



NICK NOORANI'S 

SOFT SKILLS

No Immigrant
Should be Without[®]

A Practical Guide for Newcomers
Entering the Canadian Labour Market

PREPARE FOR
CANADA 



About the Author

Since coming to Canada more than 10 years ago, Nick Noorani has dedicated himself to helping other newcomers in Canada succeed. He started his journey by co-writing the book *Arrival Survival Canada*, a handbook to help immigrants in their first few years in Canada. He also founded *Canadian Immigrant* magazine, which kicked off his career as a motivational speaker. After years of research and one-on-one interaction with diverse newcomers, he created his *Seven Success Secrets for Immigrants* seminar series, which has been a popular program across the country.

The importance of soft skills in the North American labour market is an underlying theme of his *Seven Success Secrets*, but Noorani soon realized that there was much more specific information newcomers needed to understand regarding this topic. While soft skills can cover everything from organizational skills to leadership, Noorani noted that there are nine specific soft skills that are particularly relevant for a new immigrant. He has turned those nine skills into the sequel to his *Seven Success Secrets for Immigrants*. Called *Nine Soft Skills No Immigrant Should Be Without!*, Noorani is delivering his latest speech to audiences across Canada, but wanted to turn his tips into a helpful booklet, so any immigrant can access this helpful advice.

No Canadian Experience = You don't have the right soft skills!



Introduction

There is a term you'll start to hear quite often now that you're in Canada — “soft skills.” What does this term mean? Well, to help define it, let's first look at the term with the opposite meaning — “hard skills.”

Hard skills are all the technical know-how, credentials and experience you have in your field of expertise. For example, if you're a chef, your hard skills are your cooking skills, know-how with kitchen equipment and so on. An employer looking for an experienced chef will want to know candidates' abilities in the kitchen, where they studied and trained, and so on.

So what would the chef's soft skills be? They are all the intangible qualities that aren't as quantifiable. For example, how does the chef work in a team? Does he/she have good leadership skills? Is he/she organized, dependable, punctual, friendly? When we are talking about immigrant soft skills, perhaps the most important question is can he/she communicate well in English!

Unfortunately, many immigrants don't fully understand or want to accept the importance of soft skills in getting ahead in Canada.

Why Soft Skills Matter

Skilled immigrants are let into Canada on the basis of their technical skills and often focus on improving these technical skills after landing to help them get a job in Canada. So many are shocked when they are told they didn't get the job. And they are confused by the reason they are given: “You have no Canadian experience.”

What exactly does this mean? It is actually a vague way of employers saying: you lack the soft skills I am looking for in an employee. It is often said that hard skills will get you an interview, but you need soft skills to get (and then keep) the job. That applies to non-immigrants as well, but it's even more critical for newcomers to understand since soft skills tend to be culturally specific. Have you heard the expression “the right fit”? Employers want to hire employees who will “fit in” to the workplace. And that's what soft skills can help you do.

The job interview process in Canada is, in fact, mostly about determining these soft skills. The employer has already determined you have the necessary technical skills to land the interview. The remainder of the interview process is about determining whether you will be a good fit for the organization.

Soft skills are the interpersonal, communication, behavioural and organizational skills that cross all types of jobs and industries. Employers are looking whether you can get along with others, deal with conflict and handle yourself professionally.

Soft skills encompass a wide spectrum of traits, including being self-aware, trustworthy, conscientious, adaptable. They are also made up of abilities like critical thinking, attitude, initiative, empathy, confidence, integrity, likeability, risk-taking, influence, problem solving, conflict resolution, handling criticism, time management, leadership, organizational awareness and so on.

Immigrants usually arrive here with 90% technical skills, and only 10% soft skills, without realizing what a big obstacle this is in their way to finding employment.

Many Canadian employers feel a candidate with the right hard skills, but poor soft skills won't be able to learn the soft skills required quickly enough. But a person with the right soft skills has the potential to acquire any hard skills they may lack.

And the need for soft skills in today's workplace is only becoming more vital because of business globalization, virtual offices, technology and increasing diversity in age, gender and race. We all need to ensure our soft skills meet new and constantly evolving social and environmental demands — not to mention the old office politics which never seem to go away — being placed on us.

Unfortunately, immigrants usually arrive here with 90% technical skills, and only 10% soft skills, without realizing what a big obstacle this is in their way to finding employment. Some decide to go back to school and get Canadian degrees and certifications; in other words, they keep working on their hard skills. Though Canadian credentials can be indeed useful, they do not compensate for the lack of soft skills.

	What Immigrants Have	What Employers Want
Soft Skills	10%	60%
Technical Skills	90%	40%

Think to yourself a moment about whether you've ever worked with someone in your homeland who has been difficult, hard to communicate with and lacked the ability to work as a team? Even if they were great at what they do, how did their attitude affect the workplace?

