



readiness redefined

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SOFT SKILLS – AN ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT FOR CAREER AND COLLEGE READINESS

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Abstract

Our educational systems are not producing qualified applicants for available jobs in our workforce. Although current levels of employment average 9% nationwide (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, November 2011), several million jobs go unfilled, across all industries, because individuals applying for these jobs simply lack the skills required for the available positions. Among those most egregiously absent qualifications employers mention are “*soft skills*,” which define how employees *perform* in their jobs.

What are these *soft skills that employers find lacking in job applicants*? Whether referred to as *attitudinal and behavioral skills, social skills, job search skills, or 21st Century skills*, one thing is clear: Our high-school, college, and workforce program graduates generally lack mastery of these skills. It is up to us, as educators, program administrators, and communities, to work together and assure all student and adult learners have a strong awareness of the *soft skills* they need to succeed in any endeavor.

The Georgia Department of Labor has begun this process through its commitment to work with private partners such as WIN Learning, Inc. to build a world-class, prepared workforce which contributes to the economic prosperity of the State. WIN Learning’s *Career-Driven Education* model comprises a series of coordinated Web-based interventions that align education with the realities of the workplace. Included among its signature interventions is the exciting WIN Soft Skills Series[®], which builds skills mastery around the behavioral, attitudinal, social, and readiness skills employers and post-secondary programs demand.

Problem and Challenges – Soft Skills

Career and college readiness has become an important and popular topic of conversation across the country as policymakers, educators, program managers, and businessmen and women look to ways to assure *all* students and transitioning adults are ready for the workplace—either directly from high-school or workforce programs, following college, or upon completion of certification and training programs. More and more, these conversations focus on the lack of *soft skills* as a measure of “readiness.”

In our increasingly technological economy, academic skills alone are not sufficient. Jobseekers must be able to solve problems, write and speak well, evaluate information critically, and work with other people, including those from other cultures. Employees need to know the importance of being on time, and showing appropriate professional attitudes and work habits. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, this skill set is “the ticket to economic upward mobility in the new economy” (Gerwertz, 2007).

Applicants’ *soft skills or their lack of them* play into every business decision. Employers look for a mastery of soft skills, whether evaluating applicants or current employees and deciding —who to hire, who to promote, or who to retain.

College admissions counselors similarly look for this mastery of soft skills in students who apply for competitive placement in college programs. How students present themselves is an important characteristic of college essays as well as raw data for a deeper analysis of academic achievement. Both employers and college counselors ask:

What kind of work ethic do these employees or students have? Are they positive and exhibiting professionalism in their interactions with peers and customers?

Can they work well in teams? Do they know how to share responsibilities and collaborate toward a common goal? Do they show concern and respect for others?

What is their level of communication? Can they express themselves verbally as well as in writing?

Can they work independently? Can they solve problems on their own, and set their own goals? Can they think critically and evaluate all components of a project or problem?

Are they motivated to come to work or school each day? Are they punctual and ready to work? Can we depend on them? Do they take initiative? Do they represent the company or the school in the best light?

When jobseekers and college applicants can’t meet these expectations, they have shown a lack of mastery of essential *soft skills and place themselves at risk in competitive situations*.

Responsibility for this lack of mastery across our current and future workforce is being placed firmly on the shoulders of education and workforce development programs. Consider the following studies, and note their conclusions:

