

In the Finance and Accounting World, Hard Times Ahead for Those without Soft Skills

“Communication has traditionally not been a necessary skill for finance and accounting professionals, and that tradition runs deep.”—Dawn Fay, Metro manager, Robert Half International

In the past, many organizations have overlooked the need for their “numbers people” to interact well with others. But a 2006 survey of 1,400 chief financial officers indicates a clear and growing need for communication skills in the finance and accounting workforce. CFOs were asked: “Compared to five years ago, do you think that verbal, written, and interpersonal skills have become more or less important for accounting and finance professionals?”

CFO responses:

Much more important	43%
Somewhat more important	32%
No change	20%
Somewhat less important	2%
Much less important	1%
Don't know	2%

The results of the survey draw a clear picture of emerging challenges for accounting and finance professionals. While more and more firms are calling for and expecting employees with highly developed communication skills, fewer than 40 percent of the CFOs surveyed report offering any soft skills or communications training to their staffs. While today's business environment demands more and more proficiency in communication and interpersonal skills, employees may well find themselves on their own when trying to develop those skills.

Human resource professionals can play a central role in closing the skill gap and better equipping finance and accounting professionals to face changing organizational expectations.

Here are a few suggested initiatives:

- Research and pass along information on local and regional educational institutions that offer programs in communications, public relations, and public speaking.
- Recommend professional organizations, books, and web sites supporting soft skills and communications learning.
- Construct a set of tips in the form of a job aid for easy access and daily reference.
- If training interventions have not improved the professional's skills, consider engaging a coach who can assist the individual on a one-on-one basis.
- Consider connecting the individual to a mentor who successfully demonstrates strong communication skills.
- Review your performance management system to be sure you are measuring both technical and nontechnical skills such as communication.

- Encourage the individual's direct manager to meet monthly or quarterly to review progress and engage in coaching discussions.

Adapted from Michael Laff, "Wanted: CFOs with Communication Skills," Training and Development Magazine, December 2006.