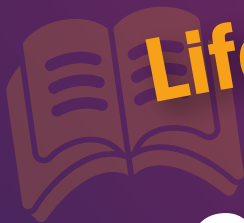


SOFT SKILLS: Why They Matter More Than Ever

A Quick Guide To The Skills That Can Help
You Learn, Work and Progress

Lifelong Learning



Adaptability



Communication



Teamwork



Leadership



Problem-solving



Time Management



Organisation



Analytical Thinking



Department for the

Economy

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An Roinn

Geilleagair

Welcome

Soft skills can help you get a job, progress in your career and adapt to a changing workplace.

This short guide looks at why employers value these skills and how you can build them, whether you're planning your future, exploring new opportunities or looking to grow in your current role.



Why They Matter More Than Ever

What are soft skills?

Soft skills, sometimes called **transferable skills**, are the personal qualities and behaviours that are often not accredited, but help you to work well with others and succeed in different situations. Examples include communication, teamwork, problem-solving and organisation.

Unlike technical or “hard” skills, which are often accredited and linked to a specific job or qualification, **soft skills can be used across almost every industry and occupation.**

Why are soft skills important?

Soft skills play an important role in helping people succeed at work and progress in their careers. They help you work effectively with colleagues, adapt to new situations and make a positive contribution to your organisation.

Strong soft skills can also help you take on new responsibilities and progress into higher-level roles. For example, moving up into a management or leadership role often requires skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving and leadership, alongside any qualifications or technical knowledge.

DID YOU KNOW?

Research from Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford University all suggest that 85% of job success is dictated by an employee's soft skills.

What Are Employers Looking For?

Employers are increasingly prioritising soft skills for recruitment and career progression. This means employers are looking beyond qualifications and placing more value on the skills, behaviours and attitudes that help people perform effectively in the workplace.

Attributes such as **communication, adaptability, collaboration** and **emotional intelligence** are now considered essential for creating well-rounded employees who can thrive in dynamic and team-orientated environments.

Soft skills, including interpersonal, cognitive, and organisational abilities, are increasingly recognised as **key factors in personal and workplace success.**

Employers continue to place a high value on candidates with strong soft skills because they help create **positive workplaces, improve teamwork** and **support productivity.**

DID YOU KNOW?

The NI Skills Barometer 2023–2033 reveals a marked shift in employer priorities.

The research highlights that **68% of employers valued attitude and aptitude as the most important factors in graduate recruitment.** Meanwhile, 55% of employers valued skills and competencies beyond academic knowledge, compared with 52% who valued degrees.

Why They Matter More Than Ever

What soft skills are employers looking for?

According to the [UU Graduate Employment Survey 2025](#), the top three soft skills employers look for in graduates are **communication**, **problem-solving and analytical skills**, and **teamwork/collaboration**.

Other soft skills employers are looking for include **interpersonal skills**, **being proactive**, **adaptability**, **work ethic**, **customer service**, **leadership** and **organisational** skills. These requirements are broad and the research notes that each job role will have its own specific requirements and this can vary across industries.

How is technology changing the workplace?

Technology, including artificial intelligence (AI), is changing the way people work. While employers increasingly value digital skills, they also continue to place great importance on soft skills.

As routine tasks become more automated, skills such as **communication**, **adaptability**, **creativity**, **teamwork** and **a willingness to keep learning** are becoming even more valuable.

[The World Economic Forum Future Jobs report](#) brings forward the expectations employers have for the evolution of skills to 2030. Alongside **rising demand for digital literacy** and **cybersecurity**, soft skills such as a **commitment to life-long learning** complement the move towards a more automated workforce while also maintaining an employee's competitiveness.

As technology continues to evolve, soft skills remain essential. They help people apply their technical knowledge (hard skills) effectively, work with others and adapt to new ways of working.

Which soft skills are becoming more important?

Several soft skills are becoming increasingly important in today's labour market.

