

Soft Skills: A Key Determinant of Professional Success and Employability

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ABSTRACT

Soft skills play a crucial role in shaping how undergraduate students are perceived by employers and how they are assessed by professors. This abstract examines the perspectives of both sample employers and professors regarding the soft skills of undergraduate students. From the employer's viewpoint, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and leadership are highly valued. These skills enable students to collaborate effectively, think critically, and navigate complex work environments. Employers also emphasize the importance of emotional intelligence, including empathy and self-awareness, as these traits contribute to strong interpersonal relationships and effective conflict resolution. Professors, on the other hand, assess soft skills through various means, including class participation, group projects, presentations, and written communication. They observe students' ability to communicate ideas clearly, work collaboratively with peers, demonstrate initiative, and adapt to new challenges. Professors often provide feedback and guidance to help students develop these skills throughout their academic journey. Overall, both employers and professors recognize the significance of soft skills in preparing undergraduate students for the workforce. Integrating opportunities for students to practice and enhance these skills is essential for their holistic development and future success in professional environments. This paper looks at the ranking of soft skills by employers and professors from various disciplines.

KEYWORDS: Soft skills, Employers, Professors, Employability

INTRODUCTION

Soft skills are highly valued by employers in today's dynamic workforce. Effective communication is key, as it ensures clear and impactful interactions within teams and with clients. Collaboration and teamwork thrive when employees possess soft skills like empathy, conflict resolution, and adaptability, enabling them to work harmoniously towards common goals. Employers also seek individuals with strong leadership potential, demonstrated through skills such as decision-making, strategic thinking, and the ability to motivate others. Problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, and creativity are equally important, as they enable employees to navigate challenges and innovate solutions. Additionally, soft skills contribute significantly to customer service excellence, fostering positive relationships and enhancing customer experiences. Overall, employers recognize the indispensable role of soft skills in driving productivity, teamwork, leadership effectiveness, problem-solving, and customer satisfaction in today's competitive landscape.

CONCEPT OF SOFT SKILLS

Soft skills refer to a set of personal attributes, social abilities, and non-technical communication skills. Unlike hard skills, which are specific to a particular profession or task, soft skills are more universal and can be applied across various domains and contexts. Often called interpersonal skills or people skills, soft skills are essential for effective interactions and relationships. They contribute to one's overall emotional intelligence and are crucial for both personal and professional success.

In simpler terms, 'soft skills' encompass the essential abilities and competencies needed for personal development and career success. These skills are also known by various names, such as "people skills," "employability skills," or "EQ skills." Essentially, they are non-technical skills that are vital in achieving

success in one's job or career.

SOFT SKILLS VS HARD SKILLS

Soft and hard skills are essential for success in the workplace, but they differ in nature and application. Soft skills refer to personal attributes, interpersonal skills, and emotional intelligence. Examples include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, leadership, empathy, and time management. Soft skills are generally more difficult to quantify and measure than hard skills, as they involve behaviors, attitudes, and personality traits. However, they are crucial for effective collaboration, communication, and overall workplace success.

On the other hand, hard skills are specific, teachable abilities that are usually job-specific and technical. Examples include computer programming, data analysis, graphic design, project management, foreign languages, and accounting. Hard skills are typically acquired through education, training, and experience, and they are easier to quantify and assess than soft skills.

While hard skills are important for performing tasks and responsibilities related to a particular job or profession, soft skills are equally important for effective communication, teamwork, leadership, problem-solving, and overall professional growth. In today's dynamic and interconnected workplace, a combination of both soft and hard skills is often necessary for individuals to excel and thrive in their careers.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To Explore the ranking of soft skills valued by employers and university professors.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Delors J.(1996) The "Learning: The Treasure Within" report is a publication from the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, which was convened by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). The report, authored by Jacques Delors and published in 1996, is a comprehensive examination of education and its role in the modern world.

The report delves into various aspects of education, including its purpose, challenges, and potential impact on society. It emphasizes the importance of lifelong learning, the integration of different forms of knowledge, the promotion of cultural diversity, and the need for educational systems to adapt to changing global realities. One of the key contributions of the report is its identification of four pillars of education:

- Learning to know: Emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge and the development of critical thinking skills.
- Learning to do: Focusing on practical skills and competencies relevant to employment and everyday life.
- Learning to live together: Highlighting the importance of social skills, empathy, and understanding in fostering peaceful coexistence and global citizenship.
- Learning to be: Recognizing the holistic development of individuals, including their emotional, spiritual, and ethical dimensions.

