

The top skills in the World of Work: Are you leading or lagging?

By Marius Meyer

Over the past 20 years, there were several studies focusing on the skills required for the new world of work. According to the World Economic Forum the top skills in the World of Work for the year 2020 are as follows:

1. Complex problem-solving
2. Critical thinking
3. Creativity
4. People Management
5. Co-ordinating with others
6. Emotional intelligence
7. Judgment and decision-making
8. Service Orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive flexibility

Interestingly, while these skills focus on the world of work, they are not only relevant for top managers, but also for other professionals and employees, especially during this time of lockdown. In fact, most people have applied some or all of these skills while working from home. For instance, you may have been in a position in which you had to renegotiate your lease agreement like many people have done in recent times. In addition, the Covid-19 situation and lockdown in particular required people to display a very high level of emotional intelligence. Being restricted to your home required you to increase your level of self-awareness in terms of your own focus, strengths, frustrations, and maintaining or building relationships with family members, colleagues, suppliers, customers and your manager. It is also encouraging to see how some people have stepped up in some of these skills areas. Some managers realised that complex problem-solving is now required to deal with higher levels of uncertainty and complexity given the fact that our conventional approaches to forecasting and managing projects and problems during times of stability have become irrelevant, or had to be adapted considerably.

Some of these skills will require more attention, focus and development than others. As an example, cognitive flexibility is a special skill during the Covid-19 crisis. According to Wikipedia, cognitive flexibility is “the mental ability to switch between thinking about two different concepts, and to think about multiple concepts simultaneously.” The Handbook of Behavioural Neuroscience (2016) defined cognitive flexibility as the ability to adapt behaviours in response to changes in the environment. All of us had to apply the skill of cognitive flexibility during this difficult period. We were required to handle so many different aspects at work, at home and society at large, especially in the light of uncertainty, complexity and conflicting and changing conditions. Moreover, we were required to adapt and change our behaviours when isolating ourselves from other people and to practise additional hygiene requirements and other forms of behaviour change. However, we all have ample

opportunities to practise the top 10 work skills of 2020. Here is a quick set of basic guidelines to apply these skills in the current circumstances:

- Consider different options and apply your mind and a variety of problem-solving techniques when solving problems at work and home;
- Think deeper and more critically about conventional wisdom and the things around you, including the future of business and the world of work;
- Apply your creativity in making your home and work environment more interesting and conducive to working remotely and productively;
- Use your people skills in influencing other people if you are in a non-management or specialist position, and people management skills if you manage other people or your household;
- Coordinating with other people is of utmost importance when working on projects and initiatives;
- Emotional intelligence is needed to first have self-awareness, and secondly to build and maintain good relationships with other people;
- Think clearly when using the skill of judgment to reach conclusions and to make decisions affecting your behaviour, work, family and life in general;
- Assess your skill of service orientation to customers and make the necessary improvements where necessary;
- Work on your negotiation skills when it is necessary to negotiate your position, contracts or other forms of reaching agreements on actions going forward;
- Practise cognitive flexibility when entertaining different or multiple concepts and when you are required to change your behaviour in terms of hygiene, physical distancing, and complying to all the Disaster Management Act regulations.

Most of us applied the top 10 skills to a greater or lesser degree over the first five months of the year, and in particular over the past two months of lockdown. Admittedly, you will immediately see that you are more proficient in some of these skills than others. Reinforce your strengths and work on those areas requiring more attention. Also use other team members who may be stronger in some of the areas you are struggling with. There will be people in your team with better judgment than others, therefore, make them part of your decision-making. Likewise, your most creative people will find it easier to display creativity than those who lack creativity. Using a strengths-based approach to building and growing individual team members and the team at large can help people grow as individuals and active team members adding value to your organisation.

What is important to realise, is that these skills are the unique value-adding skills required in the world of work today. Ironically, they are also life skills during the Covid-19 pandemic. If you are leading in the application of these skills, congratulations, and keep it up! In addition, help others if you see they are struggling. Some of these skills also need to be developed in your children, such as problem-solving, creativity, emotional intelligence and judgment. If you are lacking or lagging in any of these areas, use the last seven months of the year to develop and refine your skills. Then you will not look back to the year 2020 as the year of lockdown only, but a milestone in developing your top 10 skills in the new world of work and add significant value to your family, organisation and broader society.

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