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W19.2 INTERPERSONAL SKILLS DEFINITION AND DEVELOPMENT

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Aim and objectives

The aim is to define interpersonal skills, being aware of the complexity of a simple definition, and explain why they are so valorized, and how they can be developed.

Learning outcomes

After studying this resource, it will be possible to identify the main characteristics of interpersonal skills, and know some strategies that can stimulate them.

Keywords

Interpersonal Skills; Communication



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1. Introduction

Even if you are not aware, every day you use your interpersonal skills. None of us lives in a bubble; we interact with others, and without that interactions it's impossible to achieve success in live.

However, while, on the one hand, is quite easy to understand that we have and we use it, on the other hand, is quite hard to get a simple definition.

2. Into a definition of interpersonal skills definition

The definition of **Interpersonal skills** is not easy, because the expression refers to several other skills, particularly communicational and emotional ones. That's why they are sometimes referred to as social skills, people skills, soft skills, or life skills. Lots of soft skills could be defined as interpersonal, and employers often look for applicant who can work collaboratively, communicate effectively and have positive relationships with others. Lots of jobs involve collaboration and interaction with different types of people, and interpersonal skills are vital to make this happen. Everyone is different. You may know someone with great interpersonal skills, and another person lacking some interpersonal skills. People with great interpersonal skills are generally more successful both professionally and personally than those without.

Shortly, let's define interpersonal skills **as the ability to communicate, cooperate, connect, relate, and interact with other people**. In fact, in any interaction between two people where information is being exchanged, including both verbal and nonverbal communication, interpersonal skills are in play.

In the course of our lives, we must communicate with and interact with other people on a daily if not hourly basis, and sometimes more



often. Good interpersonal skills allow us to build better and longer-lasting relationships, both at home and at work.

2.1. The complexity of interpersonal skills

Let's start to refer some of the skills that can be considered interpersonal.

- **Communication skills**, which include Verbal Communication – what we say and how we say it; and Non-Verbal Communication – what we communicate without words; and Listening Skills – how we interpret both the verbal and non-verbal messages sent by others;
- **Emotional intelligence skills**, that is the capacity of being able to understand and manage your own and others' emotions;
- **Team-working skills**, being able to work with others in groups and teams, both formal and informal;
- **Negotiation, persuasion and influencing skills**, that allow to find a mutually agreeable (Win/Win) outcome;
- **Conflict resolution and mediation skills**, to resolve interpersonal conflict and disagreements in a positive way;
- **Problem solving and decision-making skills**, that consist in identify, define and solve problems, which includes making decisions about the best course of action;

As you see, is not easy to give a clear definition without refer other skills that you have already study in this specialization course.

*Klein, DeRouin, & Salas, 2006*¹created a useful Interpersonal skills taxonomy that can help you to understand the complexity of their definition and relations with other skills. They divided their

¹ Klein, C., DeRouin, R. E., & Salas, E. (2006). Uncovering workplace interpersonal skills: A review, framework, and research agenda. In G. P. Hodgkinson & J. K. Ford (Eds.), *International review of industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. 21, pp. 80-126). New York: Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

description in two main groups, which are communication skills and relationship-building skills.

Interpersonal Skill	Description	Related Skills
Communication Skills		
<i>Active Listening</i>	Paying close attention to what is being said, asking the other party to explain exactly what he or she means, and requesting that ambiguous ideas or statements are repeated	Listening with empathy and sympathy; listening for understanding
<i>Oral Communication</i>	Sending verbal messages constructively	Enunciating; expressing yourself clearly; communicating emotion; interpersonal communication
<i>Written Communication</i>	Writing clearly and appropriately	Clarity; communicating intended meaning
<i>Assertive Communication</i>	Directly expressing one's feelings, preferences, needs, and opinions in a way that is neither threatening nor punishing to another person	Proposing ideas; social assertiveness; defense of rights; directive; asserting your needs
<i>Nonverbal Communication</i>	Reinforcing or replacing spoken communication through the use of body language,	Expression of feelings; perception/recognition of feelings; facial regard



