

# MONTHLY MENTOR

“A” Player human capital leadership by  
HUNT EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Volume 15, Issue 11



*For twenty six years, the Monthly Mentor has been a value added service to encourage our employer and candidate clients in their Personal & Professional Development.*



## Interpersonal Skills & Big Data: A New Era of Relationships

*by Joe Hunt*

In some ways, we've known this all along: Human interactions rule our lives. In a data-driven world where technological advances increasingly provide solutions and perform jobs, our interpersonal and social skills can increase or diminish our value.

In fact, our jobs hinge on how well we interact with others. Yet many of us—professionals, employees and managers alike—undervalue our social skills. This is not an option in an era of dwindling job opportunities.

In my opinion, we aren't judged so much anymore by what we accomplish but by who we are as human beings. And I'd love to hear your opinion on these ideas.



This is not the first time I've emphasized that our success derives from how well we can work in groups. CEOs recognize that teams are more productive, creative and valuable than individual workers—as long as team members work cohesively.

Some experts note there's a growing demand for relationship workers: people who are socially astute, no matter the field. As neuroscientist Michael S. Gazzaniga aptly states:

*“Natural selection mandated us to be in groups in order to survive...that is how we are built. Without our alliances and coalitions we die. It was true...for early humans. It is still true for us.”*

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## The Critical Need for Teams

CEOs are turning to teams to solve increasingly intricate problems. The most effective groups include people with strong social skills.

Wanting to work with other people is one of the healthier aspects of human nature. We rely on human interactions to:

- Tell our stories and hear others' stories
- Brainstorm new ideas and create new products/services
- Share our feelings and learn to appreciate other points of view
- Connect on a deeply human level through our physical senses
- Form coalitions and alliances
- Negotiate agreements

Even if a computer spits out the right words and makes the right decisions, we want to follow human leaders. We need to look into someone's eyes.

## What We Don't Want Computers to Do

We must first identify the skills we want other humans to perform, regardless of a computer's prowess. Most of these tasks involve projects or areas for which people are held accountable. For example, computers have shown they're superior to juries when evaluating criminal evidence. But there's a social necessity for humans to be accountable for life-and-death decisions.

Humans are also critical to organizational life because priorities continually shift. It takes a human touch to redefine problems and goals.

## Priority Skills for the Future

The Towers Watson consulting firm and Oxford Economics research firm asked employers which skills they'll need most over the next five years. Employers' top priorities include:

- Relationship-building
- Teaming
- Co-creativity and brainstorming
- Cultural sensitivity and diversity management

These are right-brain social skills. It's important to note that survey respondents did not cite business acumen, analysis or other left-brain thinking skills.



Those who will be hired, retained and capable of flourishing in almost all professions are the ones skilled at forming emotional bonds, persuading others and making judgments.



## How Technology Is Changing Us

We tend to over-rely on tech tools to communicate quickly and efficiently. We text or email instead of calling or meeting face-to-face. This does, indeed, save time, but it's impossible for us to pick up on nonverbal cues.

If you cannot face another person, you're deprived of noticing facial expressions, as well as subtle shifts in vocal tone, eye movement, posture, physical distance and other social signals. Spotting these cues quickly is crucial to responding appropriately.

In one social experiment, scientists gathered a group of sixth-graders in a camp for five days, without any screen access: no computers, tablets, cellphones, music players, games or TV. They wanted to measure the children's ability to recognize nonverbal emotional cues in others. After five days of solely face-to-face interaction, the students had become far more emotionally insightful.

American adults (ages 16 to 45) with access to at least two devices report 7.5 hours of screen time daily. Indonesians spend 9 hours a day and Filipinos just a few minutes less, so this is not an affluence-related phenomenon. Imagine what this does to our social sensitivity.

## Nothing Beats Face-to-Face Contact

With digital communication, the quality of real human connection is weak. When two people talk face-to-face, their brains synchronize. This doesn't happen when they're back-to-back, so our faces are vital communication tools. Video communication provides only weak synchronization.

Reading one another and conversational turn-taking determine how well a group performs a wide range of tasks. Teams that have met face-to-face at least once can thereafter work well virtually. Greater challenges occur with teams who have never met in person.

## Our Most Crucial Human Skill

Empathy is the foundation for sociability. At its core, it's the ability to discern what another person is thinking and feeling, as well as respond appropriately. Employing highly empathic workers has numerous advantages, including better customer relations, team cohesiveness and a more positive working environment.

Research confirms:

- Empathic salespeople and negotiators are more successful.
- Waiters who display empathy earn nearly 20 percent more in tips.
- Debt collectors with empathy skills recover twice as much money.
- Empathic doctors make more accurate diagnoses and fewer errors, incur lower costs and are sued less.



Each of us can learn to recognize the social signals we produce and perceive. We have innate empathic skills, but they weaken if we don't use them.

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