- The *Partnership for 21st Century Skills* (including leaders from AOL/Time Warner, Apple, Cisco, Dell, and Microsoft) has called for a greater focus on the development of “21st century skills,” especially through training in softer skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity and communication (Harvard, 2011). In closing, the Partnership criticizes our “one size fits all educational model” that is so focused on college it ignores workforce realities.
- The US Department of Labor (DOL) now emphasizes direct training in soft skills, which they refer to as “Personal Effectiveness Competencies.” DOL’s Competency Model, a pyramid of skills required for employees to achieve success in the workforce, places *soft skills* firmly at its base— *interpersonal skills, integrity, professionalism, initiative, dependability, reliability, and willingness to learn* (USDOL, 2011).
- In the *Global Achievement Gap*, Tony Wagner (2008) similarly calls for the mastery of seven skills to be successful in today’s workplace— *the ability to think critically, solve problems, work in teams, be agile and adaptable, communicate clearly and concisely, analyze information effectively, and be curious and imaginative*. Wagner laments these skills remaining outside our curricula in American schools.
- A New York City-based Conference Board study of human-resource professionals reported noticeable deficiencies in new hires’ knowledge and practice of *applied work ethics*. Similar findings were reported by the National Association of Manufacturers, where most employers rated the public education system as deficient in equipping students with basic employability skills, e.g., attendance, punctuality, and a strong work ethic (Olsen, 2007).

In a series of studies of employers and workforce needs, Northwestern University researchers concluded “employers may be able to redesign their jobs around academic skill deficiencies, but not soft skills deficiencies” (Olsen, 2007). Mathematica Policy Research similarly suggests improvements in nonacademic competencies such as work habits may be at least as important as academic gains for improving later earnings and post-secondary success.

In a slight turn on the value of *soft skills*, economist and Nobel Laureate James Heckman, a strong advocate for linking education and the economy, expressed concern that schools have glossed over a key skill set, “*soft skills*,” which, as much as academic ability, may help disadvantaged students succeed. If Heckman is correct, “*We may find a better society through education*” (Blighty, 2011).

Soft skills are what employers and college counselors are calling for, and they can’t be left for learning on the job. Most applicants won’t get that opportunity.

Solutions Gleaned from the Research

Many researchers—from Georgetown University, University of Oregon, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and Harvard University to name a few—urge educators to assure that beyond specific content knowledge, we teach soft skills to students and adults as part of career readiness strategies. Teaching these skills will ameliorate the problems reported in the workplace and in college classrooms,

and help our student and adult learners build cognitive and non-cognitive abilities that command a premium.

The onus for correcting this problem lies with both educators and workforce development administrators. Both are tasked with revamping education and training programs. Both prepare their student and adult learners to meet the demands for technical skills as well as a range of intellectual, social, and life skills (Gerwertz, 2008). Some progress is being made: In programs across the country, some soft skills training has been infused into core curricula. For example,

- Students' math project evaluations include grades on interpersonal skills such as collaboration, teamwork, and group ethics, all of which are imbedded in course-content (Sacramento New Technology High School).
- Students work on portfolios during their junior year to present to local businesses in mock interviews (University Park Campus High School in Worcester).
- High-school students must show they can do an in-depth research project and present it orally to graduate (North Carolina).

Teacher professional development includes strategies for infusing soft skills into core curricular subjects (Virginia).

Perhaps one of the brightest lights of progress has been demonstrated across the State of Georgia this year when Georgia Governor Deal signed House Bill 186 into law. The legislation establishes a statewide certification in soft skills. Upon graduation, a high-school student would have both a diploma and certification in soft skills and work readiness. Perhaps even more significant, implementation is a coordinated effort with the Georgia Office of Workforce Development, Department of Education, and Board of Technical and Adult Education. Working together, these three agencies will assure all of Georgia's high-school graduates are career and college ready. Georgia has created a win-win for its high-school students and employers.

oft skills for a brief time had taken a back seat to the push for increased academic performance driven by standards. The pendulum is swinging back, however, to an emphasis on more than just technical competence. *Soft skills* are at the top of the list of requirements as we redefine "career education" to be career and college readiness. Common goals across education, the workplace, and the economy are to assure: (1) *students and transitioning adults* are prepared for success in our workplace; (2) *businesses* have well-qualified applicants for the many unfilled jobs; and (3) our *nation* can compete in an increasingly global economy.

