



# New Expectations, New Skills

What companies **Need** from Professionals Today.

By Virginia LaGrossa and Suzanne Saxe  
Advance Consulting, Inc.

**TIMES ARE CHANGING! AS WE MOVE TO A MORE KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY**, there is a concern that employees won't have the specialized technical skills needed to keep American companies competitive. Although technical and specialized skills are important, they are only one part of the equation. In a knowledge-based organization, the way in which people work together and exchange expertise will become critical to the success of an organization.

Regardless of their chosen profession, the employees of the future no longer will consider technical expertise "value added." Employees will have to provide value beyond knowledge--meaning that they will have to be willing and able to play a variety of roles within an organization, both regularly and effectively.

A recent survey by a Chamber of Commerce agrees. In the first Skills That Work survey, leading business executives were asked what they considered were the greatest challenges facing their companies. The overwhelming answer was "the availability of a prepared workforce." They were quick to point out "prepared" was defined broadly. Not only were they looking for highly skilled, technical employees, but they put an equal amount of emphasis on interpersonal skills, viewed as critical to the success of the employee in the organization.

In the survey, company executives were asked to fill in the blank for the following question: "If my employees could just learn how to \_\_\_\_\_"

Here are a few of the responses:

- Identify tasks that do not add value to the end result that the customer sees.
- Manage and plan their work and their time, and feel confident to make their own decisions (self-management skills).
- Communicate effectively with one another, management, clients and customers--specifically the ability to listen and articulate complex information.
- Work as a team member--exercising leadership, negotiation skills and the ability to teach others.
- Become more goal oriented and motivated to learn new skills that would make them more valuable to the company.
- Enjoy their job and approach it with a positive attitude.
- Expand their vision of why their job is important and better understand the big picture.

*In the traditional economy, success was determined by how well you performed a particular function. Successful employees in today's workplace must move effectively between a variety of technical functions, as well as manage a broad range of situations and human interactions.*

Overall, employers said they wanted a conscientious workforce. They felt employees weren't willing to spend the time to get into the details, to feel accountable for results or set high expectations and goals for themselves. Business executives also expressed concern regarding the lack of personal qualities in employees, specifically mentioning responsibility, self-esteem, integrity and honesty. Employers want employees to think outside of their particular job function, essentially thinking of themselves as "business partners."

Thinking skills such as decision-making, reasoning and problem solving, and personal qualities that help build trust and commitment in the workplace always have been important, but as we move into an information-oriented economy, they are absolutely critical. Traditionally, many employers believed these skills to be innate--either you have them or you don't. It now appears that these skills can be learned by changing the thinking patterns of employees.

In order to be successful, employees must learn how to expand their thinking to play a variety of roles within the organization. The first step is to break down the narrow focus and boundaries of "what is my job" and replace it with getting people to see themselves as part of the bigger picture. In the traditional economy, success was determined by how well you performed a particular function. Successful employees in today's workplace must move effectively between a variety of technical functions, as well as manage a broad range of situations and human interactions.

The critical roles employees must master within the organization in order to be successful in the "new economy" are as follows:

- **Specialized professional**  
A technical or functional expert--competent in developing solutions and formulating recommendations, able to relate technical or complex information so that it is valuable to others, respected for technical capabilities; encourages others to "buy in" to ideas.
- **Facilitator**  
Manages discussions effectively, demonstrates flexibility, ensures that all parties are in agreement before moving on, has a clear understanding of the agreed upon steps to be taken while focusing on keeping the project moving.
- **Problem solver**  
Takes the time to thoroughly understand and effectively analyze the overall project, proactively identifies potential problems, explores and proposes several options for solutions, and develops a process for problem solving.
- **Coach**  
Knows how to motivate and work effectively with others while helping them develop skills and knowledge--creating an environment where feedback is important, has keen awareness of one's own personal reaction to situations before responding and consistently asks for ideas on working effectively with others.

- **Administrator**  
Demonstrates the ability to manage time, deadlines and budgets simultaneously, provides a variety of written summaries including roles, responsibilities and resources required for those involved in the project, has a clear understanding of policies and procedures involved for utilizing resources and consistently monitors and reports project status.
- **Influencer**  
Recommendations are usually acted upon, able to persuade when faced with differing opinions, presents options and trade-offs, able to obtain what is necessary to do the job, focuses on win-win outcomes during negotiations.
- **Strategist**  
Considers the overall big picture, strategically involves key stakeholders in the process, has a clear understanding of the client's business strategies and needs as well as objectives and concerns.
- **Partner**  
Ability to create a high level of trust and commitment in working relationships; ensures that everyone has a clear, well defined common goal; has a keen, objective sense of awareness as to whether expectations are being met; values open communication as a fundamental building block for all relationships.



**The Consultative Roles**

Turning these roles into viable work philosophies may be a little tricky and takes some practice. For these roles to help you succeed in the workplace, not only do you have to master the characteristics associated with each, but you must have the ability to confidently identify and apply the appropriate role to a variety of ever-changing workplace scenarios. Ideally, the roles should work together, complementing each other, as you move easily, quickly and effectively between the various roles to achieve maximum results.

While all the roles are critical, the partnering role is the most important and is the foundation for success in today's work environment. Playing the role of the "partner" in workplace situations has a lot to do with motivation and attitude. The role of partner is what ties all the other roles together and allows you to achieve optimum results while simultaneously building trust and commitment.

You can't be successful if your own success is your primary concern. Your clients, customers and co-workers need to know how they will benefit from your work. When you play the role of partner, that becomes apparent. Mastering the role of partner will make you a valuable part of any team, company or relationship.

Partnering is a philosophy or way of working that is pervasive in all aspects of one's behavior. It is easy to play the role of the partner at the beginning of the project when things are in the planning stages--when you aren't feeling attacked or blamed. Partnering becomes much more difficult as the project progresses and you run into problems that create dynamic situations--the client may be unhappy with the progress or results, the implementation phase becomes riddled with problems, etc.

The irony is that these are the exact moments when the partnering attitude can be the most valuable. As opposed to becoming adversarial with clients and coworkers, true partnering requires you to remain reflective, rather than reactive--instead of kicking into the defense mode, kick into the partnering mode. One way to do this is to focus on your goals for this particular interaction and the overall project.

Furthermore, partnering is contagious. If you exude a partnering attitude, chances are, your clients and co-workers will follow your lead. Before long, you will be viewed as someone who behaves like a partner, no matter the dynamics of the interaction.

The role of the 21st century worker will no longer be well defined, which could lead to some confusion in the workplace. But it will not be as confusing as one might think. The workforce of the new economy actually will be more productive than the one associated with the traditional work environment because business goals will be more clearly defined and communicated. As competition increases, accountability and responsibility will heighten and the single most important issue for all employees will be how they contribute to the overall success of the company--which will serve as the beacon for all workplace interactions.

*Originally published as "Workplace Success in the New Millennium" in Careers and the MBA,  
Volume 30, No. 2.*

*Published by Crimson & Brown Associates*

---

For more information about this article or how Advance Consulting, Inc. can assist you in developing your people as consultants and business partners, contact us at [advanceinfo@advanceconsulting.com](mailto:advanceinfo@advanceconsulting.com) or 415.927.5401.