

SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AMONG STUDENTS OF TRANSYLVANIA UNIVERSITY OF BRASOV

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Abstract: *The aim of the paper is to determine the importance of soft skills development among students of Transilvania University of Braşov to improve their level of employability and reduce the number of unemployed graduates. In order to discover a solution to the problem represented by the lack of soft skills among students, a quantitative research among Transilvania University's students has been considered necessary. The purpose of the research was to discover the main soft skills that students need to improve in order to increase their level of employability. The study is based on a psychological approach, which has the role of examining students' thoughts, based on behaviour and attitudes in various situations.*

Key words: *soft skills, employability, students*

1. Introduction

Globalization is a factor that has brought major changes in the world, most of them being very beneficial to humanity. However, this phenomenon has led to a faster evolution of things. To survive in a globalization era, people must constantly adapt to even the smallest changes.

Continuous economic developments lead to fierce competition for employment. This problem is increasingly affecting the population, especially young individuals.

Due to the impossibility of keeping up with fast changes at the organizational level, the labour market is facing a deficit in the skills and experience needed for employment. This also has an impact on potential employers, who are increasingly deploring the lack of some skills among employees.

More than a billion jobs, almost a third of the total number of jobs worldwide, will undergo transformations due to the evolution of technology in the next ten years (according to estimates by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development - OECD). By 2022, the World Economic Forum estimates that 133 million new jobs will be created in major economies to meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

At the same time, economic and demographic change is putting additional pressure on

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today's workforce. Entering the new decade, one may see important transitions to a more sustainable world, focusing on making equitable, inclusive progress to equip and enable people to thrive in the jobs of the future.

Employers cannot ignore the lack of essential employment skills among young people who have graduated from college. Young graduates are expected to be prepared to adapt to change and thus develop lifelong learning and information management skills in this era, when change occurs rapidly.

2. What are Soft Skills? Hard vs. Soft

In order to get the job they want, people focus during their years of study on learning hard-skills specific to the field in which they aspire to work in the future. These are also called "technical skills", are measurable and can be learned.

Although hard-skills open the door to the desired profession, the skill package for a professionally developed person also implies the existence of socio-human skills, which are called "soft skills".

Soft skills have a special role in professional advancement. However, the importance of their contribution to a successful career is often underestimated by individuals.

According to Bruce Tulgan (2015), an efficiency management expert, "hard-skills hire you, but the lack of soft skills fires you". Soft skills play an important role in consolidating technical knowledge, being considered the basis for supporting hard-skills.

Compared to technical skills, soft skills are abilities that cannot be quantified and cannot be learned, but only developed. Although hard-skills are the ones mentioned in the CV, soft skills are those that help in terms of adapting to the workplace, relating to the rest of the team and many other advantages.

In short, hard-skills define the level of expertise, and soft skills describe character traits and interpersonal relationships.

3. The Importance of Soft Skills in the Labour Market

Human resource management considers communication, interpersonal and initiative skills as the most desired skills in the labour market, having an equal importance with understanding and knowledge of technical notions.

At the same time, some employers mentioned that in certain fields, soft skills are even more important than hard-skills, because the latter can be learned and developed much easier with trainings.

There have also been situations in which soft skills have brought greater added value to employees than technical knowledge. For example, employees may excel in job-specific hard-skills, but if they are unable to manage their time or are unable to work in a team, they may not be successful in the workplace.

Things differ from country to country. The business sector in Romania has developed considerably in recent years. Romania recorded the highest growth of the EU services sector in the first quarter of 2020, according to data published by Eurostat. However, companies claim that the process of transitioning business to digital has been hampered

by a lack of appropriate skills among employees.

Following a report made on the Romanian labour market in 2021 by Hipo.ro, it appears that soft skills are important for companies. As the number of graduates increases from year to year, employers no longer consider graduating from college as an important selection criterion. They focus on finding people who have, in addition to hard-skills, as many soft skills as possible.

As a result, companies are looking for graduates who adapt easily to the flexible work environment, thus ensuring a rapid adjustment from a professional point of view, which is very important in growing markets and which are under competitive pressure.

In the 21st century, there is a growing emphasis on soft skills at the workplace, as well as on the role that education plays in the development of these skills.

