



Essential Soft Skills for CX

Introduction

Research suggests that many customer experience (CX) professionals found their way into their roles through varied professional paths like marketing, customer service, market research, management consulting – to name some of the most common. They (CX Professionals) typically build their knowledge base through a combination of formal training, self-directed exploration, peer-to-peer and on-the-job learning, and knowledge transfer from working with consultants and the various service providers. Due to the work that CX teams are often responsible for, the list of *what* CX professionals need to know is a long one, encompassing both technical and interpersonal skills (Lucas, 2019).

During the past few months, living and working through the coronavirus global pandemic, we have all learnt a thing or two. For thousands of people across the globe, much of this leaning has been done through online courses, while for others, much of the where and how of the learning that has taken place is harder to define. The way we work has undergone huge changes, forcing us into different routines, new ways of connecting with colleagues, and bringing soft skills to the forefront (York, 2020).

Now more than ever, as we navigate times of uncertainty, understanding not only *what* soft-skills are needed, but understanding *why* they are of such importance, and further implementing training of these are crucial to business continuity and of course, offering good CX to customers even through all the chaos. *At home employee soft-skills training* will produce long-term positive customer experiences (Moore, 2020).

Are your employees armed with the necessary soft skills to deliver exceptional customer experiences?

What are soft skills?

Soft skills are much more than just being nice. Rather, they are the non-technical skills that relate to how you work. They include how you interact with colleagues, how you solve problems, and how you manage your work (Doyle, 2020).

It is not news that “soft skills” have been underestimated for years and that they are a real set of transferable skills that make or break an incredible worker. Furthermore, it is also not news that they should be looked at very closely and not taken for granted



when looking for a great leader, peer, or in some cases, support 'person' (Waksman, 2019).

While hard skills are teachable knowledge and abilities, such as computer coding or video editing, which are often cited in job posts and listed on your CV/Resume. Soft skills, although equally essential in the workplace, are harder to define. They comprise *"the qualities, behaviours, and attributes needed to succeed in the workplace"*. These include interpersonal skills, teamwork, time management, communication and productivity, among many, many others. While these traits are often thought to come naturally to some people—and forever elude others— they can in fact be taught and developed (York, 2020).

Studies (Nicereply, 2020) suggests that it is just as possible to learn soft skills as it is to learn to speak French. The bad news is that just like picking up a different language, picking up soft skills like negotiating, conflict management, and teamwork all **takes time and effort** (Nicereply, 2020).

If you have ever worked with someone who has a knack for calming down difficult customers over the phone, they have not picked up that skill by accident. On the contrary, they have likely spent time working with frustrated people in some capacity for many years. Perhaps they have read about it and learned tactics along the way. But the only way to improve your soft skills is to **continually use them** (Nicereply, 2020).

The Importance of Soft Skills for CX

A business cannot operate and will cease to exist without its customers, hence the fundamental need to focus on delivering great customer experience.

If you have put together a list of personal development goals lately, it may have looked something like this:

- Complete Javascript course
- Work with data team on CSAT analysis trends
- Increase CSAT score to 95%

For most of us, when we think about learning new skills for our roles, we want to pick up extra or additional hard skills. However, that might not be the only place where we should be spending our effort.

If you think of 'soft skills', you probably think of a happy smiling 'people-person', but as mentioned, soft skills are much more than just being nice. Furthermore, when it comes to exceptional CX, we need to think beyond just the customer-facing agent.



That is, even employees who have no direct interaction with customers, play a significant role in the customer's overall experience- whether it is regarding the design of a product or service, or even the development of systems that customers make use of or interact with.

