

Seven Soft Skills for Super Success



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THE BROADWAY MUSICAL *How To Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* features a small book by the same title that offers a litany of recommendations on business behavior that helps humble window-washer J. Pierpont Finch rise rapidly to the top of his company.

While what occurs in the musical is a fantasy, most of the skills mentioned are not actually job skills, but “soft skills”—how you interact with other people and what other people see in your behavior. In the title song, the list includes things like “how to begin making contacts” and “how to observe personnel” (Loesser).

I have been hiring and managing technical communicators since the late 1980s. The workplace has changed a lot since my early days. But one thing hasn’t—to be hired, you need both the “hard skills” of your job (such as your technical know-how and authoring tools) and “soft skills.” It’s the soft skills that are most likely the skills that will differentiate you from the crowd and will assist you in your own rise to the top.

I’d like to offer what I think are the most important soft skills for today’s technical communicator. To succeed in the techcomm business, I believe you need the following skills:

Skill	Action
Observation	Pay attention to detail and follow through
Curiosity	Listen and ask pertinent questions
Critical Thinking	Evaluate what’s important and leave your ego behind
Leadership	Know how to lead a meeting (in person and virtually)
Flexibility	Adjust your expectations and solve problems
Social Intelligence	Demonstrate good manners (with technology and without it)
Communication	Be skilled in corporate as well as technical communication

Let’s look at how each of these skills applies to technical communication.

Observation: Pay Attention to Detail and Follow Through

It’s gotten a lot easier to do what we do in this profession in the last 25 years. We used to work hard to see that everything we published was perfect because each book cost a fortune to print, and each printed item was not updated for several years. With faster release cycles and a smaller head count, we just don’t have the resources to be as “perfect” today as we once did.

But that doesn’t mean that technical communicators, as guardians of information and as responsible professionals, don’t have an obligation to produce good, clean, and complete work. I have been watching millennials in the workforce and have noted a trend: As a rule, the world they grew up in didn’t demand as much attention to detail so (consequently) they are often content to let things pass as merely “good enough.”

For a lot of things in life, good enough is fine. But in my company, where we document safety systems for nuclear power plants, good enough is *not* fine.

“Good follow through is an asset for most professions—and technical writing is no different. It demonstrates personal investment and accountability, and goes a long way to building trust,” says Marta Decatrel, a former technical writer who is now an executive director at a global financial services firm.

Your job is to make sure that your work is complete, correct, thoroughly fact-checked, thoroughly reviewed, and to make sure that when you start something, you actually complete it. If people know they can rely on you to do high-quality work, with no loose ends and no dropped balls, you will stand out from your colleagues.

Curiosity: Listen and Ask Pertinent Questions

The art of listening is nearly lost today. It is common to be in a room full of people where everyone is communicating via email or text message at the same time with someone in another room, or another part of the globe! I am as guilty of this as anyone. No one wins in this scenario.

How can you become a better listener?

You know the first step: be fully present. Put away your smartphone and your computer, and participate in the discussion. If you are meeting one-on-one with someone, ask them to put away their distractions, too. If the two of you can stay focused on the exchange of information between you, the time will be more productive and you'll need less time to complete the task at hand.

If you have arranged time with a SME to gather information for the product you are documenting, also come prepared with questions to ask so that you can walk away with the information you really need.

“If you are not strong with good questions on the fly, consider preparing questions ahead of time. When you ask a question, don't just listen to the words, pay attention to the nonverbal communication (tone of voice and body language). This often gives the clue for what to ask next,” says Ken Kinard, an executive coach and chief creative officer of Accent Interactive, a creative agency in Hunt Valley, Maryland.

Critical Thinking: Evaluate What's Important and Leave Your Ego Behind

Jack Molisani, the guest editor of this issue, first introduced me to the idea of the “Evaluation of Importances” (see Hubbard). A lot of technical communicators *are* people who are very strong in the “detail orientation” soft skill, so much so that they don't know when to let certain things go. Technical communicators also tend to be very intelligent, often an interesting meld between the creative and the technical sides of the brain. The combination can lead to a person not knowing the appropriate levels of information to raise to their peers or management, or when to stop arguing a point they believe in strongly that may have no actual bearing on the success of a project.

Not wasting time is an important show of respect to the people you work with. Todd Smith, author of the *Little Things Matter*, says in a blog post entitled “Top 10 Soft Skills to Master” (www.littlethingsmatter.com/blog/2010/12/21/top-10-soft-skills-to-master-in-2011), “People's tolerance for being disrespected is as low as I have ever seen it. The days of advancing careers by stepping on the toes of co-workers are over. People deserve to be treated with respect and are now demanding it.”

Learn how to manage your encounters with the people who provide you with the information you need so that you maximize the time you spend with them. Do your homework, stay on task when you meet with them, and be willing to be told you might be wrong. Check your ego at the door and stand ready to learn.

Leadership: Know How to Lead a Meeting (Virtually and In Person)

Some people think they need to be vivacious and bubbly to be in charge of a meeting. What if you are shy?

