The Soft Skills Gap

by Cheddar Tutorials

In this course, we will be talking about leadership, grit and bridging the soft skills gap. There's quite a bit of important information, and we are going to begin this unit with the soft skills gap and why grit matters.

Let's first talk about what soft skills are. They are those communication and personal skills that allow someone to interact in an effective manner with those around them. They include professionalism, critical thinking, followership, positive attitude, cooperation, adherence to culture and rules, collaboration, communication and more. We'll be going into them in more depth throughout the course, but for starters, these soft skills are especially important in the work environment.

In this first challenge, you will be reading excerpts from the book,*Bridging the Soft Skills Gap: How to Teach the Missing Basics to Today's Young Talent*, by Bruce Tulgan. Answer at least one question in each section for review. Be sure to watch the unit introduction video from entrepreneur, Jon Steinberg. Then you will have the opportunity to reflect and write about how you understand the soft skills in a warm up touchstone before you complete the self-assessment touchstone at the end of the course.

≔ WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will explore the soft skills gap by defining and discussing:

1. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH THE SOFT SKILLS GAP?
2. WHAT ARE THE SOFT SKILLS?

---

1. WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH THE SOFT SKILLS GAP?

Bruce Tulgan explains the soft skills gap in this way:

You are very careful in your recruiting, selection, and hiring process and, yet, it is getting harder and harder to figure out which young job candidates to hire. Should you hire the promising new graduate with impressive, freshly minted credentials indicating valuable technical skills, even though he seems like he might be yet another new graduate lacking in some of those elusive, yet critical "soft skills"?

It seems like more and more of your young new hires are not working out. They make very little effort to "fit in." Does every single one of them expect to be treated like a "special case"? They often don't seem to appreciate that they are entering a pre-existing scene; joining an organization with its own mission, history, structure, rules, and culture; integrating with a group that has its own established dynamic; and engaging with

individuals, each of whom has his or her own story and many of whom have been part of this scene in this organization for years on end or longer.

Too often they say the wrong things at the wrong times and they fail to ask a lot of the questions they should be asking. Heck, they often can't even get to work on time. Anyway, they spend half the workday on their devices, instead of focusing on the work. That really comes through in customer service scores, along with other complaints about young front-line service personnel. Sometimes, their lack of interpersonal skills leads to misunderstandings and even conflicts on the team.

Most of them seem to have one foot out the door from the day they arrive, all the while asking for more of something—or more of everything. Even the young superstars nowadays don't seem to come in early, stay late, work through meals and weekends and holidays, bend over backward, and jump through hoops like the young superstars of yesteryear did. If you are like most managers with employees in their late teens and twenties, then you no doubt have first-hand experience with a very serious management challenge that has been growing especially fast in recent years. There is an ever-widening "Soft Skills Gap" in the workforce, especially among the newest new young workforce.

I use the term "soft skills" because most people understand the term is used, in contrast to "hard skills" which are technical, to encompass a wide range of non-technical skills ranging from "self- awareness" to "people skills" to "problem solving" to "teamwork."

These skills may be less tangible and harder to define and measure than many of the "hard skills," but they are absolutely critical to the success or failure of any individual in the workplace. The problem is that these old-fashioned basics—professionalism, critical thinking, and followership—are out of fashion and are too rarely spoken of nowadays. Today's young talent is not being indoctrinated in these old-fashioned basics either at home or in school. Usually, by the time they get to the workplace, employers figure it is too late to focus on them. Certainly, most managers think it is neither their place, nor do they have the time or resources or know-how to deal with the soft skills gap in their newest, youngest employees. So the soft skills gap continues to grow, hiding in plain sight, despite the fact that it costs organizations a fortune every day.

2. WHAT ARE THE SOFT SKILLS?

Bruce Tulgan describes the soft skills this way:

What are the soft skills that young people are missing nowadays that the grown-ups really miss the most? There are so many of them. I've boiled them down to some key behaviors in three old-fashioned categories:

- Professionalism
- Critical Thinking
- Followership.

