

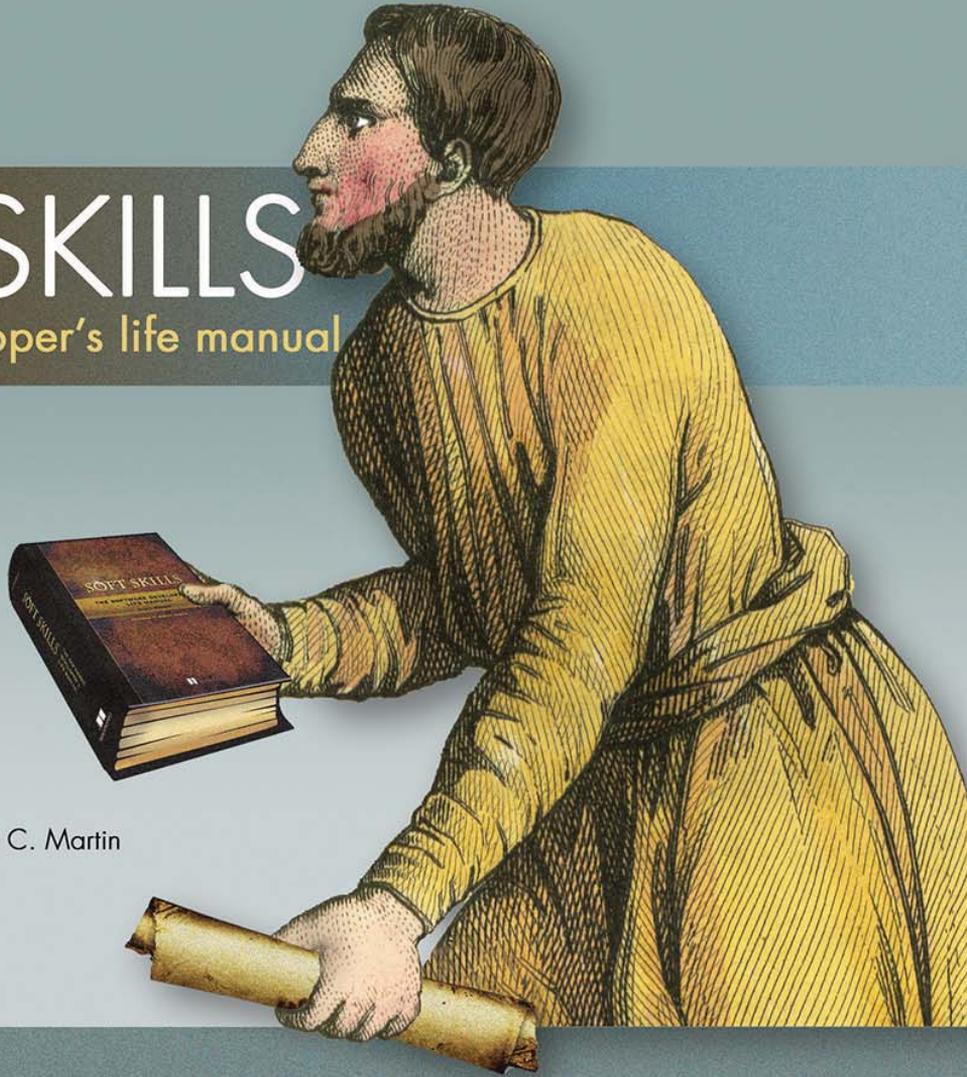
SAMPLE CHAPTER

SOFT SKILLS

The software developer's life manual

John Z. Sonmez

Forewords by
Scott Hanselman and Robert C. Martin





Soft Skills

by John Z. Sonmez

Chapter 9

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Climbing the corporate ladder

I know quite a few people in the IT industry who just can't seem to ever move up in the world. Year after year they have the same exact job and job title. I wonder if they ever even get a raise. Do you know someone like that? It's surprisingly common. If you don't want to end up on that dead-end path, you've got to do something about it. In this chapter, I'm going to give you some advice on how to climb the corporate ladder so that you don't get stuck in the same position, never advancing.

Taking responsibility

The most important thing you can do to go up in the ranks at any company is to take on more responsibility.

