Soft Skills Hard Facts: an Unwritten Symphony
Penelope Tobin

A world where many disparate voices are suddenly able to communicate is like an orchestra improvising its way through an unwritten symphony; we are all players, responsible for the sound, and will either produce an unbearable cacophony as we resist change, closing our ears, playing ever more loudly within our own section, from our own outmoded scores; or we will listen closely and each find a way to weave our different strands into something of new beauty.

If we are section leaders, we must listen especially keenly...

At the turn of the century I was playing and composing jazz, living between London and New York, working in both cities and beyond, promoting a CD, and undertaking an intensive touring schedule. Who I am now, and what I do today would have been inconceivable to me then. It has been an unplanned evolution; a unique story of transformation that, along with millions of other similar stories, can be unpicked to reveal something of our shared experience: the impact of rapid, global change on the ways we all live, learn and work. And within this story are some common questions that are being put into the spotlight, urging our attention:

- what new skills do we now need to learn and to teach for our well-being?
- what internal and external barriers do we have to face and overcome?
- where do we look for guidance as traditional structures topple?
- what does leadership now mean and what are the attributes of a new leader?

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The story I’d like to share has two main themes: the first is around “the artist’s way of working”, specifically, the soft skills that a working artist of any discipline has to develop as the ‘support team’ to their artistry.

Soft skills are the traits and abilities of attitude and behaviour rather than of knowledge or technical aptitude
Tobin (2006)

As I began my metamorphosis, emerging from the cocoon of the artist’s life, I realised that the artist’s way of working had shifted, within a comparatively short space of time, from an oddity to an aspiration. Without artists changing anything about their modus operandi, the world had changed around them, and their practices were moving from maverick to mainstream. A skill set that had historically been dismissed by the majority was now sought after, and perceived as lacking in all sectors.

[Employers are] continually asking for a workforce rich in creativity, communication skills and cultural understanding
Knell (2007)

However, the link between artists and this skill set seemed little recognised and consequently remains undervalued by artists and the wider society; in what specific ways, I wondered, are artists’ wider skills now relevant, and how can more be extracted from this underused resource for the benefit of all?

Working artists hone soft skills as a matter of survival, and the skills that they develop over and above their artistry are the skills we all now need …not just artists, or the self-employed, but those working at every level within organisations of all stripes.

These skills are now seen as crucial factors for social and economic development.
These so-called soft skills have been too long ignored or badly dealt with by education
Robinson (2001)
Artists have always navigated uncertain career paths and income streams; in the past, the rest of society looked on suspiciously from their more secure position - the predictable career plan or job for life.

_The dice are loaded in favor of the organization_
Whyte (1956)

But now job security is becoming a thing of days gone by, and careers and organisations are rapidly being completely reinvented...many of the careers that today’s children can look forward to do not yet exist. Uncertainty has moved from the edges of society into the core of normality, and consequently meanings defined by a past age blur around the edges.

_The dice are loaded in favor of the individual_
Pink (2001)

We are all increasingly unlikely to be employees in the traditional sense of working for one company, within one discrete sphere, and receiving and responding to instructions from one employer. The trend is moving determinedly in a direction more akin to the uncertain life of the artist, demanding a radical rethink of ‘leadership’, to include those who are leading in new ways. For example, 70% of the UK’s small business market now comprises ‘alterpreneurs’ – the term coined by the author Dan Pink to describe the rising class of micro-business owners who are more interested in their quality of life than in growing their business, and who run approximately 2 million micro businesses. This significant sector embodies a new and growing approach to leadership – where individuals taking the helm need to be equipped with the skills that allow them to manage themselves in unpredictable circumstances, to forge untested routes, to lead in a far more diffuse setting than ever before, to maintain diverse relationships with people they may never meet, and to nurture the things they care about – bottom line and beyond.