Let's take a closer look.
Old fashioned "Professionalism"

Why don't young people today hold themselves to a higher standard when it comes to their attitude, work habits, and people skills?

Just like those of previous generations, Gen Zers' first real job usually coincides with their first real taste of adult freedom and autonomy. They embrace the freedom and autonomy of young adult-hood, but often resist the attendant responsibility, discipline, and consistency. Why do they not, like those of previous generations, quickly realize that young adults need to make the adjustment to the grown-up world?

There are five reasons: First, most Gen Zers are coming to you straight from school. If they have the most in-demand technical skills, then they are probably coming from college or university; maybe graduate school. That means they've probably become quite accustomed to a very luxurious form of pretend adulthood. I'm not blaming the institutions, but think for a moment about the college/university lifestyle from which your young employees come to you: Room and board are not only covered, but also arranged conveniently in close proximity to campus. College students are surrounded by their peers all the time, and often with intimate friends. College students have access to the resources of a major institution, but their only responsibilities are those of a valued customer. They have the support and services of staff, administration, and faculty, but their social status is determined by where they fit in with their peer group. Their "job" is a privilege for which someone else is paying (even if it is paid for by student loans, the tremendous cost of all this is deferred).

In exchange for all of this, one could make a strong argument that very little is required or expected of most young college/university students. Of course, there is substantial coursework. Still, they have very little supervision and a great deal of latitude in all manner of their personal habits and conduct. How many college students come to work for you who have been in the habit of staying up too late hanging out with their friends? Skipping too many classes? Doing their work at the last minute . . . or not at all? Then expecting to receive an inflated grade? Or else their parents might call an administrator to insist on why the student's individual learning need requires a special accommodation, maybe an A–.

That takes me to the second reason: Being raised by those helicopter parents on steroids. Even after they arrive in the workplace, Gen Zers are still only a phone call (or text) away from their parents. It is unlikely that their parents are still enforcing a bedtime (perhaps that one is unfortunate), but I would bet some of your less than tardy Gen Zers may still be receiving an actual wake-up call from a parent in the morning. Even worse, maybe they are on their own now, for the first time, after being reared by parents (and their parenting posses) who did all the work for them of closely scheduling, managing, and supporting their every move. With their parents doing so much of the work, many Gen Zers never mastered the basics of taking care of themselves.

Third, the customization of everything has entrenched in Gen Zers a fundamental expectation that individual accommodation is the norm. Even if they, themselves, did not home-school, never had an ILP (an "individual learning plan," very common in schools nowadays), and never took meds for their special "diagnosis," they surely grew up among kids who did. And surely too many people told them each and all, way too often, "You are a special case." Meanwhile, there has long been a growing current of personal customization in every sphere where consumers dwell—especially media. Of course, all of this dovetails with the long-term zeitgeist swing toward relativism, that is, "all styles are equally valid."

Gen Zers' basic assumption is that they should be able to just "be themselves" and "express" their true identity at work, even if that might include stuff like failing to follow through on a day when they are "just not feeling it."

Fourth, when it comes to Gen Zers' people skills, it is easy to blame the fact that they have become so accustomed to electronic communication that they are losing the ability to communicate well in-person. That's surely a big part of the story. Communication practices are habits, and most Gen Zers are in the habit of remote informal staccato and relatively low-stakes interpersonal communication because of their constant use

of hand-held devices and social media and instant messaging. But there is much more going on here than Gen Zers staring at their devices too much, sending too many texts, and becoming increasingly less articulate because they have so little practice having real conversations. As a partner in a large accounting/ consulting firm put it so well, "It's not just how they communicate that is the problem. It's what they have to say that really pisses me off!"

Fifth, much of what older, more experienced people might see as matters of professionalism—attitude, self-presentation, schedule, and interpersonal communication—Gen Zers are more likely to consider highly personal matters of individual style or preference and really none of their employer's business.