So, the next question is, now that you're in Canada, are you willing to accept that not only are soft skills highly valued here, but the *types* of soft skills here may be different than in your country of origin? Are you the type of newcomer who will cling to the ways of your homeland and be resistant to change, or are you willing to leave old habits behind and embrace the Canadian norms?

If you're ready to take on the soft skills challenge, let's begin with the *9 Soft Skills No Immigrant Should Be Without!*

9 NICK NOORANI'S SOFT SKILLS

No Immigrant Should be Without[®]

**So, what are the 9 Soft Skills No Immigrant Should Be Without?
In simple terms, they are:**

- 1. Communication Skills**
- 2. Local Language**
- 3. Presentation Skills**
- 4. Small Talk**
- 5. Leadership and Initiative**
- 6. Conflict Resolution and Negotiation**
- 7. Accepting Constructive Criticism**
- 8. Flexibility**
- 9. Business Etiquette**

Many immigrants rely on the same level of language skill they had in their home country, but it's important to keep improving your skills.



Soft Skill #1: Communication Skills

The most important soft skill for new immigrants is communication. If English is your second language, this can be challenging, but it can't be stressed enough how important it is for career success to be able to not only speak, but also write clearly and persuasively.

Verbal Communication

Verbal or oral communication skills are critical, whether delivered in person or over the phone. Many immigrants rely on the same level of language skill they had in their home country, but it's important to keep improving your skills.

If you feel that your English skills are not sufficient, invest in yourself by enrolling in classes to boost your grammar and vocabulary. And go beyond the basic English you will learn through government-funded ESL classes; many colleges and schools offer advanced English or business communication classes, helping you with both verbal and written English.

There are small strategies you can perform daily, too, such as:

- listen to English radio or watching TV
- read magazines
- watch your Canadian colleagues closely and adapt your skills accordingly
- practise with friends or family
- give a mock speech

In some cultures, it's not as common to smile and make direct eye contact as is the norm in Canada

Listening

Listening can be equally important. In a corporate environment, you will be asked to be present at meetings, and listening here is very important. Follow these listening techniques:

- be an active listener by nodding and smiling at appropriate times
- jot down key points and show you're engaged
- don't interrupt; let the speaker finish

Non-verbal Cues

Another part of communication is non-verbal. Body language differs from culture to culture. In some cultures, it's not as common to smile and make direct eye contact as is the norm in Canada, but if you don't adapt to such practices, you may give off the wrong impression.

Dos

- **Keep an open mind**
- **Be present and focused**
- **Listen attentively for the whole meaning**
- **Tune into the speaker's feelings**
- **Stay attentive to nonverbal cues**
- **Ask questions at appropriate times**

Don'ts

- **Make assumptions or prejudgments**
- **Interrupt with your thoughts and advice**
- **Interrogate or preach**
- **Let your mind wander and stop listening**
- **Take the subject into a different direction**
- **Be defensive if their ideas are different**

Soft Skill #2: Local Language

But there's more to communicating in English than learning the ABCs. The second soft skill that no immigrant should be without is local language ability.

While learning English is essential, to truly succeed in a corporate environment, your language skills have to evolve even more, to understand local phrases and business jargon that's peculiar to your trade or industry. Communicating is about more than just grammar and vocabulary.

For example, what would you say if someone asks you for the ROI on your IT department's latest SEO strategy? Or the best practices on offsetting your organizational brain drain? Will you know how to respond?

Beyond business jargon, Canada as a whole like most countries has its own unique language. Nowhere in the world would a "double double" mean what it does here (a coffee with two cream, two sugars). And, of course, there's the world-famous "eh!"

While such colloquial terms can be picked up over time, it's important to understand professional jargon as quickly as possible, so do plenty of research so you sound like you know what you're talking about.



Soft Skill #3: Presentation Skills

According to many studies, people's #1 fear is public speaking. Death is # 2. Does that sound right? Truth is that most people hate giving presentations. As an immigrant, it can be even more nerve-wracking, particularly for those who have accents or are still getting accustomed to Canadian workplace culture, so they often shy away from the spotlight. But, in a recent survey, senior managers rated the ability to make presentations as a top qualification for employability. Now this could mean a formal presentation to clients or a more casual way of presenting yourself in meetings and with colleagues. Either way, it takes confidence and lots of practice.

Immigrants who learn the art of presenting and speaking to groups inspire confidence and are more likely to be seen as prospective leaders. The simple truth is that people who present well in front of groups are far more likely to succeed at captivating, persuading and inspiring others.

