

# LAB

ACCOUNTING AND BUSINESS SINGAPORE 09/2011

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## The softly, softly approach

Soft skills are transferable and important for personal growth and career progression, as well as for working successfully in an increasingly global business environment, says **Patrick O'Brien**

**Charles Darwin promoted the concept of natural selection in his 19th-century work *On the Origin of Species*. Mutation was the driver of evolution, creating a 'functional advantage' – a springboard for competitive advantage as a species surged ahead. The modern, DNA-based view is that humans do indeed inherit certain traits through their genes – eye colour, for instance.**

Intellect also plays its part, which is why intelligence is tested and nourished through formal education. Once in a profession, however, relative differences in intelligence between co-workers tend to be typically small. So when it comes to job performance and career progression, intelligence quotient – IQ – is often only the entry ticket. Instead, it's the person's soft skills that surface to set them apart.

### Hard and soft skills

Personal growth is underpinned by acquisition of new skills and competences, of which there are two fundamentally different sets.

First, there are the hard skills, typically technical or functional in nature. They are specific and usually heavily related to a job, its products and processes, or to the organisation itself. Hard skills focus on explicit activities with objective outcomes that are clearly visible and measurable.

Because these skills are specific, many do not transfer well to other environments. Thus a change of job usually requires learning a new set of product-related practices and processes. That said, their tangible nature means that learning hard skills is relatively straightforward.

Second, there are soft skills, relating more to personal qualities, inner feelings or outer expressions. These are picked up unconsciously from birth,

modelled by family, friends and social situations. Soft skills focus on interactions and relationships, are more subjective, not as easy to spot and often difficult to quantify.

Because they are generic, soft skills are highly transferable to new environments and are usable within any job, company, industry or country. Communication, networking and presentation skills, influencing, decision-making, time management, anger management, teamwork, coaching and leadership skills are examples. Their transferable nature makes them valid and highly valuable skills for an individual to acquire for

an amalgam of cognitive ability, emotional competences and social skillsets. It's an intensely powerful concept, because relevant emotional and social skills and competences can be labelled and learnt.

Goleman's concept sets out four key areas: two personal – self-awareness and self-management; and two interpersonal – social awareness and relationship management.

### Self-awareness

Self-awareness relies on tuning into how the environment makes you feel. It requires you to make an accurate assessment of the interactions

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improved job performance, personal growth and career development.

However, acquiring new soft skills may feel difficult, often requiring the letting go of old habits. Put another way, learning soft skills is like changing an old golf swing. Before you can improve, you first have to unlearn that old habit; that's the really hard part.

Soft skills broadly describe learnable competences that help you deliver a desired competitive edge. It doesn't matter whether you call them personal, interpersonal, people or social skills; they are strongly related to emotional intelligence.

### Emotional intelligence

Peter Salovey and John Mayer, followed by Daniel Goleman, brought our attention to the concept of emotional intelligence – or EQ – in the mid-1990s. Drawing heavily on a person's soft skills, EQ is

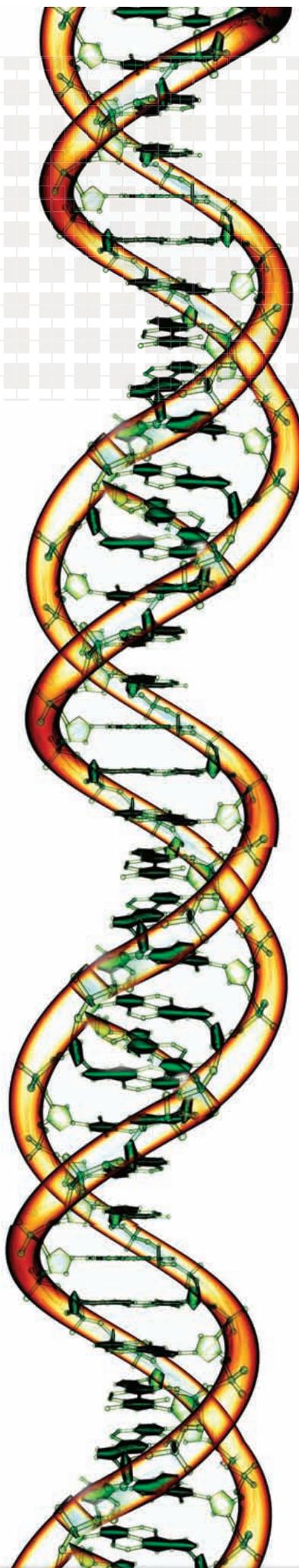
between you and your environment and have the confidence to take action.

Self-awareness means tapping into your intuition and listening to your inner conversations or 'self-talk'. Are you feeling relaxed or totally stressed? Is your mind focused or does it keep constantly wandering off topic? Is your mind quietened or do you find yourself having the same noisy internal conversations over and over again?

### Self-management

Action begins with ownership and requires a belief in one's ability to make a difference. Self-management calls on you to take charge of your situation – acknowledging your feelings, providing a series of options, making decisions and taking action.

Do you know what your intentions are or are you continuously driven by events? Do you reframe things to your advantage or just accept them as they



are? Do you embrace your emotions to bring logic centre stage or are you constantly overwhelmed by conflict?

Self-management is about seizing the initiative to put yourself back in control of your own situation, in positive ways. It means trusting yourself to do the right thing, which in turn will achieve the right personal and business outcomes.

#### Social awareness

Understanding begins with empathy. It requires a retuning of motivations, to allow a person to draw strength and do right by others. Social awareness calls on you to not just place yourself in the other person's shoes; it also demands that you take steps along the path they ordinarily take, no matter how different from your own.

Are you driven by wider interests or do you find yourself always focused on your own self-interests? Do you get pleasure when others succeed or see things only through a 'you-win, they-lose' lens? Is providing service to others rewarding or is being waited on hand and foot the epitome of all your pleasures?

Social awareness requires building deep-seated, long-lasting relationships founded on trust, respect and honesty. It means being attuned to differing perspectives, and having patience to invest time to truly appreciate the perspectives from another person's viewpoint.

#### Relationship management

Leadership calls for teamwork. It requires influence and an unequivocal commitment to develop others in positive ways. Relationship management calls on you to reach out to others, build bridges and cement bonds in deeply enmeshed networks. It recognises that relationships are

built around value, influence and persuasion, as well as positive and clear communication with others.

Are you in your element when fostering and nurturing relationships or do you only feel comfortable when in total control? Do you invest to add value to relationships or are you constantly extracting demands from others? Is a consensual leadership style something that sits well with you or is the only acceptable approach based around your command and control?

Relationship management requires recognition that you cannot do it all alone; others are important, too. It means being a committed team player who harnesses cooperation and collaboration for the collective good.

#### Career progression

Tapping into the softer side leads to real benefits for job performance, personal growth and career development. First, soft skills are the glue on which relationships are built, which in today's team-based yet globally dispersed world helps you perform tasks to the maximum.

Next, where IQ makes little perceived discernible difference among peers, soft skills set people apart, allowing others to notice your contributions and personal growth. Finally, career development is about connections, and your ability to make and maintain good ones will provide career development opportunities over time.

So, choose to become more emotionally intelligent by embracing transferable soft skills and see how they can work for you. Enjoy!

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