



Valuing soft skills

The challenge and the promise

What is going on with work that it is turning out so poorly for so many, ask Max and Frances Harré. If the hours we spend at work are not ticking all the boxes, it's time to take a step back and rethink our approach.

What explains the vast difference in motivation between an elite rower training out on the lake pre-dawn and a knowledge-worker reluctantly creeping to another dreaded day at their keyboard?

These are extremes, but they raise the question "What is going on with work that it is turning out so poorly for so many?" Some researchers even tell us that only 24 percent of the workforce (in New Zealand) is 'engaged'. The rest, three out of four, are 'disengaged' or 'actively disengaged'. As individuals, each of us will spend well in excess of 8500 hours at work over the next five years. If these hours—about a third of our life's available time for that period—are not ticking the big boxes of life, producing joy,

fulfilment, manageable challenge, sense of meaningful work, of being useful in a way that matters to us, then it is time to step back a little and rethink.

This crisis of engagement bedevilling the world of work today is not so much a crisis of employee engagement with work—rather it is a systemic crisis of engagement between staff and managers, and employees and owners.

A SKILLS ISSUE

While it is practically impossible to address these issues at the whole-of-system level, they do respond well when taken as skills issues. Not just tips and tricks, nor brain science, nor nutrition, but skills built up over time, systematically pursued, tested, modified and tested again—and everyone is involved: individual staff members, team leaders, managers, directors and owners.

The skills needed to explore performance and engagement are in the so called 'soft skill' zone—ranging from basic self-management all the way up to designing business models themselves.

Unfortunately, many of us do not really want to know this—it's too difficult, perhaps felt to be too risky or disruptive. In a world that tends to value everything 'hard' above anything 'soft', soft skills get a relatively poor rap. But there are big performance increments available for individuals and businesses from a focus on this zone.

It goes without saying that it's essential to stay on top of the technical side of your work, and how to do that is fairly well understood and easily managed: short courses and just-in-time learning are current reality in many workplaces. There are MOOCs, apps and training courses for everything. If not now, then shortly.

But soft skills, how do they relate to performance? Here's a recent example.

Exhibit #1: Paul found out that he was again overlooked for a promotion (he worked in light manufacturing). His manager implied somewhat casually that his communication skills were below par for more senior roles. He said Paul came over as a bit of a loner, and indeed he did feel rather isolated at work.

Paul decided to try and do something about this and we worked with him on giving and receiving feedback non-defensively, coaching others and being more coachable himself, taking initiative, making better connections with others both inside his work situation and in associated areas. In only a couple of months he had turned around a tricky situation with a supplier creating havoc through being unable to deliver on time, he had begun actively training his staff, and had made several new relation-

ships outside his workplace. Shortly thereafter, the productivity increases in his area were noticed and he was offered a significant promotion. Now Paul is taking a more systematic and supportive approach to appreciating and building interpersonal skills.

There is little doubt that, whether we are employees or managers/owners, the better we appreciate the performance-enabling role of soft skills and grapple with developing them, the more satisfying our careers will be and business results will show it too.

Exhibit #2: A trend. Right now, performance management is being deeply re-tooled in many organisations. One size definitely does not fit all, and the annual performance management, target-setting session fits very few. Partly this trend is being driven by the needs of the infamous (at least to some Baby Boomers) cohort of 20 to 36-year olds commonly labelled Millennials. Partly it's a result of the long-term shift from industrial era command-and-control thinking towards understanding workplaces as complex adaptive systems. This shift heralds the emergence of a new era of work—the 5th generation era.

How to thrive in a complex adaptive system and pursue the promise of 5G work—that's the 5th generation of work life—is the subject of our new book *Work Passion Power: Strategies for a working life you will love*.

Another factor in this trend towards more continuous, coaching-like performance enhancement interactions is our improved understanding of what soft skills actually are and how they enable and drive performance. They are often thought of as predominantly communication skills. While that is not a bad description as an opener, it does not go nearly far enough.

