

Developing your soft skills

If you have seen our series of short videos, you'll be familiar with Jake, and his colleagues Carrie and Mark. If you haven't, go to [icaew.com/workexperience](https://www.icaew.com/workexperience) and watch them before you dive in.

These videos show you the importance of using soft skills in your working environment. Soft skills are what the finest employees use to behave professionally around others and perform to their full potential. The simplest way of understanding these skills is by referring back to the videos: Carrie and Mark use their soft skills to great effect whenever they're faced with a task. Jake's soft skills, on the other hand, aren't so great.

When we say that you should present yourself in a certain way, this doesn't mean you need to be a different person altogether; it simply means if you can demonstrate your ability to use these soft skills around people, you'll achieve so much more.

There are seven soft skills that you will be encouraged to use during your work experience:

- Consideration
- Problem Solving
- Technical Competence
- Team-working
- Decision-making
- Adding Value
- Communication

It's important that you understand the purpose of each one, and how vital it is to employ them as best you can.

CONSIDERATION

We all love a good funny video, but you always have to consider the reputation of the company whenever you're producing or sending work. By working for a company, you have a responsibility to uphold their reputation as well as your own - so you should always present yourself in an appropriate manner. Remember that it takes a lifetime to build a reputation and only a few seconds to destroy one.

You should also be mindful of what's going on around you. Try to use a professional approach, understand the impact of your actions on others, and show that you appreciate the views and values of your peers. In other words, don't do a Jake, and you'll be fine.

TIP

Respect others, respect the company and always consider reputation.

PROBLEM SOLVING

If you find yourself facing a problem during your work experience, approach it like Carrie and Mark would - by establishing a cognitive and reasonable solution, while aiming to create the best outcome for everyone. Be willing to offer your knowledge and influence a positive outcome, but if you are not sure what the problem is, like Jake, then find out more before tackling the problem head on.

Assess the risks involved and come up with an effective way to get around them. Whether the problem is large or small, the best way to approach it is from as many angles as you can. If you can manage your workload, rank potential solutions and risks, and show us you can adapt in the face of change, then you'll go far.

TIP

Look for risks in the problems you face, make well thought-out recommendations and use your experience to help others.

TECHNICAL COMPETENCE

Remember how Jake tried to solve Mark's spreadsheet issue, without fully knowing how to approach it? There's a very simple solution: if you don't know, then seek help or look it up. Trying to resolve a situation without knowing the consequences of getting it wrong could result badly for everyone.

Always be aware of the technology and resources available to you, and seek to develop your skills and knowledge whenever possible. Alternatively, if you have knowledge that you believe would be useful for the task at hand, then share it with your colleagues - just don't pretend that you 'excel' at spreadsheets if you've never used them before.

TIP

Always look to develop your skills by identifying where you have knowledge gaps and plan ways to develop skills or gain extra knowledge. When you feel confident you have the knowledge, share your expertise with colleagues and clients.

TEAM-WORKING

Showing your ability to collaborate and work effectively with other people is one of the most essential soft skills you can have. Building relationships with colleagues and working together to complete objectives can be immensely fulfilling - and you can demonstrate this skill by throwing yourself into your work experience. Be aware of other people's workloads and ask what you can do to help.

Think back to how much work Carrie had on her plate in the video. Mark immediately offered to help her, while Jake was contrastingly unhelpful. If you have time to spare when others around you are struggling, you should be lending your skills to those who need them. The needs of your colleagues are just as important as your own. Work together, and the solutions will come about much faster.

TIP

Think of the team - not just yourself - recognise the value of others, and appreciate other people's stresses.

DECISION-MAKING

Good decision-making means using all the information at your disposal to produce the best possible outcomes, even when you're under pressure. If you take your time and conduct your research, like Carrie, then you'll be confident about any recommendations you make. If you end up cutting corners like Jake, however, you are likely to make mistakes.

Be meticulous with everything you analyse, evaluate all the potential risks, and use multiple resources to gather the data and pinpoint necessary improvements. You should support any point you make with evidence, draw statistical conclusions within an ethical framework, and be confident about the arguments you are attempting to get across.

TIP

Use software to make sense of data, analyse it thoroughly, and make strategic decisions.

ADDING VALUE

When it comes to producing any form of work, there can always be room for improvement. Going the extra mile to exceed people's expectations will always go down well and make your work stand out. Put in minimal effort like Jake, however, and you'll never achieve your full potential.

You should try to evaluate your work with immense attention to detail, determine every possible way of adding value and ultimately push yourself to succeed on everything you do. Do this, and you can build not only on your own reputation, but on the reputation of the company as well.

TIP

Seek out opportunities, exceed people's expectations, and be independent and committed.

COMMUNICATION

If, like Jake, you have a point you believe is worth making, by all means share it, and do what you can to persuade a colleague's point of view. But at the same time, you should also be able to appreciate others' ideas, and see the situation from their perspective as well. Never try to force your argument on them.

Use data that you've thoroughly evaluated to build a logical argument and articulate it in the best possible way. Communicating effectively at all levels is an incredibly important skill; so keep an open mind, demonstrate your ability to listen, present your idea in a formal manner, and you'll collaborate with success.

TIP

Build logical arguments, negotiate successfully, and show an appreciation for both sides of the argument.

WORKSHEET

As mentioned, while you are at your placement, we'll be looking out for your use of these main seven soft skills. In the table below, make notes on how you feel you have achieved this. Mention what risks or issues you may have faced, how you went about using these skills, and how you think you've improved or developed over the week.

SOFT SKILL	RISKS/ISSUES FACED	HOW YOU USED YOUR SOFT SKILLS	HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED
CONSIDERATION			
PROBLEM SOLVING			
TECHNICAL COMPETENCE			

SOFT SKILL	RISKS/ISSUES FACED	HOW YOU USED YOUR SOFT SKILLS	HOW HAVE YOU IMPROVED
TEAM-WORKING			
DECISION-MAKING			
ADDING VALUE			
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