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FIRM MANAGEMENT

How to Hone Your Soft Skills to Strengthen Client Relationships

As summer draws to a close, kids and young students aren't the only ones who need to think about heading back to school. Your employees — even your top performers — can become stronger contributors by enhancing their abilities and expertise through professional development opportunities.

Paul McDonald • Sep. 12, 2014



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Besides honing their technical skills, your accountants will need to focus on their nontechnical, or soft, skills as well. Solid communication and interpersonal abilities are becoming just as important to accounting professionals in addressing client needs.

Soft skills include diplomacy, customer service, problem solving, adaptability and, in particular, communication. Your team members also need business acumen that extends beyond accounting to understanding clients' bigger-picture business goals and concerns.

The importance of nontechnical skills is borne out by the results of a [survey](#) conducted by Accountemps, a Robert Half company. When chief financial officers (CFOs) were asked to identify the most common reason their employees failed to advance, [poor interpersonal skills](#) was the top reason cited.

But here's the twist: Although CFOs recognize the need for their employees to possess key soft skills, there seems to be a disconnect in their willingness to help staff develop them: In the same Accountemps survey, only one in five (19 percent) executives said their organization is likely to invest in soft skills training for accounting and finance employees in the near term.

It makes business sense for your firm to be among that 19 percent. Accountants must be able to clearly communicate findings and recommendations to clients.

Another factor increasing the need for outstanding soft skills is the unprecedented amounts of data clients are generating. They often rely on consultants to team with management or, if the company is large enough, their in-house accounting and finance teams, to analyze this information and then tell an easy-to-comprehend story behind the numbers to colleagues and executives.

Providing this strategic advice requires excellent communication, teamwork and other interpersonal skills. In cases where a CPA firm has off-site accountants to handle a client's daily accounting needs, these professionals need to know how to adapt successfully to another business's culture and work well with employees and company leaders who may not have an accounting background.

Building up Your Firm's 'Soft' Side

Some people believe that communication and other nontechnical skills are in-born — you either have them or you don't. The truth is there's plenty you can do to help improve your team's soft skills:

- **Give context.** Make sure your staff understand why interpersonal skills are so critical to the firm's work as well as their advancement within your organization. Explain how professionals without these skills increasingly find themselves held back in the workplace and have difficulty moving up in the organization.
- **Offer mentoring.** Soft skills are inherently hard to teach; they are definitely an art rather than a science. A mentor can “show by doing” for your team members. When partnered with top-performing employees, staff can observe the interactions of these individuals with leaders in your firm as well as clients.
- **Structure training.** Best practices for some skills, such as verbal and written proficiency, can be taught more easily. Instruction can take a number of forms, including online classes and membership in a public-speaking organization.
- **Make it part of performance reviews.** Include soft skills in your employees' evaluations. Provide specific examples of successful or unsuccessful communication and collaboration, rather than just your general impressions.

Hiring for Soft Skills

Just as you want to train your staff to have top-notch interpersonal skills, you should also look for these abilities in job candidates. Yes, it's harder to make a judgment about a person in an interview than it is with staff you've known and worked with for years, but it's not impossible.

Ask open-ended questions that require thought and prompt the candidate to reveal attitudes or opinions. Examples include, “Can you describe how you handle tight deadlines on the job?” and “Who was your best boss ever and why?”

Hypothetical questions can probe deeper into a candidate's personality. Here's an example: “How would you respond if placed in a situation you felt presented a conflict of interest or was unethical?”

You can also ask an off-the-wall question and take note of the candidate's reaction. Was he rattled by the question, or did he welcome it? A candidate who smiles at a surprise and handles it deftly indicates someone who is able to quickly adapt when the job and situation require it.

Today's accounting firms can't rely on having candidates with just the best technical skills. It's also key to focus on interpersonal abilities in your professional development and recruitment efforts.

Paul McDonald is senior executive director with [Robert Half](#), the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm. Over the course of his 30-year career with the company, he has spoken extensively on employment and management issues based on his work with thousands of companies and job seekers.

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