

Soft Skill Development:

Ensuring success beyond the classroom



What are Soft Skills?

The importance of soft skills is recognized by both professors and administrators alike. Unfortunately, many rarely agree on what constitutes a soft skill. Some define them as people skills while others define them as communication or leadership skills. Truth be told, soft skills are a combination of all of these skills and many more. Soft skills are personal qualities and attributes that help people not only succeed, but also excel in the classroom and workplace.



So why should schools care about soft skills? Dr. Robert Rubin, Professor of Management at DePaul University's Driehaus College of Business, believes that it's important for schools to be fully invested in their assessment and development of soft skills not only because it's the hot thing to do, but because it's the right thing to do for students' careers and progression¹.

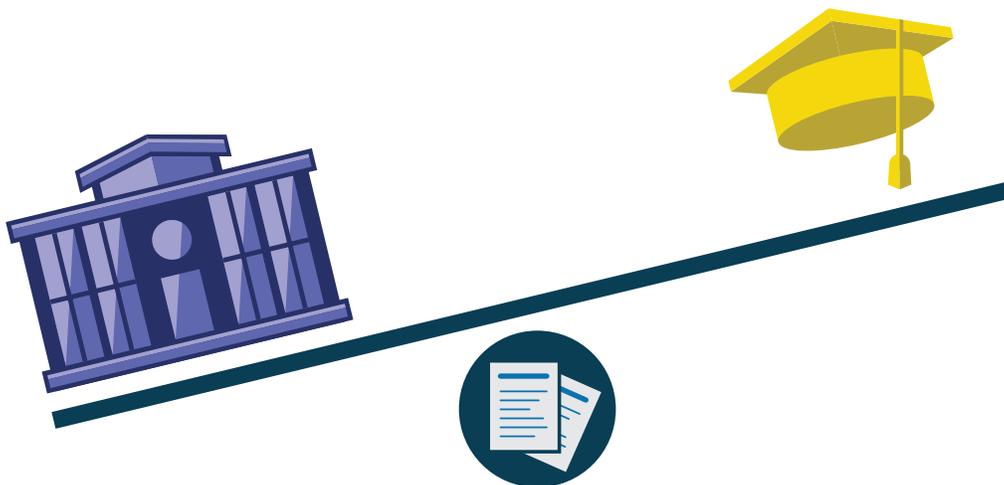
Professors and administrators have to understand that even though technical skills/hard skills get students noticed, it's these soft skills that get them promoted and ultimately lead to sustained long-term success.

The Challenges of Soft Skills Assessment and Development

Balancing the needs of schools with the needs of students.

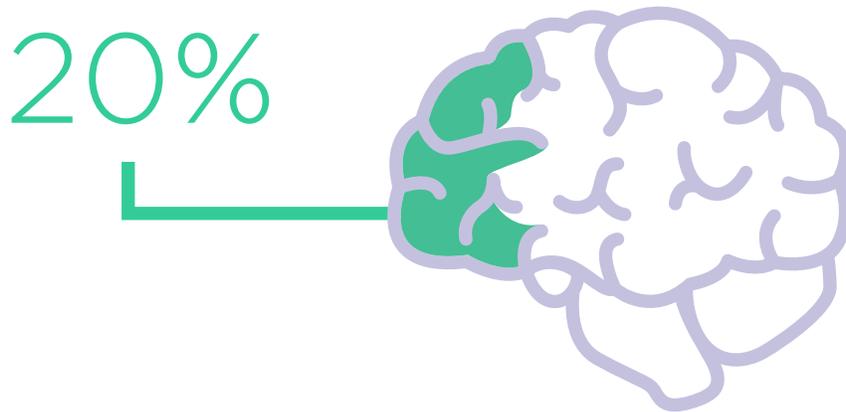
One of the main challenges business schools face when trying to effectively and efficiently assess and develop soft skills is the fundamental tension that exists as a result of balancing the needs of the school, such as providing data for accreditation purposes, and the needs of the student, such as receiving actionable developmental feedback. This challenge is born from the common practice in which schools solely focus their soft skill development efforts on easily measurable, readily available data to fulfill accreditation requirements.

The authors of a leading article in a special issue of the Journal of Management Education speak to this point by bluntly expressing, “It is not clear whether any given accredited or aspiring school is merely interested in compliance or is using assessment for real improvement in student learning².”



Bridging the knowing-doing gap

The tension mentioned above is compounded on by the ever-growing knowing-doing gap that develops in students as a result of schools being better at assessing and instilling knowledge via testing memorization rather than assessing and instilling skills via the practice of such knowledge. According to a large-scale research study, only 20% of the knowledge students acquire can be skillfully applied³.