Here are important tips on improving your presentation skills:

- Relax. And remember that not everyone is a born speaker, but with practice and confidence, you can learn the skill.
- Get help! Join your local Toastmasters club. Google it and find a place close to work or home and start attending the events regularly.
- Know your subject matter well. Use your notes to remind you of key points you will discuss.
- Be authentic. If you truly believe in what you're saying and understand the subject well, your honesty and confidence will shine through.
- Use aids — whether PowerPoint or a simple flip chart, remember most people learn better visually. It's also a way to guide you in your presentation.
- Anticipate questions and prepare answers ahead of time so you don't start stammering.
- Use handouts, especially if you want your audience to take action on the basis of your talk.
- Speak clearly — do not rush through the speech.
- Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. And, after that, rehearse some more. Best speeches are the ones where you have practised your nods, pauses, winks and smiles.
- Humour is critical. Don't put your audience to sleep especially if the subject matter is serious.
- Eye contact with your audience shows you are talking to them and you can see how engaged they are in your talk.
- Interact with your audience. But don't let their questions lead you off course; always stay in control of the presentation.
- Above all, enjoy the experience! The audience doesn't know you are petrified! Keep it that way!



Soft Skill #4: Small Talk

The fourth most critical soft skill for immigrants is small talk. Are you starting to sense a theme here? Have you noticed that the first four soft skills for immigrants are all related with how we communicate? While for a non-immigrant, such things may be obvious and natural, for immigrants it's a little different. Small talk — or water cooler talk — may be natural for them, but that's because it's culturally derived. Societal norms are a big driver of small talk. And immigrants are new to Canadian culture and society, making it that much harder.

For example, a male executive who is making a cup of coffee at the office lunchroom may start chatting to a fellow male colleague about the hockey game last night. Or their golf game. If it is a woman who comes into the lunchroom, the conversation may be entirely different; perhaps something about their families or the outfit they are wearing. Either way, water cooler chitchat is a part of corporate life. It's a casual way of networking and making your presence known, perhaps even with the boss!

Unfortunately, many newcomers avoid such pleasantries; instead of making friendly chitchat, they might give a small smile but say nothing.

While many immigrants feel shy to make that first move, it's better to get over it! Make the first move. Show your new colleagues that you want to fit in and be friendly.

That then might extend to going out for lunch together or a drink after work, which are common practices. While you may rather get home to your spouse and kids after work, it doesn't hurt to go for lunch or a drink once in a while. If you don't drink, order a club soda with lime or coffee.

Of course, it's important to avoid getting too personal in the workplace. There are a few things you shouldn't discuss, including religion, politics, sex, money problems, complaints about other colleagues or the boss.



Soft Skill #5: Leadership and Initiative

The fifth soft skill — leadership and initiative — applies to anyone, be they born in Canada or not, but there are specific nuances here for immigrants.

Even if you're not naturally shy, many newcomers are more hesitant in Canada than they were in their country of origin because they feel out of place or are nervous about their language skills, so they stay in the background.

And that's why many are overlooked when it comes time for promotions. Even organizations that are progressive in diversity recruitment still have a lack of ethnic representation at the managerial and executive level.

Is it a racial glass ceiling? Perhaps. Is it a cultural barrier? Maybe. Is it intentional? Who knows? But, is there anything you can do about it? You bet!

In other words, don't just sit there and wait for your boss or colleagues to tell you what to do, or give you more work. While asking how you can help is nice, asking to take on a specific task or project is better. Even more impressive is coming up with a new idea that you'd like to spearhead. For example, maybe you're in HR and you see something lacking in the way the team handles cross-cultural awareness. Take a risk, bring forward an idea to create a diversity task force and then champion it!

Beyond initiative, what else makes a good leader? According to a recent leadership survey of HR professionals, good leaders have, in order of priority:

- great communication skills
- ability to deal with change
- skill in managing people
- good goal-setting
- problem-solving
- project management

Underlying all of this is your ability to work in the Canadian corporate culture, which highly values teamwork. Ask yourself: Does your leadership inspire others? Are you humble and open, or an authoritarian? Do you encourage others to collaborate and contribute equally? Are you helping your teammates grow and evolve? Working as a team is an important value in the Canadian workplace.



Soft Skill #6: Conflict Resolution and Negotiation

Teamwork also comes into play when discussing the sixth soft skill — conflict resolution and negotiation.

Let's face it, put together people with different backgrounds and ideas, and you'll eventually end up with some disagreements. It is important to learn how to disagree with a colleague or even your boss without getting emotional about it! And, if things go too far, learn to apologize.

You want to be seen as someone who can create mutually beneficial relationships with all types of people at different levels.