Graduating from college does not guarantee graduates a job. Lifelong learning has become a "must", because the speed of transformation and change of each field is so fast that many essential jobs today can disappear in a few years. Companies cannot ignore the lack of essential skills for employment among young people who have graduated from college.

There is a growing consensus among employers in all fields that graduates do not meet the standards of potential employers in the globalized business environment. In addition to solid technical knowledge, graduates need to have a growing range of soft skills in order to quickly adapt to the increasingly unpredictable requirements of the business world.

Bruce Tulgan (2015) argues that the lack of soft skills is more pronounced among young individuals, as they grew up in a high-tech environment that led them to take refuge in free communication, interaction with others and other activities that contribute to developing soft skills.

The level of competitiveness of graduates in the labour market is measured in the number of soft skills they have. The selection criteria have changed, focusing in principle on experience and soft skills.

Previous experience in a similar position does not refer to the hard skills already put into practice at the former job, but to the opportunity to develop soft skills in that field. In other words, it is known that in a job competition, experience is a criterion that makes a difference and, in most cases, it takes precedence over the level of education. This does not mean that education does not matter, but it is interesting to note that the use of knowledge gained after university is possible only by combining it with specific soft skills.

Developing soft skills is not an easy thing to learn and is considered very difficult or even impossible to teach by other people. Teachers can easily recognize students' soft skills as they interact with them during classes, but judgment is usually subjective and intuitive.

Soft skills are defined as the set of essential skills necessary to achieve the three requirements that any student should meet at graduation: to comply with the requirements of employers, to have developed the need for lifelong learning and to be a good citizen.

4. Soft Skills Improve the Level of Employability

Students seek employment both during college and after graduation. However, there are factors that create barriers to their employment.

Although there are many definitions of this term, employability is defined by Tulgan (2015) as the set of skills that help a person develop an understanding of the concepts of professional practice. In other words, this is the ability of an individual to function successfully at the workplace.

Employers are looking for students with a high level of employability in order to provide maximum yield on their position in the context of a competitive market. In general, it reflects the relevance of study programs for the labour market.

According to a report by the University of Connecticut (Şerbănescu, 2011), there are numerous studies that analyse the relationship between education and employability, presented from stakeholder perspectives.

Employability factors are analysed at two levels: academic performance, which refers to the specific content of a discipline, and soft skills, which are non-academic. Researchers in higher education institutions and employers have increasingly focused their attention on the importance of soft skills, being considered to have a value of anticipating success in professional activity after years of study.

5. Stakeholder Perceptions according to the Literature

Research indicates that stakeholders (employers, universities, students) believe that there is no adequate training to learn soft skills. Employers expect young graduates to have both professional skills and a minimum of soft skills at the time of employment. Also, many graduates say in job interviews that they have these soft skills, but the perceptions of the two parties on having these skills are different.

In most cases, companies are disappointed by the poor training in soft skills and consider that the biggest blame lies with educational institutions, as their role is to prepare students for the demands of the labour market.

Universities agree with the statement that soft skills are not sufficiently developed in the higher education cycle, and that subjects aimed at developing such skills are not integrated into the curriculum. However, they argue that such competencies are obtained by involving students in extracurricular activities.

Students believe that learning certain soft skills, such as effective communication, conflict management, teamwork and flexibility, would help them develop professionally and personally. They also state that these skills should be intelligently integrated into the curriculum, by adapting course projects to as realistic scenarios as possible, which reflect potential problems they may encounter in their future job.

A common denominator between the perceptions of all stakeholders would be that soft skills cannot be learned in the classroom or by reading a textbook, but are acquired through practical activities.

Also, the business environment must understand the academic environment and know its limits, and universities should try to adapt as much as possible to the requirements of

employers. The existence of closer, more involved and more transparent cooperation is necessary for student training to be meaningful and relevant to the workplace.

All stakeholders should explore ways to improve soft skills, as the result is a win-win situation.

6. How Do Universities Approach the Soft Skills Problem?

Although the lack of soft skills in graduates is a topical issue, it is not necessarily new. Indeed, the importance of soft skills is much more pronounced today than in previous years due to rapid changes in the labour market. However, there are many universities that have addressed this issue in recent years and have tried to implement measures that involve the acquisition of soft skills among students.

The growing demand of employers for soft skills among young graduates has led universities to resort to different approaches to implementing these competencies within their own faculties, such as support programs, teaching and learning activities, practical activities carried out through student organizations etc.