Confusion about what constitutes soft skills and how to measure them

The confusion about what constitutes a soft skill stems from a lack of understanding and recognition of soft skill competencies that can be taught and assessed. If we take into account educators' tendency to prefer clear-cut, well-defined problems and solutions, we can see why many of them might not like the generalized definition of soft skills provided above. The difficulty recognizing teachable soft skill competencies also results in many educators developing a sentiment along the lines of, "If I cannot identify the core competencies of soft skills, then I cannot teach those skills⁴."

Popular vs. Best Practices for Soft Skill Assessment

As a result of the aforementioned tension that exists between accreditation needs and student development goals, popular methods for soft skill assessment include:

- Knowledge Tests
- Self-reflection Essays
- Case Analyses

On the other hand, best-practice methods for effective soft skill assessment and development are hands-on, experiential learning opportunities where students are given an opportunity to apply knowledge, make decisions, and engage in critical thinking without worrying about the negative consequences that typically result from making mistakes. Best-practice methods include:

- Service learning opportunities where students complete consulting projects for real-life organizations.
- Simulations where students are forced to make decisions that integrate cross functionally as they operate a simulated business.
- Peer evaluations that utilize multisource feedback to allow students to obtain different perspectives of their current skill proficiency.
- Assessment centers where participants are placed in a simulated managerial role in which they must respond to a variety of situations and stimuli.

For any experience to promote development it must meet four key criteria

-  **Require both knowing and doing**
Skills and/or the application of knowledge
-  **Foster accurate self-awareness**
Objective (not just self-reported) information
-  **Deliver an engaging and relevant experience**
Fidelity, experiential approach, and career-related
-  **Provide actionable feedback**
Specific, developmental, and application guidance

Best-practice methods specifically differentiate from popular methods because they solve the accreditation needs vs. student development tension by building in metrics that express the value of driving student development while capturing relevant data needed for accreditation purposes.

CAPSIM|inbox

CapsimInbox: A Closer Look

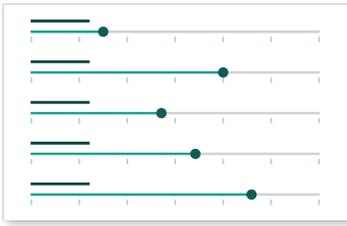
CapsimInbox encompasses the methods used in assessment centers by providing participants with a 60 minute simulation-based assessment that is designed to objectively measure the five key skills that heavily impact employability⁵. These skills are:

	Organizing	Planning and prioritizing work through the effective scheduling of people and tasks, as well as managing personal effectiveness through time management and delegation.
	Leading	Influencing others toward the achievement of goals by directing and empowering people to accomplish tasks while remaining sensitive to their professional needs.
	Problem Solving	Exhibiting sound judgment by developing an accurate understanding of situations, collecting useful information, and completing precise analysis of data in order to make effective decisions.
	Communicating	Presenting information to others in order to maximize understanding by defining the appropriate target audience, identifying core ideas, selecting the most important communication medium, and developing supportive arguments.
	Initiating	Proactively influencing events without others' direction in order to accomplish a goal or task, or to make a decision.

These skills are regularly identified by hiring organizations as those that are most valued, yet least possessed, in job candidates today.

Let's take a closer look at CapsimInbox so you get a better feel for how this soft skill assessment experience really works. Characteristics of CapsimInbox that make it ideal for soft skill assessment and development include a student self-assessment, the email inbox simulation, a feedback report, and the student-specific development plan.

Self-assessment



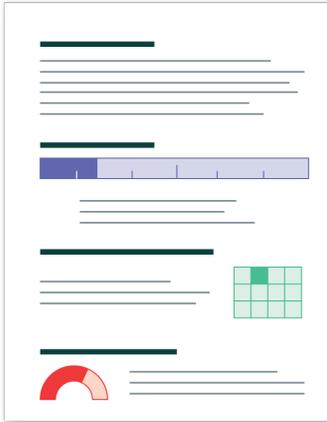
CapsimInbox guides your students through the completion of a self-assessment before they begin the inbox simulation to provide them with the self-awareness that is essential for professional development⁶. Those who are more self-aware develop more effectively and more quickly than those who are not⁷.

