



onTrain

Online Training, the treasure within

C. Online Training

5. Teaching soft skills and hard skills

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Let's start



While in the past learning consisted on individual knowledge acquisition, storage and retrieval, nowadays, in the digital society, it implies “*the connected learning that occurs through interaction with various sources of knowledge (including the Internet and learning management systems) and participation in communities of common interest, social networks and group tasks*”¹.

Many training programs focus only on hard skills development. It essential a balance between hard and soft skills. Soft skills are perceived as not being as important as knowledge and they are ignored because it is believed that they are some things that can't be taught.

What am I learning here and why?

In this chapter, you will learn about the importance of soft skills and how you can improve them, especially your communication skills..

What content will I find here?

After completing this chapter, you will be able to define soft skills and hard skills and you will know the difference between them. Every interpersonal relationship is built on our communication skills. Good communication is a skill to study and practice. At the end of this unit you will be able to identify different types of communication, to recognize communication barriers and how to deal with them.

Soft skills and hard skills



According to Loureiro, Messias and Barbas “*soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects.*”²

Schultz narrow down skills into “*personal traits and interpersonal skills:*

- *communication skills (for most people having proficiency in spoken and written language as well as to know what to say and how to say it in different occasions is the most important soft skill);*
- *critical and structured thinking along with analytical skills (so needed to problem solving capability);*
- *and creativity (when together with brainstorming and mind mapping gives the ability of “thinking out of the box”, which is often needed to find innovative approaches to problem solving in the business world).³*

¹ Siemens, G. (2005): Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age. In: International Journal of Instructional Technology & Distance Learning, 2(1). Available https://jotamac.typepad.com/jotamacs_weblog/files/Connectivism.pdf

² Loureiro, A., Messias, I., & Barbas M. (2012): Embracing Web 2.0 & 3.0 Tools to Support Lifelong Learning - Let Learners Connect. In: [Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences](#) 46:532-537 (2012)

³ Schultz, B., (2008): The Importance of Soft Skills: Education beyond academic knowledge. In: NAWA Journal of Language and Communication, June (2008)

All these aspects are what makes soft skills so important to have and develop, because in fact, *“soft skills are what shapes our personality, enable social competences, for they complement the technical skills required to do a job, and so are as equally important as to have technical and scientific knowledge”*⁴.

Soft skills are qualities that form an individual’s distinctive character, and hard skills are about the knowledge the individual`s possess. *“Hard skills contribute only 15% to one`s success, whereas 85% of success is due to soft skills”*⁵.

A hard skill is a teachable ability and it can be measured, quantified, for example with a degree. Therefore, hard skills contain those skills that can be learned and acquired through formal education and training programs. They are mostly unchanged and transferable.

Soft skills are usually formed with our personality, but they also can be learned and developed. Soft skills are difficult to teach, but they can be improved with experience and practice. For example, a soft skill as active listening can be improved by writing down notes when others are talking during meetings; repeat one`s words mentally as he says them; at the end of one conversation conclude with a summary statement.

Differences between soft and hard skills:

	HARD SKILLS	SOFT SKILLS
Definition	skills acquired through formal education and training	skills learned through experience, personality traits
Examples	• programming	• decision making
	• accounting	• problem solving
	• science skills	• leadership
	• typing techniques	• communication
	• data analysis	
	• language skills	

⁴ Loureiro, A., Messias, I., & Barbas M. (2012): Embracing Web 2.0 & 3.0 Tools to Support Lifelong Learning - Let Learners Connect. In: [Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences](#) 46:532-537 (2012)

⁵ Watts&Watts (2008) as cited in John, J. (2009): Study on the nature of impact of soft skills training programme on the soft skills development of management students. Pacific Business Review, October/December, pp. 19-27

Soft skills developed by learners from online courses:

- organization. They have to organize effectively their time between work, personal life and studying
- communication. Online courses are designed to be interactive and encourage learners to participate in group discussions.
- adaptability. During online learning that lasts for an extended period time, throughout learners` professional and personal life may occur many changes. How they handle them will test their adaptability.
- problem solving. This skill is developed by using gamification in online learning.
- decision making.

We must possess a specific set of skills and competencies that will allow us to effectively benefit from e-government, e-learning and e-health services, and participate actively in the *knowledge society as co-creators, and not simply consumers, as highlighted by the European e-skills strategy*⁶.

