The importance of groupwork skills

This article provides further discussion of the importance of group skills and invites you to think further on how you are going to develop your own ideas on the skill you are developing.

Groupwork develops valuable skills for your future

The world changed for all of us during and following the coronavirus pandemic of 2020/2021. As we write this article in March 2022, we can point to many examples of organisations and employers trying to decide the best working practices for their long-term future. One key issue is the nature and extent of remote and online working which the organisation will settle for when the pandemic further recedes.

We cannot predict exactly how the world will change long-term, but we can highlight current and emerging trends which are very relevant to this book:

- Commercial and public organisations are making increasing use of technologies which support collaboration and group working. These technologies include the expansion of teleconferencing systems like Zoom which saw a dramatic increase in uptake in 2020 alongside growing concerns about access and security.
- Universities and colleges are also making more use of similar technologies to support both staff collaboration and student learning. An example is the increasing use of Microsoft Teams in both further and higher education with some institutions replacing their previous online communication systems.
- Groupwork will continue to be an important component of most courses in higher education and may even become more important in the 'new normal'.

As a result, we designed the book to promote an approach to groupwork which you can apply to the three main group situations you are likely to meet on your course and in your future career:

1. Working mainly face-to-face with some online support.
2. Working mainly online with minimal face-to-face contact.
3. Working flexibly to take advantage of the advantages of *both* face-to-face and online interaction.

We recommend that you integrate face-to-face contact with online interaction in **all** your groupwork to make the most effective use of your time and energies. This will help you both on your course and to prepare for your future career, whatever that might be. And you will be able to work effectively in all 3 of the contexts listed above.

After you leave university, your group skills will be important, whether you decide to work for an employer or for yourself or move into some form of social enterprise. Think about where you are planning to go and make sure you take advantage of all the opportunities offered by your course and institution. Groupwork offers you the chance to develop skills you will need to succeed. We asked one large University to summarise their views on this:

"You will undoubtedly develop your employability through groupwork by working with other students - discussing, planning together, and coming to agreement. This can be challenging at times. However, you will also discover the benefits that come from brainstorming ideas with others and sharing tasks according to individual strengths. The communication and interpersonal skills you will develop are highly valued by employers."

Sheffield Hallam University Careers and Employability team.

Skills that support and complement groupwork

Another important trend which is likely to influence most if not all of your future careers is the growing applications of new computer-based technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI). However, experts agree that so-called 'soft skills', like collaboration and communication, will be equally if not more important. For example, the World Economic Forum's list of the 10 skills that we all need to thrive in the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution', includes people management, negotiation and emotional intelligence (World Economic Forum – WEF - 2016, 2019). You can find updates at the WEF website, including their report on 'The Future of Jobs' (https://reports.weforum.org/future-of-jobs-2016/chapter-1-the-future-of-jobs-and-skills/). (last accessed 6/3/22)

A similar survey from Linkedin in 2020 concluded that creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability, and time management were the '5 top soft skills'. Their update for 2021 is available at https://reports.weforum.org/future-of-jobs-2016/chapter-1-the-future-of-jobs-and-skills/ (last accessed 6/3/22)

In the book we use a quote from the Institute of Student Employers (2018:8): "across the globe, problem solving, the ability to work in a team and communication are considered to be the most important skills". This reinforces the conclusion from the Deloitte 'Power Up: UK skills' report (2018) that future workers need to 'prioritise personal development around transferable skills' (Deloitte, 2018: 23). (https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/innovation/articles/power-up-uk-skills.html) (last accessed 6/3/22)

Also remember that your groupwork can develop practical skills which people in organisations often struggle with, such as managing introductions and running effective meetings. (Perlow et al, 2017; Rogelberg, 2019)

Getting ready for that job or career interview

Recruitment practices reflect the importance of all the skills mentioned above. Large organisations typically assess candidates' performance in group tasks designed to highlight abilities such as clear communication and the ability to collaborate.

For a discussion of typical employer practices, see https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/interviews-and-assessment-centres/group-exercises-what-expect (last accessed 6/3/22)

If your tutors in university/college use problem-solving tasks then you may even find your future employer uses one of the same tasks, such as 'Lost in the Desert' which are also widely used in team development (see https://www.humansynergistics.com/change-solutions/change-solutions-for-groups-and-teams/team-building-simulations/survival-series/desert-survival-situation) (last accessed 6/3/22)

As we say in the book, you will almost certainly be asked questions about your experience of working with others in job interviews. And that is why we invite you to think about yourself from the perspective of a future employer. The checklist in the book which you can download gives you a tool to review your groupwork experience against likely interviewer questions. To use this tool effectively, we suggest you develop a log of your group experiences across the course and any extra-curricular activities so that you can answer all the questions in the checklist with a range of different examples.

References

Perlow, L.A. et al (2017) Stop the meeting madness. *Harvard Business Review*. Available online at: https://hbr.org/2017/07/stop-the-meeting-madness (last accessed 6/3/22)

Rogelberg, S.G. (2019) Why Your Meetings Stink—and What to Do About It. *Harvard Business Review.* Available online at: https://hbr.org/2019/01/why-your-meetings-stink-and-what-to-do-about-it   (last accessed 6/3/22)

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