Whether you're the project lead or in a support role, you have to learn to negotiate different ideas and perspectives. Perhaps you believe the way things were done in your home country were better, but you'll find it difficult to impose those beliefs in a new country. While you should feel comfortable to present new ideas, do it diplomatically, and be respectful if the idea doesn't go forward.

Negotiation is about being open to different ideas and coming up with a solution together. Hopefully, the end result is a mix of the best of both worlds.

But even if you are doing your best to keep an open attitude, someone else may not. There are difficult people everywhere.

Conflict in the workplace can be emotionally exhausting and even wreak havoc in all aspects of your life. It's important for your success, reputation and emotional wellbeing to know how to handle such conflict and work well with all sorts of personality types.

At the end of the day, you want to be seen as someone who can create mutually beneficial relationships with all types of people at different levels (from entry-level to senior executive). You need to be able to negotiate win-win solutions to serve the best interests of the company and the individuals involved.

Soft Skill #7: Accepting Constructive Criticism

Perhaps one of the simplest strategies for avoiding conflict is knowing when to stop fighting back and realizing there is something we can learn, bringing us to the seventh soft skill: accepting constructive criticism.

It can be difficult to hear an employer's criticism. No one wants to hear that they're doing a bad job or making the workplace uncomfortable. While there is a time and place where you should defend your actions and ideas, there is also a point where you should stop being defensive and really consider whether the criticism is valid.

No one can be right 100 per cent of the time, after all, and perhaps you're not seeing what your manager sees. The trick here is to show that not only are you willing to listen to such criticism, but also able to learn and grow from it.

Asking questions is a big part of that learning process. Employers often fault immigrants for not asking questions. The old cliché that there are no stupid questions is true, in that there is always something new we can learn. Better to ask what you don't know than to proceed without knowing — and then indeed looking stupid.



Soft Skill #8: Flexibility

Learning and growing is a result of the seventh soft skill — accepting constructive criticism — but none of it can truly be accomplished without the eighth skill — flexibility.

Show that you're willing to be flexible, open to change, willing to evolve and go with the flow. Unfortunately, it's often difficult for immigrants to adapt to the new ways and expectations of the Canadian workplace. And that's a big fear of Canadian employers — they are worried about taking the risk of hiring a newcomer, investing time and effort in the individual, and then seeing them not willing to adapt in the Canadian context.

Truly, it's important for any employee to be flexible, because technology, the economy and businesses are changing at a rapid pace, and we must all be flexible, willing to stretch our skills and adapt to the changing needs of the organization.



Soft Skill #9: Business Etiquette

The ninth, and final, soft skill no immigrant should be without is an extension of all the learning and adapting you are already doing — it is practising Canadian business etiquette.

First impressions count to employers, and appropriate business etiquette can make or break that first impression. Often, behaviour is seen differently across various cultures, so it's important to understand what are seen as positive and negative behaviours in the Canadian business context. Here are some of the key elements of practising good business etiquette in Canada.

Handshaking: Shake hands firmly. This gives the impression that you are genuine and confident. Hold the handshake for one or two seconds and shake steadily from your elbow. However, avoid an overly powerful handshake; do not crush the other person's hand. At the same time, you should not have a loose, weak handshake.

Eye contact: Make eye contact at the same time as you shake somebody's hand. This is an important, and often neglected, sign of mutual acknowledgement and respect. Also continue to make natural eye contact with others, without staring uncomfortably.

Manners: Whether it's eating using the right fork and not slurping your food, or holding a door open for a colleague, or learning not to interrupt others while speaking, be aware of what expectations are in Canada for what's considered good manners. If you're considered rough around the edges, this can impact the way people see you and your leadership potential.

Magic words: Children here are taught about so-called magic words — please, thank-you and I'm sorry — for a reason. They work! If someone says to you: "Meet me in the boardroom in two minutes," you'll have a much different initial response than if they had said: "Can you please meet me in the boardroom in a couple of minutes." And don't be shy to say, "I'm sorry." In some cultures, it's very important to save face, which makes apologizing difficult. But these words can smooth things over quickly, instead of allowing ill feelings to harbour.

Physical appearance: Etiquette extends to your physical appearance as well. While Canada is a multicultural environmental, there is something to be said for clean, crisp business attire.

Smiling: And don't forget to smile. It's a sign that you're a positive person, even in times of difficulty. It's really amazing how a smile can lift the moods of others around you. So if they feel good when they see you, they will like being around you.

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Step Up to Success!

You've made one of the biggest decisions of your life - the decision to immigrate and come to Canada. Now, Prepare for Canada wants to help you succeed in this exciting new chapter of your life. We have created and designed this website with you, the immigrant, in mind; we want to help you before you come to Canada and after you land. Think of us as your friend and mentor in your Canadian journey!

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