

Soft skills: The role of 'emotional intelligence' in development careers

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International development professionals chat with recruiters at the Devex D.C. Career Fair in 2010. Photo by: Devex

In development, soft skills can just as easily come into play during challenges in the field as when navigating office politics.

“Technical skills are very important, but if you’re missing soft skills, you’re missing a critical ingredient for success,” said Shana Montesol Johnson, a career and leadership coach who works with development professionals. “Some soft skills have to deal with managing yourself — self-awareness, optimism, assertiveness, resilience and independence.”

The term “soft skills,” often associated with a person’s emotional intelligence, refers to the interpersonal abilities that enhance an individual’s interactions with others, career prospects and performance on the job. And human resource leaders, recruiters and career experts emphasize the importance of these proficiencies for global development professionals.

Kelly Tobin, recruiting manager for [Engility](#), said her team uses a rigorous interview process to make sure candidates have strong soft skills. Although somebody might be able to show a positive attitude during the first interview and perhaps maintain it throughout that first meeting, this might not be the case during a second interview.

“A continuous, sustained sense of positivity about their application and candidacy is really important, but also tenacity, drive, motivation, and humility,” Tobin explained.

Even careers in more technical areas such as innovation require strong soft skills.

“There are lots of soft skills involved in innovation,” said Otto Farkas, a senior advisor for the Global Office of Strategy, Collaboration & Innovation at [World Vision International](#). “It is increasingly about innovation management. How do you scale something beyond the pilot or the trial? I think we have matured about what kind of skills we want to see.”

Soft skills are especially critical in global development jobs

Soft skills are important in any career, but Johnson said they can be even more valuable in international development.

“It’s one thing to have soft skills and be able to use them effectively in your own culture, but using them in another culture is like the black belt level,” Johnson explained.

For example, when applying the soft skill of emotional awareness, it takes an additional level of knowledge and experience to identify the emotions of people in another culture or socioeconomic background than one’s own.

In addition, individuals in development are often working remotely or in disparate locations. As a result, professionals rely heavily on email, where meaning is often lost and room for misinterpretation huge.

“When working across geographies with other people, it can be challenging to use soft skills, so being strong in this area is even more important,” Johnson said.

Anne Steen, director of the Graduate Career Development Center at the [Georgetown School of Foreign Service](#), noted that the students and alumni she works with count adaptability, problem-solving and creativity as among the most important.

“In international development, the ability to be able to adapt, whether you are on the ground or in home office, is really important,” she said. “You have to be able to problem-solve. You have to be creative, often with limited resources.”

This becomes even more crucial as people advance in their international development careers, according to Johnson.

“The more you move up in an organization, the more you’ll be drawing on soft skills and emotional intelligence,” she said.

Soft skills for success in international development

A blog post [on the subject](#) by Kate Warren, Devex’s director of global recruiting services, suggested five universal soft skills every international development professional should strive to have: flexibility, self-awareness, cross-cultural understanding and communication, customer service and resourcefulness.

To the list above, Johnson said she would add empathy, coaching, motivating and delegating, which are especially important skills for leaders.

1. Empathy

Empathy is recognizing, understanding and appreciating how other people feel. Empathy involves being able to articulate your understanding of another’s perspective and behaving in a way that respects others’ feelings. In a work setting, it means being able to identify the feelings of other people and use that information effectively.

How to get this across to an employer: You might demonstrate that you have this soft skill by offering examples of times when you were managing a team and used emotional information effectively. If people were stressed or excited, how did you use that information to further the team’s progress?

2. Coaching

This is the ability to help someone else figure out what they need to do to be effective. This can be a great tool in a manager’s toolbox. It gives employees more ownership and power over their work, and leads to greater engagement.

How to get it across to an employer: During a job interview, you might share a time when you coached someone and they were able to be more effective as a result. It is also important to talk about why you took a coaching stance as opposed to telling or teaching the employee to do it. Knowing when to take a coaching stance is important (there are situations that call for a more traditional approach).

3. Motivating

Again, the ability to motivate is critical for anyone who is leading or managing other people. In an ideal world we’d all be self-motivating, but in reality, different things inspire different people. When leading, it helps to know what motivates or drives your team.

How to get this across to an employer: Share stories about times you motivated people, why you took that approach, and the results.

4. Delegating

It's important to be able to recognize that you can't and shouldn't do everything yourself. Delegation also involves the judgment of who is suited to a particular task as well as the communication of the assignment. Johnson said she's coached a number of managers in international development who are overwhelmed by their to-do lists but don't delegate because they feel they lack the time to teach other people how to do things. If these managers would take the long view, they'd have more time for other duties while empowering others.

