



5 Essential Soft Skills to Develop in Any Job

By Marlo Lyons

Being laid off is a shock — even if you see it coming. If you're eligible for severance pay, you might feel okay for a while, but there may come a point when you need to take a job outside of your profession to pay the bills (maybe in retail, food service, or hospitality). But landing a job outside of your industry can still move your career forward.

Here are the skills you can practice and learn while working outside of your chosen field, and how to position them on your resume.

Skills to hone when you're in the role

If possible, look for ways to practice the hard skills from your profession. For example, if you worked in finance at a tech company and are now working as a host or server at a local restaurant, ask if you can do the reconciliation at the end of the night or the financial planning or modeling for ordering food, beverages, and supplies to cut down on waste.

If you can't use your hard skills, focus on soft skills, which are needed in every job in every industry. Consider how you can develop or improve these five soft skills while working outside of your chosen field:

Effective communication

Working in any industry affords the opportunity to improve your communication skills. Being able to take complex problems and simplify them for all audiences is a critical capability. Use the new job to work on adjusting your communication to each audience you interact with and see how they receive what you say. What worked? What didn't? For example, some people like direction and some people like to be empowered. For those who like direction, provide guidance in your communication, and for those who like to be empowered, be curious and coach to allow them to come up with their own resonant solutions. Delivering communication to each audience in the way they like to receive it is crucial for success in nearly every business.

Teamwork

Depending on what kind of employment you found, you may have the opportunity to elevate your teamwork capabilities. For example, can you learn and practice new ways to resolve conflicts? Can you advance your ability to align stakeholders? Working with new people who have different personalities and perspectives will always provide opportunities to increase these interpersonal skills.

Influencing without authority

If you take a job in an industry outside your current career path, you may be able to use your experience to influence how the business runs. For example, I once had a client who lost her sales job and worked for her father at his small marketing agency while she continued to job search. Her experience in sales gave her great exposure to which marketing tactics work and which don't. But her father believed he knew what was best for his company. She had to work incredibly hard to influence him to think in a different way. After two unsuccessful attempts, she worked to see things from her father's perspective and brought him along on the journey of change at his pace. It worked, and her father encouraged her to try her approach, which increased business by 20%. While she was successful in driving her father's business, she was also successful in learning how to influence more effectively, and that helped her in her next career move.

Problem solving

Every job has challenges, some more complex than others. Being adept at problem solving — which includes understanding the problem and root cause, then brainstorming solutions and alternatives — shows structured thinking with logic-based reasoning. Look for challenges in the new job and actively work to solve problems in creative and constructive ways. Once you've implemented the best solution, determine if adjustments need to be made to ensure long-term success.

Leadership

Leadership is about guiding and influencing others to maximize their capabilities to achieve a collective goal. Perhaps you want to be a manager in your chosen field and haven't had the opportunity, or you've been a manager before. Either way, you can develop or improve your leadership skills in any job where you want to advance your listening, coaching, and guiding capabilities to align a group of people to move toward the same direction. You can also use any leadership experience you have to help the next generation develop their own leadership skills, which will help them achieve their career goals.

How to translate these skills on your resume

For the first few months after being laid off, you can leave a new job outside your industry off your resume. But if you're still seeking employment in your chosen field after six months, you'll want to show you're keeping relevant skills fresh.

When positioning your job on your resume, tie the experience to your career path. For example, if your career has always been in marketing and you're working at a retail store, your resume could reflect your current job like this:

Retail Associate

[Retail store name]

Develop deep understanding of consumers through in-person observation and interaction, and provide expertise on store displays to highlight holiday marketing campaigns.

Collaborate cross functionally with colleagues in other departments and external vendors to creatively solve problems in innovative ways that drive business.

Adapt to changing priorities while inspiring team members to meet all deadlines and take pride in their work.

This language includes keywords from marketing job descriptions and includes the skills needed in the marketing field. It doesn't include working the cash register or stocking shelves, which may be most of your daily work responsibilities, because those skills aren't directly relevant to marketing.

To keep your skills fresh, you may also decide to take some professional courses during this time. If you do, be sure to highlight them on your resume as well. For example:

Education

University of North Carolina

BS, Business Administration

Continuing Education:

Digital Marketing Certificate developed by Google – Coursera.org (December 2022)

How to Write Copy That Sells – Skillshare (January 2023)

Content Marketing Certification – HubSpot Academy (February 2023)

Taking a job outside your industry shows work ethic, accountability, and willingness to jump in and do anything to support yourself and your family. It also shows you're willing to be flexible and can take on work you've never done before because you're determined and resourceful. Don't underestimate the value of self-motivation and perseverance. Any new employer would be thrilled to have someone who has demonstrated they're willing to be involved in all areas of a job and do the hard work to persevere.

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