Lalithambigai, N. (2003). "Communication Skills: What Do Employers' Expect? (Workplace Communication Skills For Engineering Graduates)." Published in Johor, UTHM. This work likely delves into the expectations of employers regarding communication skills, specifically focusing on engineering graduates. It may explore the types of communication skills employers value, how these skills contribute to workplace success, and strategies for developing effective communication abilities in engineering professionals.

Overall, the reports advocates for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to education that goes beyond academic learning to encompass personal growth, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Dr. VijayaKumari S.N. (2014) published an article titled "Soft Skills and Teacher Accountability in the

Context of Quality Education" in the International Journal of Education and Psychological Research (IJEPR), Volume 3, Issue 1, in March 2014. The article likely explores the relationship between soft skills, teacher accountability, and their impact on the quality of education. It may discuss how teachers' soft skills, such as communication, empathy, and collaboration, contribute to creating a positive learning environment and improving student outcomes. Additionally, it may address the importance of holding teachers accountable for developing these skills and ensuring that they are effectively integrated into educational practices to enhance the overall quality of education.

Sharif Nadiyah Razal, et al. (2017) , the primary purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of the Online Project-Based Collaborative Learning (OPBCL) model in improving students' soft skills. In today's rapidly changing environment, employers demand more from soft skills rather than only hard skills. Therefore, the development of soft skills in students must take place at their educational institutions. In the modern competitive world, Collaborative Learning (CL) is widely used in teaching and learning and very helpful in learning soft skills. This study is conducted to highlight the dearth of soft skills among Malaysian Polytechnic graduates.

Rosli Ibrahim et al. (2017) study titled "The Effect of Soft Skills & Training Methodology on Employee Performance," explored how acquiring soft skills and using specific training methods impact job performance. In today's competitive corporate environment, employees need a combination of soft skills, such as qualities, perception, habits, language, and self-awareness, along with hard skills like experiences, technical expertise, and education. Using a quantitative research approach, the study employed regression analysis and designed a questionnaire for managers and executives in selected Malaysian private companies. The study's population comprised employees from these companies, and a sample of trainees was chosen from this group. The findings revealed a positive correlation between employees' possession of soft skills, the training methods employed, and their overall performance.

Noah and Abdul Aziz (2020) conducted a systematic review to identify the soft skills most valued by employers and examine the role of universities in developing these competencies among graduates. The review found that employers consistently prioritized communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, leadership, adaptability, and interpersonal skills. However, many graduates lacked these essential soft skills, creating a gap between higher education outcomes and labour market expectations. The authors concluded that universities should integrate soft skills into the curriculum through experiential learning, industry collaboration, and student-centered teaching approaches to enhance graduate employability.

Garcia-Alvarez et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review to identify the transversal (soft) competencies most valued by employers for graduate employability. Using the PRISMA framework, the authors reviewed 52 studies from the Scopus and Web of Science databases. The review revealed that communication, teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability, leadership, and interpersonal skills were consistently ranked as the most important competencies by employers across different countries. The study concluded that higher education institutions should embed these soft skills into the curriculum through active learning, work-integrated learning, and industry partnerships to bridge the gap between academic preparation and labour market expectations.

Urkia-Basterra, Imaz Agirre, and Alvarez-Huerta (2025) conducted a systematic review of work-based learning programmes in higher education. The findings revealed that internships, apprenticeships, and industry collaborations effectively develop communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, and professional ethics. The review concluded that work-based learning is a critical pathway for enhancing employability through authentic soft skills development.

METHODOLOGY

The study examines the reasons behind graduate unemployment from the perspective of employers, highlighting the crucial link between employers' views on the importance of soft skills.

It delves into two key areas:

1. Ranking of soft skills by the Employers
2. Ranking of soft skills by University Professors

Additionally, the research investigates employers' perceptions of graduates' deficiencies in soft skills.

For this research, the following sides of the sample were selected

1. 50 employers from various local organizations in and around Chennai district.
2. 50 professors from various educational institutions in and around Chennai district.

Soft skills are generally recognized and defined by various organizations, educational institutions, and professionals in the field of human resources and workforce development. However, some common soft skills often cited across different sources include:

- Leadership skills
- Problem-solving abilities
- Communication skills
- Teamwork and collaboration
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Time management
- Emotional intelligence
- Interpersonal skills
- Conflict resolution
- Creativity and innovation

Employers and professors alike value these ten soft skills, considering them essential for success in today's workplace.

