

Soft skills: what, why and how to teach them in ESL classes using *Office Soft Skills*

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The following is a summary of the conference presentation at the TESL Toronto Spring Conference, May 2011.

The meaning of the term ‘soft skills’ has not yet crystallized. Soft skills are similar to language appropriacy and for this presentation can be defined as a combination of:

- self-awareness
- cultural awareness
- interpersonal skills
- verbal and nonverbal communication styles

that follow expected polite behaviour, especially in the business or workplace context. Each one of these elements plays a role in establishing good relationships at work, as well as in the neighbourhood or community – so knowledge of soft skills, the unwritten rules of acceptable behaviour, can help everybody.

The term comes up repeatedly in discussions about employability. “Canadian business experience” and “soft skills” are often mentioned by employers who are thinking about hiring internationally trained professionals. If immigrant professionals show only technical qualifications and skills on their résumés, they will have difficulty getting an interview in Canada. And if they fall short of the culturally expected behaviours, communication styles and interpersonal skills at work, they will have a hard time getting promoted and maybe even keeping their job. This is where knowledge of soft skills can help.

The contents of *Office Soft Skills* give the reader unwritten rules of the Canadian office workplace. These books are unique among ESL textbooks because of their subject matter and format. They are:

- modular, thus flexible
- appropriate for mixed groups
- based on adult learning principles of discovery and self-discovery
- practical and Canadian
- fun!

The chapters in *Office Soft Skills* introduce many situations that newcomers need to successfully navigate with soft skills more than technical vocabulary:

- Introductions
- Meetings
- Phone (customer service) and voicemail
- Email
- Getting along in the office (cubicle etiquette and socializing)

- Teamwork
- Supporting the boss (good and bad bosses)
- Feedback and negotiating

These are topics that interest even native speakers, so they are appropriate for immigrant professionals who do not require LINC or ESL classes as well as those whose language level is CLB 6 and up, so mixed groups. The topics are modular, each one independent of the others, so they can be covered in any order.

The material is based on adult learning principles of discovery and self-discovery, the self-awareness that is part of soft skills. Our learners are adults and have life experience. With *Office Soft Skills*, readers' previous knowledge is elicited and respected as they take quizzes, find out what they know and don't know, and can then concentrate on the gaps in their experience and knowledge. Experiencing the gaps, readers are motivated to fill them. The books are full of tips and survey results from Canadian and other North American sources, and so reflect more than just one author's opinions. The quiz format is also challenging and a lot more fun than a list of "Do's and Don'ts."

The audience tried out some verbal and nonverbal communication questions. They found out, for example, how your handshake reflects your leadership skills, whether it is acceptable to check your smart phone during a business meeting (expand to your class setting and you can discuss whether it is OK for learners to take phone calls during class), how many managers expect employees to be punctual every single day (not 100%), and on a lighter note, how most Canadians feel about men wearing socks with sandals. For every question there was lively discussion – and our learners, too, will find themselves motivated to use and expand their language skills when dealing with quiz questions in the books. Armed with increased knowledge of Canadian business expectations, class participants can then make informed choices as to their own behaviour.

In conclusion, the outcomes, namely what the participants should know and be able to do after working through *Office Soft Skills 1* and *2*, are:

- cultural (knowledge of Canadian business customs and etiquette)
- functional (how to function, with appropriate language and nonverbal communication, in given networking and business situations)
- language-based (improved oral skills and accuracy and enriched vocabulary).

The books can be ordered through English Central at www.englishcentral.net. A free Instructor's Guide with more language activities is available with a class set of books.