

What is So Hard About “Soft Skills” ?

The end of the semester for Cooperative Education (co-op) means wrapping up company visits. Co-op students are visited at their place of employment by the co-op director and the faculty co-op coordinator from the student’s academic department. To maintain the integrity of the program, the coordinator and director observe what the student is working on as a way to ensure job tasks relate directly to the student’s major. If a student is a “coffee gopher”, “mailroom man” or “shredding queen”, that is not co-op.

During the visit, IPFW personnel also meet with the student’s manager to discuss curriculum, as well as the student’s performance. Feedback is usually quite positive with IPFW students receiving high praise for eagerness to learn, problem-solving abilities and technical skills.

Lately, employers have made numerous negative comments about students’ poor or absent “soft skills” (personality traits, social graces, communication, personal habits, friendliness). Some students were outstanding technically or academically yet demonstrated problems in these areas. *Soft skills complement hard skills.*

To me (and most employers in NE Indiana), these work behaviors should be a matter of common sense or courtesy, but it seems these require clarification:

Employees are expected to be at work if it is a day you are scheduled to be at work. If you are not able to go to work due to illness or for any reason, *call your employer.* We heard many stories about students not bothering to come in or call.

Employees are expected to be at work at an agreed upon time (usually tied to a shift start time or established business/office hours. If you will be late for any reason, again *call your employer.*

One co-op employer indicated that a student was six hours late, did not call, and arrived at 2:00 p.m. instead of 8:00 a.m., offering no explanation.

Another employer noted regular lateness of 15-20 minutes by the student with no notification. When the student was asked about this, the student did not think it was necessary to call since arrival time was within 30 minutes of start time. It does not matter how late you will be, *call your employer.*

Employees are supposed to be at work at a specific time. It does not mean being on the premises: in the parking lot, getting coffee in the kitchen, etc. It means that you are to be at your desk and working.

To clarify “lunch hour”, this means one hour from the time you leave your desk to when you return to your desk. It does not mean when you leave the parking lot or company property.

A few other employer complaints revolve around electronics use and attire. Talking on cell phones and texting on the job is not appropriate work demeanor. One student was observed leaning back in his chair with his feet on his desk, having a lengthy cell phone conversation with his girlfriend. The student did not understand why this was inappropriate because his boss’ wife called him at work. Apparently, these calls were occasional and brief such as “Can you pick up the kids?” Another student having numerous personal phone calls thought that was OK because his work was done.

When you are at work, you are being paid *to work.* Also, you do not have the same privileges as senior level employees. If you are not sure what company policies are, *ask.* If you need more work, *ask.*

Many companies have unwritten policies and rules. Determine what these are by observing your work environment. If you are the only person listening to an Ipod, then that is probably not acceptable behavior.

Look at what your co-workers are wearing and dress accordingly. Dress conservatively to be on the safe side. Low necklines, halter tops, tight pants, flip-flops, and ragged jeans continue to be problematic for students in the workplace.