ANALYSIS

RANKING OF SOFT SKILLS BY EMPLOYERS

Table 1- Responses of Softs Skills Ranking by the Employers

S.No.	Soft skills	Mean scores
1	Leadership skills	0.73
2	Problem-solving abilities	0.85
3	Communication skills	0.86
4	Teamwork and collaboration	0.76
5	Adaptability and flexibility	0.81
6	Time management	0.70
7	Emotional intelligence	0.66
8	Interpersonal skills	0.63
9	Conflict resolution	0.54
10	Creativity and innovation	0.57

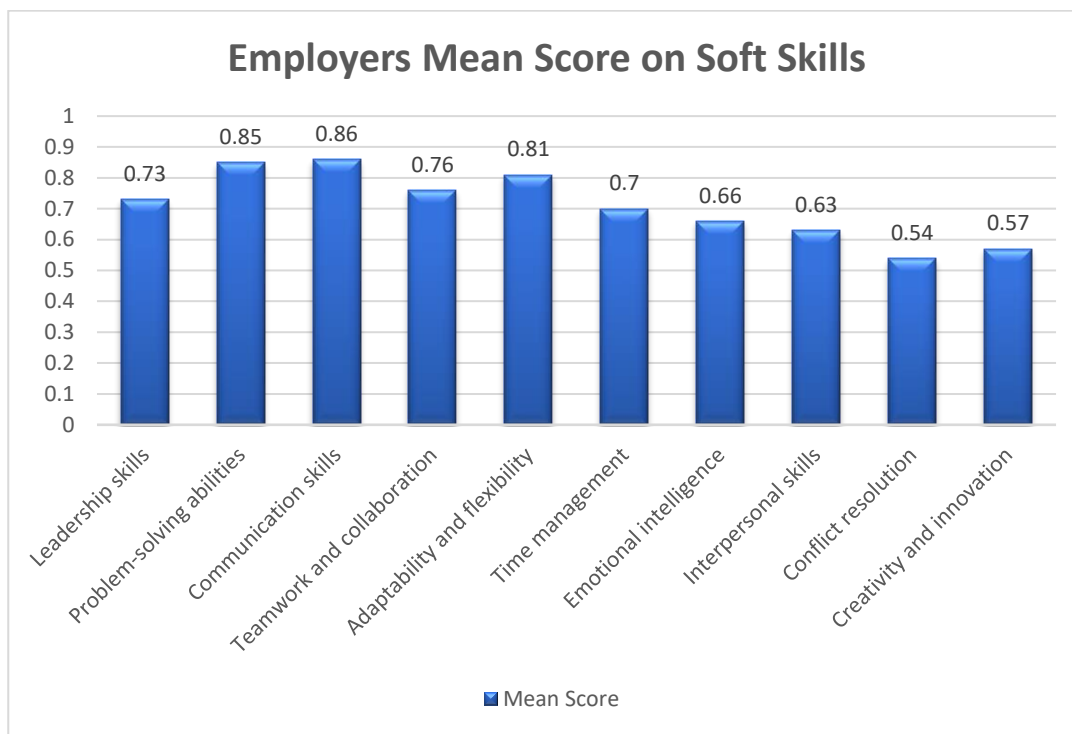


Fig 1- Responses of Softs Skills Ranking by the Employers

The mean scores for various soft skills, as derived from the responses given by the Employers, offer valuable insights into the perceived importance and proficiency levels of these skills among respondents. Communication skills emerged as the most highly rated, with a mean score of 0.86, highlighting their critical role in effective interaction and information exchange. Problem-solving abilities followed closely with a mean score of 0.85, emphasizing the value placed on individuals' capacity to analyze and resolve complex issues. Adaptability and flexibility received a strong mean score of 0.81, indicating recognition of the need to adapt to changing circumstances. Leadership skills were also highly regarded, with a mean score of 0.73, underscoring their significance in professional settings. Teamwork and collaboration achieved a respectable mean score of 0.76, reflecting the importance of cooperative efforts in achieving shared goals. However, areas for improvement were identified in conflict resolution and creativity/innovation, which received mean scores of 0.54 and 0.57, respectively.