To meet these goals: *First, we must include soft skills learning in our education and training programs, either as a stand-alone course or integrated into core curriculum. And second, presentation of these skills must be taught in the context of the workplace, rather than just as "unanchored" and "non-relevant" personal development and interpersonal skills.*

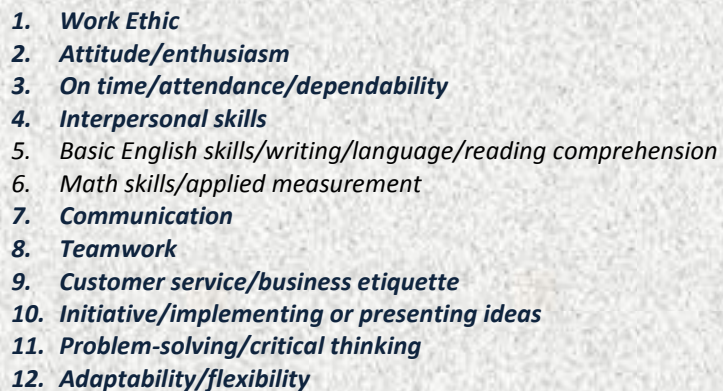
The WIN Solution

The WIN Soft Skills® curricular framework includes a wide range of attitudinal, behavioral, and applied competencies skills critical to success in today's schools and workplaces, making it relevant for workplace, training program, and college bound individuals. Addressing the solutions identified in the Basic Solution, WIN Soft Skills can stand-alone as a series of learning modules, or be integrated into workforce or academic curricula and programs. All topics addressed in the courseware are within the context of the workplace, to provide relevancy to the learning experience.

A Curricular Design Based on What Employers Want

WIN Soft Skills is the only soft skills curriculum on the market today which is driven by employer demand. All topics in the WIN Soft Skills series were the result of extensive research into hiring and retention decisions made by employers for first-time employees. In this way, WIN is uniquely positioned to support an emerging workforce.

A 2009 statewide survey of 328 business leaders across South Carolina sought to characterize the most critical employment skills and found most failures in hiring and retention stemmed from *soft skill deficiencies* (e.g., attitude, punctuality, teamwork) and not from any lack of technical capability (Nagle, 2010). When ranking the skills critical for success in the workplace, Nagle noted that *ten of the employers' top 12 were soft skills*.

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1. **Work Ethic**
 2. **Attitude/enthusiasm**
 3. **On time/attendance/dependability**
 4. **Interpersonal skills**
 5. *Basic English skills/writing/language/reading comprehension*
 6. *Math skills/applied measurement*
 7. **Communication**
 8. **Teamwork**
 9. **Customer service/business etiquette**
 10. **Initiative/implementing or presenting ideas**
 11. **Problem-solving/critical thinking**
 12. **Adaptability/flexibility**

As a single voice, the business leaders urged educators and trainers to teach these skills as a requirement for graduation or program completion. Research on soft skills including this capstone study by Nagle was embraced by WIN Learning and forms the basis for WIN's design of its Soft Skills Series.

Content Reflecting Skills for Success in College and Careers

The WIN Soft Skills Series instructionally *models* appropriate skills required for college and the workplace in the context of four modules which reflect the skills employers want:

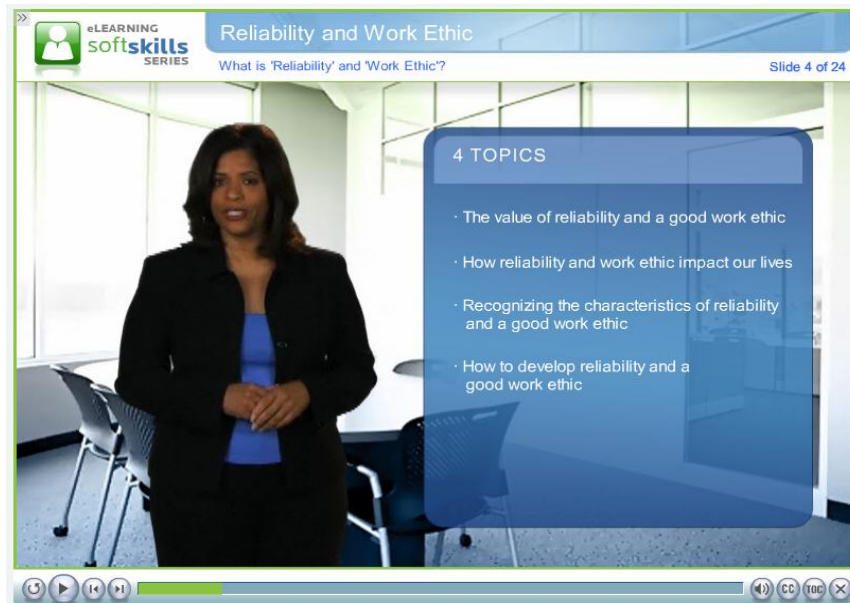
- **Module 1 - Conveying Professionalism:**
 - Describes components of a strong work ethic, including personal images conveyed to the company and to customers.
 - Explains benefits of a positive attitude and excellent customer relations.
 - Describes the importance of being on-time and dependable.
 - Discusses how motivation affects performance.
 - Offers strategies to build excellent work habits.

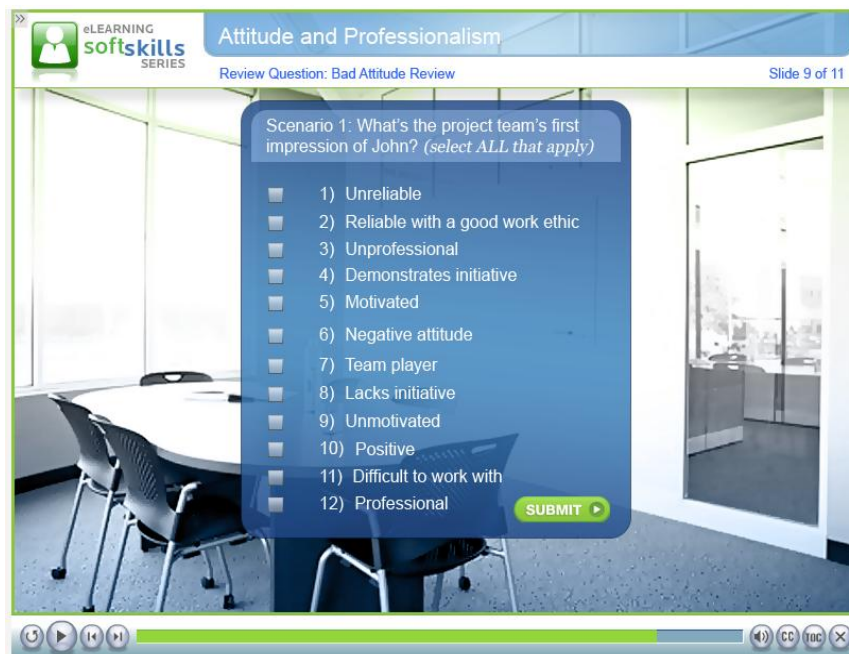
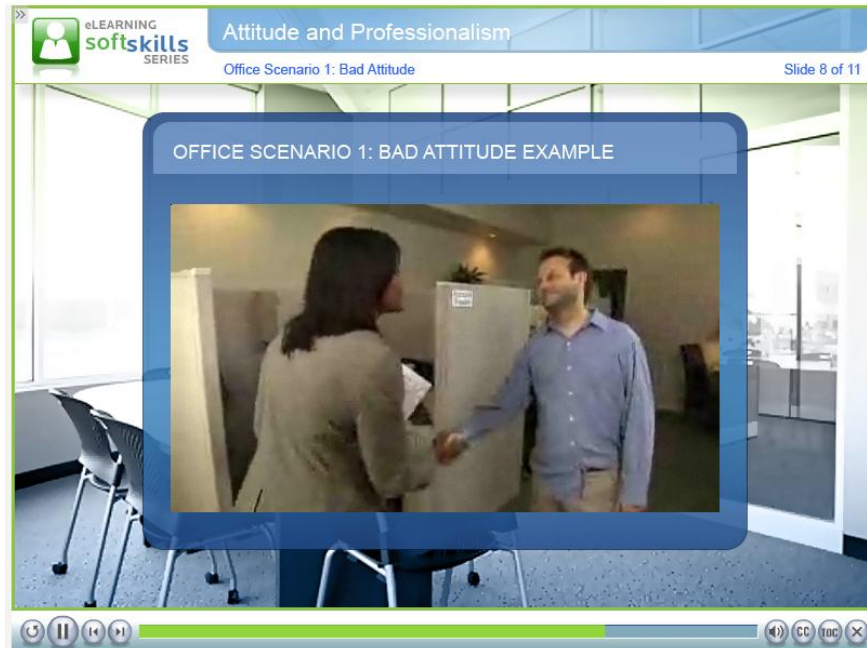
- **Module 2 - Communicating Effectively**
 - Identifies ways to improve communication and listening skills for a productive work environment.
 - Explains the importance of spoken communication to improving understanding.
 - Assesses use of communication tools—email etiquette, cell phone use, social networking.
 - Describes how to resolve conflict in the workplace.