[The World Economic Forum Jobs report](#) notes that “*ranking among the top 10 skills on the rise are leadership and social influence, talent management, analytical thinking, and environmental stewardship. These skills highlight the need for workers who can lead teams, manage talent effectively and adapt to sustainability and green transitions in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.*”

A report looking specifically at the food and drink industry in Ireland, [The Digitalisation of the Food and Drink Industry in Northern Ireland](#) explores the skills needed as new technologies such as AI, automation and robotics become more common in the workplace and enhance efficiency and productivity. The report highlights the growing importance of both technical skills and soft skills such as **problem-solving**, **collaboration** and **communication**:

“Industry 4.0 will require a workforce which will be responsible for more complex tasks, which will require numeracy, solid literacy, problem-solving, and information and communication technologies (ICT) skills as well as soft skills of autonomy, collaboration and coordination.”

Integration of AI is complex and increases the demand for complementary soft skills such as **creativity**, **communication** and **teamwork**. Research on the implications of AI for work and employment, highlights that AI reshapes hiring trends as **“Skills such as problem-solving and adaptability gain value, while tasks like summarisation or standard customer service lose relevance”** ([Implications of AI for work, employment and social dialogue: Literature review | Eurofound](#))

Why They Matter More Than Ever

AI can automate many repetitive tasks however, it lacks soft skills and it will be important for individuals to continue to develop these skills in order to remain competitive within the labour market.

Which Soft Skills Are in Short Supply?

The **Employer Skills Survey 2024 (ESS)** is a large-scale survey of employers across the UK, designed to understand the skills challenges faced by business. It covers a wider range of topics and one aspect it examines is the extent to which employers are facing **skill shortage vacancies (SSVs)**. SSVs can be broken down into soft skills and the report looks at the soft skills which are difficult to obtain from applicants.

Soft skills in demand in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the hardest to obtain soft skill is the **ability to manage time and prioritise tasks**. Approximately 57% of sites with skill shortage vacancies (SSVs) have difficulty obtaining applicants with this skill.

Other in demand soft skills are **teamwork** (36%), **sales skills** (21%) and **making speeches or presentations** (14%).

There is also a lack of **management and leadership** skills, something which is often highlighted as a key challenge in NI. The Employer Skills Survey (ESS) highlights that of the sites with SSVs, 43% have difficulty obtaining applicants with these skills.

Why are soft skills important for the economy?

Soft skills have long been recognised as an important part of workplace success and productivity.

Skills such as **communication, teamwork, leadership** and **problem-solving** help people work effectively with others and make a positive contribution to their organisation. They can also open the door to new opportunities, helping individuals progress into more senior roles with greater responsibility. These roles are often linked to **higher pay** and **better-quality jobs**, supporting the aims of the Department for the Economy's Economic Vision.

By helping people develop strong soft skills, employers can support career progression while building a more productive, competitive and resilient economy.

What can recent job posting trends tell us about soft skills most in demand locally?

The Department for the Economy produces a [monthly job posting factsheet](#) which utilises Lightcast data to provide detailed information on key job posting trends in Northern Ireland. These factsheets examine the soft/transversal skills in demand and the proportion of job postings which cited these.

Why They Matter More Than Ever

Analysis of Northern Ireland job postings shows that **employers consistently look for strong employability skills alongside technical knowledge.**

The latest data for July 2025 to July 2026 highlights a requirement for the following key skills:

- **Communication skills** - the abilities you use when giving and receiving different kinds of information. Some examples include communicating new ideas, feelings, or even an update on your project. Communication skills involve listening, speaking, observing and empathising. Communication appears in **41%** of job postings.
- **Management skills** - generally defined as attributes or abilities that enable you to lead a team or oversee projects effectively. These appear in **22%** of job postings.
- **Customer service skills** - the traits and characteristics used to help customers, clients or others in the workplace while creating a positive working environment. These appear in **22%** of job postings.
- **Detail-oriented skills** - the ability to focus on even the smallest elements of a task or project with precision and attention to detail. Detail-oriented employees complete their work with high levels of accuracy, are very organised, and are often very productive workers. These appear in **19%** of job postings.
- **Sales skills** - the core abilities that enable salespeople to successfully communicate with clients and customers to work towards closing sales. These appear in **14%** of job postings.

Lightcast data correct as of August 2026.

Key Takeaways

Soft skills are increasingly recognised as a key driver of employability in the modern labour market. Their universal applicability - across roles, sectors, and career stages - means that individuals who develop competencies such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and adaptability are **better positioned to secure employment and advance their careers**. Employers consistently prioritise these attributes, often above formal qualifications, because they contribute directly to **workplace effectiveness** and **organisational success**.

