

What Does a Project Manager Need to Know about Soft Skills

Shuang Du

Zhengzhou Institute of Finance and Economics, Zhengzhou 450044, China

Abstract

This paper discusses the concepts of soft skills and professional competencies based on a large literature review. It shows that in this competitive society, soft skills are of great importance to people's interpersonal relationship and career development, and have a positive impact on enterprise production efficiency and competitiveness. It further analyzes what soft skills are necessary for a successful project manager.

Keywords

Soft Skills; Project Manager.

1. Introduction

In today's working market, there has been an increasing interest in the significance of soft skills, which plays an important role in one's life and successful occupation that needs both specialized knowledge and communication (Klaus, 2010). He also claimed that nearly 80% of success of long-term job depends on social abilities. The aim of this essay is based on a range of published data on the area of soft skills to develop an initial understanding of the terms of professional competencies and soft skills. Furthermore, this essay explores the significance of soft skills and whether some soft skills are thought to be more important than others. Since less literature showed certain methods to improve soft skills which are intangible and unclear if these skills can be developed over time (Bronson, 2007), the essay will just focus on how a project manager can enhance a specific skill, communication skills. As such, this essay begins by the definition of professional competencies and soft skills, it will then go on to the importance of soft skills for individual careers and organizations, finally concentrate on developing the communication as a project manager.

2. The Definition of Professional Competencies and Soft Skills

2.1. Professional Competencies

The term 'professional competencies' is generally understood to mean the combination of hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills can be achieved by education and formal training and showed on a resume, such as work experience and education background. Investopedia (2012) suggested that hard skills include technical skills in work place such as the ability to master software programs as well as obtain traditional degrees and certificates. According to Woodruffe (1991), professional competency is of great importance to the success of an employee and an organization. The model of behavioral abilities for PM highlights 12 kinds of capacities, including initiative, collecting information, achieving orientation, focusing on customers' needs, influence and responses, thinking analytically and conceptually, cooperation and teamwork, leadership, directiveness, self-control and flexibility (Cheng et al. ,2005), this might be comprehensive and generally includes every competency. Interestingly, Gokhale (2005) claimed that sometimes competencies result from personal experience, which are built up over time. While this debate continues, professional competencies can generally be accepted as the combination of hard skills and soft skills, which relates to the topics of knowledge, skills, and ability.

2.2. Soft Skills

Most authors equate soft skills with interpersonal skills such as communication and teamwork (James, 2004; Perreault, 2004), but interpersonal skills are just part of soft skills. Apart from this facet, soft skills also include the qualities of a person and the attributes of people's careers (James, 2004). Personal qualities can be made of one's characteristics and charm, the ability of time management and organizing competency (Parsons, 2008). On the other hand, James (2004) also noted that the attributes of occupations might include teamwork, leadership, communication skills, and client service. Similarly, Cleary, Flynn and Thomasson (2006) stated the definition of general competencies of employment as six aspects: essential skills such as operational abilities and technical knowledge of tasks, commercial skills including enterprise and creativity, social skills, for example, citizenship education, conceptual skills like planning, organizing and controlling, people skills like interpersonal skills, individual skills includes self-resourcefulness and responsibility. To summarize, the term of which can be defined as the combination of personal (occupation) attributes and interpersonal (people-related) abilities.

3. The Importance of Soft Skills

3.1. Importance of Soft Skills for Individuals

A soft skill set is beneficial to people's interpersonal relationship and career progression in the competitive society. In the perspective of socializing, the term soft skills is generally applied in the field of sociology as Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EQ), because interpersonal skills and personality traits included in soft skills can help build extraordinary interpersonal relationships with others. Many writers also presented evidence that soft skills could make the working atmosphere more warm and create more productive working environment.

Besides, soft skills are critical in all types of occupations, which help enhance potential employees' self-competitiveness. When people start to hunt jobs, people-related skills confronting ever-changing workforce in the society goes beyond hands-on vocational and academic abilities. Similarly, research conducted by university administrators investigated how to upgrade graduates' competitiveness, which indicated that academic knowledge is far from enough, and soft skills play a significant part in job satisfaction (Crawford et al., 2011) because of dynamic workforce and advanced technology. As a result, people with occupational abilities might work effectively but not efficiently (Jelphs, 2006). In addition to this reason, Wilhelm (2004) also claimed that HR (human resource) staff appreciate interviewees who are socially well adjusted, and value soft skills as the most important criterion for recruitment. Therefore, it is necessary for potential employees to enhance both technical and people-related abilities.

Furthermore, soft skills are the key for personnel to obtain the opportunities of promotion and achieve successful career in the long turn. Success of a person's career is based on both specialized knowledge and communication (Klaus, 2010). He also claimed that almost 80% of success of long-term job is dependent on social abilities, while only about 20% depends on occupational knowledge. In contrast, lacking soft skills may sink a promising job of a person who has high expertise rating but no interpersonal abilities (Klaus, 2010).

3.2. Importance of Soft Skills for Organizations

Employees of an organization can indirectly boost the productivity of corporations and improve the competitiveness of companies. This is because workers' people skills help facilitate their job performance, bringing about positive influence to an organization. For example, teamwork spirit among employees is valuable, because output and efficiency can improve if workers in a team collaborate by sharing knowledge and methods to make goals achieved. Therefore, screening such employees equipped with high soft skills can yield considerable potential return

on investment for a company and help organizations to keep a competitive superiority (Glenn, 2008).

