The Soft Skills Challenge

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In my previous column "Auditor: About Yourself (and How Others See You)," published on 1 April 2015 at *www.isaca.org/journal*, I touched on how being more aware of oneself helps to understand our interactions with others. Here, we explore those soft skills that do not appear in the Certified Information Systems Auditor® (CISA®) examination, but are important components of an auditor's life and work.

Figure 1 lists the differences between those things that are part of our nature and so deeply ingrained that they are hard (even impossible) to change and those that can be learned through the combination of the 3 Ds—desire, dedication and discipline. However, these learnable skills are necessary but are not sufficient on their own.

Figure 1—Changeable Vs. Unchangeable Traits	
Hard to Change	**Learnable**
• Temperament • Personality • Cultural values • Work ethic • Risk appetite	• Communications • Interviews • Time management • Negotiation • Collaboration • Problem solving
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It is important to remember the motto of the University of Salamanca in Spain, which, in 2018, will be celebrating 800 years of existence: *"Quod natura non dat, Salamantica non praestat."*[1]

This Latin expression can be loosely translated as, "If you did not get it from nature, Salamanca cannot give it to you," i.e., without talent, learning is that much harder. This is why not everyone can become a concert violinist or world-record-holding athlete. While there is truth in this, it should never be used as an excuse for not making the best of the knowledge, skills and abilities we do have. And the answer to this involves *learning*.

Learning takes time and it helps to have learned how to learn—a process that depends so much on one's nature that there is no single way that works for everyone. A search engine query on "learning to learn" will lead to many web sites[2] to explore and exploit. Curiosity (not listed in **figure 1**) should be treated as a good thing to have and to exploit.

Be prepared to accept that learning may require you to first unlearn what you already know. Many of the topics covered in my studies 50 years ago now belong in a museum, and the things we deal with today were totally unthought of until recently and had to be learned from scratch. A challenge, but the results are well worth it.

For those seriously interested in soft skills, consider exploring the following:
- An article on soft skills published in the *ISACA Journal* in volume 1, 2011,[3] that takes a different perspective than this column
- A document titled "Soft Skills Resources"[4] on the ISACA® web site
- A 19-minute video[5] produced by the University of Aarhus in Denmark. This is available both as a DVD and online (YouTube).

THE PRIMARY LEARNABLE SKILLS

The exploration of soft skills can make a difference to personal development. In this column, we will focus on communications and interviewing. A subsequent column will explore time management, collaboration, organizational politics and problem solving, and a third column will focus on negotiation and conflict resolution.

Communications

Communications can be broken down into three categories: the verbal, the written and the presentation (the hybrid). All need to be learned and continuously improved. Fortunately, there are many helpful sources of advice. Some starting points are included in the endnotes, but there is a great deal more material from which you can choose.

The prerequisites for successful communications include mastery of language, scope of vocabulary and understanding the culture of those involved. These make a difference in all three areas of communication.

Lack of such competencies, on the other hand, may lead to misunderstandings, mistrust and loss of credibility.

Listening and Nonverbal Cues

Becoming a good listener[6] is probably the hardest skill to acquire, and, interestingly, the Latin root of the word "auditor" precisely defines this skill. But learning to be a good listener requires more than reading a few words; it takes a lot of concentration, willpower and practice.

A really good listener must also learn how to take into account nonverbal communications, also known as body language.[7] This includes body movements, gestures, eye contact, facial expression, physiological changes and more.

Warning: Body language is, like national languages, not universal and is strongly embedded in the culture. For example, some cultures allow body language to be explicit and show emotions openly through gestures, physical proximity and strong—even challenging—eye contact; whereas, other cultures are more focused on controlling emotions and body language and reveal little, unless you are truly familiar with the particular culture.

Control and understanding of body language can be learned and mastered, as evidenced by the best poker players and diplomats. Like good listening, this demands a conscious effort and time to develop and perfect.

Writing

Written communications inevitably involve the drafts and final reports of an audit.[8, 9] The two guides in the endnotes offer particularly good guidance for the preparation of such reports.

However, there are many less-formal communications, such as electronic mail,[10] short text messages or Tweets. These should be used with care to reflect the culture and protocols of the organization. Bypassing lines of authority, using casual language and informality may be inappropriate. Professions like diplomacy, where these tools are valued yet the problems that may arise if they are misused are recognized, have published guidelines[11] that may be equally appropriate for auditors.

Presentations and Public Speaking

Presentations and public speaking (e.g., presenting to an audit committee) can cause anxiety. Not doing it successfully can be detrimental to your image and reputation. Fortunately, there are many helpful sources of guidance.[12, 13] There is no secret

as to what makes such events successful: knowledge of the subject matter, careful preparation and a clear focus on the audience's needs.

An auditor's challenge is to deliver in such a way that the presentation makes good use of the listeners' time, conveys insights and does so using the language of business, not technical jargon.

Too much detail and lengthy presentations are not only boring, they risk overwhelming the listener. It is interesting to note that scientific studies show the average attention span of an adult is in the range of 10 to 20 minutes, possibly less.[14] As with most things, practice makes perfect.

Interviewing

This is a subset of communications requiring the auditor to:
• Listen carefully, in particular for those things that are not said
• Prepare the interview so that the questions are pertinent and formulated in a manner to encourage the interviewee to open up and provide information other than simple yes and no responses
• Take accurate notes and produce a summary that can be provided to the interviewee for validation or modification

In a multicultural environment, the parties need to be aware of the interaction of a high-context culture[15] (one in which many things are left unsaid and are still clearly understood by members of the same culture) and a low-context culture (in which specificity and directness are more common). When both types of culture are involved in an interview and participants are unaware of such differences, misunderstandings are almost inevitable.

The interviewee, however, needs to make sure that any question is understood correctly and that the reply covers what is needed to answer the question.

DIFFERENT ACTORS HAVE DIFFERENT NEEDS

The audience for auditor communications includes parties with significantly different needs: the auditees with whom contact and exchanges will be the most intense from the start to the end of the audit and beyond; the auditees' management; the chief audit executive; the audit committee; and, from time to time, the external auditors and board.

> Communicating… must be given attention at the planning stage.

Time is a scarce resource, and communicating with each of these parties must be given attention at the planning stage so that participants do not perceive their time as having been wasted.

CONCLUSION

There is much more to communications skills than the short overview presented here. In the ideal situation, your curiosity and wish for self-improvement will encourage you to explore these topics further.

ENDNOTES

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