Inbox



Your students experience a day in the life of a manager who comes back from vacation to find their email inbox full of messages from people including direct reports, other managers, and their direct supervisor. In order to assess current skill proficiency, CapsimInbox presents your students with four general kinds of stimuli:

- **Just Read (“FYI”)** – no response required, these stimuli are intended to provide information that may or may not be relevant to other emails, messages, or files.
- **Read and Choose** – these stimuli are “self-contained” in that all of the information needed to choose among response options is contained within the email or message itself
- **Research and Choose** – these stimuli require searching for a particular piece of information beyond the focal stimulus of the email or message to effectively choose among response options
- **Synthesize and Choose** – these stimuli require searching for multiple pieces of information beyond the focal stimulus, or combining another piece of information with something in the stimulus, in order to effectively choose among response options



Feedback Report

Upon completion of the inbox simulation, your students are presented with a feedback report where they're able to obtain a clear picture of their current skills proficiency, as well as next steps needed for skill development. The feedback report is composed of:

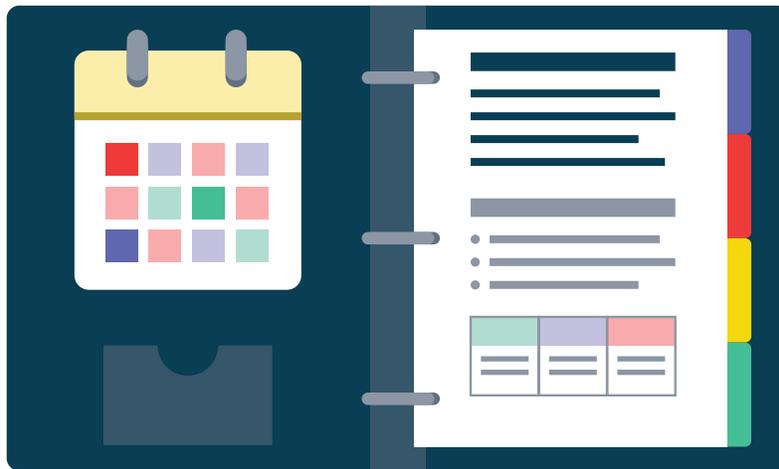
- **Overall Performance** - a percentile score that reflects the quickness and accuracy of a student compared to the total population.
- **Developmental Index** - describes a student's general skill proficiency and consistency across all five skills.
- **Self-Awareness** - an index that reflects the accuracy of the student's self-awareness in relation to the objective skill score given by CapsimInbox.
- **Individual Skill Scores** - percentile scores for a student's performance on stimuli that specifically relate to each of the five skills.
- **Developmental Tactics** - next-steps for each student to further learn and develop the five skills.



Individual Development Plan

Participants also have the opportunity to be guided through the creation of an individual development plan. By incorporating the developmental tactics with the creation of S.M.A.R.T. goals, students have actionable next-steps to improve each soft skill.

Implementation Examples



Pre-test/Post-test

For this implementation method, you would assess your students at the beginning and end of an academic term or course in order to measure their growth during a predetermined amount of time.

Providing this assessment at the beginning serves to uncover your students' current skill proficiencies, as well as areas in need of development. From your students' perspective, obtaining such feedback at an early stage gives them an opportunity to plan their curriculum and co-curricular choices in a manner that will aid their overall development.

Repeating this assessment at the end helps your students analyze their progress and determine if there are still areas where continued improvement is needed. From your perspective, results become learning-outcome assessment data that can be used for accreditation documentation.

Course-embedded

CapsimInbox's flexibility also means that professors have the option to implement the assessment as part of a specific course. With this implementation method, you have the freedom to decide factors including:

- **Time of implementation** – instruct your students to complete the assessment at the beginning, middle, or end of a course.
- **Manner of implementation** – in-class completion or as an outside homework assignment.
- **Assessment's impact on student grade** – incorporate the assessment into the course's overall grading rubric, or simply provide the assessment as an extra-credit opportunity.

Orientation

For this implementation method, you have the option to incorporate CapsimInbox as part of your students' orientation. This approach gives them a deeper understanding of their current soft skills proficiency and guides them toward future development. The data collected during this assessment can also provide an inside view and deeper understanding of your program's cohort. It serves to identify soft skill strength and weaknesses that can then impact the curriculum and other learning opportunities being offered to a particular cohort.

Adding Value to All Stakeholders

The ultimate goal of incorporating soft skills development into your curriculum is to add value to both your students and school. This is done through development, demonstration and differentiation.

Development

by using CapsimInbox to for soft skill assessment, you can arm your students with the self-awareness and actionable feedback that is needed to actively work on improving skill proficiency. You can help your students close the knowing-doing gap by giving them the opportunity to apply knowledge and practice these skills in a safe, development-oriented environment.

Demonstration

CapsimInbox provides your school with the hard metrics that are needed for accreditation documentation. This tool puts an end to the fundamental tension of trying to balance school and student needs by directly answering to both.

Differentiation

CapsimInbox creates a point of differentiation that your school can brand and market to demonstrate that you not only care about meeting requirements for accreditation, but that you're not willing to sacrifice student development to achieve it.

References

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- ⁷ Gardner, W.L., Avolio, B.J., Luthans, F., May, D.R., & Walumbwa, F. (2005) "Can you see the real me?" A self-based model of authentic leader and follower development. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16, 343-372.