Old-fashioned "Critical Thinking"

Why are today's young people not better at "thinking on their feet"— learning, problem solving, and decision making in their own heads without a device?

What managers tell us regularly in our interviews is summed up well by one senior-level nurse-manager with more than three decades of experience managing young nurses: "They just don't think on their feet the way they used to. They know a lot. But if they are not sure of something, they go right to their device. If there is not an obvious online resource to answer their question immediately, then they turn right to another person—whoever is available—another nurse, a doc- tor, or anyone they run into next. What they never seem to do is just stop and think. They can often find the 'right' answer, but often they don't fully understand the answer they've found. It's not just a lack of experience. It's a different way of thinking—shallow and wide, instead of digging deep. They don't puzzle through the problem, and they don't stop and reflect on why the right solution is the right solution."

As they become adult players in the real world of work, why don't they stop and think on their feet, puzzle through problems, and reflect more on the best solutions?

Of course, there is one big reason: They have never had the need. Today's information environment offers infinite answers to every question under the sun, and they've always had powerful, easy- to-use information technology at their fingertips all the time.

On this subject, I often remind older, more experienced people: "Do you remember when we used to have conversations with very smart people about meaningful things that sometimes ended with a giant chorus of 'I don't know,' 'I don't know,' 'I don't know,' and 'Neither do I'? Or maybe you remember having those 'I wonder if _____' conversations with yourself." Are you old enough to remember those conversations? Well, Gen Zers are not! They have never had that conversation—with themselves or with anyone else. As long as they can remember, when they reach that point in a conversation—"I wonder if _____"—they (or someone else) would go immediately to a hand-held device to find answers or a short related video or a giant detour that distracts them from the original inquiry altogether. Or they would ask the ultimate authority on everything—their parents.

With computers, content providers, and grown-ups to do so much of their thinking for them, Gen Zers have hardly any experience digging deep, puzzling, and reflecting. They have a built-in expectation that learning curves are instant. They think of learning in small increments, filling skill and knowledge gaps as they run across them. The long learning curve is a rarity and a bit of a mystery to Gen Z.

When it comes to the learning habits of Gen Zers, many experts blame changes in the emphasis of the

education system at all levels: Teaching to the test has become too common. It is all too rare that schools are teaching students to assemble and evaluate evidence, construct multiple competing arguments and understand multiple sides in a debate, untangle seeming inconsistencies, and wrestle with complexity. In college, university, and graduate school, those learning technical skills are likely to continue throughout their education on that "learning for the test" pedagogical trajectory. Those being schooled in the liberal arts often err all the way on the other end of the spectrum. Young liberal arts graduates may become so convinced that "all styles are equally valid" they have difficulty vetting information for legitimacy, use value, and broader implications in the real world.

This takes me to another disturbing factor in today's information environment: the proliferation of half-baked experts spewing content on just about everything. Nowadays, you can find an expert to support nearly any proposition: "My expert says that two plus two equals five." What is one supposed to do with information like that? Yet information like that is everywhere. The impact of this factor goes way beyond the common Internet search misfire in which Gen Zers find the answer, but the answer is "two plus two equals five." Far more damaging, the organic pluralism of the Internet has led to a false sense of intellectual pluralism, a world in which people think, "Maybe two plus two does equal five." This has led to profound distortions in the public discourse—in all media—in which pure fiction, gut feelings, and opinions are given the same weight as well-researched facts, rigorous analysis, and strongly constructed arguments. This phenomenon dovetails with the swing of the zeitgeist pendulum toward cultural relativism more generally and the weakening of institutional credibility. After all, what authority figure in what institution has the staying power to say, definitively, that "two plus two must equal four"?

Maybe we shouldn't be so shocked when Gen Zers sometimes tell us, "It appears that two plus two may actually equal five." After all, in virtual reality, this equation probably has very few negative consequences. It's only now that they are entering the real world of the workplace where, suddenly, their lack of skill and experience in the basics of critical thinking can have very real consequences.

