

THE KEY TO LANDING AND KEEPING A JOB FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES: SOFT SKILLS: COMMUNICATION

For years now job seekers with all skill sets and abilities have been experiencing the rigors of looking for a job in a highly competitive employment market. Highly educated, experienced candidates can go months before landing a job. Employers are becoming more choosy; knowing that if they take their time, their ideal candidate will eventually come along.

The key for the job seeker is to become the ideal. What exactly makes up the ideal job candidate? Of course that is going to vary from one employer to the next. However, there are general qualities that all employers look for. These qualities may help you stand out from the crowd.

They are referred to as Soft Skills. Unlike Hard Skills such as knowledge of industry specific tasks or computer software, soft skills are those skills that speak to the character of an individual. They are an indication of your capacity to behave appropriately in a professional environment.

While hard skills, which are presented on your resume, will land you an interview, it is often the soft skills that could be a deciding factor between two candidates with similar education and backgrounds.

Here is an introduction to the most basic of soft skills that you should master.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The ability to communicate effectively is always at the top of employers' lists. It involves much more than just speaking however. Communication involves both verbal and nonverbal cues, including:

- **LANGUAGE:** Do you use appropriate language and grammar when speaking? Do you speak in a professional manner?
- **INTERPERSONAL:** Do you actively engage in conversations, providing more than just single word responses?
- **LISTENING:** Are you an attentive and active listener? Do you acknowledge that you heard what was being communicated? For example: nodding, paraphrasing or repeating back.
- **TONE:** Is your tone of voice friendly and conversational or is it terse and confrontational?
- **BODY LANGUAGE:** Do you stand tall with good posture? Do you make solid eye contact?

HOW CAN YOU IMPROVE YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS?

There are many different ways to communicate and no single way is the correct way. However, as you become more aware of the different styles of communication you will be able to adapt your style accordingly.

BECOME SELF AWARE. Pay attention to how you speak, how you stand, and how you use your body when you speak. At the same time, identify someone who you admire as a communicator and observe how they interact with others. How does your style match up with their style? While you do not want to copy their style exactly, adopting some of their mannerisms may help you improve your overall communication.

LISTEN CAREFULLY AND INTENTLY. Humans, by nature, are an impatient species. Often times we are so caught up waiting for our turn to speak that we do not actually hear what is being said. Always make solid eye contact with the speaker. This not only shows interest, but will help your mind from wandering elsewhere. Additionally, paying close attention to what the other person is saying and how they say it may help you identify appropriate communication behaviors.

WORK ON YOUR DELIVERY. It is not only what you say, but how you say it. If you have a habit of speaking quickly, make an effort to slow down and speak clearly. If you find that you speak in monotone try to speak with more emotion or excitement. Using appropriate facial expressions (smiling, widening your eyes to express excitement, etc.) to highlight your speech is important. At the same time however, try to keep your excitement in check. Being overly dramatic with your speech or using too many expressions can become overwhelming and distracting for the listener.

WORK ON YOUR BODY LANGUAGE. It is important to come across as open and approachable. If you are slouched over with your hands in your pockets for example, you may come across as disinterested and aloof. Pay attention to how you stand when others are around. Do you close up with arms crossed or do you stand tall? If you feel nervous when speaking and have a tendency to curl inward, make an effort to stand with your head high, shoulders back, and chest out slightly. This will not only make you appear more confident, it may also help you feel more confident.

CONCLUSION

Communication is not only important for employment, but for everyday interactions as well. Miscommunication and misunderstanding can and has lead to immense frustration. Remember, communication is not one-sided. Effective communication also involves listening in an effort to understand. The fastest way to improve your communication is to observe yourself and others, while at the same time being willing to acknowledge areas that may need improvement in your own communication.

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