The Importance of Soft Skills Training Today

There are several invaluable soft skills which have been at the forefront of many managerial discussions in recent months. **Empathy**, for instance, has been a hot topic in the customer experience industry during the pandemic and is a critical skill for customer support agents to demonstrate. Even prior to the pandemic, studies (Mongalo, 2020) suggested that many employees identified soft skills as the type of training that they believe companies need to provide their employees with most. However, despite this need, 51% of employers/ organisations do not offer soft skill training, or training that teaches essential communications skills. COVID-19 is giving businesses reason to ramp up this training quickly (among others), as customers expect compassion and empathy when they call or interact with customer service. Companies should plan to continue this type of training even after a return to 'normalcy'- whenever that may be, and whatever that may look like- as this is a skillset that will transcend the crisis (Mongalo, 2020).

Ways the Covid-19 Pandemic is Shaping the Future of CX

As the COVID-19 pandemic is keeping many of us in our homes, the future of Customer Experience has shifted as much of the consumer market has shifted to online interactions for their essential and even non-essential items. Furthermore, that has also been an increase with regard to customer service interactions that have been required during this time.

We have all quickly learnt what matters most in unprecedented times of crisis, and although we can't predict when the world will return to whatever our "new normal" looks like, there will be valuable lessons that organisations and brands can take with them to shape the future of their customer experience strategies for years to come (Mongalo, 2020).

When to Use Tech versus the Human Touch

With the spike in customer service interactions, businesses have been pushed to determine what can be answered via AI/chatbots or directed to an online help centre, versus which issues must be escalated to a person instead.

Studies (Mongalo, 2020) suggest that prior to the pandemic, three in five (59%) consumers already felt companies had lost touch with the human element of the



customer experience. While the emotional intelligence needed through these times is certainly best served by a human being, the long wait times (to get in touch with a person that is competent and actually able to assist) many are experiencing may be a by-product of systems that do not have the right balance between human and tech elements in their customer experience strategies.

Companies should take this time to analyse frequently asked questions that do not need a human being to respond, and work to improve or develop user-friendly AI chatbots and self-service pages to help consumers find their answer quickly and efficiently, and lower customer service wait times (Mongalo, 2020). Those who implement superior systems now will reap rewards in the future.

Commit to your Employees & Customers

Consumers and employees agree that customers receive better support when employees have a positive experience in the workplace (even if that workplace is in their home).

Setting a high standard for employee experience through areas such as training, not only boosts performance but also improves employee satisfaction rates, and can further help attract and retain these important workers through the crisis, while also helping retain customers in the long run (Mongalo, 2020).

Now that we have discussed what soft skills are as well as their importance in order for businesses to not only continue operating through a crisis, but thrive in times of calamity, let's take a look at a list of some of the most crucial soft skills that all businesses should be developing in their employees.

Your CX Soft-Skills May Require Some Refreshing

Lockdown, with all its challenges, has provided the perfect storm to test and develop these skills.

With there being a wealth of research surrounding the soft skills required for good CX as organisations begin to realise the value of these skills, we have put together a list of the skills that are *most* critical for all organisations, seeking to provide good CX, to hone in on.

So, let us concentrate on the soft skills that make the most impact (DeMere, 2018; DiJulius, 2019; & York, 2020):

1. **A genuine willingness to help** – Not only does a genuine willingness to help make customer support agents shine and customer success managers effective, this



instinct to solve problems and make positive impacts bleeds into other areas as well. For example, a customer success agent who becomes aware of a problem through customer feedback can begin to assist with the issue – or the agent can investigate the problem and actively work with other teams to bridge that success gap for everyone, strengthening the product or service and the company as a whole.

