

Communication skills vital for new graduates

Technical proficiency in a chosen field is no longer enough to help a graduate land a job and be successful in the workplace. Other attributes, such as building relationships, listening carefully, influencing and building empathy, are also vital in securing employment in a tight market.



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“Students and higher education institutions understandably spend a vast amount of their time on ensuring sound technical understanding and subject expertise, however too often the skills that will make a student stand out and ensure resilience in a volatile environment are not given due consideration,” says Wonga Ntshinga, senior head of programme: Faculty of ICT at The Independent Institute of Education.

“It is important that colleges and universities devote sufficient attention to cultivating those skills that will leave graduates more well-rounded and able to operate effectively in the workplace, with communication being one of the most important skills a human possesses. It encompasses a wide range of skills such as building relationships, listening carefully, influencing and building empathy.

“Yet poor communication skills are often cited as a major workplace challenge for technical staff. For instance in the case of IT experts, they work with systems that are predictable and that do as they are told. However when dealing with people, a logical approach will not always be effective, and many technical professionals and students become frustrated with colleagues in other sectors when there is a failure to do ‘the obvious’ thing.

“This could cause someone, who is at the top of their game technically, to lose out on career opportunities because they do not get along with their colleagues and superiors. It is therefore incumbent on higher education institutions to enable an environment in which empowering skills are given due focus.

Guidelines for students, institutions

1. **Encourage students to read - prolifically.** “Reading is essential - be it the daily newspapers or a variety of fiction and non-fiction. The curriculum of technical programmes is composed of technical reading, and very few students take the time to read something outside their domain. However this causes for a blinkered outlook to life which will limit a student’s opportunities.”
2. **Expose students to their peers in other disciplines or academic programmes.** “This will help

students to understand what the communication norms are and what will be effective. It creates the opportunity for them to learn from others and participate in meaningful conversations not restricted to their own subject matter, and builds engagement, collaboration, and value-based leadership skills. Additionally, students will learn how to adjust their communication approach depending on the audience.”

3. **Encourage students to learn an additional language.** Whether a local or foreign language, being able to at least converse with and understand people from another culture will always broaden horizons and understanding, and will serve as a valuable addition to a graduate’s CV.
4. **Give students a thorough understanding of the business environment.** “Institutions should train and upskill students to understand the business area that they will be working in, together with the type of customer they will be dealing with, to empower them with workable solutions to communications issues that commonly arise in their field.”
5. **Develop a solid understanding of social media.** “Social media is no longer just a social thing, and even a cursory glance at many students’ profiles reveals the precarious position in which they find themselves. The personal has become public and even a like of the wrong kind of content can cost you your reputation or career. Students need to understand the power of social media, and also the great degree of responsibility required when interacting online, where mistakes last forever.”
6. **Develop an understanding of the rules of engagement.** “Students should be encouraged to learn at least rudimentary debating skills, as well as the main techniques of reflecting. It is often reflection that results in optimal communication, thinking and learning.
7. “Finally, **a solid understanding of ethics** and about right and wrong behaviour will stand any graduate in good stead, particularly in our South African context,” concludes Ntshinga.