

# Marketing Thought Leaders

A playbook for leading your company to future success

## Soft Skills Matter

By [Jacob Gregus](#)

Increasingly, business schools and universities are focusing on “soft skills” to best prepare business students for the corporate world. The C-Suite is zeroing in on these “softer skills” to move the needle on everything from ROI to market penetration and business development. Today, organizations are learning more and more that their best employees are the ones with the strongest set of soft skills.

For some, having a strong set of soft skills comes from years of experience working in the corporate world. College graduates, however, often need to acquire better soft skills before anyone will hire them, according to Jim Stedt, president of Business SoftSkills Inc.

“It’s a real shock to these people,” Stedt said. “They’ve been in school where being an individual is key, and now they have to be part of a team and don’t know how to do that.”

Stedt’s company focuses on training people in everything from how to interview for a job and writing resumes to networking with potential employers. It’s these skills that help clients “get jobs quicker,” Stedt said.

“When you talk to upper-echelon people and ask them what they’re looking for in up-and-comers, they say they need somebody who has good presentation skills, who can write a good business email or letter,” Stedt said. “You have to have these types of skills to enhance your career.”

To Al Duncan, president of Al Duncan Enterprises, soft skills make everything run smoothly in the workplace. Duncan said an employee without soft skills is like a waffle iron without non-stick cooking spray.

“I was making waffles one day and (my first one) came out perfect, so I wanted another one,” Duncan said. “In my haste I forgot to spray the waffle iron, and when I tried to get it out it was a big mess. The spray increased what I got out of my product, and to me, that’s what soft skills are.”

While good “hard skills” are important (just as batter and a waffle iron are essential for waffles), Duncan said soft skills “allow you to implement your hard skills” in way that maximizes potential. For marketers, having good soft skills when communicating with consumers or businesses can be very important when trying to get a specific message across.

“Without soft skills, it becomes very challenging to bring everyone in the workforce together,” Duncan said. “My ability to tell a story and communicate with you in a different manner really makes my point stick out in your mind.”

According to a recent survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, four of the top five skills desired by employers can be classified as soft skills, Duncan said. With a poor economy, however, many companies are decreasing soft skills training when making budget cuts.

“If you cut soft skills training, it’s going to have an opposite effect if you want to save money and increase your bottom line,” Duncan said. “There’s not enough emphasis placed on soft skills because soft skills are hard to measure well.”

Sometimes, a lack of soft skills in potential employees can be a result of business schools failing to recognize the need for them. Stedt said there has always been a “gap” between academia and business.

“Schools have never understood what businesses need,” Stedt said. “When we talk to professors, a lot of them have not worked in business, so they don’t understand it either. They have their own game plan.”

Nancy Barry, author of “When Reality Hits: What Employers Want Recent College Graduates to Know” (Brown Books Publishing Group, 2007) said there needs to be an increase of soft skills training at the university level to “meet the demands of employers.”

“There’s been a trend over the last five to 10 years of employers telling universities that their students are coming out with a wonderful education but aren’t ready for the real world,” Barry said. “An employer can teach someone how to do a job as long as they have a good set of soft skills.”

[Jacob Gregus](#) is an editorial intern at the American Marketing Association. Continue the conversation about soft skills in [AMAConnect™](#), the AMA’s online community.