Genex Insights offers closed-loop recovery software which allows you to manage complaints in real time- Speak to a Genie for more information

2. **Empathy** – Customer support professionals are often trained to “show empathy” by repeating phrases that come off as insincere at best: “I understand that this can be frustrating.” Empathy phrases can be incredible tools, but only when used with discretion- so it does not sound like you are reading off of a card. However, empathy is not merely about the words you use, rather, it is the desire to really understand where someone else is coming from and what they need. That is Customer Success 101, right there: Taking the time to learn about your customer’s challenges so you can understand their needs and your product from their perspective.
3. **Communication** – Communication skills, the ability to listen carefully, explain clearly and treat kindly are must-haves in the People Skills toolkit. Unsurprisingly, digital forms of communication have come to the fore. In a recent report, 81% of companies surveyed (WillisTowersWatson, 2020) said that they have made good use of communication tools such as Zoom, Teams and WhatsApp. Social communication has also become a priority for many organisations, who have implemented informal game groups- whether it is within a particular team or interdepartmentally. This also offers a great platform for newbies to get to know their team, even while working from home.
4. **Emotional Intelligence** – Connected to empathy in that you are aware of other people’s emotions, Emotional Intelligence also means you are aware of your own. EQ and social awareness of mood, emotional strengths and weaknesses, and potential underlying motivations behind behaviour. In practice, this means knowing when to praise team members and how to constructively criticise. With customers, often it is about understanding how your actions and responses can positively affect their interactions to create memorable experiences.
5. **Integrity** – Managing expectations by honestly telling customers what they can and cannot expect builds a tremendous amount of trust and sets customers up to have positive experiences when businesses do not overpromise. Being able to set expectations also builds trust with internal teams.



6. **Problem-Solving** – The best problem-solvers are the ones who jump in as soon as they see a problem starting and have enough confidence to figure it out if a solution does not immediately present itself. Really, it is all in the attitude. You do not have to know the answer to everything to help. You just must be willing to help figure out the answer that's needed.
7. **Stress Management** – Dealing with people, even lovely co-workers, and customers – is inherently stressful to most humans. The ability to manage that stress and not take it out on those around you is one of the best 'People Skills' you can cultivate. One bad day can lose a lot of clients when you think in terms of not just the client you are speaking to, but all of the future clients they can bring in with recommendations.
8. **Listening Skills** – This is one everyone in the company, from the Founder on down, needs to have, because listening to your customers effectively, focusing on their needs and desires (instead of your needs), is how great products and companies are built. More than that, though, is the willingness to listen internally as well – to people from different departments who often have valuable insights to add.
9. **Leadership** – Once you uncover a good idea or customer feedback that requires action, it is a real skill to be able to inspire others to follow your lead (especially if those others are above you). This becomes easier when you work from the mentality that your role is to make those you lead wildly successful. Everyone wants to follow a leader who gives them what they need to do their best work and get the best results. Furthermore, leadership qualities are made up of a blend of soft skills such as decision-making, integrity, problem-solving and the ability to teach and mentor. These skills are obviously important for managers and CEOs, but employees can also show leadership, and in doing so, become more self-reliant, productive, and influential.
10. **Team Building** – Team building across departments brings leadership to a whole new level. Reaching out and forming relationships with people in other departments is something anyone can initiate. Furthermore, when you approach your co-workers with an open willingness to help and collaborate, it is less likely that you will be turned down.
11. **Adaptability**- *"The only constant in life—and in business—is change. Employees who thrive in a dynamic environment and bounce back quickly in the face of challenges are the ones who can handle anything that comes their way,"* (York, 2020)
12. **Relationship building**- In the digital transformation age, organisations that focus on human interaction and relationship-building – both internally among staff and externally with customers, clients, and vendors – will be the ones that dominate in their industries.



However, not everyone is inclined to be outgoing or to strike up conversations with people they do not know. The environment you grow up in plays a big part in how you act: If your parents were extremely outgoing, for example, you may be more likely to behave similarly.

But even if your early influencers skewed more on the shy side, relationship-building can be developed and mastered with the following:

1. Authenticity

People are highly intuitive. Your interest in others and your desire to make a connection must be authentic. If you ask questions just for the sake of appearance- for instance, just to make a sale, or to turn the conversation back to yourself, people will see through you. Not being authentic will earn you a poor reputation.

Instead of trying to manipulate people into buying products or services, show them you care. Demonstrate that you are genuinely interested in them and that you realise that they are human beings with lives, not just customers to whom you're trying to sell.