Oxford University

It is at the top of best universities in the world, according to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2021. Although it is the most appreciated higher education institution in the world in terms of academic performance, Oxford University emphasizes the accumulation of soft skills by its students.

The measures that the university has implemented to develop soft skills are contained in a dedicated site, Oxford University Careers Service. Through this site, the university offers development opportunities, support services and personalized assistance in order to help students improve their soft skills and increase their level of employability in the labour market. It is also important to note that this initiative is not limited to students currently studying at them, but also involves graduates or alumni of that university.

Among the activities organized for the development of soft skills are: internship programs in various partner organizations, virtual career fair, organizing workshops throughout the academic year, soft skills development programs, such as The Oxford Strategy Challenge (TOSCA) or The Agency (which is based on practical work experience).

Cardiff University

Cardiff University in the UK is another higher education institution that focuses on developing soft skills. As the university website points out, the number of students enrolled is equal to the population of many small towns, which makes it quite difficult to monitor each student's progress and influence their behaviour. But this did not discourage the university from paying attention to soft skills. They realized that, in order to become a top university, more involvement is needed in developing the level of employability of its students.

The institution decided to create a closer link between the university and companies. Thus, for clearer and more transparent information of the needs on the labour market, Cardiff University organizes meetings with recruiters from various organizations through which they express their expectations from a future graduate, the university thus adapting to those requirements.

John Moores University of Liverpool

The institution is composed of a number of technical universities, which means that it focuses in principle on hard skills. However, they also wanted to integrate soft skills through their own initiative, called "World of Work" (WoW).

WoW is the university's response to a number of influential reports that support the need for more active involvement of universities in improving the employability of students for the benefit of the local, regional and national economy, as well as the requirements of partner organizations. At the same time, they want to have a competitive advantage in the market of higher education institutions, considering that the respective approach is an attractive one for potential students.

Within that program, each participating student will develop and reflect on soft skills (such as problem analysis and solving, teamwork and interpersonal skills, verbal and written communication, personal planning and organization, initiative, numerical reasoning and information skills) that will be adapted to the hard skills learned in the courses. Also, each student will have an e-portfolio (online portfolio which records all the results obtained during the participation in the program) through which one can track his own progress.

University of Pittsburgh (USA)

This university chose debates as a method of developing soft skills. They created the William Pitt Debate Union (WPDU), an extra-curricular program that focuses on a wide range of debate activities, including intercollegiate political debates or public debates.

One of the oldest organizations of this kind in the country, WPDU was originally developed from the Public Speaking Division of the University of Pittsburgh in 1912. Undergraduate student debates are based on disparate academic topics, which can range from computer science to philosophy.

The basic philosophy of WPDU is that argument can educate and emancipate in a very effective way. This union supports various student forums in order to improve critical thinking, deepen understanding of political issues in a timely manner, and improve speaking and expression skills. By stimulating a solid and inclusive discussion in the student community on various topics, WPDU contributes effectively to the development of the soft skills of the participating students.

Much of the energy of this debate union comes from a team culture that prioritizes solidarity and group cooperation. The resulting synergy allows the development of a rich learning environment, achieving competitive success, academic excellence and enriching public arguments.

7. Methodology

Due to the fact that there is no past or recent research regarding the level of soft skills of the students within Transylvania University of Braşov, the primary data were collected by the researchers. So, a quantitative research study was conducted among the aforementioned population in order to generate comparable and current data.

The non-random sampling method was used in this research. The sampling was done on a voluntary basis, the questionnaire being distributed on Facebook using the snowball method, because it allows the collection of a large amount of information at a low cost, in a relatively short time and it is very easy to apply.

The sample size was determined based on the number of responses received from the surveyed population. Due to the didactic nature of the research and the limited financial and time resources, a very large sample could not be considered. The research sample consists of 116 respondents.

As there is a large number of soft skills, in order to make a correct choice of the most suitable ones, the report made by Hipo.ro ("National Labour Market 2021") was taken as reference, more precisely the chart which reveals the top of the most sought after soft skills pursued by employers in 2021.

This study was considered relevant because it was conducted very recently (December 2020-January 2021), on a sample of 337 companies from various fields of activity, which operate in Romania and which covers to a significant extent the fields in which the students of Transylvania University of Braşov carry out their studies. Therefore, the level of seven soft skills was analysed, using Likert scales.