	gestures, voice, or artifacts	
Relationship-Building skills		
<i>Cooperation & Coordination</i>	Understanding and working with others in groups or teams; includes offering help to those who need it and pacing activities to fit the needs of the team	Adaptability; shared situational awareness; performance monitoring and feedback; interpersonal relations; communication; decision making; cohesion; group problem solving; being a team player
<i>Trust</i>	An individual's faith or belief in the integrity or reliability of another person or thing; willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that certain actions important to the trustor will be performed	Self-awareness; self-disclosure; swift trust
<i>Intercultural Sensitivity</i>	Appreciating individual differences among people	Acceptance; openness to new ideas; sensitivity to others; cross-cultural relations
<i>Service Orientation</i>	A set of basic individual predispositions and an inclination to provide service, to be courteous and	Exceeding customer's expectations; customer satisfaction skills; ability to maintain positive client relationship; selling; building rapport;



	helpful in dealing with customers, clients, and associates	representing the organization to customers and the public
<i>Self-presentation</i>	Process by which individuals attempt to influence the reactions and images people have of them and their ideas; managing these impressions encompasses a wide range of behaviors designed to create a positive influence on work associates	Self-expression; face-saving and impression management; managing perceptions; self-promotion
<i>Social Influence</i>	Guiding people toward the adoption of specific behaviors, beliefs, or attitudes; influencing the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within an organization through one's actions	Business etiquette; reasoning; friendliness; coalition building; bargaining; appeals to higher authority; imposing sanctions; networking; persuasion, positive political skills
<i>Conflict Resolution & Negotiation</i>	Advocating one's position with an open mind, not taking personally other members' disagreements, putting oneself in the other's shoes, following rational argument and avoiding premature	Conflict-handling style; conflict management; conflict prevention; compromising; problem solving; integrative bargaining; principled negotiation; cultural negotiation; mediation

	<p>evaluation, and trying to synthesize the best ideas from all viewpoints and perspectives</p>	
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So, to get a more accurate definition of interpersonal skills, we can resume that they are the ability to communicate, cooperate, connect, relate, and interact with other people making use of your communication and relationship-building skills.

2.2 Interpersonal skills development

People with strong interpersonal skills tend to be able to work well with other people, including in teams or groups, formally and informally. You can improve your interpersonal skills by developing your awareness of how you interact with others and practising your skills.

Good interpersonal skills are essential at work, but many people find them hard to demonstrate during a job application process. There are, of course, some jobs in which interpersonal skills are particularly important (Customer services, Healthcare professionals, Financial advisers and brokers, just to give a few examples) but everyone will benefit, personal and professionally, with their development.

Remember: you already have interpersonal skills, even if you are not aware of that fact. We have all been developing our interpersonal skills since childhood, usually subconsciously, as Interaction with other humans is a fundamental part of being human; and everything that you have learned when interacting with others over your lifetime will have given you a good foundation, but there is always room to improve.

Here are some tips to develop your interpersonal skills:

1. Identify areas for improvement - The first step towards improving is to develop your knowledge of yourself and your

weaknesses and decide which areas you need to improve. You may already have a good idea of areas that you need to develop. Of course, it isn't always easy to self-analyze, so don't be afraid to ask those who are close to you for their feedback; it is easy to develop 'blind spots' about yourself.

2. Learn from feedback - Consider the relationships you have with your colleagues. Are there ever any conflicts? Have you ever had any feedback from your boss on your interpersonal skills that you could review? Thinking about the feedback you have been given, either directly or indirectly, will help you develop.

