

'Soft skills'

Common sense is the accumulation of all your experiences

NO matter whether you've just landed a summer job or have embarked on a new full-time, permanent job, you'll be surprised at how many things there are to learn.

Of course, you'll need to learn all the technical skills and operational tasks, but how many of you think about the "soft skills" that need to be learned?

Soft skills include understanding your work environment, understanding people's personal emotions, feelings and needs, relating to customers and colleagues, conflict management, teamwork skills, leading meetings, interpersonal communication and using your intuition and common sense.

Soft skills are the most neglected of all skill development. Why? One reason is that we've always limited our focus on intelligence to include only "school smarts." For centuries, society has discounted and disregarded the value of an individual's ability to understand themselves and other people and to sense the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Second, as individuals, we have also taken ourselves for granted. We believe that because we "talk," we can "communicate." Because we are "thinking" human beings, we believe that we can automatically "problem solve." The result is most people don't pay much attention to opportunities that can systematically develop and expand these skills.

Too bad because I believe future career success will be limited to those

who complement their technical skills with the "soft" or "people skills." In other words, successful folks in the future will have the ability to systematically integrate their academic, knowledge-based thinking with intuition, experience and common sense.

So, you might ask where do I get this training? What does it cost? Will my company pay for it? Or, you may be making excuses by saying: "I'm just new in my job, I don't have time."

But there is no excuse, your career is your responsibility. Anyway, soft skills are best developed through experience, by paying attention to everything that is going on around us and noting what worked and what didn't. Part of this development is labelling the skill you want to work on and developing a plan to get there. So, let's start with the skill of "common sense."

Common sense is really the accumulation of all your experiences that can then be put to use to interpret your environment, identify problems that arise and to help you make decisions. Common sense enables us to sense fear, trouble and danger and to respond quickly. It also helps us to sense our emotions and personal needs and advises us on when to take certain actions. But because common sense is such an "automatic" type of response, learners must be cautioned against the overuse of common sense and/or the singular reliance on the common-sense skill. We certainly don't want to take a course of action that we might regret.

On the other hand, Barry Siskind, a leading Canadian trainer and motivational speaker, feels a strong committed effort to developing common sense can be undertaken by adopting seven key strategies. Use these as a good guide to begin your developmental journey. Siskind's strategies include:

■ Doubt the obvious

Accept that "nothing is absolute" and challenge everything. Be skeptical, reject direction from anyone that says, "You should do this or you shouldn't do that," step back and re-evaluate everything. Test and challenge any longtime myths that may be currently or could in the future block your thinking, decisions and, therefore, your career progress.

■ Let your reach exceed your grasp

Be creative and look for solutions and answers in unexpected places. Push the boundaries of your experience and search all of your awareness, then interpret what you are sensing as you review each area of the problem. Look beyond the apparent disorganization and seek themes and similarities that might suggest some sort of structure.

■ Know yourself

Learn to understand your own values and then apply these to the situation. Understand from what perspective you look at things, keep an open mind and ask questions that will let you filter the answers through your values. Let your values be your guide, but recognize situations where compromise is necessary.

■ Transform information into knowledge

Make the most of opportunities as they present themselves, learn from these experiences and store them for future use. Then transform this information into guideposts for future behaviour. If you make a mistake, pick yourself up and try again, assess your error, explore what you have learned and store the information for the next time. Remember, common sense is a successful combination or blending of a number of factors that influence decision-making.



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■ Embrace the unexpected

Don't blame anyone else for your problem, take personal responsibility and control over your situation. Look at what you want for an outcome and develop a plan of action to get there. Recognize there isn't always a linear cause and effect, nor is there always one solution. Then thoroughly analyse the problem, but don't overdo it. If you identify and confirm the best solution, then get on with it. Solutions are not always obvious so remember to look for the unexpected.

■ Stay on course

Have you heard of strategic planning for businesses? Well, you, too should develop a strategic action plan for your future. Retrace all of your steps to date, and take time to evaluate the effectiveness of your decisions and the results of your actions. Stop and measure your success and make adjustments as needed. But don't get bogged down in details.

■ Don't be afraid to change horses in midstream

Don't let yourself be caught in a downward spiral to depression, recognize when it's time to cut your losses. It's hard to accept that a situation isn't working out and that your best efforts can't produce enough influence to change it, but it happens. Set your limits and stick to it or you will be trapped.

Common sense goes beyond "school smarts" and enables individuals to use their experience to find the right solution to the right problem at the right time. So take advantage of whatever experience you can — use the seven strategies as a guide.

Source: Bumblebees Can't Fly, A Practical Guide to Making everything Work by Barry Siskind, 2001.

Barbara J. Bowes, CHRP, CMC, is president of Bowes Leadership Group, Inc., past president of the Human Resource Management Association of Manitoba and author of The Easy Resume Book: A Transferable Skills Approach. She can be reached at 947-5525 or