

[music]

CHILD 1: When I grow up, I wanna be a contractor because I like building stuff.

CHILD 2: When I grow up, I wanna be a stunt double.

CHILD 3: When I grow up, I want to be an astronaut and travel to Mars.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Hey, Shawne, did you there are four generations in the work place at the same time right now? First time in modern history that's happened.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Cool, cool, cool. Modern history.

RAY HARRIPAUL: It's great. It presents the opportunity to get broad perspectives from a wide range of ages but let's be honest, generational differences in working and communication styles could cause some friction, don't you think?

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Hold on a sec. Sorry, Ray. I love modern history.

RAY HARRIPAUL: We're recording right now. We're working. It seems like you could really benefit from this episode on soft skills.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Wow. Wow, Ray. What are you trying to say? I think I have great soft skills. Okay, maybe there's room for improvement.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Today we're talking about the types of skills employers want to see in new hires and well, in everyone.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: While technical skills are important, your ability to problem solve, communicate effectively and manage conflict basically demonstrate that you're a well-rounded professional person, will help you land a job and more importantly keep that job.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Yup. Employers report a skills gap when it comes to communication, customer service, collaboration and other soft skills. So what happened? Why now? Well, there are a few factors including technology and shifting workforce.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Stay with us for a very interesting conversation on why these human skills are more important than ever and why they'll continue to be important moving forward.

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RAY HARRIPAUL: Welcome to *Work Shift*.

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RICHARD ALMONTE: To me, you know, the new technologies we live with like social media, artificial intelligence, they are disrupting industry. We hear a lot about that but I think sometimes people forget that they're also disrupting traditionally the way we are, the way we behave. We used to make eye contact, we used to smile at people. Now we pass them by on the street or in the hallway with our face turned down and our thumbs working overtime. And yes, it's easy to excuse this and just say, "that's the way things are now" but I think the change is actually more significant and far-reaching than being blasé about it. I think that this shift to human to human--- from human to human interaction to human mediated by a device to other human is really important.

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RAY HARRIPAUL: Digital disruption.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: The gig economy.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Artificial intelligence.

(synthesized voice) Robots.

RAY HARRIPAUL: There's a lot of talk about these things in the media and online but what do they mean for you?

SHAWNE McKEOWN: I'm Shawne McKeown.

RAY HARRIPAUL: And I'm Ray Harripaul.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: We are exploring the future of work and changes you can expect to see at your job.

RAY HARRIPAUL: We'll tell you how this massive digital shift could change your career and what you can do to adapt, evolve and thrive.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Today we're talking about the non-technical skills you need to succeed professionally and personally too. They are called soft skills also known as human skills, personal skills or transferable skills.

RAY HARRIPAUL: We're talking to George Brown College professor Dr. Richard Almonte; an entrepreneur, educator and professional speaker Bailey Parnell. In a world where it feels like everyone's always connected to a device, they're gonna tell us why the human element is more important than ever at work.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Richard Almonte has been heavily involved in curriculum development at the college. He developed a soft skills course at George Brown's Centre for Business called *Successful Social Relations* which launched six years ago.

RAY HARRIPAUL: And Bailey Parnell is the co-founder of SkillsCamp, a Toronto-based organization that provides soft skills training to a wide range of clients including large companies, not-for-profit organizations and educational institutions. So before we get started, let's find out what exactly do we mean when we say 'soft skills'.

RICHARD ALMONTE: I always kind of find it interesting when I hear the idea that people already innately possess soft skills. I always say, "Do we innately possess arithmetic or geometry skills?" Not in my experience. In fact, the chances are that you were taught your soft skills whether you knew it or not by a combination of family, maybe a religious community and usually your teachers. Soft skills have a really kind of big focus I think in the past few years for a few factors that maybe we'll talk about later. They are becoming more necessary than ever before but to go back to your question of a definition, what I tell my students, I say soft skills are the positive attitudinal, behavioural and interpersonal competencies that we demonstrate in the workplace or in life. For example, showing a baseline level of positivity about our jobs; showing that we can solve problems instead of creating them and contributing to them; working positively with other people to get things done. And the other part of the definition is that you have to notice that they're all about-- these things are all about how we are; you know, behaviours. Which is why they've taken on this shorthand term of 'soft' rather than the 'hard' skills that show we can do something like edit a video, design a web page, give a presentation.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: George Brown College and other organizations break this down into specific skills including: communication, customer service, collaboration and team work, problem solving and work ethic. SkillsCamp, the soft skills training organization Bailey Parnell co-founded, offers training in others, including burn out and stress management, leadership, intergenerational understanding and resilience among others. Here's Bailey on why she started SkillsCamp.

