





Beyond Technical Skills: Essential Soft Skills for Sterile Processing Technicians

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify four soft skills that benefit Sterile Processing professionals and their essential roles
2. Explain how the four soft skills influence Sterile Processing operations and outcomes
3. Learn methods for developing soft skills and applying them in Sterile Processing environments

Sterile Processing (SP) is labor-intensive work that requires both physical and mental skills. This includes maneuvering case carts and sorting instruments, recalling specific information and process requirements, and much more. A significant portion of SP orientation and training focuses on technical skills—the process side of SP; however, there is another set of skills that is crucial to the success of SP technicians and the team: soft skills, also known as foundational skills. In a recent study of more than 1,000 occupations, such skills provide professionals with a competitive edge, including opportunities for advancement and adaptability to the ever-evolving job landscape.¹

Objective 1: Identify four soft skills that benefit Sterile Processing professionals and their essential roles

Soft skills are defined as a “set of competencies that individuals can

develop to effectively manage their emotions, plan and achieve goals, and improve interpersonal relationships.”² There are many types of soft skills; this lesson will focus on four of them:

- Time management
- Problem-solving
- Adaptability
- Teamwork

Time management is the practice of managing one’s available time and resources to maximize efficiency and productivity in performing specific tasks.³ It is not necessarily about how much can be accomplished in a shift, but rather how work gets prioritized and delegated. Managing time effectively requires strategic thinking and intentional execution of routines.

Time management is a crucial skill for SP professionals every day in the department, especially on days of high procedural volume or when emergencies arise, which bring additional pressure to turn around instruments efficiently.



Strong problem-solving skills are also essential and continue to be developed and sharpened over time and with experience. The more knowledge and expertise SP technicians have about specific processes, practices and scenarios, the better equipped they will be to make informed decisions to overcome both routine and unforeseen challenges. Put simply, problem-solving skills keep operations running smoothly and help maintain workflows when challenges arise.

Adaptability—being suited for a particular use, purpose or situation—is another critical soft skill SP technicians must possess. Adaptability allows professionals to pivot and make swift, as-needed adjustments to handle what is in front of them. Remaining open to change and adjusting routines and practices safely, effectively and efficiently to accommodate the requirements of an environment or task delivers high value and reliability in the eyes of the SPD's healthcare customers.

Teamwork is another aspect that drives departmental and operational success. It is defined as work done by a group acting together, in which each member performs a part that contributes to the efficiency of the whole. Each member is an active contributor to the overall success and efficiency. The team comes together under a common goal, and in SP, that ultimately comes down to employee and patient safety. Every technician's assignment requires skills, reliability and trust in their co-workers' knowledge, skills and abilities.

Objective 2: Explain how the four soft skills influence Sterile Processing operations and outcomes

Understanding how soft skills influence departmental operations is where true

development presents itself. SP work involves far more than following a series of repetitive steps. Instead, it is a complex operation that includes precision processes, environmental and data analysis, quality assessments, and legally compliant documentation. Each aspect requires both foundational and technical skills to be completed with utmost accuracy, consistency and efficiency.

Effective time management positions SP professionals to look at the bigger picture and aids in how tasks are delegated and which resources will be used to accomplish a task. From a technician's perspective, time management is used to determine which trays to assemble to ensure instruments are ready for surgery when needed. It also helps ensure appropriate coverage during breaks and absences from assignments, reducing the risk of backlogs and bottlenecks.

For leaders, it is about strategizing how to use time to ensure operational efficiency and developmental progress for both the department and the team. This can include initiatives such as routine education planning and shift staggering and quality improvement plans such as tray audits and in-depth surgical instrument training.

Problem-solving comes with the territory of SP. Equipment failures, staff vacancies and volume imbalances all require some level of problem-solving and creativity. SP professionals are best able to solve problems when they have the appropriate knowledge and resources. For example, knowing how to read a case schedule to determine which instruments will be needed may help SP technicians plan instrument turnarounds effectively and safely. Another example of problem-solving is understanding the troubleshooting steps for automated equipment and how to effectively read

manufacturers' instructions for use (IFU) when facing challenges that may require transitioning from automated to manual processes.

Adaptability often goes hand in hand with soft skills like problem-solving, as resolving an issue may sometimes require a shift in practice, process or environment. Adaptability occurs when SP professionals take the initiative to learn new processes, volunteer to support a teammate, or champion new initiatives, including quality assurance measures. Further, adaptability can look like shift coverage or assisting with STAT turnaround instruments. Other examples may include taking on special projects or a new assignment to meet the needs of the department and those it serves.

Sterile Processing departments (SPDs) of all types and sizes require effective teamwork to succeed. Whether it is stepping in to fill a void, assisting when volumes become unmanageable, or ensuring adequate communication for smooth transitions, SP teams cultivate trust and reliability when they come together to form a united front.

