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7 skills for the future

Adaptability, Critical Thinking,
Empathy, Integrity, Optimism,
Being Proactive, Resilience

1 ADAPTABILITY

Being adaptable helps you to embrace change and respond to the unexpected with ease being ready for potential opportunities and handling setbacks with grace.

2 CRITICAL THINKING

Knowing how to think and work smarter, being more resourceful, creative and collaborative really gets you places. We've got amazing brains – get yours truly working for you.

3 EMPATHY

Never has empathy been so important. Nurturing all your relationships, understanding where other people are coming from and experiencing how effective it is to live in the present will have an immediate and tangible effect.

4 INTEGRITY

Trust, values, principles and honesty are valuable in a world of constant change. Integrity helps you to make decisions and set direction for your life as well as making you stand out.

5 OPTIMISM

Happiness is right at your fingertips every day. No matter what life throws at you, you can respond with positive action and achieve different outcomes as a result.

6 BEING PROACTIVE

Respond rather than react to whatever is going on around you. Be the captain of your own ship in life through small every day steps.

7 RESILIENCE

Know how to bounce back from disappointment, rejection and setbacks. Equip yourself with a strong support network and look after yourself. Resilience has never been so vital.

Critical thinking is ‘raw material’ for a number of key workplace skills, such as problem solving, decision making, organisational planning and risk management. These are the skills deemed to be essential for avoiding mistakes and miscalculations. Lack of critical thinking can lead to evaluating market and needs inaccurately through preconceived notions and assumptions. Quite often, too, people at the top of an organisation are automatically *assumed* to be bright and ‘good’ thinkers – the ability to think critically tends not to be assessed or measured the higher up an organisation you go. Critical thinking is even more important when sophisticated decision making and judgement are needed.

On a day-to-day basis, in your personal life critical thinking can help strengthen your relationships and help you to be more creative, resourceful and reflective when handling problems or difficulties:

- Thinking critically means you ask more questions, look for relevant information, think open-mindedly and communicate well to find effective solutions.
- Developing your capacity to think more critically will impact the quality of your decisions and judgements. They will be more informed and less biased or subjective.

The human mind is rarely objective so strengthening critical thinking skills keeps your mind objective, at least about those things based on facts. However, sometimes we will take opinions and subjectivity as a ‘fact’ too and it’s all too easy to do this, especially if we are busy and distracted or spend too much time online.

It is so important to be clear about this as often we make decisions and judgements without all the facts or based merely on assumptions and subjective views.

Top tip

Human thought is amazing, but the speed and automation with which it happens can be a disadvantage when we're trying to think critically. Our brains naturally use mental shortcuts to explain what's happening around us.

A critical thinker is aware of their cognitive biases and personal prejudices and how they influence seemingly 'objective' decisions and solutions.

All of us have biases in our thinking. Becoming aware of them is what makes critical thinking possible.

Reflective thinking

By thinking critically, instead of reacting emotionally to a problem, we use strategies which:

- Help us learn from an experience
- Help prevent it from occurring again
- Result in a reasonable, effective solution
- Helps us make better decisions in the future

The quality of life we experience is in direct proportion to the quality of our thinking. Take a few moments to absorb that last sentence – quite powerful, don't you think?

'Thinking is skilled work. It is not true that we are naturally endowed with the ability to think clearly and logically – without learning how, or without practising. People with

untrained minds should no more expect to think clearly and logically than people who have never learned and never practiced can expect to find themselves good carpenters, golfers, bridge players, or pianists.' – A. E. Mander *Logic for the Millions*

Dr Linda Elder, an educational psychologist and an authority on critical thinking, defines the process as 'self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way. People who think critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably, empathically.'⁴

Thus, critical thinking is also inextricably linked to cultivating self-awareness and crucial for developing all seven skills.

Critical thinking has been proven to have a positive impact on creativity. A 2012 study by Nusbaum and Silvia found that people high in fluid reasoning (closely connected to critical thinking) outperformed others in creative ideas.⁵ Why is creativity important? Because creativity contributes to having fresh new ideas and being able to take the initiative amidst uncertainty. Creativity gives organisations and individuals the competitive advantage – original ideas and our ability to produce and articulate these makes each of us unique.