BAILEY PARNELL: SkillsCamp started because I was actually working in Student Affairs at Ryerson University a few years back and, as you might know and maybe some of your listeners, Student Affairs is pretty much everything outside the classroom that supports student success. So we have our career centres and our health wellness departments and learning support and basically the stress management, time management, personal branding for students. Really the soft skills development of a university. And it was so clear that the students that were using Student Affairs services were much more successful but that the reality is most weren't. I was seeing this kind of ecosystem where there was a problem, which is a lack of soft skills in both, you know, the grads going out into the work force who then of course become the workforce without those same skills and then I just thought I was the best person to solve the problem because I had been working at Ryerson and part of my role on top of marketing and storytelling was working with each of the Student Affairs departments to help kind of co-create and innovate their programming. So I was already working in a space innovating soft skills programming; I had a background of media, marketing and I had worked in that before so the

kind of the sales, how to get press, how to get attention, that was already in my know-how and also of course the actual delivery of the service we had already been doing speaking, Hamza Khan and I, and so we kind of just got it going, started doing some speaking, started like rolling that along and seeing what was working, what was not working.

RAY HARRIPAUL: And here's Richard on why George Brown's Centre for Business developed a mandatory soft skills course.

RICHARD ALMONTE: So I think it was 2011, my Chair Elizabeth Speers at the time and the Dean at the time Maureen Loweth, they basically came up to me and said--- at the time I had to successfully applied for a professional development leave and they said, "We'd like you to do some research. We are hearing a lot of negative feedback from our employer partners about the fact that George Brown graduates come to them at interviews and are really good on the technical hard skills. They know a spreadsheet inside and out; they can write a business plan; they can do this and they can do that; all the 'do' things; however, the way they do it or the way they communicate when they're doing it or the way they communicate in the interview that they came, leaves a lot to be desired. And what they were talking about is soft skills, a lack of soft skills. And so Maureen and Elizabeth said, "Go do a literature review. What are soft skills? Is anyone doing anything about it, particularly a post-secondary institution?" So that was my job back in 2011. Did the research, wrote the report, the report was accepted by the managers and then the question was, "What do we do?" And that was when things got interesting because when we started to research what sort of interventions are being done, honestly the answer was, 'not that much'. So long story short, we had to choose among modalities and the best modality that employers said was of course something with a grade, something where there's testing. And so we went for the course model and we've been doing it for six years and we've had a lot of anecdotal as well as feedback so far that it's a positive intervention.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: So employers say they see a gap in these skills when it comes to new hires. Why? What happened? Here's Bailey.

BAILEY PARNELL: You're definitely right in that there's been a growing demand for soft skills training. So even just from a business perspective it's my job to know that and to have seen the opportunity in the market a few years ago. But beyond that I think why that opportunity has come up now is for a few reasons. And the first is we do have a shifting workforce so when we think about things like the future of work, often the conversation is centered around automation, AI, shifts towards even more technology integration and just a pure proliferation of that stuff in our everyday work. And so with that, if we're gonna be moving to automation and AI, what skills then become the most marketable? It's the human skills. It's things like, "Can you adapt quickly when this market changes? Are you able to do things that computers can't do? Like hold those conversations; like, be able to sell? Like, be able to work well in a team? Be able to make this technology sound appealing? Be able to withstand the stress that might happen in busy and non-busy times?" And stuff like that so those-- I think that's one reason why there's a big focus on human skills right now. And the other reason I think was just maybe a 'come to Jesus' moment for the organizations because if you--- when I look at things like the

business cell of SkillsCamp, of course, at first it's very easy for me to say, you know. "Your life's gonna be easier when your people get along." But then if you kind of move a little bit forward to the actual financial consequences of not having these skills, they exist as well. So when you look at business turnover, the reasons for turnover are most often due to interpersonal issues. So that's a really expensive issue because maybe, you know, maybe if you have, you know a five-person company, 10, 20; it's not so big a deal. Though it is because you don't have the revenue but when you start looking at companies like, you know, CIBC, RBC, GM when you have 10,000 people across the country and let's say it costs-- some people say 50,000; some people say three times your salary to replace someone in turnover because of things like, obviously the lost productivity, having to re-hire, the postings, the hours of the having to get the new person, of interviewing them, of training them on everything they need to know. Like, all this stuff costs and so that turnover when you start, let's just say 50,000 a year, and you have that happen 500 times a year, you're now starting to get into thousands and sometimes millions of dollars spent on--- that could be may be mitigated if people had better soft skills because it's based on interpersonal. So now we're getting into a money issue not to mention things like if you are better at managing your stress; if you have good well-being practices, resilience, then that helps things like burn-out, absenteeism, sick days. Like, all of this stuff, right? So there is actually a financial motivator as well so maybe that's kind of the 'come to Jesus' moment that a lot of these companies are having. And then I would say perhaps-- because we could go on forever about the reasons why but perhaps a third reason is that with the younger generation, we now have four generations in the workforce at the same time for the first time ever. Because people are just living and working longer so with that you now have kind of the, you know, the Millennial Generation or Gen Z now as well because they're 2000 and under so for sure. I had jobs in high school, university and they're coming in and they're saying actually, "learning and development is important to us if we're gonna be literally giving our lives and our time to these companies like, you have a responsibility to the population, like, to humans to also help us learn and grow." And with that is not just-- you know, I'm not just talking here about the newest Excel, you know? Like that kind of thing. The newest tech tool we're using but also that we want to develop and grow and if we're not getting it here, we will get it elsewhere.

