

INDUSTRY INSIGHTS

Closing the skills gap in early career professionals

How employee communication, expressiveness and self-knowing contribute to business goals.

By: **Tim Harnett**

According to the latest LinkedIn global trends report, a rising focus on soft skills is one of the biggest trends affecting the workplace.¹ At the same time, there's a gap between the skills employers need and those employees have:² How to reconcile this? Drew Jacobs, director of learning for Ariel, advocates for a holistic approach to development through presence training — essentially, developing the ability to connect authentically with the hearts and minds of others. Presence encapsulates how you show up and the impression that you leave, and can be developed through a prescribed model.

Developing presence helps people express and share their ideas in an impactful way. Jacobs believes it's crucial to start building this skill at the beginning of your career. "Individuals need to show up in a genuine way and communicate from an authentic place to understand what they stand for," she says. "Ideally, this should be nurtured early in an employee's career, to avoid creating bad habits that will hinder success later."

Turning this soft skill into a priority

When people think of presence, they might picture dramatic, charismatic characters. But Jacobs argues presence is more than just being captivating. "We all have presence but use it in different ways — even if we're unaware of it," Jacobs says. "You don't have to be larger than life to make a powerful impression on others. But you do have to have an awareness of the impact you have both in and out of the room."

How can people develop these skills? Jacobs says the first step is recognizing the need for improved communication: "It's important to acknowledge that communication skills are just as crucial as technical skills. Too often, soft skills are placed in

the 'nice to have' bucket, when really, soft skills help get work done and improve the bottom line just as much as tactical talent."

"When something goes wrong at work, people tend to immediately look to the work itself to find the issue. In reality, it usually boils down to people not showing up in the right way or not conveying a message clearly. Organizations lose opportunities because people just don't know how to communicate appropriately."

The PRES model

Present: Able to be completely in the moment and flexible enough to handle the unexpected.

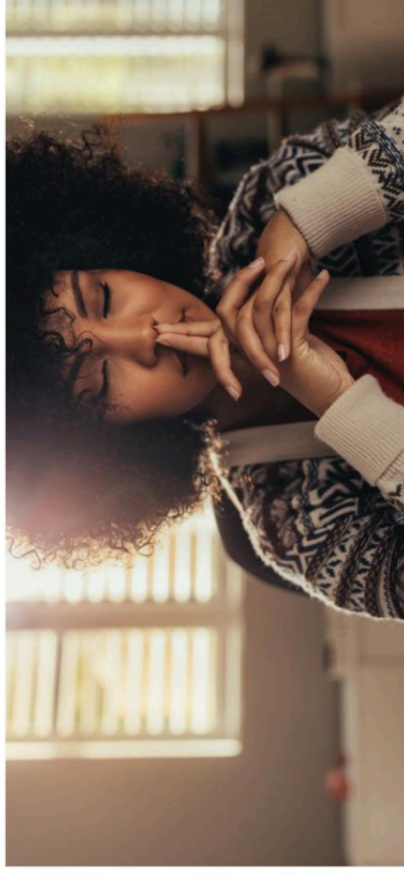
Reaching out: Able to build relationships through empathy, listening and authentic connection.

Expressive: Able to express feelings and emotions appropriately using words, voice, body and face to deliver one congruent message.

Self-knowing: Able to accept yourself, to be authentic, to reflect your values in your decisions and actions.

Want to improve work quality? Start with relationships

"Not having genuine relationships with others leads to true challenges at work," Jacobs says. A lack of honest connections can prevent creative ideas from being heard. Taking relationships from transactional to more natural builds trust, leads to robust collaboration and brings more depth to the quality of work. These relationships are especially critical for early career professionals, creating



bonds that nurture employee engagement and potentially smooth work processes.

Communication is essential in today's world

Presence training can increase awareness of proper cross-cultural communication. "We're connecting with people cross-culturally more than ever," Jacobs says. "People need to be both authentic and respectful in their communications — that's essential for today's globally connected world. Employees should always be aware of their audience and the impression they want to leave on people."

And we can leave an impression in an instant. Humans judge others in a split second, even if they don't know it. That may sound daunting, but Jacobs says, "What you can control is how you show up and connect with others. But people need to take these skills seriously first. Organizations should recognize that soft skills demand as much of their attention as technical ones, if not more. Without presence

and self-awareness, your employees might communicate without being understood, which causes work processes to stumble."

Why you need to invest now

Presence is a critical managerial skill, which is why high potentials should develop theirs early. "Often we promote people with great tactical skills, and then they struggle because they don't have the tools to effectively lead teams," Jacobs says. "Leaders need presence to engage, manage relationships and communicate complex ideas in a clear and concise way." Organizations that develop presence in early career employees will build a stronger position for the future, with a well-rounded talent pipeline of leaders who can effectively communicate their vision for what lies ahead.

To learn more about how Ariel can improve presence among your entry-level employees, visit www.arielgroup.com.



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¹ LinkedIn, 2019 Global Talent Trends Report.

² Payscale (2017). These five soft skills will get you hired.