A Young Professional’s Guide to Career Success Using Soft Skills

In a highly competitive job market, what are the most important skills to have as an information systems governance, security, or audit and assurance professional? What will ensure that professionals get ahead and get the recognition and rewards they desire? What will differentiate someone from the rest of the pack, help earn promotions and pay raises, or just help him/her to do a better job?

There are some obvious answers. Demonstrating the right knowledge and experience through certifications, such as the Certified Information Systems Auditor (CISA), the Certified Information Security Manager® (CISM®) or the Certified in Risk and Information Systems ControlTM (CRISC™), can definitely help. Experience with relevant standards, legislation and compliance requirements, e.g., Statement on Auditing Standards (SAS) 70, the Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI DSS), the US Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), the US Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act (GLBA) or the US Sarbanes-Oxley Act, can also help. And, it goes without saying that it is important to be on top of the latest trends and technologies—cloud computing, social media, unified communications and virtual desktop infrastructure (VDI), to name a few.

What may not be so obvious is that it is equally important to develop and tune soft skills—those skills that relate to one’s EQ (emotional intelligence quotient), rather than IQ. This article examines the importance of soft skills in career success, identifies a number of the key soft skills areas and discusses ways to improve those skills.

**IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS**

The results of a Right Management online poll of 895 North American senior leaders and human resources (HR) professionals, conducted 9 February through 9 March 2010, highlight the importance of soft skills when it comes to business performance. The organization’s culture and the professional’s interpersonal behaviors and critical reasoning and judgment heavily outweigh technical skills and relevant experience (see figure 1).1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1—What Contributes Most to Accelerated Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Reasoning/Judgment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**COMBINING SKILLS**

The combination of technical expertise and soft skills is important for career success. The following scenario is provided as an example:

Tom’s company (Acme Auditors) provides audit services to Widgets Manufacturing, and he was engaged to audit its IT systems. During the audit, he identifies that Widgets’ operating systems have not been patched in the last year and he raises an issue to the IT manager, stating, “The systems are vulnerable to a buffer overflow and should be regularly patched.” A year later, Tom performs the audit again, and the issue has not changed. When there is a major outage and Widgets’ production line shuts down for two days, Acme Auditors is blamed. Despite threats to tear up the contract, Tom’s manager convinces Widgets to keep Acme Auditors. However, Tom is
moved off the account and is overlooked at the next round of promotions.

Why was Tom overlooked for promotion? The answer is that while his technical skills were good—he successfully identified this patch issue—his soft skills were poor. Tom should have presented his findings to relevant business stakeholders, not just IT, and should have highlighted the impacts of the issue in the context of the business, not just technically. This would garner support and buy-in for his recommendations and help ensure that they were acted upon.

While this is a simplistic example to illustrate the point, it is clear that soft skills are a determining factor in career success. Sandra Senfit and Frederick Gallegos highlight this in *Information Technology and Control Audit*:

> The broader and more well rounded the IT auditor is, the better the chance for a successful audit career. The auditor can pull on experiences in other fields, software packages, or even operating systems to act as a mental guide during the audit. During the questioning process, the [auditor can establish] a rapport with the client by using “people skills” or “soft skills.” The role of an auditor is not an easy one when […] asked to review and question the work of others. Many times, the auditee must have a clear understanding of [his/her] role and that the auditor’s focus is not to be critical of the individual but of the organizational policies, procedures, and process. The audit objectives focus on the organization’s goals and objectives.³

Similarly, in IT auditing, it is important to complement technical skills gained over time with much-needed soft skills such as communication, presentation and writing skills. Ultimately, these skills come in handy when delivering technical information. As these skills are not honed in the classroom, it is imperative that audit management or leadership coach teams in identifying opportunities to strengthen them.³

In the *Information Security Management Handbook*, Micki Krause and Harold F. Tipton reiterate this point by explaining how soft skills complement technical skills.

> The [information security] environment requires information security professionals to supplement their technical skills with a variety of “soft skills” such as managing, communicating, and stressing the business reasons for security objectives. The successful information security practitioner will learn these additional skills in order to be heard in the on-rush of challenges facing senior executives.⁴

**SOFT SKILLS IN DEMAND**

The difficulty of finding candidates with the right skills is an international problem. A KPMG report examining financial services firms in the UK and India highlights the “soft skills gap” by noting that 62 percent of organizations in the UK and more than 58 percent of organizations in India struggle to recruit the right talent.

> Essential soft skills required by graduate employees joining global financial and business services in the UK and India include teamwork, communications, client relationships management, customer services, business awareness, problem solving and achievement orientation skills. Drive, energy and a “can do” attitude, the passion to learn and negotiation skills are considered essential in financial services in India, whilst analytical and mathematical skills are considered essential in the UK.⁵

Regardless of location, it is important for young professionals and seasoned professionals to understand that the dynamics of the workplace require the use of myriad soft skills. While no particular area is more important than the next, it is important that the skills be used in tandem. Whether that is by communicating effectively, having awareness of the surrounding environment, utilizing interview techniques to probe for information from the interviewee, or coming to a shared understanding to negotiate on terms or resolve conflict, a meaningful balance must be applied consistently.
TYPES OF SOFT SKILLS
In 2007, the US Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) discussed the importance of soft skills with the Circle of Champions, a distinguished group of US businesses that have received the Secretary of Labor’s New Freedom Initiative Award for innovative and proactive efforts to recruit, hire and promote people with disabilities. As part of this dialog, the companies identified several competencies as key to the success of young workers in the 21st-century workplace. These include networking, enthusiasm, professionalism, communication skills, teamwork, and problem solving and critical thinking.6

Portland-based HR expert Lori Kocon advises that some of the most common soft skills employers look for and assess candidates on include:7

1. **Strong work ethic**—Are they motivated and dedicated to getting the job done, no matter what? Will they be conscientious and do their best work?

