

Soft skills on sale – how students consider soft skills and corporate expectations

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DOI: [10.29180/978-615-6342-49-2_29](https://doi.org/10.29180/978-615-6342-49-2_29)

Abstract

This paper introduces the research team and its research results on soft skills. By making a clarification on the scope of soft skills and the literature approaches, our research focus falls on detecting how employees, mainly students of the future labour market, and employing companies, mainly those who sharply face the changing world, rank and evaluate soft skills, as well as how these can be harmonised and developed. The data collection is based on surveys, and the analysis uses statistical methods. The results express that there are frictions in the demand and supply side of the labour market in terms of soft skills, but agents see paths and methods to improve them and to match to the changing world.

Keywords: soft skills, university students, employers' expectations

Introduction

The Soft skill research team has been working since 2020 with the aim of detecting, evaluating, and comparing the supply and demand side of soft skills. Theoretical and methodological foundation of the scope of soft skills and their measurement has been a determining pillar since the beginning. The scope is being extended, and the measurement is also altered to the evaluation and improvement of soft skills. The first part of the empirical research is focused on employees, mainly university students, who are to become the determining layer of the labour market in ten years' time. This research aims not only at tracing what knowledge and image students possess in terms of the necessary soft skills but also how they evaluate and rank these skills. The next stage was a survey on the employers' side: what skills they experience to need for an improving performance in the global economic transition. The increasing database of these surveys enable the team to match and compare the demand and supply side, as well as conduct research on how soft skills can be developed, and how the two sides can be harmonised. The future aims of the research team is an international comparison in terms of Central-Eastern Europe, Europe and worldwide scope. In addition, anticipation and foresight skills play a particular role in management, the analysis of which the team also sets as a target.

The present global economic transition, on the base of an emerging new technological era, has created a highly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous arena for business and everyday life. These circumstances call for qualities, knowledge, and skills of the human resource different from the former economic structures. An increasing number of literature sources have been recognising the importance of soft skills and contribute to their articulation.

Hard skills are knowledge-specific skills and are mainly related to qualifications and papers. Soft skills are a set of personal qualities that the employer would like to know about the candidate at the first personal meeting or at the job interview. Soft skills include -among others- personality, behaviour, intelligence level, communication and problem-solving skills, interests, and motivation. Furthermore, workload and stress tolerance, decisiveness, and the ability to

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work independently are also required soft skills from new candidates entering the labour market.

Understanding soft skills fundamentally determine the operation, management, and performance of companies; in addition, they hasten the emergence of new management cultures. The research of soft skills is a new perspective of understanding global value chains, too: how effectively they can operate and how soft skills influence the international structuring of global value chains.

The aim of this study is to investigate the role and the value of soft skills on the labour market. The study focuses on some research questions as follows:

1. How do students rate soft skills?
2. How well do students think these skills match employers' expectations?
3. What tools can be used to develop soft skills?
4. Literature background / Hypotheses development

Soft skills play an important role in the quality performance of any job. Professional experience and expertise are essential but communicating successfully with colleagues or cooperating with them in teams is also important for the smooth running of the company.

Soft skills – or in other words interpersonal skills – are a set of social skills, such as communication skills, empathy, and openness. It includes all the skills we use in our everyday life when communicating with other people. Soft skills are used and applied not only in our private lives but also at our workplaces.

Our skill sets determine whether we can solve or avoid a conflict, deliver a good presentation, manage our time and submit materials precisely and effectively lead our team. We use soft skills in many different situations every day, so developing them can make a huge difference to our lives. At most companies, usually work is carried out in teams, therefore it can be very expensive for a company if colleagues do not or cannot work well together, therefore interpersonal skills have become much more valued on today's labour market. Even in a job interview, it is crucial to be able to quickly find the right tone with your future boss. Later, when it comes to promotions or bonuses, assertive communication, active listening and negotiating skills can play an important role.

Soft skills are the common language of empathy, collaboration, team building, resilience and agility transforming organizations. According to Lepeley, human and social challenges cannot be solved only with hard skills (Lepeley, 2021); soft skills are inevitable.

