George Pennington provides a psychologist's perspective on why training in soft skills is vital for business (and personal) life

Soft skills IN THE BUSINESS & PERSONAL WORLD

In a 2008 survey the German Chamber of Commerce asked employers which were the most important skills future employees should be conversant with.

The results of the survey were remarkable (see Table 1 opposite).

Of the ten most important skills eight were soft skills (yellow). Among the top 20 there were only five hard skills (blue). Other surveys have shown similar results.

Employers want soft skills

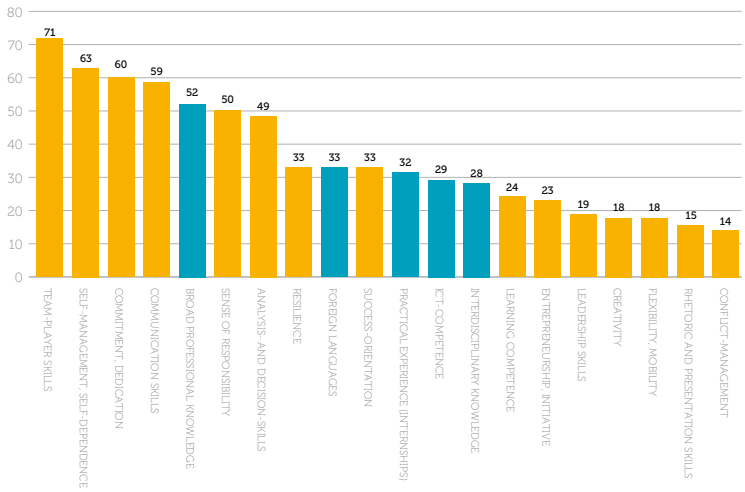
Employers obviously want reliable, committed and responsible team players who are mature and independent people. They explicitly ask for soft skills. Strangely, though, our schools and universities do not feature soft skills in their curricula. So employers have to make up for the deficit by providing training courses themselves. Many do this at great expense.

...but not too much

When the head of HR of a large German technology corporation declined to schedule my soft skill training sessions for his employees he gave me the following explanation:

"We only get the very best performers from the high schools and universities. Once they are here we hang a beautiful golden carrot at the end of a stick just in front of their noses. Trying to reach that carrot they give not 100%; no, they give 140%. Mind you, they are not meant to get hold of the carrot. Very few do. That's OK by us. It keeps the myth alive. The rest of them just run after it.

TABLE 1:
MOST IMPORTANT SKILLS FOR FUTURE EMPLOYEES



Die Studienreform zum Erfolg machen!, Erwartungen der Wirtschaft an Hochschulabsolventen, Dr Franziska Pankow, DIHK Januar 2008

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"We know that we will have to replace them at the age of 40 or 45 at the latest because by then they will be burned out. But until then we want them to give all they have."

And with a friendly smile he added:

"I am afraid, Mr Pennington, if I let you loose on my middle management they might stop running after the carrot. We cannot and do not want to run that risk."

This reluctant attitude towards equipping employees with soft skills is not uncommon. Employees should be self-reliant, committed, responsible, perceptive, creative and all that, certainly, but not too much so. They might become aware of the price they are paying for running after their carrot – and reconsider their options.

The idea is: "Lord, let it rain, but don't make them wet".

Thus soft skills are clearly a matter of business ethics and philosophy. Is business there to serve the people or is it the other way round?

The fact that our schools show no signs of teaching the soft skills should make us think.

Are our schools really equipping our children with the best possible knowledge and expertise, with the basic and indispensable prerequisites for a fulfilled life? Or are they just training them to do as they are told, making them fit for the carrot-race?

And which of these philosophies do our business schools stand for? In the business world I have encountered both attitudes. Only on rare occasions are they the result of careful deliberation or discussion.

Few HR departments and business schools seem to be aware of the philosophical and ethical implications of their soft skills practices.

Neither seems to attach any importance to the topic. When there is a demand for soft skills training they provide it more out of habit than conviction.

What are soft skills?

Soft skills are based on knowledge of ourselves. This knowledge is the very foundation of our self-management, of our fitness for working effectively and for life in general.