_Pioneering business people see business in a new light. Of course they must compete – but in nearly every case the number and variety of their competitive relationships is trifling compared with their cooperative relationships_
Petzinger (1999)

While these small businesses may seem a world away from the monolithic power, influence, and bureaucracy of corporations and public sector institutions, distinct echoes reverberate between them. With the rapid movement from one project to another, one initiative to another, one job to another, one career to another, there comes the need for all of us to have skills that weren’t asked of most ‘workers’ in the past. But these are skills familiar to every working artist, nowhere more so than in the sphere of communication: collaborating effectively with different people and teams, networking, building and sustaining an ebb and flow of working relationships, and switching rapidly between different roles...in the morning to be an employee and in the afternoon an employer; one day to be this project’s manager, the next day to be that project’s novice.

And leaders sometimes lead, and sometimes dissolve into the background. Think ‘jazz combo’, where each player takes a solo, takes their turn at being centre stage and driving the direction of the music, relying on the others to listen closely to them, to respond to what they are ‘saying’, to support them as they state their case, to help them all make the total more than the sum of the parts; and then stepping back and allowing another to take the lead from them. This manoeuvring from one role to another has to be done with ease and enjoyment, to allow the ‘music’ to come through, to be an effective performance...and to minimise personal stress! Admittedly, “you don’t go on stage to be comfortable!” as a manager once barked at me, apparently to quell my first night nerves...but if you take on the role of leader, you need to be sure that you actually enjoy leading.

_Today’s visionary leaders echo the most ancient wisdom: To be happy for life, you must first try to know yourself_
Csikszentmihalyi (2003)
As change propels us forward we have to adopt, like the artist, the habit of continuous ‘practice’ - to constantly refine, remember, learn, and re-learn.

*Knowledge becomes obsolete incredibly fast. The continuing professional education of adults will be the number one industry in the next 30 years*

Peter Drucker

No-one can depend upon any corporation or institution to nurture them; in a tumultuous time each individual is responsible for equipping themselves to negotiate their own journey, and to undertake it successfully requires adaptability, self-motivation, creativity, and a lust for learning. In the past, such attributes were principally the domain of leaders – or artists – and in others seen not merely as surplus to requirements, but as potentially disruptive and therefore actively discouraged; this is the premise upon which much of our current education system was designed. Can this design sustain the growth of future leaders?

*In a society that is increasingly fragmented, in which the only genuinely successful people are independent, self-reliant, confident, and individualistic, the products of school ...are irrelevant*

Gatto (2000)

While we may struggle in this country with deeply unsatisfactory literacy and numeracy rates, it is soft skills that employers are actually crying out for. The National Employers Skills Survey (2003) reported that employers regard shortages in soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and customer focus and responsiveness, as far more crucial than ‘hard’ or technical skills (Watkins 2004). These skills are found wanting in all sectors, at every level, including graduates at entry level. Those who are just leaving our education system may have technical or knowledge skills, but are lacking the skills they need to thrive in today's world.

*Employers have long been concerned that they are not getting recruits with the skills they want*


To negotiate this unmapped terrain successfully we increasingly need the ability to be self-determining, to sculpt our own lives, to act from intention rather than instruction; but this is a state that, as a rule, is considered to be out of most people’s grasp. Maslow’s ‘hierarchy of needs’ asserts that people have to get basic needs met before they can progress, and that only 2% of the general population reaches the highest level of “self-actualisation” – that is, only this small proportion have the desire for self-fulfilment, for realising their potential or, as with Rogers’ term “people of tomorrow”, for living fully in the moment. An aspect of the artist’s skill-set which has brought them much disfavour in the past is this very ability to prioritise self-actualisation above all other needs; in today's climate, however, their degree of drive and motivation is a sought-after attribute.

And so too is the central tool of every artist's trade - creativity. A word that a few years ago induced nothing more than a wry smile from the worlds of academia, business and politics is now attended to by a plethora of texts, policies and programmes – although, it must be noted, still rarely informed by artists’ insights, despite it being their core skill.

*Stripped of any special significance by a generation of bureaucrats, civil servants, managers and politicians, lazily used as political margarine to spread approvingly and inclusively over any activity with a non-material element to it, the word creative has become almost unusable*

Tusa J (2003)
As my personal metamorphosis progressed along this first stream of thought, and the relevance of artists’ soft skills to the 21st century world of work became clear, the second theme emerged as a consideration of how artists acquire these skills, and whether their ways of learning are transferable.

