

Why Durable Skills Make the Difference

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In the late 1960s, the U.S. Army coined the term *soft skills*. The practical application of this action was to distinguish interpersonal skills from technical skills, such as those required to operate machinery. The soft skills were important to jobs, but they primarily focused on group effectiveness, leadership, and decision making. The Army trained people in soft skills, which were hard to quantify, through role-playing that acted out hypothetical scenarios and reflection exercises, from which soldiers could learn how to connect their people skills to professional development.

This wasn't the first time that soft skills in organizational settings were put under the microscope. A series of studies conducted in the 1920s and 1930s at the Hawthorne Works factory sought to understand worker productivity. It was determined that workers' productivity increased when their interactions were being formally observed, an outcome known as the "Hawthorne effect."

These studies led to the human relations movement, which was a management theory emphasizing employee satisfaction and engagement. This movement was led by Elton Mayo, a psychologist, industrial researcher, and organizational theorist. Considered a pioneer in the human relations approach to organizations, he studied workers as individuals with unique social skills that contributed to organizational success, career advancement, and employee performance.

Fast forward to 2026, where the role of humans in human resources seems to be in flux. Rapid technological change in the form of artificial intelligence is transforming entire industries and jobs to the extent that some familiar brands and long-standing career options might not exist in the near future. Training for the jobs of tomorrow, when no one actually knows what they will be, is an exercise in futility.

A pivotal shift is under way, and the need for what was previously labeled "soft skills" has been elevated as the path forward. Having evolved from so-called soft or transferable skills into durable skills that can be rigorously tested and measured using behavioral assessments and psychometric tools, they hold the key to professional success.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DURABLE SKILLS

The practice of hiring for skills has been on the rise in recent years. Yet, assessing meaningful, durable skills that are foundational and transferable requires new tools and modern solutions that enable candidates and employers to connect in new ways. For example, when most people think of "skills assessments," they think of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator—a test that's been around for years. Although it focuses on personality, it does not reliably predict how well a candidate will perform in a specific work environment when compared with more evidence-based personality models. In an ever-changing job market, durable skills such as adaptability, communication, and critical thinking can future-proof an organization. Even the company behind the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator advises against using it for hiring decisions, as it cannot effectively consider potential and possibilities—that is, the relevance of long-lasting skills.

There are two types of skills: durable skills, also known as soft skills, and perishable skills, or hard skills. What are some examples of durable skills? Broadly categorized, they fall into two areas: working with others and managing oneself. **Here are a few of these skills:**

Communication: listening actively, using written and oral communication, practicing diplomacy, and receiving/delivering feedback

Decision making: analyzing information and using logical reasoning to arrive at solutions to complex situations

Managing others: making ethical decisions, building and maintaining relationships, and balancing grit with heart

Personal management: setting goals, being accountable, and managing commitments

Adaptability and resilience: being able to adjust when circumstances change and challenges arise, including fresh thinking and innovation

Clearly stated, the difference between durable skills and



perishable skills that previously drove so many talent acquisition and talent management decisions comes down to adaptability in this changing world of work. Perishable skills can include technical proficiencies such as COBOL programming or procedural know-how. These kinds of skills can expire quickly. We've all heard stories about the rise and fall of different programming languages, where demand wanes as new technologies come into play. While essential for a period of time, these perishable or hard skills don't necessarily prepare workers for the future of work, whatever that might be.

Ironically, we have all been learning durable skills since we were children. In elementary school, play and classroom learning encourage collaboration (building blocks or cleaning up the playground), leadership (line leader or class monitor), and adaptability (learning how to handle disappointment). More complex interactions ensue as we move through middle school and high school, where students collaborate on producing yearbooks, present and debate ideas in the classroom, and manage their own schedules.

As automation reshapes roles, durable skills data reveals which human capabilities endure. This is especially relevant in this time of artificial intelligence. Much has been written about AI eliminating humans in the workplace. While AI has proven capable of automating routine tasks, it has been unable to replicate human skills such as leadership and problem solving. Durable skills keep organizations together, acting as the glue that fuels progress.

The role of durable skills and the employees that possess them was noted in a November 2025 *Wall Street Journal* article ("It's Too Early to Write Off College Degrees"). It discussed how certain employees demonstrate behaviors that are difficult to measure. These same employees exert influence through their durable skills, encouraging others while being hidden in plain sight. Able to build trust, reduce friction, and facilitate collaboration, they are exactly the employees to be rewarded and retained. Still, without the right tools to assess the depth of their contributions, they might be flight risks. Sadly, in many

organizations, the contributions of those with exceptional durable skills don't receive the same spotlight as those of a top sales performer.

At Plum, we predict that providing candidates and employees with opportunities that put a premium on the power of durable skills will differentiate employers of choice. We already know that jobs are changing, and that AI will continue to transform the workplace. We don't know exactly when these changes, or how many of them, will occur. However, we do know that durable skills ensure a path to organizational success that benefits everyone. **Consider the following:**

- According to researchers at Gallup, investments in employee development can increase company profitability by at least 11%.
- The durable skill of analytical thinking is ranked by the World Economic Forum as a core competency valued by more companies than any other skill, with its demand projected to grow by an astounding 72% over the next five years.
- NACE's Job Outlook 2025 survey found that almost 90% of employers are looking for students who've demonstrated problem-solving abilities.
- Research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation, and Stanford Research Center has found that well-developed soft skills are responsible for 85% of job success, according to the National Soft Skills Association.

Durable skills are increasingly defined as a combination of cognitive abilities—how individuals use their knowledge, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—and character-based skills such as fortitude, a growth mindset, and leadership. Once seen as "nice to haves," durable skills are foundational competencies that function as critical determinants of individual, team, and organizational resilience. Given their ability to withstand change regardless of circumstances, durable skills last long after the latest technological evolution takes place.

For leaders, durable skills are the building blocks. For some organizations, instilling these skills in leaders might necessitate realigning talent strategies, investing in learning and development, and adapting organizational culture. Those companies committed to long-term success know this is an investment worth making. [AQ](#)

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