

# Hard Skills vs Soft Skills: What the Heck's the Difference?



**STAFF DEPOT**

There's no way around it. In your job hunt, your skills matter. They tell potential employers not only what you can do, but how you can do it and even who you are. All your skills can generally be divided into two main buckets: hard skills and soft skills. And you'll need both to land your next gig. But what's the difference? And how do you show employers that you have the skills they're looking for?

## Hard Skills vs. Soft Skills

Hard skills are the skills that come from specific knowledge and are often tied to specific tasks or technologies, such as the mastery of a piece of software, the ability to drive a type of vehicle, or fluency in a foreign language. Hard skills are generally obtained through a combination of education and on-the-job training and are easier to prove you have and to quantify the results of.

Meanwhile, soft skills are less concrete, hence "soft." "Soft skills speak to your temperament, personality, and qualities such as being reliable, resourceful, organized, or professional," says Muse career coach Emily Liou, founder of Cultivatae, which helps professionals discover and land their dream jobs. Though you can definitely improve your soft skills, they're not as easy to teach or learn, and they're far harder to quantify the results of.

Compared to hard skills, you're less likely to have gained your soft skills through formal education or on-the-job training. Though both of these things can help you *build* your soft skills, you're not likely to see a class in "strong work ethic" or "being a good listener" in any course catalog.

They're also less clear cut in whether you possess them. While there are varying levels of expertise in hard skills, when it gets down to it, you either know how to use a POS (point-of-sale) system or you don't. But the definition of something like "good communicator" can not only change depending on who's evaluating it, it contains much more nuance. For example, you might struggle with presentations to large groups but be clear and concise in one-on-one conversation. Or you might be a salesperson who's great at communicating with clients and people within your team but struggle with explaining what you do to a non-sales colleague.

Some skills are on the border between soft and hard skills depending on how you use them (or will use them in your next job). For example, strong written communication skills can be soft skills if you're primarily using them to clearly exchange information with coworkers or clients. But writing would be considered a hard skill if it's a core responsibility of your job, such as if you're a copywriter, editor, communications manager, or marketer, says Muse career coach Jennifer Smith, founder of Flourish Careers. This distinction as a hard skill becomes clearer if you attach it to what you're adept at writing—like technical reports, proposals, or blog posts—since these are tasks that require a specific knowledge base, says Liou.

All job seekers (and job-havers) have to possess both soft and hard skills, but the exact combination you'll need depends on the job and company. Remember, recruiters and hiring managers aren't looking for someone who can complete tasks *or* someone they can see working with and spending a lot of time alongside: They're looking for both.

## Examples of Hard Skills

Hard skills typically include both technical skills like software programs, coding languages, or Search Engine Optimization, and task-oriented skills like forecasting, budgeting, or recruiting, Liou says. For example, if you're an accountant, tax preparation is a hard skill and so is mastery of Intuit QuickBooks. If you're a nurse, taking vitals and inserting IVs are hard skills, but so is the ability to use patient charting software. If you work in retail, knowing how to use a cash register is a hard skill. Some hard skills like Salesforce or the ability to analyze data enable you to do a wider set of tasks. The ability to speak a second language is also considered a hard skill.

Here are a few examples of hard skills employers might be looking for depending on what position they're looking to fill:

- Calendaring
- Customer Relationship Management Software (such as Salesforce)
- Data Analysis
- Data Visualization
- Editing and Proofreading
- Expense Reporting
- Forklift Driving
- Google Analytics
- POS Systems
- Profit Forecasting
- Programming Languages (like HTML, JavaScript, C++, or Python)
- QuickBooks
- Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
- Scheduling

## How to Showcase Hard Skills in Your Job Search

When possible, employers prefer to hire candidates who have certain knowledge and are familiar with the systems and processes they'll be using, especially at mid- to senior levels, Liou says. So you want to make sure that anyone who reads your application materials can quickly discern your important hard skills. What hard skills are important? That depends entirely on you and the job you're applying to.

You should always tailor your resume and cover letter for the specific job you're applying to—that is, edit your application materials so they show why you're qualified for this job. So pull up the posting for a job you'd like to submit an application for and highlight any task or technology mentioned in the description of duties or under the list of requirements. Also highlight any specific techniques or processes you'd need to know to complete these tasks. Then take note of which of these hard skills you possess and include them in your application materials. (Be honest—don't list skills you don't have!)