In reflecting on my career I was aware that when artists did not make the most of their creative abilities, it was generally not due to lack of artistic capability or knowledge, but rather because internal and external barriers were blocking their soft skills...their ‘support team’...their ‘enablers’...the skills that determine ‘how we do whatever we do’.

Soft skills are inherent human capabilities; they are competencies that exist within everyone to some level, and can be used to this extent without requiring special knowledge, aptitude, talent or intelligence. If a skill is not being used it is not because it does not exist and needs to be input, it is because it is blocked by barriers that need to be recognised and removed, so it can be accessed. While barriers remain, they both restrict the emergence of existent capacity, and form a resistance to further growth.

Soft skills give us the tools with which to take stock of our situation, take control of our development, and take responsibility for our future

By identifying barriers and breaking them down, we can mine into a far richer vein of ability and extract more of its capacity, bringing rewards for individuals, employers, and society.

Most education and training has yet to factor this in, working instead almost entirely on the deficit model – we are empty vessels into which the external source of expertise inputs what it thinks we need into us, and measures this according to its own criteria.

The model may be appropriate in some circumstances, but another solution certainly needs to be adopted when developing soft skills. Consider how artists acquire soft skills and how this approach compares with other learning and teaching methods; here we see three distinctive features that occur simultaneously:

1) Collateral Learning: artists learn soft skills through another subject, as a by-product
2) Experiential Learning: artists learn soft skills over an indeterminate timeframe, according to individualised need, through experience
3) Intrinsic Motivation: artists are motivated to learn soft skills not because of an external directive but because they choose to, fully aware that these skills move them closer to goals that inspire them

If soft skills are human competencies available to all, if the process of developing these skills has been demonstrated successfully, if the skills are increasingly recognised as critical determinants of our individual and combined growth and wellbeing, and if all sectors report worryingly low levels in relation both to need and to our global competitors, a big ‘best question’ becomes apparent: why do all sectors – including education and training – continue to sideline soft skills and treat them as non-essential, ‘only if we have time’ add-ons? This is the soft skills paradox – a place I was led to by the two themes of my story.
Creativity provides us with a good example of the soft skills paradox in action. Creativity is promoted as a vital attribute in today’s rapidly changing world – and few would disagree. However, the elemental forces that drive creativity are the antithesis to the stability that most individuals and organisations are comfortable with. So, while we may express agreement as to the value of creativity, we may well simultaneously be harbouring very different thoughts about it.

*While most people would see ‘creative’ as a good thing, many have less positive associations with the idea of uncertainty [which for some suggests] powerlessness, lack of control, even weakness”  
Claxton (2004)*

If an underlying concern remains hidden it will produce a skewed response. For example, if an individual has an internal dialogue saying creativity is undesirable, unpredictable, time-consuming, or ‘I’m no good at it’, and such fears remain unresolved, the dialogue will become a barrier to change; if the individual takes part in an event to promote creative approaches they may convey an impression that leaves others in no doubt of their enthusiasm and commitment to an ongoing process. But after the event they will, to everyone’s surprise, do nothing more.

Any initiative that tries to drive change by promoting only its benefits will fail unless it is balanced by a frank examination of associated concerns and potential pitfalls; if these are not addressed and removed they will inevitably become barriers.

The key to authentic change, as opposed to apparent change, is ‘internal attribution’. Change experts agree that people do not resist their own ideas; to take ownership of an idea we need to locate our intrinsic motivation, our own reasons to change, not someone else’s reasons – we undergo real change not because we are told to, or we feel we ‘should’, but because we want to...this produces energy through self-motivation; new leaders foster environments that produce this fuel.

If we are leading a change agenda we need to both acknowledge, respect and address the barriers that may turn someone off change, and also identify the reasons why they would be turned on to change, using these as dual levers to present a coherent, persuasive message, anticipating and allaying doubts that may otherwise lurk and corrode the process.