E-Skills can be divided into 3 levels:

- ICT practitioner skills - are defined as those that will allow us to research, design, develop, manage and maintain ICT systems
- ICT user skills are considered the basic e-skills, as they encompass the digital competencies that will allow an individual to use ICT systems and devices, digital literacy, critical use of ICT for work, leisure, learning and distance communication, covering the use of common software tools
- ICT business skills include the knowledge to exploit ICT given opportunities to enhance efficiency and effectiveness at an organizational level, improving key business areas and creating new ways to establish new businesses.

The need to develop these skills is being set by society, economy, companies and evolution.

Communication. Types and barriers



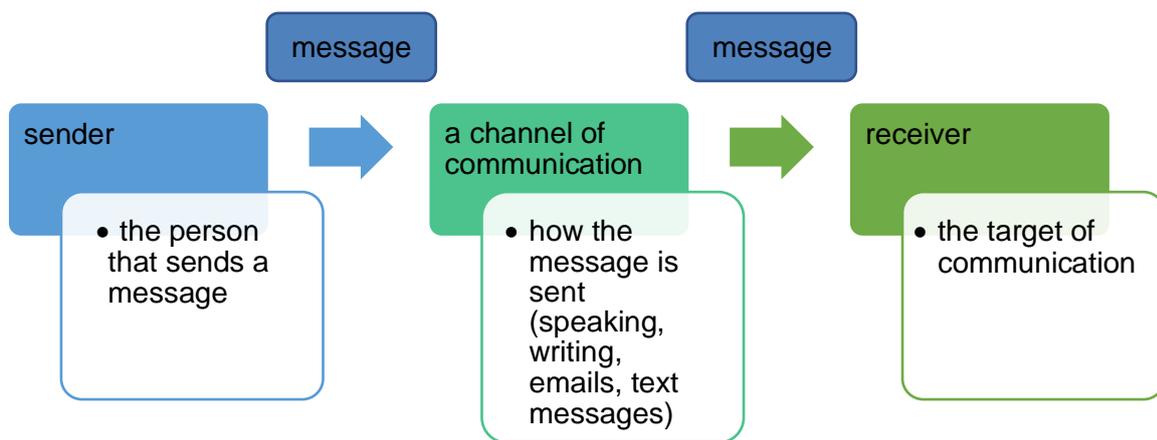
Communication is the process of sending and receiving information, a sender who transmits a message through a channel to the receiver. The final step of communication is feedback, the receiver`s response to the sender message.

Sender – the person that sends a message

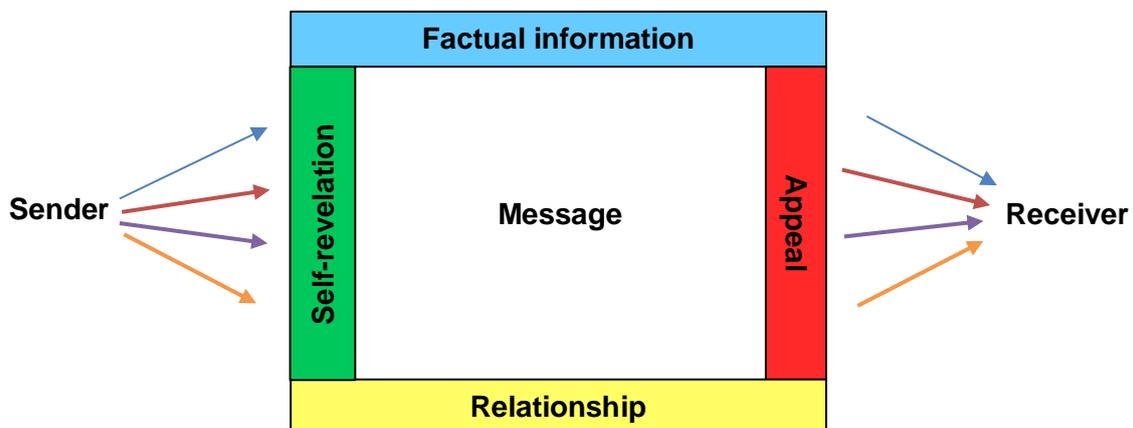
A channel of communication – how the message is sent (speaking, writing, emails, text messages)

Receiver – the target of communication

⁶ McCormack, A. (2010): The e-Skills Manifest, p. 27. Available http://files.eun.org/eskillsweek/manifesto/e-skills_manifesto.pdf [April 2011]



In 1981, German scientist and psychologist Friedemann Schulz von Thun developed the communication model known as “the model of the 4 sides of communication”.



