

These suggestions are based on the article ["Five tips for developing the soft skills IT pros need,"](#) by Carla Firey

Most IT support professionals know that the development of technical skills is fundamental to their careers. But learning about the subject matter is only one of the necessary talents every IT pro should cultivate. The human component to excel at your work requires good communication, leadership, and relationship skills, otherwise known as soft skills.

1 Actively listen

Most IT pros tend to be analytical by nature, so when a customer or coworker approaches with a problem, they're likely to hear only the literal statements. Being an active listener requires more focus and sometimes more patience. You need to wait for your turn to speak, ask for clarification, and pay attention rather than thinking ahead to your response.

It's easy to treat a frustrated customer like a technical issue, but empathizing with the person with the problem can help build a stronger relationship with your client. Try paraphrasing the other person's words and repeating them to ensure you understood their concerns. They'll feel as though you're truly listening to their problems, and you'll find out whether you've received all the facts. If you have a few hours in the evening, consider enrolling in an active listening course, many of which are offered by community or technical colleges.

2 Communicate with illustrations

Many customers will become confused—or worse yet, defensive—the moment you start talking acronyms like DHCP, SQL, DNS, and OBDC. A nontechnical person's eyes may glaze over after just 10 seconds of jargon, and it's a guaranteed method of alienating your client. Choosing common terms or illustrations to demonstrate your point will help facilitate communication. Sometimes a simple analogy can help you explain a technical concept. For example, you might compare an IP address to a phone number and explain that the DNS "looks up the phone number" for Web sites.

3 Take the lead

More IT pros are taking on the role of leader, particularly in smaller departments. Even if you're heading up a minor initiative, developing leadership skills will pay off for you. Take the time to observe some of the successful leaders within your company and note their actions and management style. If possible, choose diverse assignments or enroll in team-building classes to increase your knowledge about employee motivation.

4 Nurture your inner writer

Many IT pros need to write and respond to RFQs and create system documentation, but their only exposure to drafting text was writing a high school term paper. The secret is to write the technical material in nontechnical terms. You may also need to rely on visuals, charts, and diagrams to illustrate important points.

The best way to develop this skill is simple: Practice. Each day, choose a problem you've encountered and write the solution with a nontechnical person as your audience. Give it to a friend or family member to review. You might also benefit from taking a business writing course or checking out the [Society for Technical Communication](#), which offers training, information, and resources geared toward developing effective technical communication skills. For a general overview of best writing practices, [download this TechRepublic checklist](#).

5 Step out of the box, physically and mentally

It's easy to spend an entire day in your cubicle or office, but it's not the best career move. You should have a broader view of the company goals and how your contributions fit into the big picture. Sign up for some office committees or meet colleagues for lunch to expand your working relationships and understanding of the company's mission. To help cultivate relationships with clients, stay up to date on world business news. Subscribe to one or more general business magazines so you'll be prepared to speak with any client about current trends and industries.

6 Become a mentor

One of the best ways to practice your communication skills and reinforce your own understanding of technical issues is to provide guidance to a less-experienced colleague. You'll find yourself doing a lot of explaining, demonstrating, and teaching, and in the process, your ability to convey complex information will improve. You'll also develop a reputation as accessible and knowledgeable, which will benefit you now and in the future. And of course, you'll also be providing your protégé with valuable experience and guidance.

7 Learn to inspire and motivate your coworkers

Your attitude has a big impact on how much you accomplish and on the overall dynamics of your work group or department. It may take some effort, but try to cultivate a positive outlook even when you're facing a troubled project or cantankerous coworker. Become known as someone who doesn't complain or denigrate others' work but who instead takes ownership where necessary and strives to improve the process rather than enumerate its shortcomings.

8 Develop the habit of consistent follow-through

IT departments are full of hard-working, diligent tech professionals who plan and launch initiatives or take on responsibilities for particular tasks... and then move on to something else without completing the work. Juggling projects and commitments, often under pressure and within shifting timeframes, is certainly demanding. It's easy to let things slide or lose track of a promise you've made. But successful IT pros learn early that finishing what you start—even if that means handing a job off to another team or escalating a help desk ticket—is essential to a smooth-running IT operation.

9 Don't shy away from compromise

You've probably worked with peers and managers who never give an inch on any substantive issue (or even on trivial issues). They're always convinced they're right, and they're locked into pursuing their own agenda, on their own terms, no matter what. That type of narrow-minded conviction may come from insecurity or immaturity, or it may simply reflect an individual's ingrained behavior or personality. But you'll be more successful if you approach your job with reasonable assurance rather than an uncompromising refusal to consider other viewpoints and strategies. Learn when to take a stand and when to let go. By staying flexible, you'll discover alternative ways to resolve various issues, making you're a more versatile and astute problem-solver. And by showing confidence in the decisions of others, you'll establish yourself as a team player who is worthy of their confidence as well.

10 Cultivate strong organizational skills

Not everybody needs a system to stay on top of shifting priorities and mile-long lists of tasks and responsibilities. Some IT pros just fly by the seat of their pants and manage to deal effectively with scheduled work, meetings, e-mails, client issues, and emergencies. But if that doesn't describe you, it's definitely worth developing some habits to help you stay organized. You might want to invest in some time management training, adopt the practices of the highly organized colleague down the hall, or hone your skills on your favorite personal information manager, whether that's Outlook, Lotus Organizer, Mozilla Calendar, or some other PIM solution.

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