TIP It may seem obvious, but often in your career you'll be faced with choices between more money and more responsibility. The right choice—at least in the long term—is almost always more responsibility.

Money always catches up to responsibility. Any time you're offered more responsibility, take it.

But what if you aren't offered more responsibility? What can you do to gain it yourself? Sometimes you have to go out and look for opportunities where you can take charge of an initiative or head up a project. There is almost always some neglected area of business that you can find to contribute your talents to—you just might have to dig to find it.

One of the best places to search is in areas that no one else wants to get involved in. Perhaps there's a legacy application that no one wants to touch

or a certain module in your codebase that is particularly nasty. These are landmasses to add to your growing empire, because no one will want them, so you won't be up for much of a fight. But if you can turn those swamplands into fertile ground, you can really show your value.

Another way to indirectly take on responsibility is to become a mentor for others on your team. Volunteer to help the new person get up to speed. Always offer help to anyone who needs it. Not only will you learn more by encountering and solving other people's problems, in addition to your own, but over time you'll develop the reputation of being the "go-to" person on the team. Eventually this reputation is likely to land you a team-lead position or management position, if you want to go that route.

HOW YOU CAN TAKE ON MORE RESPONSIBILITY

- Is there a project that has been neglected that you could take charge of?
- Can you be the person who helps new team members get up to speed?
- Can you take the role of documenting processes and keeping those documents up to date?
- What job does no one else want to do that you could take on and make easier or automate?

Becoming visible

It doesn't matter if you're the brightest, best, and hardest-working developer on a team if no one knows who you are and what you've achieved. All of your hard work can easily go to waste if you can't find a way to let your boss and upper management know what you're doing.

One of the first things I did whenever I started a new job was to start keeping a daily account of where I spent my time and what I accomplished during the day. I'd then take that information and compile a weekly summary every Friday to send to my manager. I called this my "weekly report," and when I'd send out my first report at each new job, I'd include some information to let my manager know that I understand how important it is to know what your direct reports are doing,

and so I was sending a weekly summary of my activities to make his or her job easier.

This weekly report ensured that every single week I'd show up on my manager's radar and I could talk about what I accomplished that week without outright bragging. It was a great way to gain visibility and it often appeared that I was much more productive than my peers simply because my manager was hearing about all the work I was doing, but not much about the work other developers were doing.

Not only was this weekly report valuable for my visibility, but it was also an excellent resource for myself when review time came around. I could go back through my weekly reports and pick out my key accomplishments for the year. When it came time to fill out reviews, I knew exactly what I had accomplished during the year and I had dates to prove it.

I'd definitely recommend sending an unsolicited weekly report, but there are also many other ways to become more visible in your organization. One of the best ways is to offer to give presentations on some topic or problem your team is facing. Pick a topic you can present on and offer to present that topic to your team. You can even offer to do it as a lunch-and-learn where you present an educational topic during lunch instead of on company time. This is a great way to gain visibility and show how knowledgeable you are in a particular area. Plus, there's no better way to force yourself to learn something than to know that you have to present it in front of other people. I've done my best learning under that kind of pressure.

HOW TO BE MORE VISIBLE

- *Keep a daily log of your activities*—Send this log as a weekly report to your manager.
- *Offer to give presentations or trainings*—Pick a topic that would be useful to your team.
- *Speak up*—Do this at meetings and any time you get the chance.
- *Be seen*—Set up regular meetings with your boss. Make sure you are seen often.

Educate yourself

Another really good way to advance is to keep increasing your skills and knowledge. It's hard to stagnate when you're constantly improving your education level. Educating yourself makes it easy to justify a raise or promotion, because you can clearly show that you're more valuable now than you were before.

You can, of course, take traditional higher-education courses—especially if your company will pay you to get a degree—but there are many alternative ways to educate yourself that can pay off in the future. You should always be learning something new or advancing your skills in some way. Sign up for training courses or seek out certifications that will show that you are committed to continually improving.

At one point, early in my career, I felt like my upward mobility was somewhat limited, so I decided to start getting Microsoft certifications. I studied hard and took all the tests I needed to get one of the top-level Microsoft certifications. It wasn't easy, but I quickly saw the benefits in my career. The extra effort showed my manager that I was serious about advancing my career and opportunities were quickly opened for me.