In addition, high-level soft skills employees can help companies save training costs. Unlike hard skills which are teachable and specific qualities that can be measured and quantified, soft skills are intangible and different to develop (Bronson, 2007). Also, abilities such as problem-solving and communication can be enhanced over time, and it's unclear whether personalities like emotional intelligence or adaptability can be learned, but much finance is used for training. Consequently, many company training departments are reluctant to provide training soft skills, and investing more with less return.

3.3. Comparing the Significance of Some Soft Skill

The CASS (a cluster analysis process of soft skills) team which was to identify high priority skills which should be concentrated on for higher education, organized the soft skills into 7 clusters of employees and the ranking system. This system rates communication, decision-making and self-management as the top three skills (Crawford et al., 2011a). By contrast, Cobanoglu (2006) indicated that more valuable soft skills for a hotel information technology manager are communication followed by critical thinking. However, when asking commercial educators' perceptions of important qualities for a successful career, Mitchell et al. (2010) showed ethics and general communication abilities are extremely important, with 68% indicating communication and 67% stressing time-management and organizational skills. Hence, the Top 3 of soft skills differs in different fields, branches and job requirements.

Nevertheless, a common thing among the above findings is all highlighted that communication skills are the most essential, John (2009) and Timm (2005) also agreed and indicated that communication is an important part of interpersonal skills in business field, mainly because it is often assumed that communication is a fundamental skill that everyone should know. Communication has been the reason for many tragedies have taken place in the financial corporates and hospitals recently (Jelphs, 2006). Thus, communication skills can be seen as the most important soft skill in all types of jobs.

4. The Development of a Soft Skill

Meredith et al. suggested that apart from equipping with good technological skills, a successful project manager should have a high-level in five aspects of soft skills, including communicating, leading, team building, organizing, coping. Since most published data indicated communication is a kind of fundamental skill, and as a project manager, it is essential to develop this skills due to various people of different projects. To perform this skill well, a project manager should first understand what is successful communication, or effective communication, which is about the understanding of people's intentions and emotion behind the information instead of only the exchange of information. Generally, effective communication includes 4 skills: engaged listening, body language, stress management in the moment and assertion in a respectful way. The following will show how a project manager's communication skills can be improved by enhancing these four areas.

Firstly, being a good engaged listener is to focus on the speaker. Evidence from many studies suggested that being listened carefully by seniors can enhance subordinates' performance and motivation (Wellington, 2005). So, managers should avoid interrupting conversation, instead, showing interest in what's being said, trying to set aside judgment and providing feedback that helps the establishment of a positive image of a project manager and the development of an organization.

Secondly, using body languages by paying more attention to the nonverbal signals. This can be practiced by reading nonverbal signals such as being aware of individuals who has different

backgrounds and habits, and delivering expressions well, which can help connection, navigation and challenging situations in the process of a project (John, 2009).

Thirdly, keeping stress in check, which means managers are supposed to consider on their own positions, communicate effectively under pressure, and recognize the moment they are stressed and then to calm down before making a decision of continuing a conversation or postponing it (Mitchell et al. 2010). Learning to be aware of such situation and practicing bringing senses to the rescue are of value, especially benefits negotiations.

Lastly, being assertive in a right way means honest expressing, feelings, thoughts and needs. Cobanoglu (2006) claimed that assertive expression makes for clear and direct communication and might boost people's self-confidence and decision-making. Managers should value themselves and express negative thoughts in a positive way. Take escalating assertion for example, it can be used in a failure of managers first attempt to communicate with intractable employees, and may include outlining the bad results to the persons, for instance, "If you do not obey the contract, I will be forced to take legal action." To lower the risk of using those techniques, practicing assertiveness starting on friends or family first can help build up people's confidence.

5. Conclusion

This essay has argued the terms of soft skills and professional competencies based on many literatures. The former can be defined as the combination of personal attributes and interpersonal abilities (James, 2004), which generally might be seen as a part of the latter one, professional competencies, the debate on which continues, but it can be accepted as the combination of hard skills and soft skills, including a series of aspects related to the topics of knowledge, skill, and ability. This also has presented many evidences on how soft skills important for people's interpersonal relationship and career progression in this competitive society, and showed the benefits that employees with high-level soft skills in an organization can indirectly boost the productivity of corporations and improve the competitiveness of companies.

Also, though the Top 3 of soft skills differs in different fields, a common that most studies had showed that the communication skills are the most important. Given the rank of significance, the limitations of the certain methods in the improvement of soft skills and the limited academic ability of the writer, this report just has suggested methods of the development of communication skills in four aspects: engaged listening, body language, stress management in the moment, assertion in a respectful way.

As a project manager, the person should not only have a good commend of technical and academic knowledge but also realize the importance of soft skills in work place. Besides, He or she need to have the awareness of learning ways to develop several kinds of soft skills such as interpersonal ability and leadership which are more essential to achieve teams' goals, or improve those necessary for being a successful project manager that you have not equipped yet.

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