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**Richard Almonte (2022). *A Practical Guide to Soft Skills: Communication, Psychology, and Ethics for your Professional Life*. New York & London: Routledge**

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Browsing through job advertisements of recent years, one cannot help but notice that in numerous instances skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving and cooperation among other similar abilities, collectively referred to as soft skills, tend to take precedence over more technical knowledge traditionally taught in vocational and higher education. Richard Almonte's book *A Practical Guide to Soft Skills: Communication, Psychology, and Ethics for your Professional Life* is an exemplary achievement, showcasing a field that is highly valued by employers, but somewhat neglected in post-secondary education. A published author and a renowned professor of marketing with a background in English and Education, Richard Almonte Phd, BEd is currently serving as the program coordinator of digital marketing at George Brown College in Toronto, Canada. His research interests lie in marketing communication, academic writing and soft skills.

His latest book under review here is divided into three parts with the first part covering the theoretical background, whereas parts 2 and 3 are fully devoted to the practical aspects of soft skills. The volume running to 178 pages is organized into 11 lucid, easy to read chapters which do not lack depth and novelty either. Serving as a general introduction to the book, Chapter 1 *Softs Skills in a Digital Age* guides the reader through the numerous perspectives the concept of soft skills can be approached from. On the one hand, it is generally agreed that it refers to the abilities that enable individuals to effectively interact with others and manage their emotions in accordance with the demands of their workplace.

On the other hand, it can be viewed as an extension of positive personality traits and habits that individuals already possess and practice. Additionally, soft skills can also be seen as part of a long history of "moral reform" movements, where one segment of society aims to improve another segment by addressing and enhancing what is perceived as problematic social behaviour. The chapter also addresses the questions of what employers and researchers think about softs skills, thus offering the readers a multi-perspective view to ponder upon. A particularly intriguing part is the consideration of soft skills within the framework of performative discourse. The author convincingly reasons that soft skills are "a series of words, gestures, and behaviours based on discrete pieces of culturally inflected knowledge, history, theories, etc. [...] that together signal your competence in a given field" (p. 8). That said,

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argument is made that soft skills should be regarded as a pool of knowledge which should emerge as a new academic field.

The next three theoretical chapters explaining how soft skills are rooted in ethics (Chapter 2), psychology (Chapter 3) and interpersonal communication (Chapter 4) prepare the ground for the practical aspects of the book. One way or another, these academic disciplines are concerned with preferable forms of behaviour, which is of immense importance to the successful practice of soft skills in the workplace.

To understand the true nature of soft skills, it is helpful to be aware of the central tenets of ethics discussed in Chapter 2. Simply put, ethics is focused on the appropriate conduct towards others with the objective of minimizing harm. The author makes a brief comparison between duty-based versus consequentialist ethics. According to duty-based ethics, it is the obligation of the individual to consistently demonstrate ethical behaviour, whereas consequentialist ethics claim that ethical behaviour leads to the greatest good in the world, as it aligns with the social contract; that is, a set of rules people have agreed upon for mutual benefits.

After exploring the normative theories of ethics, the author discusses some of the obstacles to acting ethically, arguing that despite the evident justifications for ethical behaviour, individuals often fail to act ethically in reality, due to egoism, futility and relativism. Egoism refers to prioritizing one's own needs over others, futility means that sometimes individuals see little purpose in acting ethically, whereas relativism urges individuals to recognize that others may value different behavioural norms. From theoretical ethics the reader is guided to applied ethics, which examines how ethical justifications and theories are put into practice in real-world scenarios. It holds particular significance in the fields of medicine and healthcare, where conflicting interests may arise. Business and organizational ethics also play a crucial role here, as it raises the question of whether a company's pursuit of profit should overshadow considerations of worker safety, environmental standards, and other ethical concerns. At the end of the chapter, the reader is also offered "a practical guide to making applied ethical decisions" (p. 35) in the form of a quick and easy to remember checklist.