- **Module 3 - Promoting Teamwork and Collaboration**
 - Explains how treating coworkers as team members benefits an organization.
 - Describes how diversity benefits a workplace.
 - Discusses the importance of sensitivity to individual differences.
 - Describes the benefits and challenges of teamwork and collaboration.
 - Defines leadership and its value in the workplace.

- **Module 4 - Thinking Critically and Solving Problems**
 - Describes the importance of innovation, creativity, and flexibility in the workplace.
 - Defines adversity and describes how it affects the workplace.
 - Evaluates elements of critical thinking—evidence, reasoning, and fallacies.
 - Distinguishes between inductive and deductive reasoning.
 - Applies strategies to help with creative problem-solving in the workplace.

The WIN Soft Skills Series begins with a bundled career readiness skills assessment for each student; continues with targeted instruction to build soft skills; and ends with re-assessments to determine learning outcomes. The modules all include practice activities and a capstone project to reinforce students' learning.





As the screen displays suggest, WIN’s instruction is primarily, but not entirely based on the **modeling of correct attitudes and behaviors**. WIN’s Soft Skills Series teaches those attitudes and behaviors required for young adults to thrive in education and the workplace.

Becoming the “Classroom Conduct” Instructor Right from the Start

WIN’s Soft Skills Series is **effective** in improving educational and employment outcomes; **important** for students, jobseekers, employees, and employers; **available** through online access 24/7; and **affordable**, with a single annual learner license costing less than 40% of a single hour of classroom instruction.

Most important, WIN Soft Skills Series is *all* of these things—right from the start. With WIN soft skills, schools can mold appropriate “classroom conduct” beginning in school and continuing throughout an individual’s life.

WIN Soft Skills can be classroom-based, group-based, or individualized. No matter the delivery design, all learning is tied to the workforce and driven by employers but highly applicable to the classroom. It is strongly expected that in addition to preparing students for the workforce, establishing this high level of conduct in the classroom will address many behavioral issues facing schools, such as bullying, tolerance, and respect for other students.

WIN soft skills series can be integrated into the health curriculum, the CTE curriculum, or a before- or after-school program where little instructional support may be required. When facilitated by teachers, however, the WIN Soft Skills Series can create a forum for in-class discussions of what students viewed online. These discussions can be followed by group projects in which students role-play behaviors presented in the modules. ***This flexibility in implementation enables the lessons taught to be adjusted for any school age group.***

WIN includes soft and hard copies of implementation guides, scripted facilitator guides, participant guides, and support materials (e.g., log-ins, interactive activities, worksheets, videos). With these products, WIN passes complete knowledge of the software and curriculum directly to its participant users.

