

Transferable skills for a competitive edge

Mastering the 'soft' skills can convince prospective employers of your potential.

Paul Watson

When employers consider job candidates, they do not simply look at academic credentials and past work experience. In order to ensure that candidates have what it takes to make a valuable contribution to the company, a whole range of skills that go beyond the technical requirements of a job need to be considered. Meeting the specifications outlined in a job posting is obviously a must, but do you possess some of the intangible skills that can convince prospective employers of your potential?

Transferable or 'soft' skills can enhance your career mobility and increase your chances of success in landing the job you want. As the name implies, transferable skills can be taken with you from job to job and are therefore an important aspect of your career development. The following skills can help give you a competitive edge when applying for a position.

People skills. Personalities and needs of coworkers can vary enormously. A good leader can manage the wide range of people's expectations with fairness, tact, and understanding, while keeping an eye on organizational goals. Good people skills are critical when dealing with difficult colleagues—bullies, under-achievers, incompetent managers, and the like. Successful team members are able to clearly assert their own expectations while remaining empathetic to others' needs.

Good people skills are very important to employers, who typically look for well-rounded employees who work well in teams, are diplomatic, resourceful, and are able to build networks among their peers. When applying for a job, try to demonstrate how you have been able to bring out the best in the people around you.

Communications skills. In the daily operations of any organization, a great number of messages are passed back and forth. Being able to pass on information in a clear and concise manner is incredibly important to the achievement of a company's goals. The tone and delivery of your communications can also have a marked impact on motivation levels of fellow team members. Solid writing skills are a huge plus in any job, and if you can communi-

cate in more than one language, you definitely have an edge over unilingual job candidates.

In knowledge industries such as biotechnology, the ability to make effective presentations is very important. As in most things, practice and preparation make perfect. If you have little experience in this area, you should definitely consider enrolling in a public speaking course. Familiarity with presentation and word processing software and other electronic communications media is a necessity for many jobs.

Negotiation skills. Whether they take the form of getting a better price from a supplier, dealing with complex industrial relations issues, or getting a colleague to help you on a project, negotiations are a part of daily life. Learning to give and take in order to achieve goals is a skill that employers value highly. Show prospective employers examples of past achievements and some of the tactics you employed to successfully negotiate your way toward a goal.

Business skills. Business skills are highly transferable and the more you acquire, the more marketable you become. Employers highly value employees who possess the ability to manage a budget, make financial projections, and recognize business opportunities. Make a habit of keeping an eye on the bottom line and being aware of the business realities surrounding the biotech industry.

Experience is king in business, so make sure you let employers know what kind of skills you have acquired over the years. A previous job in sales may have taught you to think on your feet, and more importantly, to understand that the customer always comes first. Even in a research lab environment, a customer service orientation (substitute 'customer' with 'shareholder') is important in keeping a focus on profitability.

Creative and strategic thinking. Ability to apply lateral thinking to come up with unique and innovative solutions to problems help give you (and your company) a competitive edge. Biotechnology companies have a particular need for workers who can quickly adapt to changing circumstances. In interview situations you should be prepared to give examples of challenges that you have faced and creative solutions that you have come up with to help save the day.

Just as important as the ability to generate creative solutions is the wisdom to attack the

right problems. Companies value employees who understand how their work fits into the big picture. An aptitude for strategic thinking is the mark of a good manager.

Time management. Employers give top marks to candidates with a proven ability to juggle multiple priorities and responsibilities. Time is money and companies love people who are efficient in their use of time and who are effective at helping coworkers eliminate waste and duplication of effort. Employees who meet deadlines and deliver projects on time (and on budget) are huge assets. This is especially true in biotech companies where time to market is critical and money is lost with every tick of the patent expiration clock.

Motivation and commitment. Successful companies strive to align employees' personal goals with corporate objectives and they are eager to hire candidates who put a great deal of pride and personal effort into their work. Again, giving examples of past achievements is the best way of underscoring your high personal standards and drive to succeed. Just as important is the ability to bring out these qualities in others. Leadership skills are always in high demand, especially as companies rely more and more on self-directed teams and project-oriented work organization.

Personal image and self-awareness. You should be aware of the image you present to coworkers and clients, making sure that it fits the context in which you find yourself. If your eyeglasses are patched up with a band-aid it might lead people to believe that you use the same approach to resolve work-related problems. Understanding how people perceive you is important in a variety of areas such as negotiations, managing workplace relationships, and selling your company to prospective business partners.

Conclusions

Your CV and job interview should leave no doubt in the employer's mind that you either possess the above skills and qualities or are taking steps to gain the experience and training necessary to fill any gaps. Try to highlight various ways in which your skills, knowledge, and experience in these areas have led to concrete achievements. Lifelong learning is an important part of anyone's career, so paying attention to developing your transferable skills is a strategy that will serve you well throughout your working life.

Paul Watson is the communications manager at the Biotechnology Human Resource Council, 401-116 Lisgar Street, Ottawa, ON K2P 0C2 Canada (paul@bhrc.ca).