3. Focus on your basic communication and listening skills - Communication is far more than the words that you say. Some would even go so far as to suggest that there is a reason why you have two ears and one mouth, and that you should therefore listen twice as much as you talk. Listening is very definitely not the same as hearing. Perhaps one of the most important things you can do for anyone else is to take the time to listen carefully to what they are saying, considering both their verbal and non-verbal communication. Using techniques like questioning and reflection demonstrates that you are both listening and interested.

When you are talking, be aware of the words you use. Could you be misunderstood or confuse the issue? Practice clarity and learn to seek feedback or clarification to ensure your message has been understood. By using questions effectively, you can both check others' understanding, and learn more from them.

You may think that selecting your words is the most important part of getting a message across, but non-verbal communication plays a much bigger part than many of us are aware. Some experts suggest that around three-quarters of the 'message' is communicated by non-verbal signals such as body language, tone of voice, and the speed at which you speak. These non-verbal signals reinforce or contradict the message of our words and are much harder to fake than words. They are therefore a much more reliable signal. Learning to read body language is a vital part of communication.

See this TeDx Talk about Interpersonal Communication in the future World, by Celine Fitzgerald, from St. Lawrence College, and Psychology major at Carleton University.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KII2qDO0J6s>

4. Improve your more advanced communication skills - Once you are confident in your basic listening and verbal and non-verbal communication, you can move on to more advanced areas around communication, such as becoming more effective in how you speak, and understanding why you may be having communication problems. Communication is rarely perfect and can fail for a number of reasons. Understanding more about the possible barriers to good communication means that you can be aware of ineffective interpersonal communication and misunderstandings. Problems with communication can arise for a number of reasons, such as physical barriers (being unable to see or hear the speaker properly, or language difficulties), Emotional barriers (not wanting to hear what is being said, or engage with that topic) and Expectations and prejudices that affect what people see and hear.

There are also circumstances in which communication is more difficult: for example, when you must have an unpleasant conversation with someone, perhaps about their standard of work. These conversations may be either planned or unplanned. There tend to be two issues that make conversations more difficult: emotion, and change.

Various emotions can get in the way of communicating, including anger and aggression, or stress. Few of us can communicate effectively when we are struggling to manage our emotions, and sometimes the best thing that can be done is to postpone the conversation until everyone is calmer.

Difficult conversations are often about the need for change. Many of us find change hard to manage, especially if it is associated with an implied criticism of existing ways of working.

5. Look inwards - Interpersonal skills may be about how you relate to others, but they start with you. Many will be improved dramatically if you work on your personal skills. For example, people are much more likely to be drawn to you if you can maintain a positive attitude. A positive attitude also translates into improved self-confidence.

You are also less likely to be able to communicate effectively if you are very stressed about something. It is therefore important to learn to recognize, manage and reduce stress in yourself and others. Being able to remain assertive, without becoming either passive or aggressive, is also key to effective communication.

6. Develop Emotional intelligence - Perhaps the most important overarching personal skill is developing emotional intelligence. This consists in the ability to understand your own and others' emotions, and their effect on behavior and attitudes. It is therefore perhaps best considered as both personal and interpersonal in its nature, but there is no doubt that improving your emotional intelligence will help in all areas of interpersonal skills. Daniel Goleman, the author of a number of books on emotional intelligence, identified five key areas, three of which are personal, and two interpersonal. The personal skills, or 'how we manage ourselves', are self-awareness, self-regulation, and motivation. The interpersonal skills, or 'how we handle relationships with others', are empathy and social skills. These mean understanding and feeling for others, and then being able to interact effectively with them.

Improving your emotional intelligence therefore improves your understanding that other people have different points of view. It helps you to try to see things from their perspective. In doing so, you may learn something whilst gaining the respect and trust of others.

7. Use and practice your interpersonal skills in particular situations

- There are a number of situations in which you need to use interpersonal skills. Consciously putting yourself in those positions, and practicing your skills, then reflecting on the outcomes, will help you to improve. For example: Interpersonal skills are essential when working in groups. Group-work is also a common situation, giving you plenty of opportunity to work on your skills. Also when you are trying to negotiate, persuade, or problem solving and decision making, you can analyze and practice your interpersonal skills. That is the best way to develop them.