RICHARD ALMONTE: But definitely just opening Indeed or Workopolis and looking at job ads, you definitely see a move towards a sort of bifurcation; a list of technical skills and then a list of people or human or soft skills. Whereas before, maybe even five or six years ago, it might just say 'good communicator' or 'excellent communication skills'. Now there's a transparency around how we want you to behave in the workplace so definitely there but to go back to the idea of technology, I think there's a couple of reasons why soft skills are and will continue to be important for the foreseeable future. One of them is technology and one of them I think is this whole issue of diversity. To me, you know, the new technologies we live with like social media, artificial intelligence, they are disrupting industry. We hear a lot about that but I think sometimes people forget that they're also disrupting traditionally the way we are, the way we behave. We used to make eye contact. We used to smile at people. Now we pass them by on the street or in the hallway with our face turned down and our thumbs working overtime. And yes, it's easy to excuse this and just say that's the way things are now but I think the change is

actually more significant and far reaching than being blasé about it. I think that this shift to human to human--- from human to human interaction to human mediated by a device to other human is really important. You see it all the time. We get impatient more than we used to. We get impatient when we have to take a call. "My god, why are they calling? I don't want to answer the phone." We get impatient when an email is longer than three lines long. We get impatient when we have to wait for something in an office. This technology is making us impatient because we're conditioned to constantly have content flowing our way through our Twitter feed; through our Facebook feed; the pinging back and forth of our texts. We've forgotten how to be quiet; how to be patient and it's negatively being demonstrated in our interaction with co-workers, clients, customers. So I think that's one impact that technology has and why soft skills continue to be important. The way that this sort of rears its head in the course is we try to talk about the difference between selfishness and selflessness. In fact, if there are any future students of the course listening, there's always an exam--- there's always an essay question on the final exam that says, you know, "This course boils down to the difference between selfishness and selflessness. Discuss." Throws some students for a loop. It's not really the essay that everyone chooses to answer but essentially if you think about it, what are soft skills other than saying, "Richard, it's not all about you all the time."

RAY HARRIPAUL: Okay. How do we teach someone to be a better listener? Or more aware of the people around them? Or how to communicate clearly?

BAILEY PARNELL: So how you teach each of those skills does of course differ but it is all based in like, good pedagogical practice so for-- really how I think all things should be taught. So if you come to a public speaking workshop, we'll be the first to say you're not gonna walk out of this one-hour lunch 'n learn and suddenly be Obama. But you are going to learn things that you can do or a structure of a talk that you can just take with you and so that when you leave you can start working this in when you're sitting at a board room or when you've been invited to a podcast and how can you tell an engaging story. And if that model is something you can take with you, some people at first, they naturally use the model. They don't realize they're doing it which is, you know, opening with an engaging story, kind of hooking you in and telling you the problem and why you're supposed to be here; making their presentation the solution. They don't even know what they're doing but for people that don't get that naturally, they can just take the model and the next time they're doing a sales pitch or the next time they're explaining to their team why this should be the way forward for the company, they can say, "I'm gonna hook you in. Here's my problem. Here's the solution. Here's the call to action." And they'll use that stuff. For something like stress management or emotional intelligence when we get into those social-emotional things, we have had so many revelations in workshops from people and they'll say this. We've had tears, we've had like everything you can possibly imagine and sometimes when you give people the language to describe their experiences, that language ends up coming up in honestly all parts of their life. Like, I'm getting shivers right now because sometimes you'll be talking about conflict in the workplace and then I'll also just joke in the workshops. If this isn't obvious, this is true with your relationships at home as well and you might be realizing that, you know, when you do something simple-- it could be simple like conflict styles management or stress drivers; the kinds of things that stress you out and make

people name it, they start going, "Oh my gosh. That is what's happening at home." Or they'll say like, "Yeah, I am a busy person or I am a hard working like, person and those are like typology but these kinds of things do stress me out so that when they start happening in daily life, you start to actually recognize it. That's the first step and then of course giving tools like mindfulness strategies.

