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Hard-Pressed by Soft Skills, CIOs Face Talent Challenge

To better understand soft skills, chief information officers should look to academia for help

By Gary Beach

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New graduates line up before the start of the Bergen Community College commencement at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., May 17, 2018. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

For chief information officers, the talent enigma known as the skills gap has two components: technical skills and soft skills. A recent study commissioned by Capgemini SE and LinkedIn Inc. claims 54 percent of global organizations say the skills gap is “hampering their digital transformation efforts.” The report also says, “the talent gap in soft digital skills is more pronounced than in hard digital skills.” That makes sense. Soft skills are more nuanced than technical skills. And they are more difficult to measure.

It may also explain why, when asked to name soft skills needed in the workforce, chief information officers often are hard-pressed to mention more than the ability to communicate well or collaborate with others. Those are important soft skills. But recent engagements with education professionals has convinced me the list of vital soft skills is longer. Much longer.

Discussions about soft skills often focus on the hiring challenges they create. New research from Joseph Fuller, Professor of Management Practice at Harvard Business School, claims that the emphasis is misplaced. During a recent speech to educators in Iowa where I also spoke, Mr. Fuller caused a stir when he proclaimed, “Forty-nine percent of all terminations are attributed to deficient soft skills, which by a factor of 2x, is the number one reason workers are fired.”

Are deficient soft skills the primary reason workers are dismissed from your staff? Find out by reviewing terminations over the past three years. If they are a persistent problem, identify which soft skills need to be prioritized in future hires and also deploy updated corporate training and development strategies to address the needs of current staff.

Though often perceived as a recent development, the soft skills crisis has festered for decades as the forgotten step child in America’s public education system, which remains tethered to 19th century instruction methods which prioritize the ability of students to remember information and test for retention.

There’s a better way says Richard Miller, president of Olin College of Engineering. Dr. Miller claims “in this age of just-in-time-learning enabled by powerful search engines, what one knows is less important than what one can do with what one knows.” Teaching students to “do,

create and innovate” is at the core of Olin College of Engineering’s value proposition which mandates each student complete a portfolio of 20 “design-build” projects in order to graduate.

Chief information officers might consider embedding Olin’s “do, create, innovate” model into their hiring strategies by requiring job candidates, both external hires and internal reviews, to 1) submit a portfolio of recently completed IT projects where they created something new, or innovated an existing business process and 2) explain why they are proud of these accomplishments. Be firm. No portfolio. No interview. No job. No promotion.

Frustrated with “teaching to the test”, the state of Iowa’s Department of Education set out in 2009 to identify soft skills, needed by employers in Iowa, that could be taught in the classroom. The result of that project, code-named “Iowa Core,” created six categories of soft skills called “universal constructs.” The secret sauce of these constructs are twenty-four skills which represent the “Holy Grail” of soft skills. Here’s the list.

Critical thinking. 1) access and analyze information. 2) develop solutions to complex problems that have no clear answer. 3) challenge assumptions with thoughtful questions. 4) deploy processes that analyze, select, use and evaluate various approaches to develop solutions.

Complex communication. 5) successfully share information through multiple means that include visual, digital, verbal and nonverbal interactions. 6) interact effectively with people of different cultures. 7) successfully navigate through nuances of effective communication.

Creativity. 8) incorporate curiosity and innovation into processes to generate new or original thoughts, interpretations, products, works or techniques. 9) combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new. 10) think divergently. 11) reconfigure current thought within a new context.

Collaboration. 12) work among and across personal global networks to achieve common goals. 13) understand and apply effective group processes to solve problems. 14) respectfully disagree. 15) respect complex processes that require individuals to contribute and participate in meaningful interactions.

Flexibility and adaptability. 16) respond and adjust to situational needs. 17) meet the challenges of new roles, paradigms and environments. 18) intellectually embrace change. 19) balance one’s core beliefs and the appropriate reaction to change. 20) respond to dissonance in productive ways.

Productivity and accountability. 21) prioritize, plan and apply knowledge and skills to make decisions that create quality results. 22) demonstrate accountability through efficient time management and resource allocation. 23) self learn and 24) be self confident.

Best-selling author and columnist Thomas Friedman recently wrote a column in *The New York Times* about the stressed economic and employment conditions in rural America. While traveling in Tennessee to research his column, Mr. Friedman met Ron Woody, county executive, Roane County, and asked him what soft skills were needed by businesses in the region. Mr. Woody offered this unorthodox response, “employers just want someone who will get up, dress up, show up, shut up and never give up.”

Soft skills are hard to hone. They get employees fired. Or they can set trajectories for accomplished careers and successful digital transformation initiatives. Chief information officers must “never give up” trying to learn more about them.

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