8. Reflect on your experience and improve - The final element in developing and improving your interpersonal skills is to develop the habit of self-reflection. Taking time to think about conversations and interpersonal interactions will enable you to learn from your mistakes and successes and continue to develop. You might, for example, find it helpful to keep a diary or learning journal and write in it each week.

These are just a few tips, and of course there is not an unique recipe. Is with your self-awareness and practice that you will develop the interpersonal skills that you have.

3. Benefits of having good interpersonal skills

In this point, we can make a list of several advantages of having good interpersonal skills that can help you to be successful in both our personal and business life:

- work more effectively as part of a team
- get our point across effectively
- form and maintain social bonds
- relate to the situations of others



- negotiate with others
- apologize
- reconcile differences
- influence others successfully
- improve our ability to learn
- read body language

Interpersonal skills can even give us the ability to ask for help when the situation demands. From this list of interpersonal skills benefits, it's easy to see how sharpening your saw in this area can help improve both your personal life and your business life.

4. Interpersonal Communication in the Age of Social Media

In the 21st century the interpersonal relationships changed a lot, with the introduction of internet as a medium in our personal and professional contacts.

The rules are the same, but some changes must be done. Some specific tips to improve your online communication can be:

1. **maintain etiquette:** often called "netiquette", it exceeds that of in-person etiquette, because unlike fleeting acquaintances, the internet creates a permanent record of communications which can haunt people and businesses that have been ineffective or offensive in previous online interactions. To see how to improve it, check this article by Elizabeth Hartney "[10 basic rules of Netiquette or Internet Etiquette](#)".
2. **Use clear and concise language:** your audience must enjoy your content; For that you need to use a correct tone, avoid too much technical jargon, and break up when texting;

3. **Provide thorough responses:** someone that thoroughly and competently interacts with customers online can create goodwill in the online community
4. **Build a favourable online persona:** online communication often presents added difficulties because of the absence of nonverbal cues. By focusing on clear and concise writing, as well as on conveying appreciation for your listeners, you can maintain a high level of online professionalism that will build rapport with the community and inspire goodwill.

5. Interpersonal skills at museum work

In a survey from 2013² it is said that the two competencies museum leaders value most were interpersonal relationships and professionalism; after these, the most valued were all from the categories of general, including none of the eighteen information and collections management and care competencies.

High interpersonal skills are also very recommended for students preparing for a museum career, because of the need to have to work on group projects, become involved in campus and community organizations, and pursue leadership roles. Many public history and museum studies programs have strong relationships with their local museums and heritage sites. These museums utilize students for important work through class projects such as developing a walking tour on local history, developing hands-on educational outreach kits for schools, or even installing a small exhibition.

This includes the ability to dialogue with diverse visitors of different cultures, ages and interests. Strong listening, problem solving, and negotiation skills. And willingness to create a positive, welcoming environment for learning. And these are all interpersonal skills taken into practice.

² Bomar, B. (2013). Skills Most Valued for Entry-Level Professional Museum Positions. *History News*, Volume 65, Number 1, Winter 2013

6. Synopsis

In this lesson, Interpersonal skills were defined, even considering the complexity of a simple definition, but regarding the two most important dimensions of communication and relationship-building skills.

After that, we gave some tips to develop your interpersonal skills, being aware that the most important thing is to examine yourself and practice communication, learning with your own experience and respecting others.

Finally, we make clear some of the advantages of having good interpersonal skills, and take into light that they are a very valued competence in the museum sector.

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8. Further reading

Interpersonal Communication – Building Connections Together. By Teri Kwal Gamble and Michael W. Gamble, published in 2013 by Sage Publishing. We recommend the chapter [Interpersonal Communication: A first Look](#), and [Non Verbal Communication](#).