You should add your hard skills to your resume skills section, of course, but also talk about how you've used them in the bullet points describing your past experiences. Write about what you accomplished with your abilities and quantify your bullet points whenever possible. For example, if you're in a sales development role and looking to show off your Salesforce, prospecting, cold calling, and lead generation skills, you might say something like:

*Generated 100+ warm leads monthly through sales prospecting and cold calling and tracked using Salesforce, leading to an average of 30 meetings set per quarter*

If you gained a hard skill through a formal education program, you might also list it in your education section, and if you have a relevant [certification](#) you should include that as well. Consider including especially important skills in a resume summary at the top of the page.

Recruiters and hiring managers will often search resumes for important hard skills using an applicant tracking system (ATS), so use the same phrasing as the job posting when describing your hard skills—don't say "Asana" instead of "project management software" if a job description asks for experience using the latter.

And don't call it a day with your resume. Talk about how you've used your relevant hard skills in your cover letter. Include them in your LinkedIn profile (in your headline and about section along with your education, experience, certifications, and skills sections), Smith says. She also suggests working the most important hard skills for a given job into an elevator pitch you use during networking conversations or as an answer to common interview questions like "What are your greatest strengths?" or more specific questions like "Tell me about your experience using [software/tool]."

## Examples of Soft Skills

Soft skills are traits, qualities, and habits "related to how someone approaches work," Smith says. Are you adaptable, creative, self-motivated, and/or a good problem solver? A big subset of soft skills is interpersonal skills, or how you relate to the people around you. Are you collaborative, empathetic, and/or a good communicator?

Here are a few examples of soft skills employers might be looking for:

- Adaptability
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Conflict Management
- Critical Thinking/Problem Solving
- Curiosity
- Emotional Intelligence and Empathy
- Leadership
- Management
- Organization
- Perceptiveness
- Perseverance
- Self-Awareness
- Self-Confidence
- Time Management
- Work Ethic

## **How to Showcase Soft Skills in Your Job Search**

To figure out which soft skills are most important for a given position, you can start by highlighting any specific soft skills explicitly mentioned in the job description, just as you would for hard skills. Some employers will ask for “self starters” or “team players,” say that effective communication is a must, or otherwise indicate they’re looking for any number of soft skills.

But you should also take it a step further and think about what soft skills might make you better at doing this job based on the list of duties and the company description. If a job has a people management component, for instance, you'll want to show off your leadership and communication skills as well as your ability to listen, delegate, and give constructive feedback. Or if a company is a startup or describes itself as a "fast-paced environment," you might want to show off your adaptability and multitasking.

Because soft skills aren't as tangible, "it's important to show not tell," Liou says. Demonstrate *how* you've used your soft skills through stories and accomplishments. Instead of saying "I'm a strong team player," describe a specific time when you brought a team together to meet a common goal to really convince a hiring manager that this is true, Liou says. You might do this in a cover letter or in response to questions in an interview. For example Liou suggests saying something like this to demonstrate your empathy, emotional intelligence, leadership, and ability to motivate others:

*"At [XYZ company] morale was low due to a huge merger and a mass layoff affecting our department the week before. To lift our spirits, I took the initiative to schedule a team lunch outing and wrote a positive note for each team member to share what I loved about working with them. The recipients found this to be such a great energy booster, it encouraged everyone else on the team to write notes to each individual. Despite the layoffs, our team was able to smile and communicate more closely."*

On a resume, you should incorporate your soft skills into the bullet points that describe related achievements. This will often mean you're showing off your soft and hard skills in the same bullet points. For example, if you're trying to demonstrate your management, collaboration, organization, and communication skills you might say:

*Managed six-person cross-functional team from ideation to execution of the "Your Story" digital campaign, assigning tasks in Airtable, communicating between departments, and tracking engagement and sales via Google Analytics and Salesforce, resulting in 20,000+ new Twitter followers and 500 subscriptions*

Using the "show, don't tell" guideline, Liou suggests incorporating soft skills into the rest of your resume—like your headline, summary, and bullets—over including them in your skills section. But you can think about what makes sense for your situation. Smith says that including soft skills in your resume's skill section "is a great way to showcase your skills in a way that can match a job description and let the recruiter or hiring manager know you're perfect for the job." And though skills sections are more traditionally reserved for hard skills, "if you have space remaining, it doesn't hurt, as it can help with the applicant tracking system's keyword matches," Liou says. You can also incorporate important soft skills into your LinkedIn profile.

You need both soft and hard skills to be a well-rounded employee. "For example, a software developer who knows how to code *and* can communicate across all levels of an organization" will be more effective at their job and more appealing to a company that's hiring, Smith says. So, in your job hunt, make sure you're demonstrating *all* the abilities, qualities, and knowledge that make you a great candidate.