

How to Hire for Soft Skills

by **Bill Benjamin**



Why hire for Emotional Intelligence?

The Wall Street Journal cites a recent LinkedIn study that revealed 58% of 291 hiring managers believe the dearth of soft skills in the job market is hindering their firms' productivity.

Is the same thing happening to the other 42% and they just don't know it?

Meanwhile, 89% of 900 executives polled by the Journal in 2015 said finding candidates with soft skills has proven very, or, somewhat difficult.

LinkedIn crunched data from its users' professional profiles to find out which "soft" skills were most prevalent among users who successfully landed jobs they'd applied for.

Here are a few of the leading attributes:

- Communication
- Capacity for teamwork
- Creativity
- Adaptability

While you might have an indication of soft skills in the resume, unlike hard skills, a resume doesn't usually provide enough information to properly assess strengths. A potential hire may tell you they are collaborative, have strong communication skills and were born to be a leader, but you need to have a framework to truly assess these capabilities and hire a top performer.

Top 10 Most In-Demand Soft Skills

(Based on % of members with skill who were hired into a new job)

1	Communication	57.9%
2	Organization	56.5%
3	Teamwork	56.4%
4	Always Punctual	55.9%
5	Critical Thinking	55.8%
6	Social Skills	55.8%
7	Creativity	55.0%
8	Interpersonal Communication	55.0%
9	Adaptability	54.9%
10	Friendly Personality	54.6%

Source: <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/trends-and-research/2016/most-indemand-soft-skills>

58%

291 hiring managers in the U.S. revealed that 59% of them believe that soft skills are difficult to find.

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Hiring a top performer

Indicators of Top Performers

For our New York Times bestselling book, [Performing Under Pressure](#), IHHP conducted a research study of 12,000 people globally to determine what the top 10% performers were doing differently from the rest.

We found the following six behaviors most highly correlated with those who performed in the top 10%, and those who were high in Emotional Intelligence:

- 1 They are able to remain calm under pressure.** This doesn't mean they don't express emotions, it means they are able to regulate their emotions in order to express concern, excitement, frustration, passion, etc. in a proactive and skillful way.
- 2 They do not become defensive when criticized.** High performers seek out feedback as a way to improve. Even if the feedback is expressed as criticism, they are able to manage their emotional response in order to process the feedback as an opportunity to grow.
- 3 They are able to listen without jumping to conclusions.** There's two parts to this: they listen, and are not just waiting for their turn to talk or waiting to confirm their point of view. Secondly, they don't jump to conclusions, especially about the other person's motives and intentions.
- 4 They try to see things from another's perspective.** High performers demonstrate empathy – when others feel understood and cared about. It doesn't mean agreeing with the other person or giving in, but as Steven Covey said: "People don't care what you know until they know you care".
- 5 They are willing to admit a mistake.** We are not perfect, and when someone admits their mistakes, it shows vulnerability and authenticity. It also enables everyone around them not to feel like they have to be perfect.
- 6 They air their grievances skillfully.** This is the most difficult of the six behaviors, and, in fact, being good at the first five behaviors is necessary to being able to step into difficult conversations in an effective way.

Assessing Pressure Management in Interviews

Behavioral Event Interviews

To hire people who have soft skills, [IHHP](#) uses a technique called Behavioral Event Interviewing (BEI) combined with very targeted questions to determine how a candidate has handled pressure situations in the past and to observe them under pressure.

The advantage of using BEI questions to determine soft skills is that when people are asked to recollect a time in the past, it's much harder for them to describe what they would do vs. describe what they actually did, giving you much better insight into how they have handled pressure situations in the past.



In addition, the brain is wired to cause people to start feeling the tension and emotions of a pressure situation just by recalling it. (Just start thinking about the last nasty e-mail you got or difficult feedback someone gave you and you'll know what we mean.) This allows you to actually observe how the candidate responds to feeling pressure.



“It's much harder for people to describe what they would do vs. describe what they actually did.”



Set the stage

Explain to the candidate the process that will be used in the interview. Let them know that you will use a series of questions and will ask them to recall specific situations in the past.

Put the pressure on

Prior to starting, let the person know you are going to ask them to describe a number of situations they have faced. You want them to describe the situation, what thoughts and feelings they had, and the actions they took. Let them know it's ok if they take a few moments to think of the situation. The buildup actually increases the pressure.

