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SPECIAL FEATURE: THE HUMAN EDGE

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THE HUMAN EDGE (PART 1): UNDERSTANDING THE SOFT SKILL SPECTRUM

— As AI automates technical tasks, the professional landscape is shifting. The skills that once seemed “nice-to-have”—emotional intelligence, adaptability, and authentic communication—are becoming business-critical. Understanding where capabilities sit on the hard-to-soft spectrum isn’t just academic; it’s essential for staying irreplaceable in an automated world.



By Patrick O'Brien, Chartered Manager, FCMI, Managing Director of The Amanuenses Network Pte, Singapore



Coco Chanel once said, “In order to be irreplaceable, one must always be different.” Raised in a nun-run orphanage, she learned to sew, an early foundation of hard skills. Later, in cabaret, she layered in softer, more communicative traits. Her transformation into a style icon wasn’t just about craft, but about connection: she cultivated deep, charismatic relationships with resourceful, influential people.

Her journey from technical mastery to social artistry is telling. That ability to evolve wasn’t based on technique alone, it was deeply human. Emotional nuance, presence, and adaptability helped her navigate shifting contexts with elegance.

In today’s workplace, dominated by digital tools, data and AI, it’s tempting to assume that technical expertise alone is enough. But that assumption

is increasingly misleading. While technology accelerates the pace of change, it’s our ability to relate, reflect and respond as humans that sets us apart. These soft skills such as presence, empathy, and insight, are what help us, in Coco’s words, “be different.” They keep us grounded and moving forward with purpose.

The Evolving Balance: Hard vs. Soft

Traditionally, hard skills were our go-to place for professional growth. Organised around established protocols, they were quantifiable, methodical and teachable. In contrast, soft skills were considered more as nice-to-have qualities, vaguely defined, and often underappreciated. There was clearly a dominance in the hierarchy: hard skills drove performance, soft skills made people like you.



Today, the tectonics of that hierarchy are shifting, not just rhetorically but structurally too. Hard and soft skills have pivoted to reposition as peers, and their early undifferentiated schism has stretched to a chasm. Though often interdependent, they're now most impactful when harnessed in tandem. The reality is that data-heavy tasks that increasingly rely on hard skills are being automated. What remains are soft skill capabilities that technology can't easily replicate: emotional intelligence, critical thinking and authentic communication.

To understand these skills better, let's dive deeper into three important dimensions:

- **Focus:** Hard skills are built through addition and reinforcement. They follow best practices and adopt structured methods, while we repeat them until proficient. Soft skills, by contrast, often require unlearning; we embrace new behaviours, let go of outdated habits, and integrate new ways of relating, listening, and leading.
- **Nature:** Hard skills are tangible, measurable and deliver visible results. Soft skills are lived experiences, shaped by emotion and reflection. Often tacit and felt, they are sometimes only fully recognised by an uncomfortable awkwardness in their absence.
- **Acquisition:** Hard skills are procedural, following clear steps to yield predictable outcomes. Soft skills are relational, emerging through interaction, feedback and a willingness to grow within context.

Going Deeper: Five Criteria for Differentiating Skills

To get clearer on how hard and soft skills differ, it helps to move beyond labels and explore the characteristics beneath. We use five practical criteria to help locate where a skill sits on the spectrum, ranging from highly systemisable to deeply human.

1. Routine

Does the skill follow structured, predictable, and repeatable patterns?

High-routine skills sit at the hard end of the spectrum. They follow set procedures and are easy to replicate; they're ideal for automation. Low-routine skills require adaptation, improvisation, or contextual response, nudging them toward the soft side.

2. Technological Reliance

Does the skill depend on tools or systems to function?

Skills like coding or analytics are deeply embedded in technology, and typically hard. Human-centred skills, expressed through conversation or emotion, are more often soft.

3. Originality & Imagination

Does it require generating new ideas or navigating ambiguity?

Highly original skills rely on imagination, intuition, and synthesis. They resist standardisation, key hallmarks of soft skills. Low originality, by contrast, often signals structure and repeatability.

4. Contextual Judgment

Does it demand situational awareness or reading complexity?

Skills shaped by interpreting ambiguous environments, such as social, organisational or emotional, are characteristically soft. Those that operate the same regardless of context, tend to be hard.

5. Emotional Intelligence

Does it involve empathy, self-awareness, or interpersonal sensitivity?

Soft skills often require emotional clarity and psychological insight. Hard skills, meanwhile, draw more on logic, consistency and abstraction.

Three Examples That Map the Spectrum

As the first two criteria, Routine and Technological Reliance tend to push skills toward the hard end, whereas the last three, Originality, Contextual Judgment, and Emotional Intelligence, lean toward soft. Let's apply this lens to three familiar skills: Creativity, AI & Big Data, and Critical Thinking.

Let's start with that archetypal soft skill, Creativity. While tools and training can shape it, creativity ultimately emerges from within. It doesn't rely on rigid routines or structured workflows. Instead, it thrives on open-ended thinking, emotional nuance, and cognitive flexibility. Its value lies in





unpredictability and resistance to templates. Creative outcomes are often subjective, drawing power from originality and emotional resonance. It sits firmly at the soft end of the spectrum.

Now consider AI & Big Data, which occupy the other end. These skills are steeped in technical execution. Whether building models or processing datasets, the work is rooted in logic, structure and systematised frameworks. Tools are central, the role is procedural, and outputs are measurable. And success is usually binary; either the model works, or it doesn't. There's little room for ambiguity or emotional nuance. These skills invite and expect automation, which is why they're squarely in the hard category.

Finally comes Critical Thinking, which inhabits the chasm in between. On one hand, it uses structure, logic, clarity, and reason. On the other, it requires nuance, judgment, and human awareness. It's we humans who must weigh assumptions, detect bias, and interpret intents. These tasks live in people and context, not manuals or algorithms. While it can be taught, critical thinking isn't formulaic. Its power lies in application, always shaped by circumstance. This makes it a blend of both worlds.

Stepping Back: Nuance Matters

Few skills live fully at the extremes, and most jobs involve a blend; hard and soft, explicit and subtle, technical and human. These criteria give us a sharper lens to explore that mix. They help us better understand the capabilities we need, how they work together, and where they resist replacement.

Just as importantly, this lens promotes a kind of meta-skill: critical thinking about skills themselves. It moves us from checklists to context, from categorising what people do, to understanding how and why they do it.

In Part 2 of this article, we'll look at how soft skills show up in action, particularly in how we navigate social media, remote work, and artificial intelligence. Keep a lookout for the next issue of Orient Magazine.

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