



Lori Wolfe/The Herald-Dispatch Cole Bantaa works on a threading project in machine trades class on Thursday, Feb. 12, 2015, at Cabell County Career Technology Center in Huntington.

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## **Soft skills as important as technical skills**

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HUNTINGTON – When a potential employer looks through a pile of resumes filled with impressive educational backgrounds, awards and skill sets, the one thing that could mean the difference between what makes a person a bad, good or stellar employee could be something that can't be spelled out with ink and paper.

Technical skills can be reflected on a resume, but soft skills – including a person's communication skills, their attitude, the ability to engage in teamwork, professionalism and critical thinking – have proven far more difficult to anticipate ahead of the hiring of a new employee, said Denise Hogsett, director of Career Services at Marshall University

“Soft skills are those set of skills that can range from manners and dress to working well with others,” Hogsett said. “If you think about a particular career, such as a teacher or a nurse, which we classify in the helping fields that both certified or licensed individuals, it is the soft skills that separate an excellent one from an average one. ... It is the combination of the hard skills that are learned at the institution and the soft skill sets process that get candidates the interview. It is the soft skills that can be vetted during the interview process by phone, in person or at lunch or dinner interviews.”

As fewer people are retiring from the U.S. workforce, there are increasingly more businesses where there are three generations of workers in the workforce, Hogsett said.

The differences from one generation to the next has posed some interesting challenges as the country's population aims to meet the demands of its job market.

“The older generation's soft skills are different than the younger generation's soft skills,” Hogsett said. “At times, this difference muddies the water. Many fields are more conservative and require that the candidate be dressed in suits, with great oral communication skills, a firm hand shake and great eye contact. But many younger candidates with great technical skills are more relaxed with dress, using email, texting and social media that reduce their experience with verbal and oral communication skills face to face. It is not as natural to them as it is to the older generations.”

Those generational differences haven't gone unnoticed by the public education system.

Tonia Fry, a graphic design instructor at the Cabell County Career and Technical Center, said there had not been a heavy focus on such skills during her time as an instructor prior to the last two years.

Fry said her eyes were opened a little more than a year ago by a state official who visited the school last year, who said employers were looking for more from Career Technical Education programs, like the one at CCCTC.

“They were not able to get an employee who could pass a drug test or had a work ethic, who could communicate or even show up to work on time,” Fry said.

That was the segue for the center to initiate its version of the West Virginia Simulated Workplace program at the start of the 2014-15 school year.

Simulated Workplace is a West Virginia Department of Education initiative through which a few high schools and CTE centers in the state have implemented workplace protocols including that align with West Virginia workforce requirements, including random drug testing, professionalism, attendance and safety.

The program is on pace to eventually be implemented in all of the state's CTE programs.

“A Simulated Workplace doesn’t change the curriculum of a class,” said Crystal Davis, Simulated Workplace coach for Cabell County and a law and public safety instructor at the school. “It changes the class environment. It puts students in a leadership position where they take charge of their education.”

In the Simulated Workplace, students are the employees and managers of their own small businesses. In the case of Fry’s students, their business is called Knightlander Designs, a nod to the mascots from the county’s two high schools.

Students in the class are sorted into design teams, and they are responsible for clocking into “work” each day, monitoring their own safety standards and keeping up with the demands of the job, which includes designing and manufacturing uniforms for other programs at the school and community entities outside of the school.

“It gives them the opportunity to interact and know what it’s like to work with the customer,” Fry said. “They know they’re responsible. If they make a proof of a print, they know it’s their job to run it to that client and work with them. It helps them deal with constructive criticism and working with people that way.”

Aaliyah Jackson, 16, is a student-employee in Fry’s program, and she said she feels better prepared to get a job in the future thanks to the Simulated Workplace.

“I can see what working at a real job will be like,” Jackson said. “When I go out and get a job, I’ll be able to understand what I need to do, so hopefully, even though I’m young, I’ll seem more mature to (employers). It’s a better experience for me.”

That kind of real-life training also carries over to the college experience at Marshall University, Hogsett said.

In February, **Marshall’s Forensic Science Graduate Program** hosted its annual mock job interview event for its students, who are among the best and brightest in the country, said Pam Staton, program coordinator at the Forensic Science Center.

During the event, second-year graduate students applied for jobs with such agencies as the West Virginia State Police, Kentucky State Police, the West Virginia Medical Examiner’s office, the Huntington Police Department and the Forensic Science Center.

“Managers from each agency were present to interview each student, placing the importance of soft skills on par with that of the science and technical skills those students have acquired,” Staton said.

“We feel like career development is as important as technical skills, Staton said. “These individuals, when they leave, are interviewing all over the country. For them to interview for jobs in California or Texas, the cost is expensive. We want them to go out with very best interview skills possible. Individuals can be at the top of the chart in science skills, but if they can’t portray that in a job interview, they might not get the job.”

As a result of that effort, 95 percent of the May 2014 graduates from the program are employed in specialty areas including DNA, drugs and controlled substances, digital forensics and crime scene investigation in 11 states: West Virginia, Ohio, Texas, Maryland, Tennessee, Washington, Arkansas, Wisconsin, Missouri, New York and California.

In addition to mock interview opportunities, Marshall’s Career Services employees help students craft a job search tool kit consisting of resumes, cover letters, references and career coaching to aid them in clearly and professionally presenting a clear brand of themselves.

That includes guiding the students into career paths that fit them and internships that support their fields of study that would increase the likelihood of employment.

Students also are encouraged to be engaged in other activities that would give them opportunities to practice and refine their soft skills through student groups, study abroad programs, cultural enrichment programs and taking service learning-based classes.

“We feel, because of the competitive nature of the job market today, at some point, the fit and soft skill sets might be what sets a candidate apart from the others,” Hogsett said. “Also, as we have become more lax in our lifestyles, there has been a need to re-think this area as we prepare students for the workforce of today. A workforce that demands that individuals show up on time, be ready to think critically and adapt to a changing environment.”

### **Basic soft skills for the workplace**

1. Communication
2. Enthusiasm and attitude
3. Teamwork
4. Networking
5. Problem solving and critical thinking
6. Professionalism

Source: U.S. Department of Labor