Education policy on creativity exemplifies the mixed message behind the soft skills paradox: on the one hand creativity is lauded as central to innovation, critical thinking, enterprise and other crucial 21st century needs; on the other hand the system of targets and qualifications that is creeping into every pocket of learning is narrow, bureaucratic, and outcome driven.

*What we are now doing is creating an industrial culture in our schools, one whose values are brittle and whose conception of what’s important narrow... we exacerbate the importance of extrinsic rewards by creating policies that encourage children to become point collectors”*  
Eisner (2002)

As metamorphosis moved me towards an irrevocable transformation (and yes, ultimately it was joyful!), the two themes came together: ‘the artist’s way of working’ (*big lesson: soft skills as collateral learning*) plus ‘breaking barriers to potential’ (*big lesson: accessing not inputting*). These themes combined to spawn Barrier Breakers, a charitable organisation I established for “inspiring human development to create positive change”.

In response to the ‘soft skills paradox’ Barrier Breakers Methodology (BBM) was created, as a mechanism through which to break down barriers, access innate ability, develop soft skills, and measure progress. BBM is a non-deficit model, comprising 5 Barrier Profiles, which are the ‘lenses’ through which we can see the effect of barriers on the entire range of soft skills. By
viewing any activity through each of the lenses we can determine either how the activity is either being blocked by barriers, or how the activity is beneficial in breaking barriers down. Over the last five years BBM has found its form through extensive research, development and piloting, has been applied to a variety of education, training and organisational development contexts. In 2007 it received national validation from Performance Hub, as the most innovative evaluation method supporting 3rd sector performance, and also became the recipient of support from the Adventure Capital Fund to enable its rollout nationwide later this year.

When BBM set out on its mission to address the soft skills paradox, the skills were made the starting point and BBM was designed around them. This may sound obvious...and it is! But the soft skills paradox is largely due to a mismatch between soft skills’ characteristics – elusive, context dependent, open ended, and fluid – and the staunchly quantitative evaluation mechanisms into which they’ve been fed. Soft skills are far too slippery to be captured by any remodelled 20th century approach, so attempts to force the ‘round peg’ of soft skills into the ‘square hole’ of approved assessment approaches have met with the success one might expect if, for example, imagination was weighed on a set of scales. With no effective mechanism to manage them, soft skills have so far either been relegated to a low / no priority, or avoided entirely.

BBM encourages change which is authen-tic, not box-tic; it provides a mechanism through which robust data can be gathered on soft skills development without destroying the essential nature of soft skills; it proves that these crucial skills can be managed effectively and it aims to persuade those driving policy to set soft skills centre stage.

This chapter of my personal metamorphosis story is complete, but the endeavour to change the face of the skills agenda is just beginning...

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All upcoming education and skills policy will be driven by Lord Leitch’s review of the UK’s long-term skills needs (Leitch 2006); its impact will be far-reaching, throughout all education, training and employment. The only mention of soft skills in this extensive report is that “employers in the survey felt that soft skills were lacking (particularly team working and customer handling skills, each of which were mentioned as lacking in one half of all workers lacking proficiency)”. This glimpse into a deep fracture in the skills base provokes no further comment, beyond recognition that attitudes towards learning must change and “changing culture will be a generational task, but a change in behaviour can start today”. Soft skills are the skills of behaviour; they have a profound effect upon motivation to change, willingness to engage, and enthusiasm for learning - all of which are prerequisites to the success of the Leitch vision. But they are completely absent from the strategy. Instead, the discussion of how to effect this change is minimal, a generalised intention to persuade through campaigns (such as the LSC’s ‘In Our Hands’), and if the response to these is inadequate, then compliance will be forced through legislation.

While the new skills challenges we face are being recognised, the new solutions needed to tackle them are not – serving up the same recipe in greater quantity will not satisfy a hungry new customer with entirely different tastes. Soft skills are central tenets of the 21st century working life that we are adapting to, and that today’s children will soon be entering – essential to entrepreneurship, innovation, intercultural communication, teamwork, adaptability, leadership and more – yet current skills policy, at every level, is entirely predicated on assumptions that ignore their critical influence. The larger skills agenda will only be successful if the soft skills issue moves beyond lip service and rhetoric, and into policy and action.