How to get it across to an employer: To demonstrate to an interviewer that you're able to delegate, you could talk about times when you did it effectively. Another approach would be to discuss times that you didn't delegate when you should have, then learned from your mistake and performed differently the next time. This shows that, in addition to being able to delegate, you also have self-awareness.

Emphasize the soft skills needed for a role

When applying for a job or during an interview, Johnson advised that candidates think about the soft skills that are required for a particular position. If you're interested in a country program director job, for example, the posting might mention experience in contract negotiation and the ability to work successfully in complex political environments. You'd want to stress your strong negotiation skills, giving a concrete example of a time you successfully negotiated a contract as well as the techniques you used.

"Some of our strengths will be more relevant for a job than others," Johnson explained.

For example, you might be a self-starter, but that isn't pertinent to the targeted job, so you wouldn't stress this aspect of your personality. Or, if you'll mostly be working independently, it doesn't make sense to emphasize your ability to work well in a team. Look carefully at the description for a particular role, and think about which of your soft skills are the most important ones to stress in your cover letter and resume.

For instance, a description for an international program coordinator job might mention interpersonal and oral communication skills, plus an ability to work well with a wide variety of ethnicities. In your cover letter, you might describe how you modified your style to local norms in a particular country. Be specific about what this entailed. Perhaps you took on a more formal tone in emails or learned to give feedback privately, Johnson suggested.

Debra Wheatman, a certified professional resume writer and career coach, as well as the owner of [Careers Done Write](#), a New York-based company providing job counseling services, said the best way to demonstrate cross-cultural communication skills is through examples.

“How have you managed or worked on teams that were diverse?” she asked. “Share the stories of what it was like working with people in Europe, the Middle East and Asia across time zones.”

Perhaps you have experience setting up meetings where everyone can be on the phone or Skype, and everyone is in a different time zone. This could dovetail into the soft skill of flexibility, she said, by giving an example of the phone calls you organized an hour when you wouldn’t normally be up, such as 3 a.m. or 5 a.m., because it was convenient for everyone else.

Similarly, you might be able to show that you have the soft skills a recruiter is looking for when the interviewer asks about your strengths. What are two or three competencies or strengths that are deliverable for this particular job? Think about the technical skills as well as the soft skills that are aligned with the role.

During an interview, don’t just talk about the places you worked or your skill set, but be specific about how you used those skills. You should be able to answer behavior-based questions such as “Tell me a time when...”

“Look at your resume as a toolbox,” Steen said. “You might have two or three experiences where you can talk about project management, problem-solving, communication, etc.

Steen emphasized the use of the SAR method, or situation, action, results, in order to effectively talk about a situation, the action you took, and the results of the action on the organization.

“I think it is very helpful when you get behavior-based questions,” she said. “SAR can help you keep on track in answering a question, and it can also keep the interviewer focused with you.”

When applying for a position, also consider the organization’s values and needs. If you know that a nongovernmental organization emphasizes mentorship and coaching, be sure to stress any experience you have coaching and mentoring employees. Or, if you’re aware that an organization values creativity, be able to talk about times you attempted to do things in a new way in the workplace.

And remember that there is a balance between confidence and humility, as Emily Peterson, international recruiting manager for [RTI International](#), expressed in Devex’s [“The Hard Truth About Soft Skills”](#) CrowdHall.

It’s always important to be able to speak to what you, specifically, did to contribute to or achieve an outcome, but it’s also important to be honest and not oversell your role when you are working as a team, she advised.

“If you did something great but don’t want to come across as over-selling/over-confident, be able to provide some context (i.e. how did the result compare to previous results or efforts?) to help an interviewer or reviewer recognize why the achievement was significant and also see that you’re not simply providing empty self-praise, she added.

Developing soft skills

The good news is that if you don't have particular soft skills, you can work on them, just the way you would technical abilities.

“Soft skills can absolutely be learned and improved and developed,” Johnson said.

For example, emotional awareness or communication skills might not come naturally to you, but you can take a course, work with a career advisor or coach, or read a book about a particular skill.

Early career professionals may not have a lot of experience in solving problems on the job, working on intense deadlines, or communicating effectively with a global audience, Peterson said. These areas can be improved with more time on the job where you have to face these types of issues.

“But for senior level positions, a recruiter will want to find someone who has most of the soft skills in addition to the technical skills,” Peterson added.

Finally, career experts recommend that you sit back and reflect on what soft skills you need the most in order to advance your own career at least once a year.

“What skills have you gained, and what skills do you need to hone?” Steen asked. “This is the case with hard and technical skills as well as the soft skills. Maybe you know teamwork is not always easy for you. Be purposeful. How have you added value to your skill set? What do you still want to do or learn, and how can you incorporate that into your job?”

Have questions or want to share your own career transition tips? Please leave a comment below, tweet [@devexcareers](https://twitter.com/devexcareers) or email careers@devex.com.

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