

Introduction

According to the 2007 *Every Promise, Every Child: Turning Failure into Action* report, a large percentage of young people preparing to enter the workforce over the next two decades are significantly lacking in the “soft” or applied skills – such as teamwork, decision-making, and communication – that will help them become effective employees and managers. In addition, in a Job Outlook 2008 survey conducted by the National Association of Colleges & Employers (NACE), the top characteristics looked for in new hires by 276 employer respondents were all soft skills: communication ability, a strong work ethic, initiative, interpersonal skills, and teamwork. Lastly, the Indiana Business Research Center (IBRC) found that while credentials (degrees and certificates) are important, it is the development of soft skills (those that are more social than technical) that is critical to developing a strong, vibrant workforce.

Interestingly, research also suggests that soft skills are not just important for first-time employees. According to a poll released in June 2008 by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), many workplace soft skills have become more important for the experienced professional. These skills include critical thinking/problem solving, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, teamwork/collaboration, and adaptability/flexibility.

According to the National Collaborative for Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth), the development of soft skills is identified as a critical component for success in activities such as civic participation and youth leadership in addition to school- and work-based learning experiences. The *Guideposts for Success*, developed by NCWD/Youth in collaboration with its funding agency, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), clearly indicate the need for all youth to have exposure to training focusing on job seeking and workplace basic skills.

To further explore this important issue, ODEP convened a group of distinguished U.S. businesses in 2007. During the discussion, participating companies identified the following competencies as key to the success of young workers: Communication; Networking; Enthusiasm and Attitude; Teamwork; Problem Solving and Critical Thinking; and Professionalism. It was at this meeting that the leaders at ODEP thought materials should be made available to youth service professionals to assist them as they prepare all youth, including youth with disabilities, for employment.

Building on that dialogue, the activities in this publication were created to provide an introduction to the “basics” of soft skills. These materials have been designed with youth service professionals in mind - specifically those working with in-school and out-of-school youth, ages 14 to 21, on career and workforce readiness skills. The basic foundation for the structure of these activities includes convenience, cost-effectiveness, and creativity. They were designed in such a way as to be easily incorporated into current programming and/or already established curricula.

Soft skills cannot be taught in a vacuum nor can they be acquired simply because the goal of a lesson plan indicates it shall be so. Rather, they must be introduced, developed, refined, practiced, and reinforced. ODEP is committed to providing resources regarding soft skills in a way that is useful, creative, hands-on and fundamentally beneficial for all types of youth programs, and thus, all types of learners. The contents of this publication reflect that commitment.

Activity Layout

These activities were created for all youth, regardless of disability or differences in learning style, and as such have been designed with an inclusive spirit and a structure supporting universal design for learning. Each exercise consists of an activity designed to get young people thinking about, practicing, and discussing skills important for career and personal success - soft skills. Additionally, these activities are not weighed down with instructional methodology or specific teaching strategies, since it is the youth service professional who knows his/her audience best, and what might work well for one group of youth participants may clearly not work well for another. As a facilitator, you are encouraged to modify these activities in any way that better meets the needs and interests of your particular group.

All activities are structured as follows:

JUST THE FACTS: This is the basic purpose of the activity - plain and simple - and is intended to be a brief description for the instructor.



Time: A suggested time frame is offered for planning purposes. Of course, as activities are altered or modified for various reasons, times may invariably change.



Materials: A list of suggested materials for the activity is provided. The goal of the basic activity is to keep materials to a minimum.



Directions: Directions, including sample scripts, are offered for convenience. You are encouraged to adapt or modify these activities to better resonate with your particular audience, as these activities offer an opportunity to tackle some difficult issues and conversations.



Conclusion: The conclusion is a guide to engage participants in a thoughtful conversation. The goal of this dialogue is to encourage independent ideas and reasoning.



Journaling Activity: Journaling questions are offered as a way to incorporate personal reflection using an individualized means of expression. Participants should be encouraged to choose a form of journaling that feels right for them, while also being supported to “test the waters” with a technique that might stretch a traditional comfort zone. The following alternatives to “traditional” journaling (writing) are offered as suggestions:

- Dictate ideas/thoughts and/or use the computer (with or without voice-recognition software)
- Create poems, lists, stream of consciousness, as a method of reflection
- Draw (cartoons, pictures, etc.)
- Use photography (taking pictures, cutting out magazines) to create collages

For younger audiences (such as middle school-aged), you may find it necessary to modify the suggested journal questions to better reflect age, experience, and environment.



Extension Activity: An extension activity is offered for facilitators who wish to continue the topic. This activity may involve the use of technology, field trips, research, and more.