Schulz von Thun starts from the premise that any statement has a quadruple effect on the receiver and it has four types of messages:

1. The factual information - blue – concrete situation, facts and data. At this level are three criteria: true/false; relevant / irrelevant; sufficient/ insufficient
2. Self-revaluation – green – the position of the sender towards the concrete information. Every statement contains information about the sender: his emotions, behaviors.
3. A relationship – yellow – it is revealed the opinion of the sender about the receiver and about his relationship with the sender through expressions, tone of voice, gesture, accentuation, the way something is said, the choice of words.

4. An appeal – red – the request for the receiver to do something. The message is sent to express wishes, advice, instructions.

Forms of communication:

1. **Verbal communication** or oral communication is the use of language to transfer information through speaking and can take place in person, over the phone, in video conferences.
2. **Written communication** includes letters, e-mails, social media
3. **Nonverbal** – using body language, facial expressions, voice tone.

There are two **styles** of communication:

Informal communication	Formal communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is less rigid structured (a personal letter includes casual greeting and sign off). • has a relaxed tone. • allows the use of more casual language, with slangs, personal pronouns. • places less importance on correct grammar and spelling (it would be inappropriate to write an email to a trainer saying "hey, the quiz test is @930, rite?"). • is used mainly with peers (when you greet a friend you would say : "Hy! What's new?"), otherwise if you use : "Hello, Ana. How are you today?", your friend will think you are acting distant. • is needed in a personal situation (spending time with family). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • has a specific format (a business letter includes formal greeting, formal sign-off). • has a formal tone. • has an academic style vocabulary. • requires more attention to correct grammar and spelling. • is used mainly with people you don't know very well. • is needed in an educational situation (writing papers an assignments, working on a group project), in business, in career related situations (writing a job application, a meeting agenda).

1. **Formal** - the communication is made through the pre-defined channels, follows a set of established standards or guidelines. Examples: planned communication: request, reports, presentations.
2. **Informal** – the communication stretches in all directions, has no predefined procedures or standards and can be more personal. There are fewer barriers to communication. Examples: instant messages, phone calls, face to face conversations.

Difference between formal and informal communication:

The principles of effective communication are known as the 7C: complete (the message must have all the necessary information), correct (the verification of the word writing, the punctuation, the data), clear (the words are familiar), concise (short sentences, one idea in a sentence), concretely (the use of facts, with few details), coherent (ideas must have a logical course), courteous (polite).

Effective communication is established when a message means the same as the one intended by the sender. A message may not have the same meaning to the receiver as to the sender, unless the sender anticipates possible barriers and try to overcome them. Some of the communication barriers that may exist between trainer and learner are:

- language barriers: the use of too technical terms or abbreviations may not be understood by someone who is not familiar with the terminology used; using jargons
- social - psychological barriers: perceptual differences, differences in opinions, attitude and behavior, socio-cultural differences, emotions (example: an angry sender cannot communicate properly and the receiver cannot understand the message in its original sense)
- physical barriers: improper time, defects in the medium of communication, network facilities
- emotional barriers.

As a trainer you have to know how to overcome these barriers:

- Avoid abstract, overly-formal language and jargon.
- Encourage all talk.
- Persuade learners that communication is helpful to their learning.
- Select the appropriate channel for the message and encourage the use of multiple channels including formal and informal communications.
- Understand each other's perspective.
- Use constructive feedback.

Every interpersonal relationship is built on our communication skills. Good communication is a skill to study and practice. Designing an effective communication system between trainer and learners, and among the learners themselves, it is one of the important steps in teaching online.

Online communications have an advantage for learners, because they can submit their questions at any hour, but could be a disadvantage for the trainer, because can increase his workload. To control this, the trainer has to set rules from the beginning of the course: Establish your virtual office hours; specify that you don't answer to a question in a forum if it had been repeatedly posted.

