

A TOOL TO HELP EMPLOYERS CREATE TRAINING PROGRAMS FOR SOFT SKILLS



SOFT SKILLS

Upskilling Planning Guide

Much attention continues to be paid to the need to increase skills in the labor force in the STEM areas (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and while such skills are crucial to the growth and sustainability of many organizations, so too are so-called soft skills, such as teamwork, communication, problem solving, and so on.

Soft skills are central to the success of an organization's overall mission, and help to deliver on its vision, values, and employer brand. Whether onboarding new employees, providing instruction on the performance review process, or updating customer service training to introduce new technology, relevant soft skills should be woven into all aspects of workforce development.

Further, success in many organizational roles now and in the future will increasingly depend on such people skills as collaboration, adaptability, and networking. As many organizations move to virtual, cross-functional teams, or project-based work in step with the rise of automation and artificial intelligence, greater focus must be paid to those soft skills that only humans can develop—the capabilities that will continue to provide irreplaceable value to organizations.



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1 | State the business case



2 | Identify target audiences



3 | Determine which soft skills are critical for each role



4 | Use assessments to establish baselines



5 | Define/design training to increase soft skills in targeted roles



6 | Pilot and implement



7 | Continue to monitor and measure success



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A STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS TO DEVELOP A SOFT SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAM

To maximize long-term benefits for both employees and organizations, learning and business leaders should partner to create upskilling programs that focus on soft skills. How best to proceed is not always clear, as the relevant skills vary across roles and organizations, the development approaches available are numerous, and measurement can be elusive. Follow these seven steps to ensure soft skill upskilling success.

1. STATE THE BUSINESS CASE

What are the factors driving desired improvement of employees' soft skills? Potential examples:

- Organizational business model is moving from traditional functional work to cross-functional project or team-based work that requires effective collaboration.
- Tactical and/or back-office work is being automated or replaced by robots to enable workers to focus their time and efforts on critical customer interactions.
- Frontline and supervisory leaders must be equipped to have more frequent and meaningful dialogue with direct reports to drive greater levels of worker engagement and alignment.

2. IDENTIFY TARGET AUDIENCES

While audiences may vary, all organizations should pay particular attention to the following roles:

- Jobs affording touchpoints with customers.
- Positions requiring team-based and collaborative work.
- Individual or team leadership (e.g., project leaders, frontline managers, and supervisors).

3. DETERMINE WHICH SOFT SKILLS ARE CRITICAL FOR EACH ROLE

While some soft skills are nearly universally applicable, others may matter more for certain roles. For instance:

- Positions that interact directly with customers require listening skills, effective written or verbal communication, and problem-solving.
- Highly collaborative roles require focus on teamwork, influence, and effective meeting and email management.
- Frontline and supervisory leaders must build internal and external relationships, encourage open expression of ideas, and have effective conversations with direct reports.

4. USE ASSESSMENTS TO ESTABLISH BASELINES

Self-awareness assessments can confirm current baselines for soft skills in each role.

- For customer-focused soft skills use NPS (Net Promoter Score) or a similar metric to set a baseline for customer satisfaction.
- For management soft skills, use 360-degree assessments and employee pulse and engagement survey data.

5. DEFINE/DESIGN TRAINING TO INCREASE SOFT SKILLS IN TARGETED ROLES

Common approaches:

- **Consider the work environment.** Employees may have abundant soft skills but feel unsafe using them in negative environments (those in which workers believe their opinions aren't valued, manager trust is lacking, or mistakes are penalized). Enlist senior leaders to communicate the importance and value of soft skills.
- **Set achievable performance goals.** Use performance management conversations to set relevant, achievable soft-skill development goals, and track progress throughout the performance cycle.

- **Leverage varied methods to develop soft skills.**

Choose single or blended approaches:

- **Instructor-led training.** Whether in-person or delivered virtually, consider leveraging leaders as teachers to share stories of using soft skills to solve a problem and/or to take on increased responsibility. Consider both formal classroom training and informal lunch-and-learn settings that may be less disruptive to employees' work schedules.
- **Self-paced content.** This can include text, interactive content, or videos. In addition to longer-form content, leverage microlearning assets delivered to mobile devices. Try short, three-to-10-minute chunks that provide concept refreshers, or short stories that model a skill (e.g., a video showing how to handle an irate customer constructively).
- **Action-learning projects.** Assign tasks that will require use of relevant soft skills applied to employees' actual work. This offers hands-on practice, often critical to mastering a new skill.
- **Job rotations.** Move employees through different jobs or assignments to broaden their knowledge of the business, how it operates, and its customers. Rotations also encourage relationships across business functions, units, or facilities.
- **Coaching and mentoring.** Peer-to-peer coaching and coaching or mentoring from a manager or leader teaches workers to fine-tune soft skills and apply them in more nuanced situations.



6. PILOT AND IMPLEMENT

Implement the various interventions described above. Use pilots for any formal training programs to ensure they achieve the desired results.

7. CONTINUE TO MONITOR AND MEASURE SUCCESS

Perform the same assessments used earlier (self-awareness, NPS, 360-degree evaluations, engagement surveys, etc.) to measure improvement for each soft skill.