As the academic study of human behaviour, psychology is also essential in understanding soft skills. Chapter 3 draws on influential psychological theories including learning and development theories, personality theories and social psychology. It is pointed out that a central goal in the study of psychology is to uncover truths about human behaviour and its underlying reasons mainly through observation and experimentation. A significant area of investigation in psychology revolves around understanding how we acquire and develop our behaviours. According to the social learning theory, much of our learning occurs through observing behaviours demonstrated by authority figures in our lives. Additionally, the moral development theory proposed by Kohlberg (1976) suggests that as people grow older, their moral compass evolves from pre-conventional to conventional morality, with some individuals even reaching post-conventional morality. In the pre-conventional early stage, typical of children, behaviour is interpreted in terms of consequences such as reward and punishment. The author borrows Collin's (2012) words to describe the conventional stage whereby "right behavior [...] pleases or helps others and is approved by them", as usually seen by adolescents, whereas in the post-conventional stage a person "recognizes that sometimes individual rights are more important than laws or rules that seek to restrict them" (p. 40).

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Personality theories provide insights into our behaviour by highlighting various traits that shape our personalities. Particularly influential in this regard is the “big-five model” including five personality traits, such as extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness/dependability, emotional stability, and openness. Studies have found that not only are these traits essential in numerous jobs, but they tend to be good predictors of future job satisfaction and performance. Another important dimension in understanding human behaviour and the ways we interact across social contexts, for instance in the workplace, is social psychology (Butler & McManus, 2014; Collin, 2012; Morris & Maisto, 2015).

The author also highlights the significant role of stress in influencing our ability to behave appropriately. While stress can sometimes be productive, it often leads to negative outcomes, such as anxiety, decreased productivity, and even health issues. The reader is introduced to various strategies that can be employed to cope with stress, such as direct, defensive and proactive coping mechanisms. However, it is also noted that when these strategies fail to address problematic behaviours, therapeutic approaches like insight therapy, behaviour modelling therapy, and cognitive behaviour therapy can help redirect the individual towards pro-social behaviour.

After exploring how soft skills are rooted in psychology, the author delves into the realm of interpersonal communication (Chapter 4), elaborating on its vital nature in human interaction due to its role in fulfilling social, physical, and instrumental needs and goals. Soft skills are also demonstrated through linguistic behaviour with the objective of enhancing the relationship between the interacting parties. Attention is drawn to mediated communication through the internet in the form of emailing, blogging and messaging, which is a relatively new domain of interpersonal communication with both positive and negative aspects. While social media has allowed users to stay connected with more people and more frequently, it has also heightened our sense of disinhibition, leading to more direct and oftentimes offensive communication through these channels.

The author introduces the notion of communication competence, a theory developed by Jack Gibb (1961) with the central tenet that competent communicators achieve their goals while simultaneously maintaining or improving their relationship with others. Another important concept in the chapter is communication climate, which refers to the emotional aspect of the relationship being either supportive or defensive. Further, the author discusses the types of messages which assist in creating a supportive climate, as well as those which are responsible for a defensive one. Recognizing that defensive dynamics such as negative communication spirals pose the biggest barrier to effective interpersonal communication, it is shown what language-based strategies skilled communicators can employ, utilizing Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory to counter defensiveness and face-threatening acts.

In the second part of the book, the author covers the six soft skills that employers deem to be the most important. They are divided into outward-facing and inward-facing soft skills, also referred to as interpersonal and intrapersonal. The former is concerned with interactions with other people, whereas the latter pertains to the abilities of the individual to “contribute to adaptive behavior and productivity” (p. 116). Outward-facing soft skills include communication (Chapter 5), teamwork (Chapter 6) and customer service orientation (Chapter 7), while inward-facing soft skills comprise problem-solving orientation (Chapter 8),

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productivity/work ethic (Chapter 9) and likability (Chapter 10). In each chapter, the author provides a detailed explanation of the soft skill in question and why it is important.

Chapter 5, focusing on communication, posits that effective communicators utilize writing, speaking and listening skills to ensure that the audience receives the messages successfully. Communication will be successful if it adheres to the well-established norms of a given genre, as different types of written or oral texts, such as e-mails, reports or presentations, among others, have their own formats, specific vocabulary, tone of voice, as well as accompanying gestures to foster a positive relationship that minimizes any potential face-threats.

The author points out that employers prioritize effective communication as one of the most crucial soft skills for their employees due to its proven ability to enhance organizational effectiveness, provide a competitive advantage, and cultivate customer/client loyalty not only through traditional channels but also on the social media sites playing a pivotal role in organizational communication.