For some learners online communication is easier than face to face communication, because when they communicate through email, private messages, a discussion board, they are somewhat anonymous and the online environment gives them confidence. In online communication (an email or message) the receiver can't see or hear the sender. So the learners can't see the body language, the nonverbal communication gestures. They tend to misinterpret, they think that the trainer is being harsh, even though he doesn't mean to be.

One way that it could be combated is to use emoticons, little smiles, to let learners know that trainer is trying to help them.

In communications, the message may not be received exactly the way the trainer intended, therefore it is important to seek feedback from learners. In online class feedback is essential. Learners need feedback to be sure that they are seen, as people and timely feedback can decrease feelings of isolation for online learners. Feedback can be provided throughout the course in different formats: written (using Google Drive), verbal or video (using programs as: Vocaroo, Jing, Zoom).

Example



A good example for understanding the difference between hard and soft skills is the well-known parable of the ship mechanic:

“Once a huge merchant ship harbored on a port for trading. Once the trading was done and it was time for the ship to leave, it would just not start. Many expert engineers and other technicians tried to get it moving, but she stood there silently without making any noise. Even top technicians deployed on the port to help with ship maintenance failed to figure out the problem as to why the engine of the ship would not start.

Some local town people hired to load and unload the ships suggested to the captain that he should try the service of one of their local man, Peter, an old fisherman who also fixed fishing boats around the town. Desperate to get the ship moving, the captain ordered that Peter be brought aboard the ship at the earliest.

Peter walked in with some tools in his overall and went to the engine room and began to inspect the engine intently. As the captain watched losing all the hope of getting out the town anytime soon, Peter pulled a small hammer and tapped the engine thrice. Lo behold, the engine roared to life when started, dropping the captain’s jaw to the floor. He shook Peter’s rough hands saying, “I couldn’t thank you enough for what you have done”. Peter acknowledged the appreciation and then he pulled out a piece of paper and handed his roughly written bill to the captain which amounted to \$6000.

Now that the ship was back to life, the desperation was gone from the captain. He hesitated to pay such a huge amount for a simple task of tapping an engine with a small hammer. Since Peter had huge fans following in the town he could not offend him either by refusing to pay the bill.

He came up with a brilliant idea and asked Peter politely to break up the charges and provide him an itemized bill instead.

Without blinking for a second, Peter took back the scrap of bill, and added above \$6000,

Tapping with hammer = \$ 2.00

Knowing where to tap = \$ 5998

Total = \$ 6000”

Peter's hard skill was the knowledge of how to repair the ship's engine, and his soft skill was his creativity to itemize the bill.



Here you can see an example about how can a statement has a quadruple effect on the receiver and it has four types of messages

Two people are eating a home-cooked meal together. The one who didn't cook says: "There is something green in the soup."

Sender

1. The factual information: *There is something green*
2. Self-revaluation: *I don't know what it is.*
3. A relationship: *You should know what it is*
4. An appeal: *Tell me what it is!*

Receiver

1. The factual information: *There is something green.*
2. Self-revaluation: *You do not know what the green item is, and that makes you feel uncomfortable.*
3. A relationship: *You think my cooking is questionable.*
4. An appeal: *I should only cook what you know in the future!*

The other answers: "If you don't like the taste, you can cook it yourself."

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four-sides_model)

Another example you can find at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e8YwM6qMDq8>

Exercises



Exercise 1: Formal and informal communication



Give additional examples of an appropriate situation for each form of communication in the formal and informal styles.

	Informal communication	Formal communication
Written communication		
Oral communication		
Nonverbal communication		

Exercise 2: Meeting confirmation

You want to confirm you have an appointment with your headmaster. Give an example of a message in informal written communication and formal written communication.

Exercise 3: Can you justify grammar mistakes?

When you see an e-mail with poor grammar or incomplete sentences, how do you react? Does it affect your perception of the Sender? Why or why not?

Exercise 4: Move to online



Using Google Docs submit a topic from your course and ask learners to comment on what was the most surprising thing they have learned.

Summary



There are two kinds of skills: soft skills and hard skills. Hard skills are teachable and measurable abilities, soft skills are personal traits.

The process of communication refers to sending and receiving a message. Communication is a cyclic process as it begins with the sender's message and ends with the feedback from the receiver for the sender.

There are three types of communication: verbal, written and non-verbal and two styles: formal and informal.

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