It's helpful to think of soft skills in three broad clusters: self-management, critical thinking, and people skills. These categories overlap somewhat, some are hard to pin down behaviourally, most resist quantification, and most cross over the work/non-work boundary. To illustrate the actual scope of these skills, consider some of what they include:

- **Self-management:** coachability, real-time prioritising, willingness to try, showing initiative, being non-defensiveness, receiving feedback, ability to 'suffer fools' (so called), moral courage, active sense of personal direction, integrity (moral and structural), use of discretionary time, flexibility, etc.
- **Critical thinking:** curiosity, creativity, problem solving, evidence based approaches, investigative skills, desire to grasp the big picture, context-sensitivity, assumption awareness, willingness to question, results focus, etc.
- **People skills:** delegating effectively, coaching, commenting constructively on others work and behaviour, caring, patience,

inclusivity of others, constructive listening, assertiveness, humility, team work, thinking 'we' rather than 'I', body language awareness, ability to 'read the room', etc.

All these (and there are more, including many that are strongly context dependent) are causative in relation to performance, satisfaction, meaning, effectiveness and ultimately business results.

While mastering these skills may be the work of a lifetime, improving them is today's work. This is the real work of performance enhancement. It cannot be automated, it is hard-core human-to-human work and is the ultimate stuff of work satisfaction. High engagement becomes inevitable—knowing you are heard, feeling like you matter, being challenged, being respected, knowing you are making a difference that matters, exercising your competencies, growing your strengths, exercising your initiative and so on.

DRIVING TOWARDS PERFORMANCE EXCELLENCE

Back to our athlete—she hired a personal coach (possibly at her own expense), she set her alarm two hours early, she went to bed early because the race is coming up, she trained all sorts of hours, going to the absolute limit of her endurance for better performance, and examined her actions to the last second. Her behaviour is full of clues to the attitudes that drive towards performance excellence for each of us.

Interestingly, these behaviours often have little to do with financial rewards. This kind of individualised, performance enhancement tends to be focused on intrinsic factors and is likely to be orders of magnitude more effective than what can be achieved by task-oriented goal setting and tweaking bonus provisions.

When we start talking like this about performance enhancement and what individuals can do to further it for themselves at work, we sometimes hear a sentiment expressed (or at least we feel it just below the level of audible sound) "Get real, that's all too much. I just want a good, secure job, considerate boss, regular pay rises and drinks on the firm on Friday nights".

Okay, nothing intrinsically wrong with that, but there is a big 'but' lurking just off to the side. No matter what career you are pursuing, what industry sector (public or private) you work in, it is either being significantly disrupted right now, or will be soon, possibly even wiped right out as a category of work.

HR departments across the globe are scrambling to deconstruct jobs (positions, occupational groups), to find the tasks that can be done more cost-effectively by artificial intelligences, smart tools, learning machines, robots, cognitive computers, etc—and the sooner the better.

This raises a rather important question we can all be interested in. What is left over after smart tools have cut a sizable chunk out of your work? What do you do? Where does my security lie? These are big questions and can induce a little giddiness at times.

Fortunately, there is a place to focus right now that helps stave off feeling overwhelmed and keeps our minds on the job. As HR professionals thinking strategically about the future of our own performance and performance management, there is no more important project to be engaged in than kicking off a sustained conversation with your senior people about what performance means in their area. It is about expanding their understanding of what soft skills are, their diversity and their importance in enabling better performance.

To get this conversation going, it can help to change how we talk about these issues. For example, our language could usefully change from talk of management to talk of enabling increased satisfaction with work, enhancing effectiveness, supporting the root skills that enable professional development, learning coaching-like methods, improving the micro-skills of self-management (prioritising in the moment, keeping our word, receiving and giving feedback, acknowledging others, etc).

Even discussions that explore what soft skills include can be useful in opening up thoughts about what behaviours have an impact on effectiveness at work. It's easy to get side tracked into debating concepts and categories, but hold your focus on behaviour change, forming new habits, and results—pursued with an agile mindset: try, review, adapt, try again. This is not reflecting theoretically on interesting distinctions, it's about individual performance now.

These conversations will be unique to your situation, they must start where individuals are at, they tend to be focused on how soft skills connect with business results. They will involve a move from an 'us' to a 'we' mind-set, they will take time and commitment. The more open and explicit you can be in acknowledging that these conversations can be challenging, the better—because they are. Getting out on the lake before sun-up is tough, no matter who you are. But you do get to see some great dawns.



FRANCES and MAX HARRÉ are directors of Forté Career & Business Designs Ltd. The ideas in this article are drawn from their book, *Work Passion Power: Strategies for a working life you will love* (Dunmore Publishing). For more visit: www.workpassionpower.co.nz