Additionally, in a workforce that is constantly evolving and increasingly adopting AI, soft skills are going to become vital to an employee's **competitiveness in the labour market**. These skills are required to complement AI and make up for the lack of soft skills available from AI itself.

Strong soft skills can **open up career opportunities** for people from all backgrounds, including those who may face barriers to formal qualifications. They can also **benefit the wider economy** by developing a more resilient, inclusive and productive workforce.

How can I build my soft skills?

The good news is that soft skills can be developed throughout your life, in many different settings, including school, work, volunteering, hobbies and everyday life. This means they are accessible to people from a wide range of backgrounds and can help improve employability and career opportunities.

Whether you're a student, looking for your first job, returning to work, or thinking about a career change, there are lots of ways to build your skills and confidence.

Building Your Soft Skills

If you're at school, college or university

Many learning and extra-curricular activities can help you build valuable workplace skills.

You could try:

- Taking part in group projects and presentations
- Joining sports teams, clubs, societies or youth groups
- Taking on roles such as class representative, prefect, mentor or team captain
- Organising events or fundraising activities
- Developing your communication and teamwork skills through hobbies.

Skills you could develop:

communication, teamwork, leadership, organisation, problem-solving.

If you're looking for your first job or entering the labour market

If you have limited work experience, look out for opportunities to build your soft skills.

You could try:

- Applying for work experience, part-time jobs or volunteering opportunities
- Attending careers fairs, networking events and employer workshops
- Practising interview and presentation skills
- Working on customer-facing activities, such as volunteering in shops, events or community groups
- Completing employability programmes or internships

Skills you could develop:

communication, presentation, customer service, teamwork and time management.

If you're returning to work after a break

Many people build valuable soft skills outside paid employment without realising it.

Think about experience gained through:

- Caring responsibilities
- Volunteering
- Community involvement
- Managing a household or family commitments
- Supporting local groups, teams or organisations
- Completing refresher training or confidence-building courses



Top tip: When applying for jobs, think about everyday examples that show how you have used your soft skills.

Skills you could develop: organisation, resilience, problem-solving, communication and leadership.

If you're looking to progress in your current career

Soft skills are often what help people move into supervisory, management and leadership positions.

You could try:

- Leading projects or initiatives
- Mentoring or supporting colleagues
- Taking part in team meetings and presentations
- Seeking opportunities to manage people, budgets or resources
- Asking for feedback and identifying areas for development

Skills you could develop:

leadership, collaboration, decision-making, problem-solving and people management.

Why They Matter More Than Ever

If you're thinking about changing careers

Soft skills can help you transfer your experience from one sector to another.

You could try:

- Identifying the transferable skills you've developed in previous roles
- Taking part in networking events, short courses or professional groups
- Volunteering or undertaking work shadowing in your target sector
- Highlighting examples of communication, teamwork, leadership and problem-solving on your CV and applications

Remember: while technical knowledge may vary between occupations, many soft skills are valued across almost every industry.

Skills you could develop:

adaptability, resilience, communication and collaboration

Your skills snapshot

- What are your top three soft skills?
- Which soft skills would you like to develop?

Key message

You may already be building soft skills every day. Activities such as working on a school/college/university project, participating in sports, volunteering, caring for others, managing household responsibilities, or helping organise an event, can all help develop the skills employers value.

TOP TIP:

Keep a record of examples that demonstrate your soft skills. These examples can be useful when completing applications or preparing for interviews.

Thank you – COIU would like to thank Analytical Services Division for their work on this feature.

Contact the Careers Service

The Department for the Economy's Careers Service provides free, professional and impartial careers advice and guidance, to help you make informed choices about your future career, including:



Choosing subjects for study at school, college or university



Current and future job trends



Job-search techniques



CVs



Application forms



Interview preparation

If you would like to discuss your options with a careers adviser, please contact the [Careers Service](#).

Feedback

The Careers Occupational Information Unit (COIU) welcomes feedback on this guide to help improve future publications.

If you have any comments or suggestions, please email COIU@economy-ni.gov.uk.

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