

# 3 Essential Professional Skills

## COMPETENCY

Tom Zimmerman, December 9, 2023



### Ask Your Mentor

Jot down a few follow-up questions or observations as you read. For example:

1. For the mentor - which professional skills or habits have helped you the most?
2. Won't the job description explain which skills are most important?
3. I know lots of people who text their work; aren't email and live meetings a dying art?
4. If you get the work done, does anyone really care about your hours?

### Three Immutable Work Habits

Let's start here:

1. Show up every day.
2. Get your work done correctly, according to, or exceeding expectations.
3. Be on time. To the office, to meetings, to calls and to meet deadlines.

These are the must-have work habits for any profession. They quickly differentiate you from people who do not. Done consistently, these three habits alone may lead to an increase in responsibility, even promotions.

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Of course, there's more to this than meets the eye. Anyone can model a veneer of positive work habits with self-discipline and repetition. "Showing up" in our work-from-home era means to be notably present and accessible as expected. In person or online. Ready to work. Answer your email. Take and return phone calls or texts in real time. Resolve customer needs as they occur. Turn on video during your team meeting. "Let us not become weary in doing good." Galatians 6:9.

I suppose you could say that getting work done "on time," includes getting it done "just in time." The bare essential. But why not develop a habit of getting your work done "earlier than needed," whenever possible? Proactive initiative gets noticed and improves your availability for more challenging work and responsibility. Both can lead to monetary rewards.

Obviously, your completed work must be correct. Work product delivered fast with errors is net negative. On-time with exceptional quality and creative innovation is much better. But what is exceptional? Defining that for each work situation is itself a professional skill. Ask for clarity of expectations.

I would often ask a manager or project leader, "What will a successful outcome look like to you?" Helping others to define or specify outcomes - especially for complex projects - can make life easier for both of you.

## **Essential skills for the young professional**

Communication, problem solving, and collaboration show up as essential skills on almost every recruiter's list.

### **Communication Skills**

Many young professionals are surprised - even daunted by the increased volume of interactive communication, especially verbal. Professional communication involves listening (and reading), comprehending, and acting (responding, acknowledging, speaking, doing). Granted, you might text in partial phrases and acronyms to accomplish some small portion of your tasks. But texting must play a much lesser role in your professional life. You might think of it as the lower rung of communication value,

*Texting:* Real time replies and answers. Usually bland, short, and easily misunderstood. Despite emoji's it's difficult to accurately gauge emotional cues.

Risks: Your interest level may appear as low priority, casual or not fully engaged.

Email: Fast, suitable for professional format. Email is more adaptable to complete sentences and informative replies. Done thoughtfully, you can inject more of your personality. Like most communication, email requires a balance of get-to-the-point and provide-context for the messaging exchange. It's a skill.

Risks: Meandering reply "chains" and "copy all" messaging is counterproductive.

Audio call: Adds personal relationship cues from demeanor and tone. Tension, warmth, anger, humor, urgency are more easily conveyed in vocal context. Many professionals say, "Texts and emails were taking too long. I can just resolve all this with a 5 minute phone call."

Risks: People are busy and don't always pick up, delaying your progress. Audio messages should leave a clear request for specific follow-up. It's a skill!

Video call: Especially in our work-from-home era, video is an improvement over audio-only. It adds nuance and context for body language and facial expression. This means that relationship building is also enhanced beyond audio and text.

Risks: It's easy to get caught multi-tasking (losing interest). It also requires some semblance of professional appearance appropriate to your office culture.

In person: In-person conversations open us to almost all elements of good communication. Context, emotion, nuance. They are much better adapted to relationship building. Healthy professional relationships are essential to the natural give and take of collaborative work outcomes.

Risks: In person meetings can also be intimidating for young professionals. Personalities and collaborative styles are more evident, for the good and the bad. If this is a development need for you, try "practicing" in low risk settings. Coffee breaks and lunch were traditional ways for co-workers to chat and get to know each other. If you work from home or travel, it may take some additional effort and creativity. Give yourself time to develop, it's a skill.

Proverbs 18:13

"To answer before listening— that is folly and shame."