In section 3 we'll talk more about how to learn things quickly, but it's definitely a skill you should master. The faster you can advance your knowledge, the more you'll be able to learn and the more opportunities that will come your way.

Also, don't just learn about software development. Take some time to learn about leadership, management, and business if you have your sights set on higher-level and possibly executive positions.

And don't forget to share what you're learning. We've already talked about how you can offer to give presentations to share your knowledge, but you can also create your own blog, write magazine articles or books, and speak at community events or conferences. The outside exposure will help establish you as an authority in your area of expertise and will make you seem more valuable to the company you're working for.

Be the problem solver

In any organization there are always plenty of people who will tell you why some idea won't work or some problem is too hard. People like that are a dime a dozen. Don't be one of them. Instead, be the person who always has a solution to a problem and is able to execute that solution to get results.

One of the most useful kinds of people to have around in any company is the kind of person who never seems to find an obstacle that they can't overcome. Building a reputation for being that kind of person is a sure way to get promoted. Forget the political games and posturing for position—if you can solve problems that other people can't or aren't willing to tackle, you'll easily become the most valuable person at any company.

Landmine: I don't have any opportunity for advancement

Most companies offer some kind of opportunity for advancement, but perhaps you've followed all the advice in this chapter, and, for whatever reason, you just don't see any opportunities ahead of you. What do you do then?

Quit. Make sure you have another job lined up first, but sometimes you just have to realize that you're in a dead-end job and you need to find a better opportunity. Perhaps your work environment is caustic and mentally unhealthy, perhaps nepotism ensures you'll always stay where you are; whatever the reason, you might need to move on.

What about politics?

You can't really have a chapter about advancing in a corporate culture without at least mentioning politics. I'm addressing this one last, because I think it's the least important thing to focus on when trying to advance your career. I'm not naïve; I realize that most organizations have quite a bit of politics and you have to be aware of them, but I don't think you should invest too much time in playing political games.

Sure, you can advance up the corporate ladder by deft maneuvers and ruthless ambition, but when you advance that way, you're likely to fall

just as easily. Some will disagree with me, but I've always found it better to build a solid foundation based on actually being a valuable employee rather than appearing to be one.

With that said, you should still be aware of the political climate of whatever organization you're in. You can't completely avoid politics, so you have to at least know what's going on, what kinds of people you need to avoid, and which ones you should never cross.

Taking action

- What is one way you can take on more responsibility at your current job right now?
- How visible are you to your current boss or manager? What is one concrete action you can take in the next week to become more visible?
- What are you doing to educate yourself? Decide what would be the most valuable thing to educate yourself on and create a plan to get that education over the next year.

SOFT SKILLS

The software developer's life manual

John Z. Sonmez

For most software developers, coding is the fun part. The hard bits are dealing with clients, peers, and managers, staying productive, achieving financial security, keeping yourself in shape, and finding true love. This book is here to help.

Soft Skills: The software developer's life manual is a guide to a well-rounded, satisfying life as a technology professional. In it, developer and life coach John Sonmez offers advice to developers on important "soft" subjects like career and productivity, personal finance and investing, and even fitness and relationships.

Arranged as a collection of 71 short chapters, this fun-to-read book invites you to dip in wherever you like. A Taking Action section at the end of each chapter shows you how to get quick results. *Soft Skills* will help make you a better programmer, a more valuable employee, and a happier, healthier person.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- Boost your career by building a personal brand
- John's secret ten-step process for learning quickly
- Fitness advice to turn your geekiness to your advantage
- Unique strategies for investment and early retirement

John Sonmez is a developer, teacher, and life coach who helps technical professionals boost their careers and live a more fulfilled life.



"Useful, practical, and actionable advice on a wide array of topics."

—From the Foreword
by Scott Hanselman

"Conveys a message that every software developer (and everybody else, for that matter) ought to hear."

—From the Foreword by
Robert C. Martin (Uncle Bob)

"Stop coding for a few hours and read this book! Your code—and your life—will be much better."

—lonel Condor, SDL

"A pragmatic and holistic view of software development."

—Javier Muñoz Mellid, Igalia

"A career coach in a book."

—Heather Campbell, Kainos

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