HSPA's "Sterile Processing Instrument Manual," second edition, cites communication as a key factor in improving productivity and providing everyone with a better understanding of their roles. When teams know what is expected, they are better able to navigate effectively.

Objective 3: Learn methods for developing soft skills and applying them in Sterile Processing environments

Although some soft skills may come naturally, all can be further expanded and enhanced. Developing skill sets requires strategies and mindsets that foster growth. Those strategies include planning, focus, commitment, effective



teamwork, motivation and positive attitude.⁴

The Department of Labor equates professional success to enthusiasm for the work and the role professionals play in their industry. Positioning one's mindset and demonstrating a commitment to growth strongly influences the trajectory of self-development. Other recommended strategies for development include fostering teamwork, limiting distractions, asking questions, and learning how to identify and prevent errors.

Practicing skills reinforces habits, and teaching solidifies understanding. As skills are practiced and refined, they begin to compound on one another. Focusing on teamwork can refine communication skills, adaptability and time management and vice versa.

Development does not have to feel forced or unnatural. Although it may feel uncomfortable at times, it can be woven into already existing routines and initiatives. For example, microlearning can occur during shift huddles to introduce updates and new processes, thereby reinforcing adaptability and time management skills. This makes the most of the time and resources available in the meantime, while other avenues are created to expand resources and improve efficiency.

Another example would include making a habit of ensuring an assignment stays covered while an SP technician is on break. This practice alone can improve time management, adaptability and teamwork in an already existing opportunity.

Conclusion

Soft skills are a sustaining factor for both professional and departmental growth. These skills support professionals on and off the clock. The use of soft skills enables SP professionals

to cope, adapt and champion change in the SP discipline. Improving these skills enhances overall performance and empowers teams to better advocate for themselves, the profession and the patient. When skills improve, quality increases, efficiency improves, and teams become stronger communicators.⁴ The development and application of soft skills build strong foundations for strong SP operations. 

REFERENCES

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CIS Self-Study Lesson Plan Quiz:

Beyond Technical Skills: Essential Soft Skills for Sterile Processing Technicians

Lesson No. CIS 318 (Instrument Continuing Education – ICE) • Lesson expires October 2029

1. Which of the following is a soft skill addressed in this lesson?
 - a. Time management
 - b. Adaptability
 - c. Teamwork
 - d. All the above
2. Soft skills are also known as:
 - a. Foundational skills
 - b. Basic skills
 - c. Emotional intelligence
 - d. Extra skills
3. Time management is defined as the practice of increasing available time and resources to maximize efficiency and productivity in performing specific tasks.
 - a. True
 - b. False
4. Which soft skill best allows professionals to make swift adjustments on an as-needed basis?
 - a. Problem-solving
 - b. Change awareness
 - c. Adaptability
 - d. Expedient tasking
5. According to this lesson, how is problem-solving developed?
 - a. Through knowledge and understanding about specific issues
 - b. By trial and error
 - c. Guessing until the correct solution is discovered
 - d. There is no specific strategy that can be reliably applied in healthcare settings
6. Although time management is important, it is not usually effective in reducing backlogs and bottlenecks in the Sterile Processing department (SPD).
 - a. True
 - b. False
7. Which problem-solving scenarios were identified in this lesson?
 - a. Instrument availability and equipment troubleshooting
 - b. Staffing schedules
 - c. Quality assurance auditing
 - d. None of the above
8. Adaptability is often associated with which of the following?
 - a. Time management
 - b. Teamwork
 - c. Problem-solving
 - d. Error prevention
9. SP teams cultivate trust and reliability when they:
 - a. Never disagree
 - b. Do not correct mistakes in the moment
 - c. Engage in at least bi-weekly mentoring
 - d. Work toward a common goal
10. Which action identified in this lesson is required to develop soft skills?
 - a. Planning
 - b. Mentoring
 - c. Educating
 - d. Engaging in independent work
11. The Department of Labor cites which mindset characteristic as a factor for success?
 - a. Determination
 - b. Optimism
 - c. Enthusiasm
 - d. All the above
12. Per this lesson, development can be woven into:
 - a. Existing routines and initiatives
 - b. Job titles
 - c. Formal committee structures
 - d. Human Resources hiring practices
13. Which soft skill is used to ensure an assignment is covered while a technician is on a break?
 - a. Time management
 - b. Adaptability
 - c. Teamwork
 - d. All the above
14. Microlearning provided during shift huddles to introduce updates and new processes helps reinforce which soft skills?
 - a. Time management and error prevention
 - b. Adaptability and time management
 - c. Teamwork and rapid device turnarounds
 - d. Problem-solving and flexibility
15. Which are effective strategies for development?
 - a. Asking questions and limiting distractions
 - b. Fulfilling every service request from the Operating Room
 - c. Becoming certified and making zero errors
 - d. Being disciplined by leadership when mistakes are made

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