No matter the communication setting, actively listen to and parse information as it's coming at you. Take notes! Be on the lookout for key words like, "deadline, process, metrics, outcomes, audience, targets, etc." Speak up (message back) and seek clarity. "Just to be sure, can you please confirm those measures and deadlines?" Co-workers will appreciate your attention to detail. And waiting to claim that you did not understand instructions after a deadline has passed is unprofessional. Complex, multi-step instructions may even require that you request a follow-up meeting or document to repeat and confirm all that you've heard.

Similarly, when it's you that is communicating information, reverse the process. Break complex thoughts into more manageable portions. Ask if you've been understood. Offer to clear up any confusion. Keep up with communication as projects and programs progress. "Are we still on track? Do you have any questions? Have I provided the outcomes you expect?" Be present and accessible with informative communication. Speak and write in sentences with nouns, verbs, and punctuation. It's so much more than a thumbs-up text! And it's a skill.

### **Problem Solving and Critical Thinking Skills**

Good communication keeps you informed and engaged. It helps you to effectively report and participate. Even with that, your collective assignments and tasks could overwhelm you. That is why leaders value professionals who are active problem solvers.

"All things must be done properly and in an orderly manner." 1 Corinthians 14:40

"For God is not a God of confusion, but a God of peace." 1 Corinthians 14:33

Two problem solving challenges confront most professionals.

1. How do I effectively navigate longer term, multi-part projects, and
  2. How do I clear away short term interruptions that threaten progress on those long term deliverables?
- There are entire books and apps written to address these, but here are a few rules of thumb.

Choose a digital calendar and reminder system and commit to it - technology is your best friend for time management. Add deadlines, progress dates, research time, meetings, etc. to your calendars with digital reminders. Many companies have project management software and will train you to use it. Be rigorous to update, and then trust your schedule. It's a skill.

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Do the math - break down complex assignments into manageable portions.

Luke 14:28

"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?"

Start at the end date of your assignments. Do the math to determine how many hours or days you'll need for each task. Work backwards to give these smaller, interim portions their own end dates.

Seek to understand business and leadership priorities, keep them current and reconcile.

Regularly evaluate all your tasks and re-prioritize the near term deadlines. New business demands (your boss) will often upend your current priorities. Of course! Determine which work can be done in parallel vs. tasks that must be done in a sequential order. Keep moving forward. This is a skill.

Give your leaders early notice and smart alternatives to resolve a business problem.

Sooner or later you are going to spot an impending train wreck for scheduling or outcomes. Someone was late with information you needed. Your boss underestimated what resources were needed. Solve and resolve as much as you are empowered to take on, but don't wait too long. Think through what could be done, "if." If there were more time, more resources, more funding, etc.

Report problems with neutral facts and be ready to answer the question, "What do you recommend?"

1 Peter 3:15

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

### **Collaboration (Teamwork)**

Teamwork. It's what Jesus exemplified among his followers. The Bible often encourages us to work together toward our common goal.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

"Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls, one can help the other up.

Build strong work relationships. Enjoy the fellowship and be kind to your co-workers. Embrace the idea that collaboration will often reveal the best combination of diverse solutions.

We don't often have opportunities to speak of Jesus in secular professional roles. But we can live as Jesus did, shining a Light on collaborative skills like joy, encouragement, and wisdom.

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds." Hebrews 10:24

Apply good work habits and develop your core skills with intentionality. There's much more to professional success, of course. But this will get you off to a strong start.

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### **Go Do**

- 1) Self-rate, 1-10.
- 2) Action step.
- 3) Trust & obey. What might God be asking you to do? What would it look like to trust Him with that as you obey?

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**Go Deeper: Further Conversation & Study** (3-5 discussion questions or to do recommendations, etc..)

The bible says, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” Colossians 3:23-24 NIV

What does that look like in your context? Need help? Here’s a helpful article:

<https://www.gotquestions.org/heartily-as-unto-the-Lord.html>

**Sources & Resources** (cite sources when needed, refer to 3-5 additional resources)

<https://clickup.com/blog/work-habits/>

<https://www.loom.com/blog/good-work-habits>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVO-NL7FEDo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwPArMTI9i8>