Ask the right questions

What are good questions? You can start some that are specific to your industry or the position, for example, a medical professional dealing with an upset patient or a sales person who has to give presentations to large groups. Questions you can use that apply to any candidate:

Here are some examples. You'll start with "Can you describe a time when":

- you were given critical feedback?
- you had to have a difficult conversation?
- there was tension or conflict on a team?
- a change was instituted that you didn't agree with?
- you had time to come up with a creative solution under pressure?
- you made a mistake?

There are lots of other great questions you can ask. This should give a template.

Pressure Assessment

For each question, after the candidate has described the situation, ask them what thoughts and feelings they had, and what actions they took. Here is what to look for:

- If they are unable to think of a situation, then that tells you something – maybe they shy away from tough conversations or don't like to admit mistakes.
- Look for how much self-awareness they have of their emotions and thoughts – if they struggle to describe this, they may lack self-awareness.
- Did the actions they took demonstrate the ability to take ownership, personal accountability, and step into pressure situations? Were their responses more defensive, or, did they avoid difficult situations?

When someone starts describing a pressure situation and the thoughts and feelings they had, they can actually start to experience the pressure – their brain will literally begin releasing their stress response chemicals. Observe to see if they get fidgety, start stuttering, look away and even start to lose energy and confidence during the process. Those are signs the pressure is getting to them. If that happens, how do they handle it? Do they pause, take a deep breath and ask for additional time? Do they continue to muddle through and give mediocre answers, or, struggle to answer at all?



We are not suggesting that you don't ask questions related to things like education, experience, and technical skills, but, those are now the table stakes in getting that job. What differentiates people who excel and become top performers is their soft skills and especially their ability to demonstrate those skills when under pressure.

About the Author



[Bill Benjamin](#) is a training and leadership expert at the [Institute for Health and Human Potential](#) and a contributor to the New York Times best-selling book [Performing Under Pressure](#). Bill is a highly sought-after speaker on the topics of emotional intelligence and performing under pressure, and is a co-author of IHHP's Women Under Pressure [white paper](#). Bill works with people in many high-pressure environments, including Intel, Goldman Sachs, the U.S. Marines, Surgeons and doctors.

Want to read more by Bill?



Bill's article [What CEO's Need to Do to Include the Women on their Teams](#) delves into the importance of a gender diverse culture .



Bill takes us on a journey describing what it takes to drive cultural change, and how to do it. [Read article.](#)



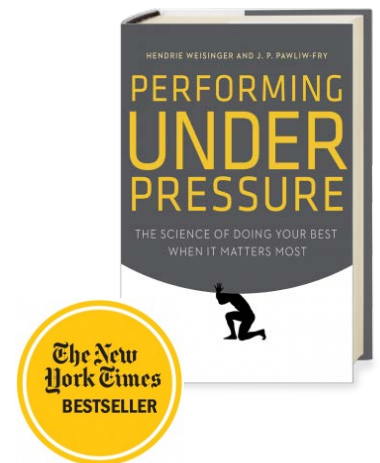
Bill helps to discover 3 signs that you are not managing pressure as well as you thought you were. [Read article.](#)

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Performing Under Pressure

Nobody performs better under pressure. Regardless of the task, pressure ruthlessly diminishes our judgment, decision-making, attention, and performance in every professional and personal arena. Co-authored by IHHP's founder, J.P. Pawliw-Fry, *Performing Under Pressure* will introduce you to the concept of pressure management, offering the latest science on how your brain responds under pressure, and many empirically tested strategies to help you overcome the sabotaging effects of pressure.



<http://www.ihhp.com/pressure-book/>

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Training

To [perform under pressure](#), an individual needs to master three key areas: managing emotions under pressure, thinking under pressure, and, conversations under pressure. Why? Pressure affects and disrupts our emotions (the emotional part of our brain), our thinking (the cognitive part of our brain) and our ability to communicate (which requires both). IHHP provides a full curriculum of leadership and pressure training programs, that, combined with our EI360 assessment and coaching, create a sustained learning approach. Check out our full curriculum at <http://www.ihhp.com/training-programs/>

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