SOFT SKILLS HARD TO FIND
Workforce development focuses on the teamwork needed to make technical ability succeed
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THE skills individuals and companies need to succeed in business typically are divided into two categories: “hard skills” – the technical expertise required to do the job – and “soft skills” – the ability to work with others, communicate well, arrive on time, pitch an idea, dress appropriately. Historically, hard skills largely ruled, although there are plenty of instances when a person with brilliant hard skills was fired for lack of soft skills, including Steve Jobs, who co-founded Apple.

Today there is a cartwheel of change concerning job skills. Not only are soft skills now increasingly valued, their importance rivals or exceeds those of hard skills in many surveys and reports of business executives. This constellation of skills even has name upgrade – now often called “employability skills” or “essential skills.”

This new thinking is reflected in the first update to the nation’s core workforce training program since passage of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) in 1998. The new law – the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) – seeks to improve connections between employment, training, adult education and vocational rehabilitation programs.

It requires states to strategically align workforce development programs and submit a four-year strategy for preparing an educated and skilled workforce and meeting the workforce needs of employers. The legislation attempts to remove lines between counties and programs by encouraging states to form regions that make sense economically.

This is good news for business, and it comes none too soon.


“Basic academic skills were assigned a high value in studies or surveys (of employers). ... Ranked on an equal or near-equal level were those attributes that have come to be known as employability skills – teamwork, communication, problem solving, and the like. Indeed, knowing how to learn, being willing to learn, and showing evidence of having a desire to work emerge repeatedly as fundamental requirements of the modern workplace.”

Then in 2015, the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce issued a report called “Kentucky’s Workforce Challenges: The Employer’s Perspective.” It states: “Kentucky employers consistently express concerns – and frustrations – about the challenges they face in finding employees who understand the importance of showing up for work, communicating well with others, taking personal responsibility for their actions, managing their time effectively and similar traits.

Employability skills/soft skills/essential skills – whatever you prefer to call them – remain a primary concern of Kentucky Chamber members, according to Travis Burton, manager of public affairs for the business association.

“Within our councils and in discussions with our members, soft skills remain the No. 1 concern about workforce challenges,” Burton said. “We used to have a situation where businesses had trouble growing and offering new positions. Nowadays there are so many jobs available, it is a challenge to fill them.

“We’re not talking about a lack of qualifications, however. It is not a lack of academic degrees. People just don’t understand the need to show up on time on day two, have good interpersonal skills and not arrive at work after using drugs.”

Rick Jordan, director of special programs for the Education and Workforce Development Cabinet, hears the same concerns.
“Everyone is complaining that soft skills are lacking,” he said. “Employers tell me that when a potential employee’s phone rings during the interview process, many answer it. That reflects poor judgment.

“I also hear that employees don’t know how to work as a team. They don’t understand team dynamics or how teams work. We’ve lost the ability to work as a team.”

The development of these essential skills is particularly thorny because it is not clear who should teach these skills – parents, elementary school, secondary schools, post-secondary schools, job training programs, employers, etc.

That question will go unanswered for now. Instead, various entities are rushing to provide an array of programs and initiatives specifically designed to help people acquire or hone their essential skills.

**WIOA offers flexibility**

Funding for many programs and initiatives comes from WIOA, but the federal law offers a wide swath in which to develop programs. In Kentucky, some programs come through the Education and Workforce Development Cabinet.

The cabinet’s Kentucky Work Ready Communities Program, for example, includes a requirement that communities develop programs that emphasize essential skill development along with attaining a specific high school graduation rate and digital literacy.

The program was the focus of an article “Economic Development: Why the ‘Work Ready’ Tag Matters” (bit.ly/1rA30po) published in The Lane Report in May 2015.

Kentucky’s state and regional colleges are also preparing their students.

Western Kentucky University this month is launching Learn and Earn. The program partners with area companies and businesses to employ both traditional and nontraditional college students. Participating students will work for wages and can receive college scholarships from their employers.

“Interpersonal skills are huge – things like interviewing, dress, networking, listening, workplace etiquette,” Witty said. “We cover all these areas where employers are expressing needs. With my communications background, it is a passion of mine to help students build these skills because it will make such a difference in their lives.”

**KCTCS plunges in**

By next fall, the Kentucky Community and Technical College System will have essential skills built into many of its courses, according to Rhonda Tracy, chancellor of the system of 16 community and technical schools.

“We are right in the throes of determining the best soft skills to address, measuring soft skills attainment, and determining software packages that reinforce these skills,” Tracy said. “We have been able to collect a lot of information on soft skills, so we should be able to help students learn these skills in a natural, organic way.”

The process moves into high gear this summer as educators meet in teams to figure out how to best meet the needs identified by the schools’ business partners.

“We thought we knew what our industry partners wanted and needed,” Tracy said, “but we wanted to hear it directly from them, and last fall we asked our program advisory councils to rank a list of soft skills. Now we have that information, so there is no guessing on our part.

“Our faculty will take this information and walk it back into the curriculum. Where in our curriculum do we reinforce dependability and reliability, for example? Then we measure. When students graduate, what might that look like?”

KCTCS also asked employers how they want to see students display that they possess these skills.