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I start with the premise that the function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers
Ralph Nader

To be an entrepreneur, to establish any business, is to be a leader – and anyone in that position knows that to succeed they must - now more than ever - be perpetual students...always questioning and constantly curious; the new breed of leaders recognise this of themselves, and encourage it in others:

- They provide both the means of learning and the opportunities that encourage others to recognise and overcome their own barriers, while actively identifying and overcoming their own
- They ask and invite questions
- They understand that if a situation makes an individual uncomfortable, it is not merely an inhospitable environment for change, but is entirely counter productive, as the individual will actively seek to avoid change, either through direct or indirect means

[Students feel deeply appreciative] when they are simply understood – not evaluated, not judged, simply understood from their own point of view, not the teacher’s
Rogers (1967)

- They eliminate blame and suspend judgement to allow exploration, self-discovery, and open communication
- They use a language of change that is genuinely inclusive – non-hierarchical, non-judgemental, and respectful

You cannot be a leader, and ask other people to follow you, unless you know how to follow, too.
Sam Rayburn

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In the dancer’s constant practice; the solo pianist’s courage; the poet’s struggle for the beautiful word; the artist’s determined vision...in all this we see how soft skills carry the artistry – without that support the artistry, no matter how brilliant, comes to nothing.

Leadership is the ability to rise to the occasion
Schein (2000)

Soft skills are the support system that everyone needs in a world where we are all now expected to ‘take a solo’. Today’s world is asking individuals and organisations to rise to the demands of rapid change, and to be transformed by unplanned evolutions. To do this successfully we need the best support system possible, and we must offer that to the next generations.

[Building on Schein’s definition] we can conclude that the leader’s real work is to create conditions that allow leaders - that is everybody who rises to the occasion – to shift the place from which their organisation or system operates

The skills needed by leaders and entrepreneurs in our newly shaped world have changed – these ‘soft skills’ have not always been in favour; they have been belittled and disregarded; they have been considered irrelevant to business; their fluid characteristics have been squeezed to nothing in the fist of more weighty, tangible considerations. But things are changing;
attributes that we all may once have seen as weaknesses must now be brought out and polished up until they dazzle.

And with these skills as our gleaming instruments of change we can make a different kind of music - sharing our individual themes, hearing how they sound to us now, exploring how we might weave them into a symphony of new beauty rather than unbearable cacophony. And we can watch how leaders, learners, and teachers, questions, ideas, and solutions emerge from ourselves and others, when given the opportunity and the soft skills to make more of who we already are. Not so much to change, but to metamorphosise.

We need fewer techies and more poets in our systems design shop. And more artists...and more jazz musicians...and more dancers...period

(Or, rather, consider that an action item)

Peters (2003)

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What Are Soft Skills?

Soft skill and hard skill both are equally important or may be a 60-40 relationship. Soft skills when combined with hard skills they together strengthens the person. It not only benefits in striving for advancements in jobs or career level but also nourishes your mind with peace and harmony.

Hard skills can help in completing work better whereas soft skill helps in slyly making your way to the top of the hierarchy. Further, one should have an idea of using both hard and soft skill properly in the time of need. Thus, both skills are equal companion on the road towards peace and success.

Soft Skills: An Exceptional Skillset:

Soft skills — a blend of interpersonal savvy, communication skills, and social intelligence — are in high demand by employers today, according to Burning Glass Technologies. Even though a lot of people agree that soft skills are important, the word “soft” when compared to “hard” suggests of them being significantly easier. These so-called “soft skills” in fact are some of the most challenging skills that people need to master. These skills allow people to work effectively in teams, to communicate well, and to think in ways that lead to innovation and creativity. Soft skills are basically job skills that, rarely get the attention that they truly deserve, but that does not mean that they are not valuable in the workplace.