Old-fashioned "Followership"

Why don't young people today "respect authority"? By the time they were growing up, "Question Authority!" was not a slogan anymore but a hackneyed cliché. So maybe it is too easy to explain away Gen Zers' seeming disregard for joining something larger and making personal sacrifices for the greater good.

Why don't Gen Zers value citizenship, service, and teamwork?

Four reasons: First, they think like customers. Yes, they know that their employers are the ones paying them. But still, they look at their relationship with any established institution, no matter how small or how large, and they think: "What do you have for me? And what currency do I need to use to get what I want/need from you?"

It's not that most Gen Zers are not feeling very fortunate just to be employed. They are. However, that gratitude is not bottomless nor is it without conditions. They are grateful to have a source of income and perhaps some benefits. They are grateful to be accepted, validated, wanted. They are grateful to have access to a hub of resources from which to acquire experience, training, networking; a place to be, with computers and phones and bathrooms; maybe a kitchen or a gym; maybe some office supplies. They are grateful for the future doors that might be opened by this current job. But let's not get carried away. It's not like they are likely to be here for a long time anyway.

Gen Zers may seem clueless about a lot of things, but they know very well that they are much less likely than

those of prior generations to make long-term uninterrupted careers with one organization. They are also less likely to be exclusively employed by one organization at any given time. And they are less likely to work full-time and on-site. They are less likely to trust the "system" or the organization to take care of them and, thus, less likely to show what looks like loyalty—a desire to belong, deference to authority, a willingness to make short-term sacrifices for the good of the whole, and an eager- ness to contribute regardless of credit or rewards.

Second is the way they think about their relationships with co-workers not in positions of authority: Gen Zers are simply not accustomed to sustained interactions with a group of "peers" who are

- Not all roughly their own age, and
- Not relationships of their own choosing, and
- Not refereed constantly, and
- Not also engaging with them in a parallel conversation through social media.

These relationships are real-world, involve a high degree of inter-dependency in pursuit of concrete goals every step of the way, and the stakes are high. Adults are in the workplace to earn their livelihoods. So there are lots of opportunities to disappoint and/or be disappointed.

Third is how they look at individuals in positions of authority— especially authority figures in institutions in which they are constituents. Once again, they think like customers. In this case, specifically, your customer!

Remember, Gen Zers love grown-ups! They have been and remain closer to their parents—and their parenting "posses"—than any other generation has ever been! The problem is that their parents, teachers, and counselors have always treated them like "little emperors." It's even worse if they are coming to you straight from a college or university, where Gen Zers were, in fact, actually the customers of the staff and faculty who were their proximate authority figures. Gen Zers look at older, more experienced people and presume on a very deep level that you are there to take care of them. Surely you wouldn't be interacting with them if you did not want to help them meet their basic needs and wants. They expect you to greet them warmly, make them feel comfortable, set them up for success, provide them with the resources they need, help them avoid pitfalls, and give them lots of encouragement. Isn't that what grown-ups do?

Gen Zers don't typically look at other people in the workplace trying to figure out "their proper place" in the context—how to adapt in order to "fit in" with others who clearly have longstanding relationships and a well-established course of dealing. Instead, they look at you—and everyone else in the room—and think: "I wonder what role you might play in this chapter of my life story?"

Fourth, Gen Zers are not planning to follow the old-fashioned career path, so they figure they are probably just passing through your organization anyway. Why go to a whole lot of trouble adapting to your approach to how they should manage themselves when they won't even be here that long? They are thinking: "Seriously, what am I supposed to do? Adapt my schedule and work habits and style and attitude for every new job?" Even if they could be convinced to adapt for an employer eventually, they are very unlikely to be ready to do it from the get-go, certainly not early in their first or second real jobs.

Source: Tulgan, B. (2015). Bridging the Soft Skills Gap: How to Teach the Missing Basics to Todays Young Talent. Chapter 1, p. 20-28. [VitalSource Bookshelf]. Retrieved from https://bookshelf.vitalsource.com/#/books/9781119138150/