2. **Positive attitude**—Are they optimistic and upbeat? Will they generate good energy and good will?

3. **Good communication skills**—Are they verbally articulate and good listeners? Can they make their case and express their needs in a way that builds bridges with colleagues, customers and vendors?

4. **Time management abilities**—Do they know how to prioritize tasks and work on a number of different projects at once? Will they use their time on the job wisely?

5. **Problem-solving skills**—Are they resourceful and able to creatively solve problems that will inevitably arise? Will they take ownership of problems or leave them for someone else?

6. **Being a team player**—Will they work well in groups and teams? Will they be cooperative and take a leadership role when appropriate?

7. **Self-confidence**—Do they truly believe they can do the job? Will they project a sense of calm and inspire confidence in others? Will they have the courage to ask questions that need to be asked and to freely contribute their ideas?

8. **Ability to accept and learn from criticism**—Will they be able to handle criticism? Are they coachable and open to learning and growing as a person and as a professional?

9. **Flexibility/adaptability**—Are they able to adapt to new situations and challenges? Will they embrace change and be open to new ideas?

10. **Working well under pressure**—Can they handle the stress that accompanies deadlines and crises? Will they be able to do their best work and come through in a pinch?

INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES
There is a wide range of questions interviewers can ask when trying to gauge the soft skills of a potential hire. When it comes to interpersonal skills, they may ask candidates to describe an unusual person they know and why the person may be different. Communication skills can be determined by having candidates relate their experiences with an angry or frustrated customer, client or coworker. A popular question that is often asked to measure the ability of one to work on a team is centered on the discussion of a project that was not successful and how it was handled. The question of solutions to problems may also deal with negative situations and how they were overcome.8 Therefore, questions used to assess soft skills often have an individual addressing the how and why, rather than what, where or who.

IMPROVE Soft SKILLS
Mark Federman, researcher at the Department of Adult Education and Counselling for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (Canada), suggests that the most effective means of learning soft skills is through modeling.9 Working with people who exhibit strong soft skills is an effective way of learning those skills. Many organizations run internal mentoring programs so that senior employees can pass on their knowledge and experience to newer employees. Local chapters of associations such as ISACA are another good place to meet with experienced professionals who can assist with mentoring and soft skills.

Other ways to improve skills include formal training courses, books, professional organizations such as Toastmasters, and the Internet. The ISACA Young Professionals Subcommittee has compiled a list of useful links on the topic of soft skills, which can be accessed through the ISACA web site’s Knowledge Center.10

Working with people who exhibit strong soft skills is an effective way of learning those skills.
CONCLUSION
The need to grow professionally and develop a successful career is evident in most professionals, and while the opportunity to be on the forefront of this challenge exists, it is not emphasized enough, hence the soft skills gap. Critical soft skills, such as interpersonal behavior, communication, report writing and presentation skills, that augment technical skills are important in developing a successful career. However, to the disadvantage of employees, especially young professionals, these skills are seldom emphasized or taught in the workplace. Similarly, employees do not recognize the lack of or need for soft skills and miss opportunities to improve these important skills.

In an increasingly information- and technology-driven society, soft skills are shaping the structure of the workplace. This is more evident in the audit or information systems environment. Professionals need to interact seamlessly with customers/clients, work in teams, communicate technical details and build relationships. Managers will always ask: Is the candidate able to lead a team successfully, communicate effectively, make presentations or write an audit report to management? These are key skills that determine promotions, raises and job success.

In pursuit of greener pastures, job applicants are always weighed on their technical ability and, most important, their soft skills. Employers often ask whether job candidates are the best fit for the organization or whether candidates will align well with the organization’s culture. Furthermore, employers can easily teach the technical skills. The soft skills that make up a candidate’s character and demeanor are not so easily taught yet can have an impact on whether the candidate gets the dream job or the top-floor corner office. That is why the key message from Nobel Prize winner James Heckman, as keynote speaker for The Long Run Impact of Early Life Events II conference, was that “both cognitive and noncognitive skills—the latter described as ‘soft skills’ such as motivation, self-esteem and perseverance—determine many life outcomes, including education, health and crime.”

It is no surprise that, even in people’s daily routines, tools such as YouTube (storytelling), Match.com (dating), LinkedIn (career networking) and Facebook (community building) have evolved to augment their communication tasks.

To benefit from soft skills and develop a successful career, the foremost step for young professionals or any other professional is to own their career. The ability to direct and fill in opportunity areas highly depends on career ownership and effective management. Soft skills are the often unrecognized elements for success; success depends on their mastery.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
The authors would like to thank all of the members of ISACA’s Young Professional Subcommittee (YPS) for their support of this article. YPS was formed in 2009 to facilitate the development of a community that meets the needs of young professionals. The subcommittee is made up of nine young professionals from around the globe—Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia and Europe.

The subcommittee has identified various needs of young professionals such as soft skills development, training/education, career development and progression, mentoring, and networking and community. As such, the subcommittee is continuously working to develop programs to address these needs.

EDITOR’S NOTE
A list of important resources for soft skills development is available on the Young Professional group on the ISACA web site, www.isaca.org/ypgroup. Additionally, ISACA also offers topics on soft skills training within the current training schedules. Please visit www.isaca.org/education for more information.

Through the YPS, ISACA is also actively engaged in developing a community of young professionals and providing networking opportunities within the ISACA web site. Please join the Young Professionals group on the Knowledge Center area of ISACA’s web site (www.isaca.org/ypgroup) and support this activity. The YPS group community is a place to share practical advice on professional and personal development.

ENDNOTES


10 ISACA, Knowledge Center, www.isaca.org/ypgroup