2. Curiosity

The strongest relationship-builders tend to be extremely curious. They love to learn about others and their experiences, and their curiosity extends to both familiar and unfamiliar topics. They become investigative reporters, wanting to learn as much as possible about other people's lives and passions. They genuinely enjoy learning and exploring what makes human beings tick.

3. Listening

While listening has been noted as a soft skill in its own right, it is a supplementary skill to relationship building. There is a lot more to being a good listener than simply letting another person talk. You need to be attentive and patient, make good eye contact, not interrupt, ask probing questions, and take the time to process what you heard before responding. A good listener will clarify what they heard, and engage the speaker to elaborate, and then expand on what was said.

4. Appreciation for people

Yes, no one is perfect, but everyone has unlimited potential. Human beings are incredibly complex. Everyone has a story about their life's journey – what they have had to overcome, their accomplishments, their talents, fears, regrets, and dreams. The fun is discovering these stories. When you are able to develop an appreciation of humans for their own sake, you're truly able to serve people. Your goal should not be about making money or getting customers to do what



you want, but to take care of their needs and desires as that will lead to elevated business results.

Finding a Balance

What good is having the industry's best statistician or a recruit with the highest prestige MBA if this individual does not “get” customer experience? What if our hired hotshot is difficult to get along with in the office, or not a great team-player, or has poor social skills during client on-site visits? What happens if this person is unable to navigate the political waters of the organisation?

Finding the balance between the hard and soft skills is essential. Fortunately, all is not lost since soft skills are in fact teachable, as aforementioned. When deciding on a new hire for your organisation, be sure to not only consider all the knowledge and experience that the candidate has to offer, but also the people skills that they may or may not possess. Figuring out what the culture within the organisation is or aims to be, is another guiding line for when one is looking to hire new employees. Hire the right person – the right fit for your team and your strategic objectives (corporate and team level). Soft skills are far too important to the success of your program to leave them to chance (Franz, 2013).

Conclusion

As for soft skills, not only do customers and employers alike increasingly want to see them, but during the economic fallout of Covid-19 they will be crucial to succeed in a competitive job market.

Because soft skills can be more difficult to quantify and certify, they can get neglected in personal development goals and reviews. Your annual review might focus more on the technology you have mastered and ignore improvement in patience. This imbalance makes it difficult to understand what skills are required to be successful in customer service (Nicereply, 2020). As such, ensuring a balance between hard and soft skills is critical and will be of great benefit not only to the customer's overall experience, but to that of the organisation as a whole, the culture, as well as the individual's personal development and career path.

The emotional rollercoaster of Covid-19 and lockdown have created stronger bonds with colleagues for many of us. Relationship-building has provided a way to let off steam and get to know their colleagues better.



Through an emphasis on soft-skills training, balancing tech, and the human touch, and committing to both consumers as well as the employees, brands will make it through this crisis, creating a new higher standard within their industry and winning over consumers.



References

DeMere, N. E., (2018). *Soft Skills are Real Skills*.

DiJulius, J., (2019). *Soft skills: How to master relationship-building*. The Enterprisers Project.

Franz, A., (2013). *Balancing Hard Skills and Soft Skills*. CX Journey.

Mongalo, I., (2020). *Three Ways the COVID-19 Pandemic is Shaping the Future of Customer Experience*. MarTechSeries. Marketing Technology Insights

Moore, B., (2020). *Utilizing Employee Soft-skills Home Training through the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Customer Relationship Management Institute.

Nicereply (2020). *Why Customer Service Teams Should Flex Their Soft Skill Muscles*.

Waksman, J., (2019). *Your CX Soft-Skills Might Be Stale: A Refresh*. The Startup

WillisTowersWatson., (2020). *Covid-19 Pulse Survey Report- GB and Western Europe*.

York, J., (2020). *Hard Times Demand Soft Skills*. Welcome to the Jungle.