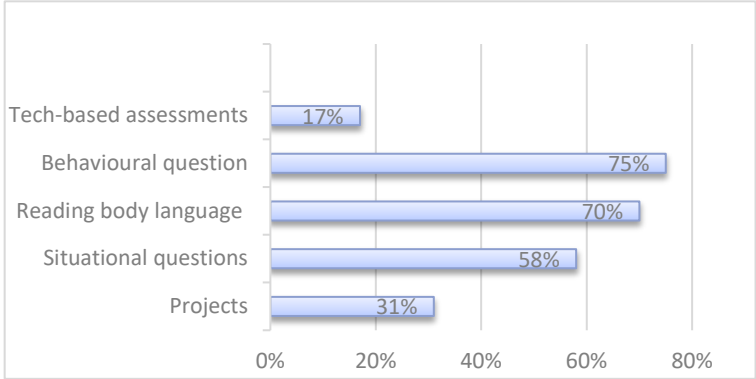
Soft skills are increasingly needed and are in increasing demand (Scheerens et al., 2020). Soft skills are not so easily acquired; they are typically learned over time by individuals as they gain more experience in their jobs as appropriate (Rasli et al., 2020). Soft skills are often viewed as personality traits and behaviours that individuals either possess or not.

Despite the importance of soft skills, the most frequent ways to measure them have not changed over the past few decades. Companies rely on asking interview questions and observing candidates' body language at job interviews. Situational interview questions ask respondents to explain how they would react to hypothetical questions in the future while behavioural interview questions ask interviewees to explain how they have dealt with actual situations in their past. STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) questions are usually used in job interviews. The acronym STAR is a contraction of the words: situation, task, action, and result. The use of this interview strategy is particularly useful in responses to competency-based questions, which typically begin with phrases such as "Describe a time when..." and "Give an example of a situation when..." These interview questions are questions that ask about how the interviewee has behaved in the past, how they have managed certain work or personal situations.

According to the LinkedIn research (2019) the most common ways to assess soft skills at a job

interview are the following: Behavioural questions (75%), Reading body language (70%), Situational questions (58%), Projects (31%), and Tech-based assessments (17%). Figure 1 shows the percentage of the frequency of each way to assess soft skills.

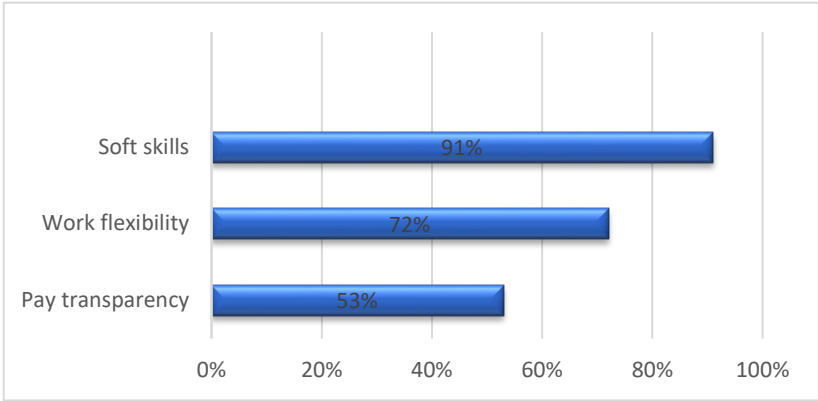
Figure 1. The most common ways to assess soft skills



Source: LinkedIn

Figure 2 represents the three trends transforming our workplace according to the LinkedIn research. The figure shows the percentage of talent professionals who agree these trends are very important to the future of recruiting and HR. The trends are the following: Pay transparency 53%, Work flexibility 72% and Soft skills 91%.

Figure 2. The 3 trends transforming your workplace



Source: LinkedIn

The McKinsey study (2020) predicts that as automation transforms the skills, companies' need and demand for creativity will rise sharply by 2030.

The study summarizes the soft skills companies need but have hard time finding them. These soft skills are the following:

- 1. Creativity
- 2. Persuasion
- 3. Collaboration
- 4. Adaptability
- 5. Time Management

Soft skills together with hard skills complement each other perfectly and only in this way can the best results and sustainable long-term success be achieved (Tripathy, 2021).

The study of Kumar et al (2022) emphasized the importance of the benefits of soft skills and why these skills are important for students as well as for employees. The study also discussed the difference between soft skills and hard skills, the significance of the soft skills and the necessary steps to improve soft skills. The results of their research summarized that students who acknowledge the importance of soft skills early can master their studies with better grades and can finish their student obligations sooner and with less obstacles. Moreover, they can make more connections with people who may be important for them in the future, and, of course, these students can present themselves more effectively, which will help them in their career prospects.