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If I know that I am allergic to lactose I also know that milkshakes are not for me. If I know that in order to stay healthy I need to sleep during the night I will not take on a job in a bakery. It's as simple as that.

Plato thought of this knowledge as a form of wisdom. He called it *phronesis*, which is usually translated as "practical wisdom". The application of *phronesis* in daily life, so say Aristotle and Plato unanimously, leads to *eudemonia* (literally, good spirits, well-being).

Plato's *phronesis* and today's soft skills are one and the same: personal and social competence.

The distinction between personal and social is an artificial one. All soft skills are part of the personal or self-competence, of the ability to organise and manage oneself adequately (in accordance with one's own and the situation's requirements). Self-competence also includes the social aspect.

Figure 1, a flip chart drawing from one of my training sessions, outlines the areas in which self-competence is relevant:

Like all other dynamic systems humans have three basic functional levels:

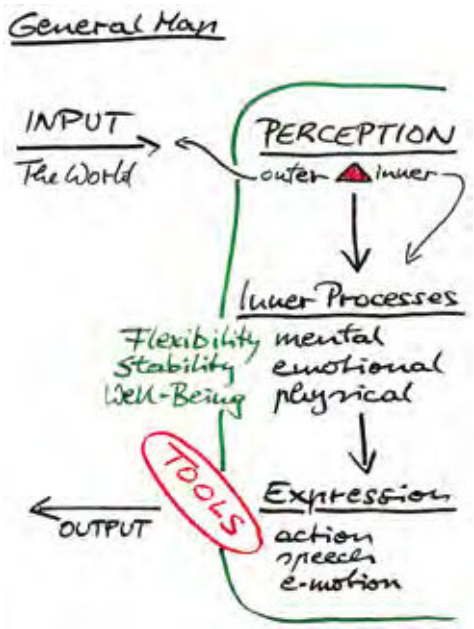
- the input-level (perception)
- the level of inner processes
- the output-level (expression)

(Other processes like metabolism, heat-balance and so on are neglected here in the context of the soft skills.)

Our perception, the organ with which we gather outer as well as inner information, is the master-key to our self-competence. Not only is it our most important interface with the outside world, it is also our prime instrument for self-reflection.

The inner processes can be mental, emotional or physical in nature. These three are interdependent. Together they form our awareness of our strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, values and goals; in other words, awareness of the forces that give us meaning and direction. Here we weigh pros and cons and make decisions. It is also the basis of our resilience.

FIGURE 1:
RELEVANT AREAS OF SELF-COMPETENCE



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The output-level (expression) is our second interface with the outside world. The quality of our expression depends on the competent handling of the first two levels, not on following predetermined values, methods or behaviours (tools).

Soft skills are the competence to manage these three areas in a wholesome way.

From this outline we can see how important the soft skills are, not only for individual life-fulfilment but also for the workplace.

Self-competence in these three areas is the key to both.

How should we teach soft skills?

Until now soft skills have been treated as if they were many: team-building, stress and conflict management, communication and presentation skills, leadership and many more. For all of these separate training is offered.

But learning to handle a conflict (a presentation, a team, high work pressure) is an illusion: what we must learn is to handle ourselves competently under the possibly aggravating circumstances of stress (a leadership role, a conflict or whatever). In my understanding all these are just one topic and should be taught as such.

This is the reason why my conflict management and stress training sessions are somewhat similar. It is the same topic: competent self-management under varying stressful conditions. This unified understanding of the soft skills could save HR considerable amounts of time and money.

The only hurdle I can see is the name.

Soft skills still smell of "nice to have but of no real importance".

Nothing could be further from the truth: Plato's *eudaimonia* does not only mean individual well-being; it also means thriving business.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Pennington holds the chair for the soft skills at ZfU-International Business School, Switzerland, and has won several awards for his work. In 2005 he produced a 13-part TV series on soft skills, Bewusst Leben – Psychologie für den Alltag (Living Consciously – Psychology for Everyday Life). Born in America in 1947, he has spent most of his life in Europe and for over 30 years he has led seminars and training sessions in the field of self-competence. He speaks fluent German, English and French and lives in Bavaria, Germany.

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