

. Highlight Your Soft Skills in the Job Interview [Hcareers Newsletter | May 08, 2008]

In the Hospitality Industry, "Soft Skills" Can Be Core Competencies

The term "soft skills" is a catch-all phrase that is often used to describe an employee's non-technical skills and abilities. Attributes such as being able to solve problems, working well in a team environment, and motivating others are the kind of characteristics that are usually grouped into this category.

In the unique context of the hospitality industry, especially in front-line of front-of-the-house roles, soft skills are often the foundation of excellent customer service. Although most hospitality industry jobs involve some level of technical skill, many hiring managers in the field see the technical aspect of the job as being of secondary importance.

Technical skills can be taught, and although soft skills can often be improved, there is really no substitute for a candidate who has a natural flair for things like exemplary customer care, a team-oriented outlook, and effective communication skills. In fact, according to Bonnie J. Knutson, professor in the School of Hospitality Business at the Eli Broad College of Business at Michigan State University, managers in the hospitality industry often make a point of "hiring the attitude," rather than focusing solely on a candidate's experience or technical skill set.

Which Soft Skills Attract Attention in the Hospitality Industry?

From a broad perspective, hiring managers in the hospitality industry are likely to be impressed by the same type of soft skills that are in demand in every industry. Simply put, candidates who convincingly display characteristics such as leadership, teamwork, conflict management, problem solving, creativity, and communication skills are always going to have a sizable edge in the hiring process.

However, from an industry-specific standpoint, soft skills that enhance a candidate's ability to provide excellent customer service will probably be most attractive to a hiring manager. Service quality is enormously important in the hospitality industry; in fact, recent market research ranks it among the top three factors that customers consider when selecting a hotel or restaurant.

Keeping this in mind, you should emphasize soft skills that relate directly to your ability to provide excellent guest service. If you have past experiences that have helped you cultivate flexibility, diplomacy, personal effectiveness, negotiation, persuasion, empathy, decision-making, and other similar attributes, make it your mission to get these points across in your interview.

Hard-Sell Your Soft Skills: An Action Plan for Your Interview

Hospitality industry hiring managers keep an eye out for candidates with a broad repertoire of guest-oriented soft skills. But how can you distinguish yourself from all of the other applicants making the same claims? Here are some guidelines that will help you stand out from the pack.

1. Try To Avoid Using Tired Interview Cliches

Don't be just another generic candidate who describes himself as an outgoing team player with excellent communication skills. Even if it's true, try to find a more vivid, memorable way to describe your soft skills. Experts recommend using this three-step process:

- a) Briefly describe the situation
- b) Tell what you did specifically
- c) Report on the positive result or outcome

2. Show, Don't Tell

Do you remember that eighth grade English teacher who was always telling you to do this in your essays? Well, this approach applies to interviews, as well. Rather than just reeling off a long list of soft skills, use anecdotes and past experiences that clearly demonstrate your diplomacy, flexibility, or communication capabilities.

3. You Can't Be Everything to Everyone

Focus on the four or five soft skills you're best at and really emphasize them in your interview. Find a way to relate each of these skills to the position you're applying for, as well as the company's needs. For example, if you're applying for a host position, you could emphasize your problem solving ability, creativity, and communication skills, all of which come in handy when dealing with a long line of hungry guests during the Friday night rush.

4. Walk the Talk

Make sure that you're actually demonstrating the soft skills you're laying claim to. For example, if you have chosen to emphasize your

excellent communication skills, make sure you can follow through on your promises by speaking articulately and being a good listener in the interview.

In some industries, soft skills are thought of as being less important than technical knowledge. In the hospitality industry, however, the reverse is often true, especially for front-line positions that involve ongoing interaction with customers. Don't underestimate the importance of your soft skills in your search for a hospitality industry job.