Assessment of Skills Mastery

WIN has developed six rubrics to use in evaluating learners’ achievement of the skills being taught. Each rubric includes weighted criteria for measurement across a list of skills. Assessments range from “unsatisfactory” to “advanced” learning. Skill area rubrics and their criteria measures include *Written Communications (composing/rhetoric, editing, presentation, audience)*; *Professional Ethics (self-discipline, work ethic, leadership, honor and integrity)*; *Oral Communications (content and language, vocal expression/physical characteristic, structure and organization)*; *Global Awareness (local connection, global connection, source utilization)*; *Collaboration (contributions, accountability and documentation)*; and *Critical Engagement (applying, analyzing, evaluating, synthesizing)*.

Related WIN Software Interventions

Online **Career Readiness Courseware**, powered by WIN, revolutionizes how we think about career-driven educational interventions. This WIN Career-Driven Intervention curriculum is a *breakthrough strategy* for career readiness. Well-developed, Web-based Initial Skills Reviews assure precise skills-based placements allowing learners to be challenged, but not frustrated by work for which they are not yet ready. Once entered into their correct learning level, users progress at their own pace. Post-tests at the conclusion of each module and certificates of completion tell students they have succeeded in mastering the material.

Designed for concept mastery, WIN's Career Readiness Courseware (CRC) includes 41 competency-based, Internet-delivered learning modules, and more than 120 hours of skills remediation per skill, totaling 1,200 hours of curriculum in ten academic and foundational skill topic areas:



WIN's Career Readiness Courseware also provides a portal through which users at all levels can earn *Career Readiness Certificates*. To date, more than one million Career Readiness Certificates have been issued nationwide, with WIN recognized as *the national leader in preparing jobseekers to earn any of the 26 nationally recognized Career Readiness Certificates*. Several examples illustrate the excellent outcomes achieved with this curriculum:

- An excellent example of this is best demonstrated through outcomes from the Fayette Institute of Technology (FIT) in West Virginia. After only one semester using the WIN Career Readiness Courseware, the Fayette Institute of Technology (FIT, WV) had *100% of its 2010 graduating class employed or accepted into a post-secondary program*.
- The GED Options Program—an alternative credit recovery program utilizing the WIN courseware for GED preparation showed far greater success for participants when compared with learners outside the program who did not use the Career Readiness Courseware.
- The Genesee Job Corps program (Flint, MI) showed significantly higher pass rates on the Test of Basic Education (TABE) over those students who did not master the courseware or used it infrequently.
- The statewide Florida Ready to Work program is built around WIN Career Readiness Courseware and Career Readiness Certificate. Since 2007, more than 67,000 Credentials were awarded to high-school students alone, and more than 110,000 for all groups. Those achieving credentials had higher success in finding employment and earned higher salaries.

WIN Learning, Inc.

Since its inception in 1996, WIN has been an innovator in matching education to workforce requirements, and strengthening partnerships between schools and communities to place students firmly and successfully in the 21st century workforce. With its integrated product solutions, WIN has remained at the forefront in providing courseware for *applied* academic and foundational workplace skills development, including soft skills. In addition to the WIN Soft Skills Series and WIN Career Readiness Courseware, WIN provides two other effective interventions bringing together education, the workforce, and the economy.

- WIN Strategic Compass® is a Web-based tool to capture current education, workforce, and economic trend data, thereby creating job market profiles which contribute to reality-based, individualized career pathways for student and adult learners.
- WIN myStrategic Compass® is a public access, electronic counseling tool providing hands-on opportunities for in-depth career exploration while also engaged in school and/or community-based learning, training, and re-entry programs.

WIN's vision is that *every community uses the WIN Career-Driven Education interventions with all student and adult learners to develop an engaged, prepared workforce that can recruit, retain, and grow jobs leading to individual and economic prosperity.* WIN is the only company offering a complete solution with a supplemental curriculum focused on foundational skills for career and college readiness.

In just 15 years, WIN has become the national leader in career readiness initiatives, with more than 10 million WIN learners worldwide.

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