



*technically
speaking*

Uncovering Soft Skills

Interviewing techniques for demonstrating your soft skills

As IT continues to evolve, integrating more closely with other business units, there has been a growing need for IT professionals to have what are called ‘soft skills’. But, what are they?

Essentially soft skills are anything beyond the technical skills needed to perform a job. They fall primarily under the categories of communication and relational skills. Communication skills include active listening, writing, and speaking, while relational skills are adaptability, a respectful attitude, problem-solving, common sense, and the ability to make decisions.

Demonstrating your soft skills throughout the interview process is important, as they are as essential to successfully doing your job as your technical abilities. How do you showcase your communication and relational skills during the interview?

There are several strategies you can use to help demonstrate your soft skills during the interview phase.

1. Assess your skills:

You should have an idea of what soft skills are, how you define them, and why they matter. If it is important to your employer to find someone with particular soft skills, it should also be important to you. In addition, an environment that values these skills and helps you develop them will be valuable for your career growth.

In preparation for your interview, think about which skills you have—outside of your technical skills—and how they might be useful in the job for which you are interviewing. Make a list of these communication and relational skills. Think about times when you’ve used them on the job, why it was necessary for you to use them, and how they helped you do your work or function in your work environment better. You do not need to have *every* soft skill, but you should be able to identify which skills you have and cite examples of times you used them in past roles.

2. Be prepared to answer open-ended questions:

Open-ended questions directly test some soft skills—like adaptability, and the ability to communicate effectively—but more importantly they give you the opportunity to reveal the skills you have or would use in particular circumstances. There are several kinds of questions that employers will ask in order to draw out soft skills. You should be prepared to answer these in a way that best highlights your skills.

- **Tell me about yourself, and general questions about your interests and hobbies.** Employers often begin with something like, ‘tell me about yourself.’ This question is a terrific opportunity to take charge of the interview and talk about your strengths, qualifications, and why you’d be good at the job while also expressing who you are personally and professionally to your interviewer.

You should also be prepared to answer a more pointed, challenging question, like ‘what would you improve about yourself, professionally, and personally?’

- **Tell me about a time when...** this type of questioning has grown in popularity as it is a good tool for drawing out an individual’s communication and relational skills. It asks you to talk about your past experiences and give examples of your soft skills *in action*.

Interviewers want to know how you’ll manage a challenging situation or how you’ll deal with a difficult co-worker; most importantly, they want to see how you work within a professional environment. A story about a time when you used a skill like adaptability or problem-solving can be used to answer a variety of questions, so prepare a few of these before your interview.

- **Responding to ‘what if’ scenarios.** Rather than drawing from past experiences, ‘what if’ questions ask you to envision working at the company and predict how you would respond to or handle a situation. Your interviewer may create a scenario he thinks would provoke someone’s emotions and let you describe how you would respond to it. You will need to process this question in the moment, and while you can practice and prepare for this type of question, you will most likely need to be able to think on the spot and figure out how you would react to the given scenario.

If you are lacking experience in one area, take advantage of the opportunity to use this scenario to unveil your potential. Be honest, but if you can approach the situation knowledgeably, even when it is a scenario with which you are less familiar, you can really impress your interviewer.

- **Speak directly about soft skills.** You might be asked something like, ‘What soft skills do you have, and how do they help you do your job well?’ Your interviewer wants to discover if you know what soft skills are, if you think they are important, and if you are aware of the communication and relational skills you possess and how to use them. Once again, you have the opportunity to impress in this situation—take advantage of it by being prepared.

3. Show your soft skills

You are probably used to the gut feelings you get about how the interview is going. Communication and rapport are very important qualifiers in finding someone who will be a good fit for a team, and as such, how you conduct yourself in the interview is very important.

Get your interviewer talking. Does she like her job? What can he tell you about the company's work environment? Set the interviewer at ease by smiling, making eye contact, and engaging comfortably about common interests.

Don't be afraid to be confident about wanting the position. Go after it with enthusiasm.

Take the opportunity to do a process check and communicate directly with your interviewer about the interview itself. Ask if you answered the question to his satisfaction. Take initiative to ask how she feels the interview is going.

Listen well. If someone is a poor listener, or is unable to explain or speak knowledgeably about her work, it could hinder work performance. Accept the other person's point of view, ask how your interviewer's day has been and show that you are interested in her as an individual, not just in landing a job.

Specifically, here are a few questions we ask ourselves when interviewing a candidate to gauge their soft skills:

Active listening—do you repeat questions back? Do you answer in a way that clearly shows you heard and understood what was asked?

Adaptability—how do you answer questions that are direct, but open-ended? Are you able to answer questions that catch you off guard or asks you to talk about a specific time, or unusual scenario?

Respect—do you interrupt or wait until your interviewer is done speaking before jumping in? Do you make eye contact? Do you say thank you before leaving the interview? Are you prepared for the interview? Were you on time?

Confidence—do you want the job? Do you give a firm handshake? Are you able to speak knowledgeably about a technology you haven't used recently, or at all?

In the coming years, soft skills will continue to become increasingly important. In most cases, IT professionals are actively involved in business, interacting and collaborating on a daily basis with other business units. Companies that interview for and value soft skills now will ensure they have a strong IT department in the future. As a top-notch IT Pro, take advantage of the single best opportunity for you to convince someone of your soft skills and be prepared to demonstrate your communication and relational skills during your interview.