**critical thinking and
creativity are a match
made in heaven!**

The majority of cognitive ability tests include critical thinking. Such tests are used more now by companies, so you may be asked to take one at your next job interview. Increasingly, these tests are now being seen as the strongest and most consistent predictors of job performance, leadership effectiveness and creativity. The main reason these tests are so powerful is because they predict both what you can do right now and the extent to which you are likely to learn and develop in the future (Kuncel and Hezlett 2010).

An example of critical thinking at work

Ellen Kumata, a consultant to Fortune 200 companies has this to say: 'It can be easy to assume that an organisation's senior leaders should have all the answers but that is no longer the case. The closer you are to the actual on-the-ground work the more analytical and creative you need to be, You need to be able to test your own assumptions, not take things at face value and let go of any preconceived ideas.' This means that the need for far stronger critical thinking skills is relevant for every employee at every level of an organisation.

As the rate of complexity rises, the need for critical thinking is resurfacing. Richard Paul of the Center for Critical Thinking says: 'Consider this Critical thinking, if somehow it became generalised in the world, would produce a new and very different world, a world which increasingly is not only in our interest but is necessary to our survival.'

Try this

We are thinking critically and in a problem-solving mindset when we:

- Rely on reason rather than emotion
- Evaluate a broad range of viewpoints and *perspectives*
- Maintain an *open mind* to alternative interpretations
- Accept new evidence, explanations and findings
- Are willing to reassess information
- Can put aside personal prejudices and biases
- Consider all reasonable possibilities
- Avoid hasty judgements

Reflect on this for a moment. Try to raise your awareness of how often you might employ any of the above strategies and ways of thinking. Think back to a recent struggle, challenge or disagreement and work out to what extent you were able to get into the right mindset.

This also implies that in order to think critically and effectively we need to manage our emotions appropriately too – not always easy in the heat of the moment or during an argument.

How critical thinking helps us at work

You may well be one of the many people who feel overwhelmed by work overload, information overload and stress. Or you may feel overwhelmed sometimes or on a regular basis. Your strong critical thinking and problem-solving skills are the very ones that are going to be able to help you manage these problems and work and live smarter; skills such as rationality, self-awareness, honesty, open-mindedness, discipline and judgement, and the ability to be an active thinker, a sceptical thinker, to question, to analyse, in depth and faster than ever before.

We need to be able to question assumptions far more and seek out the *what* and the *why* of every situation. We need to be able to adopt different perspectives and have a much greater awareness of cultural differences. These are deductive skills. But good critical thinkers also need to be creative. They need to be able to see opportunities where others might only see obstacles. So they need to be looking for solutions rather than for problems and this is so much more than mere ‘problem solving’.

Employers want employees who can think independently and autonomously, problem solve, use good judgement and make decisions. Decisions are often made at work without reflection or without all the key facts required to make a wise choice or judgement because a decision is needed quickly. And if you think about it, you are probably expected to make decisions a lot faster these days. That's OK isn't it? We make quick decisions all the time. Well, yes it probably is fine for much of the time, especially if you are able to apply a wider or deeper set of experiences to inform your decision, but it simply isn't a good idea where outcomes are critical. A good example of where critical thinking is very important is in project management. Without sufficient attention to detail, working out costs, resources, time management, team roles and priorities, a project in most industries will fail.

'The No. 1 thing we look for is general cognitive ability, and it's not IQ. It's learning ability. It's the ability to process on the fly' Need to make it clear to the reader that this is a statement made by Lazlo Bock.

I suggest adding a spaced en rule after the quote and the run text on to 'Lazlo Bock, Senior...'

Lazlo Bock, Senior Vice President of People Operations at Google

David Garvin from Harvard Business School says that there is a general consensus that everyone needs to sharpen their critical thinking skills - whether that means question their assumptions or developing the willingness and understanding to look at problems from multiple points of view.⁶

It's especially important now: companies face huge challenges with global competition (including small businesses), emerging markets, technology changes and the political and economic landscape. Employees at every level, entrepreneurs, leaders and managers need to be able to think fast and act smart – often in situations that are complex, uncertain and where there might not already be an effective policy or existing procedure in place. All this means critical thinking is vital, and it also means that these critical thinking skills have an added layer of challenge to them.