8. Results of the Research

The current level of students' soft skills is as follows:

- *Flexibility and adaptability*: Students are flexible until a certain point. When sudden changes occur, they tend to adapt with more difficulty. Master's students adapt more easily to academic changes than undergraduate students.
- *Productivity and efficiency*: University students who participated in this research are generally productive and efficient. They like to work with targets and show as much efficiency as possible when they do an assignment. At the same time, they do not consider the pressure of time as a stress factor that reduces their efficiency. Women have a higher level of productivity and efficiency than men.
- *Effective communication*: Students have a satisfactory general opinion about their own communication style. They consider that they are quite coherent in expressing their own ideas. Students from engineering faculties are less coherent in expressing their own ideas than those from non-engineering faculties. Master students are also more able to use technical and scientific terms in a presentation than undergraduate students.
- *Lifelong learning*: Respondents are partially able to sort information, are open to accumulating knowledge in various fields and to learning from professionals. However, they have little interest in reading books or scientific articles.

- *Results-orientation*: Students can, in most cases, maintain their goals, even if certain obstacles arise or they are under pressure (i.e. deadlines). They also have the capacity for self-motivation and do not give up on achieving the proposed goal. Men are more results-oriented than women. Also, students from engineering faculties are less results-oriented than those from non-engineering faculties.
- *Proactivity*: Students generally have a good level of proactivity. Most are able to take responsibility for their own actions and decisions, think and make decisions independently, and are smart enough to ask for help when they do not feel competent. However, there are small differences between the groups. Women have a higher ability to think and make decisions independently than men. The same thing happens with engineering students, who have a higher tendency to depend on other people's opinions when they have to make an important decision than non-engineering students.
- *Problem solving*: Students have an average level in terms of this soft skill. Women are better at problem-solving than men.

The first three most important soft skills required for employment in the field are: Flexibility and adaptability, Productivity and efficiency, Effective communication.

After comparing the groups, it was found that women and non-engineers need more effective communication to get a job than men and engineers. In terms of problem-solving ability, engineers need this soft-skill more for employment than non-engineers.

The first most chosen soft skills that students consider necessary to improve are: Effective communication, Time and priority management, Leadership, Creativity. The last place is held by Proactivity. Comparing the groups, it can be concluded that engineers need to develop their level of Productivity and efficiency to a greater extent than those in non-engineering faculties. Master's students tend to be willing to improve their ability to analyse, while undergraduate students focus on lifelong learning and teamwork.

9. Conclusion

As the importance of soft skills increases in the labour market, the integration of these skills at university level is becoming increasingly essential in order to encourage the employment of future graduates.

With technological advances, the equation of skills will change even more, and soft skills will become increasingly important.

Although the technical skills of a profession remain useful, more and more employers are looking to hire graduates with a wide portfolio of soft skills. Universities need to integrate as many soft skills as possible into the teaching of technical skills, thus creating graduates who can compete with confidence and succeed in a new and competitive labour market.

Transilvania University of Braşov is one of the largest higher education institutions in Romania whose students face employment problems after graduation. Of course, this aspect cannot be generalized, as there are students who have been employed since

college. However, there is a potential to increase the employability of those who are not so lucky through soft skills.

The main objective of this paper was to highlight the importance in terms of the development of soft skills by university students, which implicitly led to the need to determine both the current level of students and possible skills to be improved in the future.

10. Research Limits and Future Research Directions

The research conducted cannot be considered representative, as there was a very small number of respondents (116 individuals) out of a total of approximately 20,000 students (not even 1% of the total population).

Although the questionnaire was not very long and complicated, the answers came in a pretty long time, as part of a complicated process, as there were not many students willing to participate in the study. This may also have happened because of the subject of the study, soft skills, a term that is not very well known by students.

Due to the very small sample, most spreads are equal and no statistical differences could be distinguished between certain groups, although it is likely that, in the case of a larger sample of people, they would have existed.

The research focused on identifying the level of limited number of soft skills. Although they are the first most sought after by organizations at the moment, the demands of employers can change quickly and this study could become irrelevant.

A future research can be done on "the softer skills", considered to be a set of human skills more evolved than the soft skills discussed in this study. These include: self-confidence and self-esteem, self-realization, ethical integrity and self-awareness.

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