RICHARD ALMONTE: When one of my colleagues and I were developing the course six years ago, we were looking for a methodology to improve students' soft skills and we read in the psychology literature that there's something called 'modeling' which is a very well-known practice in counselling and therapy. And we thought this might be a relatively effective way to address behaviour change. So what we do in the courses that students are presented with a number of realistic cases. In these cases there's a character or two who is clearly not using soft skills effectively; that person is not doing-- not showing good customer service, is not being a good team member. Students have to identify that problematic skill and then crucially, they have to rewrite the events of the case as a script. They have to film themselves or act out in front of the rest of the class themselves modeling the improved behaviour. And so that to us is the crucial difference between this course and what makes it successful because students have modeling at least three times through the semester and improve soft skill. So if you don't have the benefit of being a business student at George Brown, what I suggest, you know, next time you witness a poor example of a soft skill, someone not treating a customer nicely, vice versa; someone complaining instead of offering a solution, you know, make a note in your phone or on a piece of paper about precisely what you didn't think that was optimal about that behaviour. You'd like to have seen a smile, you'd like to have seen some more eye contact; you'd like to have heard a more friendly tone. And the next time you find yourself in an analogous situation, make a conscious mindful effort to model the behaviour that you would have liked to have seen. So I think that for folks who think that technology is the most important thing that they can't get through their day without their phone, well there are other important skills and ways to be in the world and I think that the idea of modeling, practicing is really the only way that we will sort of get through this and change our behaviours. It's funny when we, you know, part of-- at the beginning of the course, I always-- I often give students an article from The Globe or from the CBC from a couple of years ago when this "manspreading" issue was a big deal in Toronto. The idea that men-- certain men were spreading their legs and taking up two or three seats and it's an ice breaker for the beginning of the course. Obviously, it talks to so many of the soft skills that we're talking about. You know, how do you-- what you think of other people? How do you behave around other people? And it is always a bit of a shock to me because students, young students, men and women tend to resist in week one when we talk about manspreading or other issues like this. This idea that they must always be thinking about other people. Students will regularly say to me, "But I get on at Finch. I've got to come all the way downtown. It's 5:00 in the morning." Or conversely, if they're finished a shift at work, it's 11:00 or 12:00 at night, "I'm tired. I am not thinking about other people." And I say to them, "Yes. I'm not here to slap you on the wrist. I'm just here to say, 'but not always'." You know, think globally. Sure you're exhausted. In this one instance, maybe it's okay to spread a little bit and not think about the other person but think about what the world would be like if you always had that attitude.

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SHAWNE McKEOWN: It's time to take a look at the future want ads.

RAY HARRIPAUL: In this segment of the show, we ask our guests to give us an outline of a job that doesn't exist. According to the Institute of the Future, a non-profit think tank based in Palo Alto, California, 85% of jobs that will exist in 2030 haven't been invented yet.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Okay Richard Almonte. What have you got for us?

RICHARD ALMONTE: I'd like to see a Workopolis or Indeed ad for a civility coordinator.

RAY HARRIPAUL: What will a civility coordinator do?

RICHARD ALMONTE: I think the person would have a sort of policing/mediating function but I think an even greater part of this person's role would be an education function. So the person could take the material from our soft skills course and actually turn it into training workshops for large organizations. And in fact, this is being done. I mean we know that this is being done among large, sort of blue chip companies. There are people coming in teaching customer service; teaching, you know, time management. So, you know, that could be this person's job to give training on the sort of soft skills that are needed to make the organization run more smoothly.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: What skills or education will be required for this job?

RICHARD ALMONTE: I think that you could draw from a large group of people. People with training and education, teachers, people with training in politics, people with training in sociology and social work. There are a lot of mediation and teaching sort of come from a lot of different places so I see it as a pretty wide catchment.

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SHAWNE McKEOWN: That's a wrap on this episode of *Work Shift*. What did you think?

RAY HARRIPAUL: Want to share your thoughts on this episode?

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Email us at workshift@georgebrown.ca

RAY HARRIPAUL: Get in touch and we might share your thoughts during our next episode.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: This podcast is brought to you by the fine folks at George Brown College. We want to thank Richard Almonte and Bailey Parnell for sharing their thoughts with us today.

RAY HARRIPAUL: It's the end of your work shift. Check you later.

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