Employees with good self-esteem tend to believe in themselves and therefore welcome challenges and find it easy to embrace objectives and goals. They also tend to mix well with other employees and are quick learners.

Accepting of criticism. This skill is difficult to master. When faced with critical feedback, most people first feel hurt and then lash back. However, the best employees view criticism in a positive light and see it as an opportunity to

learn and grow. They tend to see criticism not as a personal attack and focus more on the actions criticized. Managers should always look for ways to present criticism in a constructive, informative manner.

NEW LEVEL

In an increasingly frantic business world driven by difficult decisions and hard numbers, it is easy to dismiss soft skills as simply touchy-feely people skills that are nice to have but not all that important to the overall success of a practice. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Today’s fast-paced, service-oriented economy features a growing reliance on interactive teams that is elevating soft skills to a new level of importance within the workplace. ■

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