

How Business Schools Are Filling the Soft Skills Gap

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Soft skills: business schools around the world acknowledge their importance, but are they adequately teaching them to meet the needs of employers?

- Employers see gaps in communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership among new business graduates.
- Schools are addressing the gap by embedding soft skills into coursework and offering real-world interactions with employers.
- Students can strengthen soft skills by engaging in experiential activities and pushing beyond their comfort zones.

Call them soft skills, human skills, durable skills, critical skills—no matter the terminology, these skills are one of the areas recruiters consistently highlight as lacking in recent business school graduates.

As a result, business schools are having to create innovative solutions to fill the soft skills gap. We learn about some of the key soft skills that major employers are looking for—and the things that schools are doing to equip students with them.

Which Skills Are New Employees Lacking?

As one of the top recruiters of business school grads globally, global consulting firm PwC is well-placed to assess the areas where new employees can benefit from additional support to help them thrive. Julie Peters is the firm's US University Relations leader and a member of AACSB's Business Influencer Council. She says that teamwork, communication, and critical thinking are some of the areas where graduates could improve.

Highlighting critical thinking, she says: "What we tend to see is a new joiner looking to immediately get the right answer. And while getting the right answer is important, many scenarios allow for more than one right answer. What's more important is for them to understand the thought process for gathering all of the information needed to then analyze and determine a point of view to make an informed decision."

“While getting the right answer is important, many scenarios allow for more than one right answer.”—Julie Peters, PwC

Meanwhile, Peters identifies communication skills as another area for improvement in recent years. She says that newer graduates tend to send texts or emails to coworkers and clients instead of having an in-person conversation. However, she does note that she is beginning to see improvements.

It's a similar story from the perspective of business schools, which regularly engage with employers to try to discover any skills gaps.

"We've had feedback from employers and also from a lot of research that there are primarily four skills that they want to see developed: collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and leadership," explains Karen Russo-Donovan, senior associate dean of academic programs and executive education at [Duquesne University](#)'s Palumbo-Donahue School of Business.

For Russo-Donovan and other business school professors globally, the challenge is how to fill these soft skills gaps.

How Schools Are Helping Students Develop Soft Skills

Engaging Regularly With Employers

At Palumbo-Donahue, the approach to teaching soft skills isn't revolutionary. In fact, it's really quite simple.

"We take the approach that soft skills aren't only taught, but they have to be practised regularly—just like any other skill you're trying to develop," explains Russo-Donovan. "So we give the students lots of opportunities to practise those skills."

It may seem like a straightforward approach, but it's effective—and may be overlooked at other schools. Students at Palumbo-Donahue are given opportunities to develop their soft skills at various points throughout their program, as part of both in-classroom work and extracurricular activities. For example, the school's Cornerstone to Capstone approach allows students to engage with employers at the beginning and end of their program.

“Soft skills aren't only taught, but they have to be practised regularly.”—Karen Russo-Donovan, Duquesne University

Russo-Donovan explains how students will have “experiential opportunities” with the school's corporate partners, where they engage in challenges presented by the companies. “Then they have to present back to those executives. So they have to develop their soft skills. And they practise this over and over.”

The school has also created a Meet the Firm night, where students have the opportunity to engage directly with employers in an informal setting. It's not quite networking; it's simply more of a chance for students to learn how to communicate with potential employers.

For Russo-Donovan, the principle behind it remains as simple as ever. “They're in front of employers. The more they do it, the more comfortable they become.”

Integrating Soft Skills as a Core Competency

Even though soft skills are highly valued by employers, they can still be a tough sell to students.

“Many of our students come from highly technical or quantitative backgrounds, convinced their analytical horsepower is all that matters,” explains Deepa Mani, professor and deputy dean of academic programs at the [Indian School of Business](#) (ISB). “Then, something shifts.”

This shift in attitude often occurs because of ISB's strong focus on soft skills. And that focus has developed as a result of employer feedback.

“In conversation with recruiters, we realized that some students had learned to describe these soft competencies without truly embodying them,” says Mani. “This feedback taught us that soft skills cannot be confined to a few courses—they are habits that must be cultivated continuously.”

Soft skill teaching at ISB isn't limited to a specific module or project. Instead, the skills are treated as a “core competency” that is “woven through our students' entire learning journey.” All core courses at ISB now have learning goals related to communication and soft skills, ensuring that they're treated as a non-negotiable rather than a nice-to-have.

“Soft skills cannot be confined to a few courses—they are habits that must be cultivated continuously.”—Deepa Mani, Indian School of Business

This soft skill focus culminates in the year-end Business Simulation Challenge, where teams are tasked with a business case to solve in real-time. According to Mani, they must “make strategic decisions, present to investors, and manage complex internal dynamics—all at once.”

Mani believes this combination of technical know-how with soft skills is a necessity for modern business graduates. “This ensures we are developing the professional maturity and authentic integrity that transforms technical competence into trusted leadership.”

Taking Teaching Out of the Classroom

“I’m not a huge believer in diluting everything down to the classroom, because then you strip away so much of the extraneous information that is important.”

Those are the words of Usha Haley, professor of management at [Wichita State University](#)’s Barton School of Business. It sums up her approach to teaching at Barton, where soft skills development doesn’t just come in the classroom. That’s because Haley is also chair of the World Trade Council (WTC) of Wichita—a vital piece of the soft skills puzzle for Barton students.

| Soft skills development doesn’t just come in the classroom.

“It’s quite unique,” Haley explains. “It’s a 45-year-old organization which is more like a club that meets monthly where we sit down and discuss issues of the day with people who are moulding the issues of the day.”

Barton students who get involved with the WTC have a unique opportunity to engage with senior practitioners from corporations, government, and the local community. Haley describes it as a “stripped down” version of networking, where students can speak with business leaders in a more informal setting.

“We hold them at places like country clubs, so that CEOs feel more comfortable in these environments,” says Haley. “There, students can hone their communication skills and attract the attention of employers.”

The aim of the WTC isn’t necessarily to find students a job or to start climbing the corporate ladder. Instead, these meetings are simply a chance for students to “learn to communicate with these people” and “learn to form connections.”

According to Haley, many students have described it as the “highlight” of their experience at Barton, with a number of them securing internships or jobs through the WTC—even though that wasn’t the aim at the outset.

How Business Students Can Improve Their Soft Skills

Although business schools are actively working to address the gap in soft skills, students also have a part to play. Peters, from PwC, recommends that students “engage on campus with employers, taking advantage of [soft skills] programs, and attending presentations” whenever possible.

It’s also important to step out of your comfort zone as much as possible. Put yourself in unfamiliar situations so you can learn how to deal with them and get better for next time. You might do this by engaging in class discussions, taking part in group work, or interacting with professors.

Peters says that PwC recognizes the importance of graduates knowing how to communicate effectively and ask meaningful questions because “that process is representative of how a student might interact in our client-facing environments.”

Developing these soft skills will benefit you throughout your career. And according to Peters, they may also catch the eye of employers like PwC. “Ultimately, soft skills can set you apart in the recruiting process.”