The chapter also touches on gestures that exemplify effective communication, including smiling, maintaining eye contact and nodding to indicate agreement. Similarly, using polite greetings when meeting someone and employing courteous language when performing such acts as requests, acknowledgements, agreements and criticism are all examples of language use that require the effective employment of soft skills.

Another important outward-facing soft skill is teamwork, discussed in Chapter 6, which is ranked as one of the top three skills by employers (Riebe et al., 2017). Within the framework of teamwork, the author lists several sub-skills: active listening, cooperation, conflict resolution and persuasion (Assessing 21st Century Skills). Based on Widmer and colleagues (2009), the author explains that one of the most important qualities of an effective team player is reflexivity, which refers to “the ability of each team member to adjust to changes” (p. 86). Reflexivity is also concerned with recognizing leadership and followership. An efficient team player should be comfortable in both positions; that is, being dominant, as well as following the instructions of someone else, as the assignment of roles requires, which may change from project to project. The author also points toward a large body of research that shows the ever-increasing significance of teaching teamwork skills, for instance, in business (Dunn et al., 2020; Hobson et al., 2014), medicine (Barton et al., 2018; Lerner et al., 2009) and engineering (Chromik et al., 2020; Long et al., 2017). In this endeavour, a variety of innovative methods are applied, such as modelling, gaming, and reflection. The chapter also discusses virtual teamwork, which has been a popular field of research in recent years. Researchers have explored what skill sets are required as compared to traditional teamwork in order to be potentially productive (Chromik et al., 2020; Long et al., 2017).

The final outward-facing soft skill, effective customer service orientation, is discussed in Chapter 7. This refers to the ability to be helpful and pleasant with customers. Employers rate customer service orientation as one of the most crucial soft skills for their employees due to its proven ability to foster customer loyalty and retention. With digital technology, traditional customer service situations, such as face-to-face or on the phone interaction, are evolving to include technology-mediated service situations like chatbots and robotic interfaces. Employers, however, still emphasize the need for their employees to be service-oriented. Therefore, employees dealing directly with customers are advised to establish a connection by getting to know the person, maintaining a positive and friendly tone of voice, fulfilling the customer's

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needs promptly and minimizing any delays in the process. Additionally, it is crucial to exhibit natural courtesy, politeness and helpfulness when interacting with customers/clients. Gestures, such as smiling, making eye contact, and nodding to show agreement and active listening are effective ways to demonstrate a customer service orientation. In terms of language, the author suggests, it is important to maintain a friendly and informal tone instead of a serious and formal one, as well as using concrete language to describe the actions taken to fulfil the customer's needs.

Moving on to inward-facing soft skills, problem-solving orientation in Chapter 8 is defined based on Shim and colleagues (2019) “as a person’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioral attitudes towards a given problem” (p. 116), a skill also given high priority by employers. The chapter explains the distinction between positive and negative problem-solving orientation. Whereas negative orientation hampers effective resolution through avoidance, procrastination and other unfavourable behaviours, positive orientation is viewed as having a positive mindset with confidence and willingness to solve problems. The author convincingly argues that it is important to view problems as challenges or opportunities, and express the belief that a solution is attainable and will lead to successful outcomes. He also breaks down the steps leading to success. The importance of gestures that can be employed to demonstrate a positive problem-solving orientation, such as smiling, making eye contact, nodding to convey positivity with understanding, whilst active listening is also highlighted alongside the tone and language to be used that also show the belief in finding a solution.

Pertaining to a positive orientation to work, employers highly value productivity and positive work ethics (Chapter 9) exemplified in the pursuit of high-quality work delivered in a timely manner. The author proposes three strategies to exhibit such qualities. First, individuals should be diligent in carrying out their responsibilities. Second, they should strive for achievement, and finally, they need to display internal motivation to acquire new work-related skills. Practical actions that demonstrate productivity and a positive work ethic include maintaining focus and resisting distractions. Moreover, employing effective language, such as speaking with enthusiasm and using phrases that convey a desire to complete tasks efficiently on schedule, going beyond assigned duties whenever possible and consistently taking initiative, can effectively showcase these qualities. The significance of productivity and a positive work ethic is further emphasized by pointing out how technological advancements such as social media can potentially hinder productivity.