In what Tracy said was a bit of a surprise, 44 percent would like to see essential skills displayed in a portfolio of the student’s work.

The commonwealth’s postsecondary system, she said, will use a software program called WEN (Worldwide Interactive Network), which the Kentucky Adult Edu-
They need to succeed. That all adults acquire the essential skills. Participation is the new mantra for ensuring cooperation rather than competition is illustrated of how cooperation rather than competition is the new mantra for ensuring that all adults acquire the essential skills they need to succeed. Collaboration has brought change to curricula. “A lot of our students haven’t worked,” said Sharon Johnston, senior associate for KYAE. “We launched a pilot program (to help them) figure out how to do that. “We knew we needed to integrate soft skills,” Johnston said. “That led to the need to develop employability standards. Then we needed to determine how to integrate these into lessons and align them to college and career standards. That grew into the need for a standardized lesson plan, which grew into development of a lesson bank for adult educators.

“The result is a collection of lessons with employability standards that encourage students to learn and practice those skills.”

Kentucky Adult Education also took the lead in the development of the Kentucky Essential Skills Certificate (KESC).

The certificate is awarded upon successful completion of two requirements:
• Finish the four components of WIN (communication, professionalism, problem solving/critical thinking, and team building) and
• Instructor validation that the student has practiced and implemented skills in the classroom.

“We see KESC as one of a series of specific training, and some that blend the two. He and trainer Tia Jones have also developed workshops for the county’s adult education sites focused on helping students earn a KESC (Kentucky Employability Certificate). Essential skills are the focus of those workshops, which are designed for adults without a high school equivalency.

Interpersonal skills such as interviewing, dress, networking, listening and workplace etiquette are crucial elements of the WKU Earn and Learn program because employers value them highly.

Employability Standards from Kentucky Adult Education

The employable adult should be able to:
• Effectively contribute to a team through cooperation, leadership, and giving and accepting critical feedback to work toward a common goal.
• Utilize workplace tools and technologies to communicate effectively (e.g., memos/e-mails, basic computer programs, phone systems).
• Model compliance of workplace policies and procedures.
• Utilize and support workplace organizational structures (e.g., company departments, corporate goals, chain of command).
• Utilize resources responsibly.
• Identify and effectively use skills and materials needed for a particular task.
• Accurately analyze information and respond appropriately.
• Interact with others in a professional manner.
• Analyze self-performance to better understand strengths and areas for improvement.
• Seek out opportunities for advancement and improvement of personal skills and abilities.

Jones is teaching workshops targeted for specific industries such as manufacturing. Essential skills are incorporated into these workshops, which help adults move into a position as a computer production technician. The workshop format is important, according to Jones.

“We don’t want to provide just an online course that students go through,” Jones said. “We don’t believe you can change culture completely online. We want to engage students in activities and awareness and make sure students are able to demonstrate their mastery of skills.”

Communities, too, are focusing on essential skills, largely because they have found that economic development increasingly requires a workforce with such skills. The Springfield-Washington County Economic Development Authority (S-WCEDA) is a good example.

“Being a smaller community, everything was recruit, recruit,” said Daniel B. Carney, executive director of S-WCEDA. “Now there is a shift to workplace development because of the job growth we’ve seen.”

The authority’s efforts are bundled under their local WorkReady Project.
“In meetings with industry we asked about their challenges going forward,” Carney said. “It kept coming back to finding the right people. Industry needs skilled welders, engineers, tool-and-tie makers, but the common denominator is soft skills. A lot of employers struggle with finding people who are responsible, on time, know how to communicate, and work in a team.

“We have tried to bridge those concerns in partnership with the local school district. We have developed a Work Ready seal. For each year high school students meet criteria such as being on time and working cooperatively, they get moved up a level. As we educate employers and make it worth it for the students, we believe this will speak volumes to employers and show that the students have done something, stuck with it for four years, and are ready for the next step.”

In addition to educational institutions, professional consultants are also addressing the issue of essential skills. Greg Coker, founder of the Institute for Soft Skills and an executive coach, has a new book coming out called “Soft Skills Field Manual: The Unwritten Rules for Succeeding in the Workplace.”

It is a complement to his soft skills boot camps. “You wouldn’t be in business without the technical skills,” Coker said, “but most managers will tell you that without soft skills, their products and services are slower to market, there is a lot of drama in the office, and companies are losing millions of dollars.”

During his boot camps, Coker first defines soft skills because he said there is still a lot of confusion about what it means. Then he provides non-academic, immediately usable tools to help people improve their soft skills.

The topic is “so red hot” that Coker is working with school districts to provide a soft-skills workshop for graduating high school seniors. Many economic development organizations are paying for the workshops, he said, because they know how important the skills are to both employers and potential employees.

The veteran speaker said although soft skills are in the spotlight right now, over the long run there has to be a balance between hard and soft skills. “Soft skills are a complement to and partner with technical skills,” Coker said. “It shouldn’t be either/or. It should be IQ (intelligence) and EQ (emotional intelligence).”

Debra Gibson Isaacs is a correspondent for The Lane Report. She can be reached at editorial@lanereport.com.