The results of Miller et al. (2015) stated that practice-oriented training should be given more emphasis by educational institutions and universities in order to help future employees enter the labour market with good skill sets, good presentation skills, time management skills and empathy.

When the lack of soft skills in a job becomes tangible, the so-called soft skill gap may appear, which means that the interpersonal or soft skills are not equal to hard or technical skills. Staff turnover and low loyalty at the workplace, difficulty in retaining employees, low corporate morale, poor communication within the company, high workplace stress, reduced productivity, and lack of work satisfaction are all examples of the symptoms of soft skill gap.

The results of the research of Nagaraju show that the provision of mentoring and training increases job satisfaction and loyalty among employees increases flexibility and adaptability, and significantly increases productivity (Nagaraju, Archana M. V, 2015).

Fortunately, more companies realize the importance and advantages of mentoring practice, which might support the professional and personal development of the company's employees. Therefore, it is inevitable for the leaders to support the establishment of a corporate culture, where knowledge is value, knowledge-transfer is supported, and innovation and development is considered a core value. Effective knowledge-management requires new roles and responsibility from the leaders and employees, as well. It is necessary that the participants of the process can observe their own work from multiple perspectives, express their opinions, able to make and receive critical remarks and must be suitable and willing to share their knowledge with each other. Its success depends on several factors such as trust, cultural indifference, lack of reception, communicational problems, and the attitudes of the participants, etc. (Bencsik, 2009).

Mentoring is often the missing link, which connects the new employees with his future workplace successes (Levinson and McKee, 1978). If the previous does not exist, the latter should also be missing.

Methods

The research on the role and value of soft skills in the labour market was carried out by the research team between 2020 and 2022. The first phase of the research involved the employee side and focused mainly on quantitative questions on how the supply side of the market perceives soft skills and the extent to which these skills meet employers' needs. The researchers then asked employers what their expectations were in soft skills and what supply they faced.

In the first part of the study, 500 future employees were surveyed, while a year later, 416 employers were reached by the survey organisers. This short survey presentation summarises some of the findings on the supply side.

The participants in the research were university students who were students at MATE (Magyar Agrár-és Élettudományi Egyetem, Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences). At

the time of the research, there were around 13 000 students studying at the institution's five campuses, in five locations across the country. Students were studying a wide range of subjects, from agricultural sciences to engineering, arts, and economics. This was one of the reasons why the authors conducted their first round of research at this university.

The sample collection method was the snowball method, and most of the questionnaires were completed by respondents on social networking sites. No interpretability problems were encountered by the questionnaire fillers during the pilot survey, so the authors did not change the questions. The questionnaire consisted of closed and open questions. Of 28 questions, one was open-ended, the rest were closed, and there were nominal and metric variables. The questionnaire was designed by the authors themselves and deliberately did not use previous sets of questions. The structure of the questionnaire is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The employee questionnaire

Specification of the sample	Soft skill analysis	Soft and hard skills in the labour market
Place of residence	Soft skill interpretation	What are your expectations in terms of soft and hard skills?
Age	Respondents' soft and hard skills	What value do soft skills have in the labour market?
Highest level of education	Employer expectations of soft skills	Alternatives for the development of soft skills and
Marital		

Source: authors' own research

The questions were analysed using SPSS version 28 and Amos version 28 with univariate and multivariate analyses such as frequency and mean tests, cross tabulations, correlation, and factor tests.

Results

In the following, the authors present some of the research findings.

In terms of place of residence, the largest proportion of respondents in the study were from Central Hungary (44.4%) and Northern Hungary (21.6%). In terms of highest educational attainment, 49% had a high school diploma, 50.6% were graduates, and 0.4% had a doctorate degree. By gender, 31.4% of the sample were male and 68.6% were female.

Respondents typically disagreed that soft skills can be learned in school and that education also prepares students for labour market challenges. However, a majority saw soft skills such as communication skills, problem solving, leadership, teamwork as more important than technical skills in the labour market. There was almost unanimous agreement that it is important to measure soft skills in the job interview, in addition to mapping professional knowledge. In addition, they saw the assessment and continuous development of soft skills as an essential training function, in some jobs, as much as vocational training. It is no coincidence that this led the respondents to conclude that the key to success in leadership is the existence and application of leadership soft skills.

