

The human edge: why soft skills matter more than ever

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As technology transforms work, technical know-how is only half the story. Soft skills like empathy, adaptability and communication are now vital for navigating complexity, building trust and sustaining human impact.

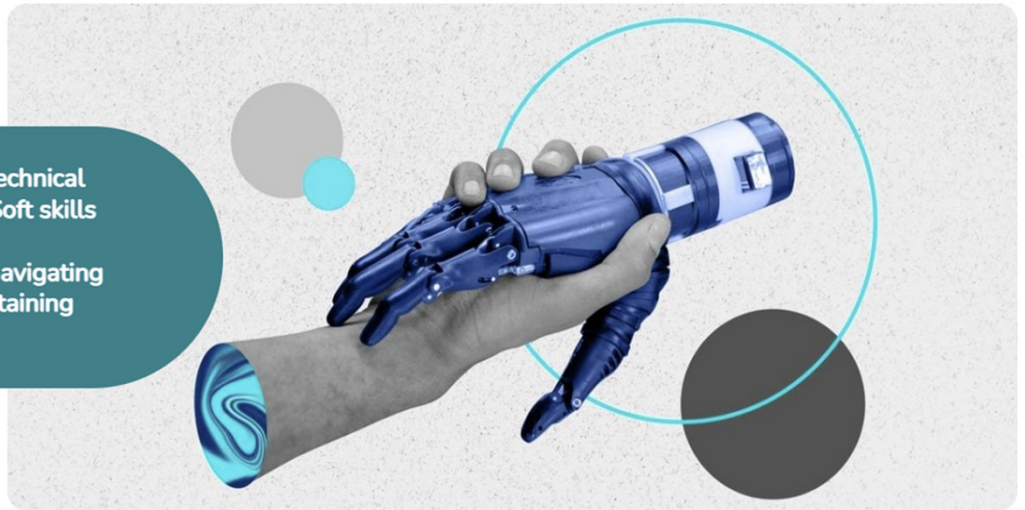


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Coco Chanel once said: "In order to be irreplaceable, one must always be different." Raised in an orphanage run by nuns, she learned to sew, an early foundation of hard skills. Later, in cabaret, she layered in softer, more communicative traits. Her transformation into a style icon was not only about craft, but also connection: she cultivated deep relationships with resourceful, influential people.

Her journey from technical mastery to social artistry is telling. No fabrication here – Coco was far from so-so. That ability to evolve wasn't based on technique alone, it was deeply human. Emotional nuance, presence and adaptability helped her navigate shifting contexts with elegance.

In today's workplace, dominated by digital tools, data and AI, it's tempting to assume that technical expertise alone is enough. But that assumption is increasingly misleading. While technology accelerates the pace of change, it's our ability to relate, reflect and respond as humans that sets us apart. These soft skills such as presence, empathy and insight are what help us, in Coco's words, "be different". They keep us grounded and moving forward with purpose.

Rethinking the divide: hard v soft

Traditionally, hard skills were where we looked for professional growth. Organised around established protocols, they were quantifiable, methodical and teachable. In contrast, soft skills were considered more as nice-to-have qualities, vaguely defined, and often underappreciated. There was clearly a dominance in the hierarchy: hard skills drove performance, soft skills made people like you.

Today, the tectonics of that hierarchy are shifting, not just rhetorically, but structurally too. Hard and soft skills have pivoted to reposition as peers, and their early schism has stretched to a chasm. Though often interdependent, they're now most impactful when harnessed in tandem. The reality is that data-heavy tasks that increasingly rely on hard skills are being automated. What remains are soft skill capabilities that technology can't easily replicate: emotional intelligence, critical thinking and authentic communication.

To understand these skills better, let's dive deeper into three important dimensions:

- **Focus:** Hard skills are built through addition and reinforcement. They follow best practices and adopt structured methods, while we repeat them until proficient. Soft skills, by contrast, often require unlearning; we embrace new behaviours, let go of outdated habits and integrate new ways of relating, listening and leading.
- **Nature:** Hard skills are tangible, measurable and deliver visible results. Soft skills are lived experiences, shaped by emotion and reflection. Often tacit and felt, they are sometimes only fully recognised by an uncomfortable awkwardness in their absence.
- **Acquisition:** Hard skills are procedural, following clear steps to yield predictable outcomes. Soft skills are relational, emerging through interaction, feedback and a willingness to grow within context.

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The context: a data-driven world

If hard skills are the engine, then soft skills are the steering; one provides humans with power and traction, the other affords us control and direction. This duality helps frame what follows as we drill down to examine three major technological shifts shaping the modern workplace: social media, remote working and AI.

Each digital evolution offers benefits, but each also poses specific challenges. Strengthening our soft skill foundations can help us in addressing these challenges.

1. Social media: for connection or comparison?

Social media has transformed how humans connect, learn and express themselves. It offers access to communities, kindred spirits and real-time information. However, it also brings with it the risks of information overload, burnout and a relentless comparison trap.

Why? Because it can be addictive; platforms are engineered to capture attention, trigger emotional responses and feed our need for validation. Without boundaries, we become reactive and driven by compulsion, rather than reflective and in control.

Soft skills can boost our ability to stay present, filter out the noise and connect intentionally. Paying attention to these areas can help, for example, self-awareness, emotional regulation, assertive communication, mindful engagement and time management.

2. Remote working: for freedom or disconnection?

In the post-Covid world, remote working has enhanced personal autonomy, yielded greater flexibility and returned our ability to focus and choose. However, as the line between work and life has blurred, new challenges have emerged, such as miscommunication, isolation and diminished personal visibility and presence.

Why? Because remote communication often lacks emotional cues and context; reducing it to transactional levels takes away the emotional connections that are vital to building trust. And a lack of boundaries can further cause work to bleed into every corner of life, eroding personal motivation and well-being.

Soft skills can strengthen our ability to weave the invisible threads necessary to sustain collaboration and identity across a labyrinth of physical distances and a geography of mediated spaces. Paying attention to these areas can help, for example, showing up authentically, communicating with clarity, holding emotional presence, demonstrating empathy and designing effective daily habits.

3. AI: for amanuensis or abdication?

We cannot deny that AI is now part of our daily workflows. It offers a helping hand for productivity gains, opens up new possibilities in idea generation and calmly supports us through AI tools like conversational assistants and coaching platforms. However, the blending of what appears human versus machine also raises concerns, such as a loss of voice, overreliance on AI outputs and fears around future job security.

Why? Because of the ubiquity and rapid pace of AI's adoption, humans out of the AI loop can feel overwhelmed, especially as new tools emerge faster than we can keep up. We're often in coping mode before we've had the chance to truly understand or learn. The real challenge isn't AI itself, but how we think about it, with it and around it. Are we using it to harness and amplify our thinking, or are we simply outsourcing our judgement?

Soft skills can strengthen and empower us to firmly lodge humans in the loop, not just as passive users, but also as active, conscious co-creators and ultimate decision-makers. Paying attention to these areas can help, for example, skills like questioning and deep listening; critical thinking with the tenacity of a detective; a willingness to experiment and learn; and adaptability to engage an AI mindset and sound judgement.

Final thought: the human edge

Soft skills are no longer the optional, junior partner in the relationship. They are now part of the central executive function we call on to navigate complexity, connect with others and remain resilient in the face of change. They enable us to adapt, not just to our changing environment, but to each other.

So, while data may drive decisions we make, and as technologies reshape our future world of work, it is still humans who must make meaning, hold context and own decisions. Building relationships that we trust is increasingly important, and it is through soft skills such as presence, empathy, adaptability and insight, that we will continue to hold our human edge.

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