

# HARD TRUTHS ABOUT “SOFT SKILLS”: THE DUMBEST, “SMART” TERM IN EDUCATION

AN ARTICLE SERIES

ARTICLE 6

I'll say the quiet part out loud: denoting communication, teamwork, motivation, and problem-solving as “soft skills” is one of the dumbest things education has ever done. We took the abilities employers consistently rank as most essential, the traits that determine whether someone gets hired, promoted, or trusted to lead — and we branded them with a word that makes them sound weak, fuzzy, and optional. That's not semantics; that's sabotage.

The irony is thick. These so-called “soft skills” are anything but soft. They are HARD! Hard to teach, hard to measure, and hard to fake. ***They're also the skills that outlast every piece of technical training.*** A welding technique may evolve with new technology; a programming language may become obsolete. But knowing how to manage conflict, adapt under pressure, and earn trust? Those are permanent assets. Yet we package them in a term that sounds like fluff, and then wonder why students and parents don't take them seriously.

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## Where Did “Soft Skills’ Come From?

The term dates back to the U.S. Army in the late 1960s, when researchers tried to distinguish between technical tasks (operating weapons systems, repairing vehicles) and leadership behaviors (motivation, supervision, decision-making). The technical side became “hard” skills. Everything else? “Soft.”

What began as a tidy classification system has since calcified into a hierarchy. Having absorbed this language wholesale, society now unconsciously devalues ‘soft,’ treating it as less rigorous, less teachable, and less important. As if showing up on time, managing conflict, or earning trust are just personality traits rather than competencies that can and should be taught.

## The Bias Hidden in “Soft”

Think about the words themselves. Hard conveys strength, durability, objectivity. Soft implies weak, squishy, subjective. We've hardwired bias directly into our vocabulary. When teachers, employers, or policymakers repeat the phrase, they reinforce the message that interpersonal and professional habits are “nice to have,” but not mission-critical.

This is more than semantics. It shapes funding priorities, curriculum design, and public perception. Career & Technical Education (CTE) programs, for example, are constantly asked to justify why they spend instructional time on communication or teamwork. The bias embedded in “soft” makes it easier for skeptics to dismiss these lessons as fluff rather than foundational.

## Industry Knows Better

Ironically, employers consistently tell us the opposite. Survey after survey ranks so-called “soft skills” above technical abilities when it comes to hiring and promotion.

- The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) found communication, problem-solving, and teamwork at the top of employer wish lists.
- Deloitte's Human Capital Trends report emphasizes adaptability and collaboration as the most critical traits in a rapidly changing economy.
- The World Economic Forum ranks resilience, emotional intelligence, and creativity as top skills for the future of work.

In other words: you can be the best software developer in the world, but if you can't collaborate across teams, manage conflict, or adapt when the client changes direction, your technical expertise will only carry you so far.

Employers are not shy about this. Yet we persist in calling these skills "soft," as if they're an optional add-on to the real work.

### **Framing Matters: Students Hear the Difference**

Students are listening. When we tell them they need "soft skills," many hear: *You're lacking something weak and fuzzy that we can't measure.* That is not an inspiring message. It does not help them take pride in the competencies they're building every day — the ability to negotiate a group project, run a meeting, or deliver a presentation.



Compare that to telling a student they are developing professional skills, employability skills, durable skills, or power skills. Suddenly, the conversation changes. By moving away from deficit language, we reframe these qualities as assets—transferable strengths that are valuable in any workplace.

This is why words matter so much in education and workforce development. If we continue to undermine these competencies by calling them "soft," we risk losing student buy-in before the conversation even starts.

### **Why It Feels Like Sabotage**

Some might argue: It's just a term — don't overthink it. But if you've worked in CTE, you know how often language shapes perception. "Vocational education" became "Career & Technical Education" precisely because we needed to reframe how society viewed the pathways. "College & Career Ready" has sparked entire debates because it implies one destination has primacy over the other.

So yes, semantics can sabotage. When policymakers allocate funding, when parents steer children toward certain paths, when students decide whether to invest effort, the words we use matter.

Calling essential human competencies "soft" quietly erodes their value. It sabotages our own mission by creating a false hierarchy — technical first, human second — when the truth is that industry needs both, integrated, at full strength.