“You don't have to be an extrovert to lead meetings effectively,” says Kinard. “Lead with your strengths. If, like most introverts, you excel at internal processing, then kick-start your meeting by asking powerful questions. Provoking good conversation gives you something to analyze, and shows that you value other opinions. Then get curious—listen deeper and longer, reflecting on what you hear. The best meetings often feature a group decision that no individual would have made on their own.”

Nick Morgan, one of America's top communication theorists and coaches, cites in *Forbes* several concerns around virtual meetings, such as how hard it is to remember what happens because you lack the normal body language and visual cues to help you remember. You can also lack the emotional cues to connect you—the “buzz” you feel in the room if you were actually present. It's also easy for misunderstandings to develop and hard to bond with your colleagues in a virtual setting.

Morgan advises, “Don't try to make virtual meetings into something they're not, or try to make them carry freight they can't. Do the less important things via virtual meetings whenever possible. Save the emotional stuff for face-to-face meetings, because it's emotions and attitudes that are conveyed mostly via body language.”

Flexibility: Adjust Your Expectations and Solve Problems

A new member of our team recently experienced her first really challenging project—one where almost everything went wrong. There were certainly a lot of lessons learned in this disastrous project, but perhaps the greatest ones to her personally were learning to adapt to the changing situation each day and solving the problems that arose in real time.

Here are some of the tactics she employed to succeed. She:

- ▶ Built individual relationships with team members at all levels, from the top manager to lowliest programmer
- ▶ Communicated with her project manager and her direct manager, and escalated issues where appropriate
- ▶ Showed she was willing to step up and go the extra mile
- ▶ Brought in outside expertise to assist her when she needed to (we ended up engaging an outside SME to lend a hand in the crisis)
- ▶ Requested additional product training
- ▶ Bent the process (with permission) when doing things the regular way would not serve the success of the project

In the end, multiple soft skills were needed to achieve the goal—relationship building, communication, personal attitude, ability to ask for assistance, and flexibility. These skills, not her technical communications skills, were the ones that actually carried her to the finish line.

Social Intelligence: Demonstrate Good Manners (With Technology and Without It)

You know what's coming here and you are already starting to feel guilty. If you need to change your behavior in one of these areas, the time has come to do it. Someone—your boss, your co-worker, your customer, your significant other, or your children (maybe even your pet)—has noticed your bad behavior in these areas.

What can you work on?

- ▶ Don't answer your telephone when you are in a formal, scheduled meeting with another person.
- ▶ Don't stare at your smartphone when you are in a conversation with another person, don't answer that text that just came in, and don't review and respond to email.
- ▶ Do a self-audit on your social media sharing and make sure you aren't posting or saying things that you don't want your current or potential employer or clients to know about.
- ▶ Be present on telephone calls and in-person meetings that you attend (see "Listening" above).
- ▶ When at all possible, for a sensitive issue *do* talk in person or via a video chat or telephone call. Some issues are more quickly and appropriately solved with a conversation than with email, chat, or text messaging.

Kevin Kruse, author of *Employee Engagement 2.0*, cited a 2013 study from the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business that found that, in all likelihood, your manners with technology are offending your colleagues:

- ▶ 86% of respondents thought it was inappropriate to answer phone calls during formal meetings
- ▶ 84% of respondents thought it was inappropriate to write texts or emails during formal meetings
- ▶ 75% of respondents thought it was inappropriate to read texts or emails during formal meetings

If you can't focus, aren't listening, have so little respect for the people with whom you are meeting, or feel so controlled by incoming news from others that you can't attend to the task at hand, it probably is time to adjust your behavior.

"I'm all about good manners, no matter what the platform is! It's all being a good, contributing team player and corporate citizen. Treating people with respect creates and fosters an environment where people like to come to work, collaborate, and innovate ... with *you*. It helps you build your network and gain people's trust," says Decatrel.

Communication: Be Skilled in Corporate as Well as Technical Communication

This is actually the soft side of a hard skill, because one of the great contributions you can make to your organization is to use your most developed hard skill (writing and communicating information) to benefit not only your customers but also your company as a whole.

I think it is safe to say that most technical communicators do not possess a great deal of political savvy. Hence they actually don't rise through their companies, but rather spend their entire careers writing product documentation.

"Having a good sense of corporate politics and culture can certainly help technical communicators hone their writing for an intended audience. In addition, developing these skills can open up new career opportunities for you," says Decatrel, who is a living example of this kind of success. "And these days, when everyone fancies themselves a writer—see the blogosphere for proof—it's all the more important for you to stay relevant by having strong, broad writing skills."

One of the final songs in *How to Succeed* is a rousing anthem called "The Brotherhood of Man" (Loesser).

One man may seem incompetent,
Another not make sense,
While others look like quite a waste
Of company expense.

They need a brother's leadership,
So please don't do them in.
Remember mediocrity
Is not a mortal sin.

My hope is that you won't settle for mediocrity, but will rise above wherever you may be in your organization, and move quickly to the top just like J. Pierpont Finch.

Which soft skills do *you* need to practice?

The top is waiting for you! **■**

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