Rated among the top five skills by employers, likability is the final soft skill discussed in the book (Chapter 10). The author borrows Sanders’ (2005) definition which posits that likability is “the ability to create positive attitudes in other people” (p. 143); that is, to make other people feel good across a range of varied situations where interactions take place by displaying traits, such as friendliness, helpfulness, enthusiasm and other favourable qualities. Likability stems from positivity, extroversion, and selflessness, and it can be displayed through language and gestures. Practical gestures that demonstrate likability include smiling and nodding to indicate active listening, raising eyebrows to convey enthusiasm, and, when appropriate, engaging in friendly physical contact, such as a shoulder touch, arm touch or handshake/fist bump. In terms of language, using phrases that end with exclamations can demonstrate positivity and enthusiasm. A highly recommended strategy to establish oneself as a likeable person is to subtly highlight the similarities between oneself and others. Thus, using phrases that invite others to share their opinions demonstrates that their viewpoints are valued, while phrases that draw

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comparisons between oneself and others subtly imply similarities. Specifically, employers seek individuals who can collaborate efficiently with others to achieve common objectives, treat clients and colleagues with courtesy and respect, and display enthusiasm towards their tasks. The chapter also touches upon the advances in technology such as the importance of human-robot interactions, pointing out that robots can be programmed to emulate human likability by modulating their tone and offering apologies when necessary among other characteristics.

In the final chapter, which raises the question of whether soft skills can be taught, the cat is let out of the bag, when the reader finally learns that the book was born out of the ambitious endeavour to design a mandatory soft skills course for undergraduate students at the George Brown College in Toronto. In response to receiving negative feedback from employers, a team of faculty members conducted research to find out what soft skills employers considered most crucial and what methods could be used to teach them. Based on the results of the research, a team of instructors embarked on designing an intervention course focused on soft skills. They drew upon pedagogical and psychological theories along with behaviour modelling to enhance interpersonal skills. This was followed by the piloting of the course named *Successful Social Relations*, which eventually became a mandatory component of the curriculum. A survey was made to assess the effectiveness of the course after more than 10,000 students had completed it. Further research sought the opinions of employers on the soft skills of students who had taken the course. Additionally, they gathered feedback from students currently enrolled in the course, regarding their knowledge and intention to utilize soft skills in the future. The results confirmed the study's hypotheses; thus, the researchers concluded that the course, as currently designed, is effective and can be expanded to reach more students and other educational institutions.

Unlike so called “self-help books”, which treat soft skills rather superficially, the value of the author’s contribution lies in its unrivalled achievement to bring theory and practice together, tracing the origins of soft skills to the disciplines of ethics, psychology, and interpersonal communication. The practical aspect of the book is enhanced by real-world case studies not only in the practical chapters but also in the theoretical ones. The reader is invited to put the concepts into practice by working on the questions raised in various case studies. The practical chapters are complete with the author’s answers and solutions concerning real-world examples, as well as a rich repository of phrases which assist in the effective demonstration of the soft skills explored in the book. Coupled with a large body of research presented by the author, not only are readers made aware of how they apply soft skills, but they are also made to think about the ways they could improve such skills, especially the ones related to communication. On the other hand, however, the somewhat idealistic treatment of soft skills leaves the reader to wonder whether a rigorous pursuit of demonstrating these skills is always beneficial in real life. Take for instance likability. The author convincingly argues that in addition to showing enthusiasm towards the tasks one is assigned, an important aspect of likability is to be always ready and enthusiastic to take on more. This attitude may be truly helpful in the short run, as employees present themselves as dependable, thus making them indispensable in the workplace, but, at the same time, it is guaranteed to lead to burnout if not worse. In these situations, for example, a beneficial soft skill to practice would be to know how to mitigate the workload to an acceptable level while maintaining a good relationship with the superior. Another delicate issue is physical contact. Engaging in physical contact to demonstrate likability is a culture-sensitive issue and may not always be welcome, which should be given more emphasis. Similarly, the speech acts

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discussed in the book, such as requesting, criticizing, agreeing and so forth have been shown to be culture-specific as well.

In summary, the book offers new perspectives in an emerging field worthy of scholarly attention and at the same time with its practical orientation it is a must read for instructors, trainers and other educators who are looking to develop similar courses, as well as for those who would like to find out where the roots of communication problems may lie and are interested in overcoming them by demonstrating effective soft skills beneficial not only in the workplace but in all walks of life.

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