



The Importance of Soft Skills in Chemistry Careers

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OPINION

Chemistry, other sciences, and the fields within engineering are thought of as technical specialty areas. Those studying or working in it or in those others often think that technical skills and good thinking related to that will lead to success. The reality is a much different.

What is often called “the soft skills” are often extremely important, setting apart a highly successful or brilliant career apart from one that is average. What are some of these soft skills? Oral and written communications (both informal and formal), time management, networking, teamwork and collaboration, mentoring or being a mentee, and countless other areas.

These areas are sometimes divided into categories, such as communications skills, interpersonal skills, personal skills, workplace skills, et cetera. These are both convenient and arbitrary. With the first, training or discussions can focus on groupings of the soft skills. Yet, doing this has vague boundaries and so are arbitrary. For example, being a mentor requires good interpersonal and good communications skills such as listening skills and empathy.

Chemists understand the importances of writing reports and manuscripts for publication. There, however, is little focus on doing this well in the formal education for any level of chemistry degree. Speaking is usually not quite as devoid of training, as most levels require a student to give a seminar or other formal presentation (such as presenting a poster at a conference, where the student must interact with the attendees). These, however, often do not involve training in speaking/ oratory. The student must learn by doing. The resulting speaking skill level can vary to extremes.

Getting along with a supervisor or coworkers or anyone else in a laboratory can be the difference between an enjoyable workplace or a horribly stressful one. Clashing with a boss can severely damage a career, often leading to an abrupt leaving.

A few insights from my own career might help emphasize the importance of soft skills. Journals often have the existing editorial advisory board members to suggest candidates for new members. If you have a robust network, your likelihood of being nominated is higher.

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Article Info:

Received Date: May 26, 2026
Published Date: June 10, 2026

Citation:

Lipson MR, Dai J, Sharma S, Vyas MV, Cheng A. Impacts of a Pandemic on Stroke Rehabilitation: Insights from COVID-19. *Physiother Rehab Int J.* 2026;2(1):1-5.

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Similar processes are used in choosing the authors for review articles or book chapters. Giving a stellar talk at a conference can lead to invitations to give seminars at universities, industrial laboratories, and at government laboratories.

People in a laboratory are still people, with their individual personalities, not being aware of that or being unskilled at dealing with others can affect many areas of the work. A coworker choosing team members for a project can either open doors to success and recognition or close them to these.

There is a brief list of books on this topic and approximately 50 articles in the column “Building a Professional Career”, published in the journal Analytical and Bioanalytical Chemistry (Springer Verlag) from 2002 to 2012.):

1. Fetzer JC. *Career Management for Chemists: A Guide to Success in a Chemistry Career*. Springer Verlag; 2004.
2. John Borchardt. *Career Management for Scientists and Engineers*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
3. Freedman T. *Career Opportunities in Biotechnology and Drug Development*. Cold Spring Harbor Press; 2008.
4. Anderson RJ. *Career Opportunities in Clinical Drug Research*. Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press; 2010.
5. Balbes LM. *Nontraditional Careers for Chemists: New Formulas for Chemistry Careers*. Oxford University Press; 2007.
6. Robbins-Roth C. *Alternative Careers in Science: Leaving the Ivory Tower*. 2nd ed. Academic Press; 2006.