### **Thoughts from a Colleague**

As I was composing this article, I came across a LinkedIn post from a colleague, Dr. Andrea Walwaven, which shared my disdain for the term 'Soft Skills'. I have asked her to contribute to this topic:

*As I began planning WBL assignments for this year, I sat at my desk and pondered how to teach "soft skills." These are the same skills that I've assigned lessons over for the past 5 years and hadn't thought too much about how students were supposed to acquire these skills. So, what made this year any different? Maybe it's the constant requests coming from our Advisory Council members who say, "it's the soft skills that kids need and don't have." Maybe it's watching my teenage children begin to navigate the world of work and wondering, "do my own kids have these skills?" Or maybe it's me just wanting to be a better WBL Coordinator? Whatever the reason, it struck me with undeniable clarity that I haven't taught soft skills very well. At the same time, how am I or any CTE teacher supposed to teach these concepts that are inherently hardwired into a person? It also occurred to me that it may be impossible to teach said skills. How can I (or anyone) teach the concept of reliability? Or integrity? Or teamwork? Either one is reliable or they're not, right? One is either a person of integrity or they're not! That being said, it continues to fall on CTE teachers to instill these qualities in our students.*

*In pondering how to teach these skills I realized I hated the term "soft skills." Soft is a term with inherently negative connotations: easy, weak, mellow, subtle...not hard. Yet, acquiring these so-called "soft skills" like emotional intelligence, reliability, and integrity is anything but easy. If acquisition of said skills is difficult, why are we calling them "soft skills?"*

In attempting to solve this conundrum, **the first step toward finding a solution must be to rebrand "soft skills."** We need new terminology that moves away from the term "soft." Second, CTE educators must design resources to develop these skills; a roadmap on how best to instill these skills in our students. We need to work collaboratively to design new (and more effective) resources to develop these life skills. These skills aren't easily obtained because they are subjective, often innate, and require a certain level of maturity.

Okay CTE community, let's do this! It's time to make the change! Let's re-think, revise, & re-brand soft skills! I'm up for the challenge. Are you?

### Alternatives That Elevate

If "soft skills" is flawed, what should we say instead? Different sectors have tested alternatives, each with strengths:

- Professional Skills – highlights the universal expectation across industries.
- Power Skills – coined by some forward-thinking firms to flip the hierarchy, recognizing these as force multipliers.
- Employability Skills – popular in workforce boards; emphasizes job readiness.
- Durable Skills – gaining traction with groups like America Succeeds, emphasizing that communication, teamwork, and leadership persist long after specific technical skills become obsolete.
- Human Skills – centers our humanity in an age of automation.

None of these are perfect, but all are better than "soft." They communicate strength, transferability, and long-term value. They also resonate more with students and employers alike.

### A Call to Action

So where does that leave us? If we want to prepare students for tomorrow's workforce, we must start by refusing to sabotage them with yesterday's language. That means:

- Stop saying "soft skills." Let's sunset this term. Retire it from our classrooms, boardrooms, and policy papers.
- Adopt stronger alternatives. Pick a term — professional, durable, employability, power — and use it consistently.
- Reframe student narratives. Help students see these skills not as filler but as foundational to career success.
- Hold industry accountable. If employers demand these competencies, they should help fund and support their development in schools. And they should certainly be employing them through Work-Based Learning.

This is not mere wordplay. It is a battle for perception, investment, and dignity. If we persist in calling the most essential human abilities "soft," we will continue to devalue them. But if we reframe them as durable, powerful, and professional, we elevate not just the skills, but the students who carry them.

### Closing Thought

Thucydides once warned that a society separating its warriors from its scholars would have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools\*. Today, America risks a similar divide: separating technical mastery from human mastery. If we continue to call one "hard" and the other "soft," we will end up with workers who can do the task but cannot lead, innovate, or adapt. **That is sabotage, plain and simple. The fix begins with semantics.**

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**\*Butler, William F. Charles George Gordon. London: Macmillan, 1889, p. 85. (First ed. Feb 1889; reprinted Mar 1889.)**

- secondary source
- Attribution of this quote is contested. I have always heard and seen this quote attributed to Thucydides, but in my research, the earliest version I could find was from William Butler's biography of Charles George Gordon

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