Respondents were asked to assess what they thought were the expectations of the labour market in terms of the strength of their soft skills. On a five-point Likert scale, one was not at all typical, while five was completely typical.

Table 2. What are students' expectations of young people's skills

Skills	Employee		
	Valid N	Mean	Std.Devi.
professional knowledge	500	3.95	0.83
language skills	500	4.21	0.777
IT skills	500	4.15	0.729
good communication skills	500	4.22	0.776
critical thinking	500	3.4	0.999
leadership skills	500	2.83	0.972
entrepreneurial skills	500	2.91	1.111
ability to work in a team	500	4.45	0.69
ethical and moral skills	500	3.59	1.137
strategic thinking	500	3.59	1.051
time management skills	500	4.01	0.913
planning and organisation skills	500	3.79	0.915
presentation skills	500	3.74	1.06
self-awareness	500	3.07	1.183
problem-solving skills	500	4.32	0.806
empathy	500	3.15	1.162
creativity	500	3.63	1.09
flexibility	500	4.46	0.757
emotional intelligence	500	3.04	1.148

Source: authors' own research

The importance of hard skills was not questioned by the respondents, so professional skills, language skills and IT (Information Technology) skills were rated as strong requirements. The authors asked respondents to what extent they felt that they could meet the employer's requirements. Here again, respondents were asked to rate their compliance on a five-point Likert scale. A score of one indicated strongly disagree while a score of five indicated strongly agree. The results show that for the hard skills, respondents judged that the majority could meet these requirements (mean professional knowledge: 3.7, mean language knowledge: 3.69, mean IT knowledge: 3.89).

When looking at soft skills, the authors found that the four most expected skills according to students were the ability to deal with stressful situations and conflicts, good communication skills, problem-solving skills, the ability to work in a team, and flexibility. In meeting these expectations, the mean for stress situations was 3.8, the mean for good communication skills was 4.01, the mean for problem solving skills was 4.21, and the mean for teamwork skills was 4.23. The compliance for these skills was even stronger than for hard skills.

The survey also analysed which skills respondents thought might need external help to develop, i.e., the involvement of a trainer/coach. The top five according to the students were communication, conflict management, decision-making, self-assertion, and motivation.

The question was asked whether the respondents were willing to invest financially in the development of these skills and whether they preferred group or individual training. In the question on payment, the respondents could choose between three variable values: yes, no or do not know whether they would pay for the development. As for the type of training solution, they had to select one of the options: individual, group or both. The authors used SPSS AMOS

28 to analyse the questions. The regression values of the model showed that the students' fundamental belief in the different forms of development in leadership maturity training was that 55% of the students believed that group and individual development could only be successful together. However, almost 25% of students considered individual training to be the appropriate form. There was no significant relationship between expectations of a particular skill and financial gain among students. An interesting message from the research was that 40% of students would have paid for opportunities to develop skills.

Finally, the research asked what more could usefully be learned in education to better prepare students for entering the labour market. Here, the authors were basically looking for suggestions on soft skills. Many ideas were received. For example, job interview situations, improvement of presentation techniques, introduction of the subject of debates, improvement of etiquette, etc. were mentioned.

Conclusion

The paper summarises some of the research results of the researchers, focusing on the employee side: how students rank the importance of different soft skills and how they think they meet the expectations of companies.

The results support that even if professional knowledge, information technology skills and language are taken as fundamentals, soft skills are also determining. In additions, students emphasise the soft skills that help navigating in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world: resilience in conflicts, teamwork, problem solving skills and communication.

The research unfolds a determining friction; namely, that these soft skills are ranked as most influential, but the present education system contributes very little to improve them, as students feel. Moreover, it seems that it is not the formal education system that enables people to acquire soft skills but rather the workplace and informal relations.

However, students argue that soft skills can be developed either by personal experience or by external trainings. Mainly resilience and communication skills demand coaching, partly on their own, partly in teamwork, for which a great number of students are willing to pay. In terms of high education, mock interviews, presentation skills and debate courses could contribute to a more efficient preparation for the business world.

Author Contributions: All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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