RANKING OF SOFT SKILLS BY PROFESSORS

Table 1- Responses of Softs Skills Ranking by the Professors

S.No.	Soft skills	Mean scores
1	Leadership skills	0.78
2	Problem-solving abilities	0.85
3	Communication skills	0.89
4	Teamwork and collaboration	0.86
5	Adaptability and flexibility	0.80
6	Time management	0.70
7	Emotional intelligence	0.66
8	Interpersonal skills	0.57
9	Conflict resolution	0.55
10	Creativity and innovation	0.61

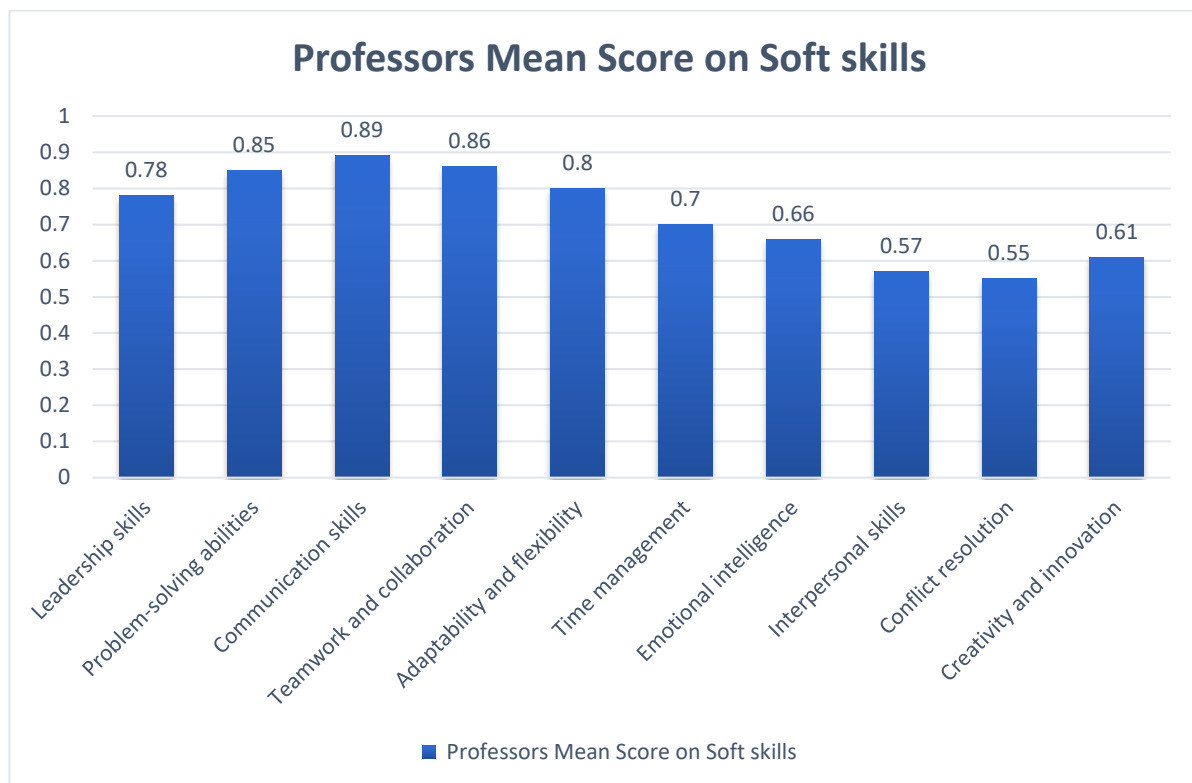


Fig 2- Responses of Softs Skills Ranking by the Professors

The data analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the mean scores for various soft skills, shedding light on their perceived importance and proficiency levels of the professor's responses. Communication skills stood out with an impressive mean score of 0.89, underlining their critical role in effective workplace interactions. Problem-solving abilities followed closely with a strong mean score of 0.85, highlighting their significance in addressing complex challenges. Teamwork and collaboration also received high recognition, scoring 0.86 on average, emphasizing the value placed on cooperative efforts in achieving common objectives. Adaptability and flexibility garnered a respectable mean score of 0.80, indicating their importance in navigating dynamic work environments. However, areas for improvement were noted in time management (0.70), emotional intelligence (0.66), interpersonal skills (0.57), conflict resolution (0.55), and creativity/innovation (0.61).

These findings offer valuable insights into the strengths and areas of development for individuals and organizations seeking to enhance their soft skill competencies and succeed in today's competitive workplace landscape.

GRADUATES LACKING SOFT SKILLS- EMPLOYERS POINT OF VIEW

Table 3- Graduates Inadequate in Soft skills

S.No.	Soft skills	Mean scores
1	Leadership skills	3.25
2	Problem-solving abilities	3.27
3	Communication skills	4.94
4	Teamwork and collaboration	4.67
5	Adaptability and flexibility	3.38
6	Time management	3.06
7	Emotional intelligence	3.16
8	Interpersonal skills	3.03
9	Conflict resolution	3.07

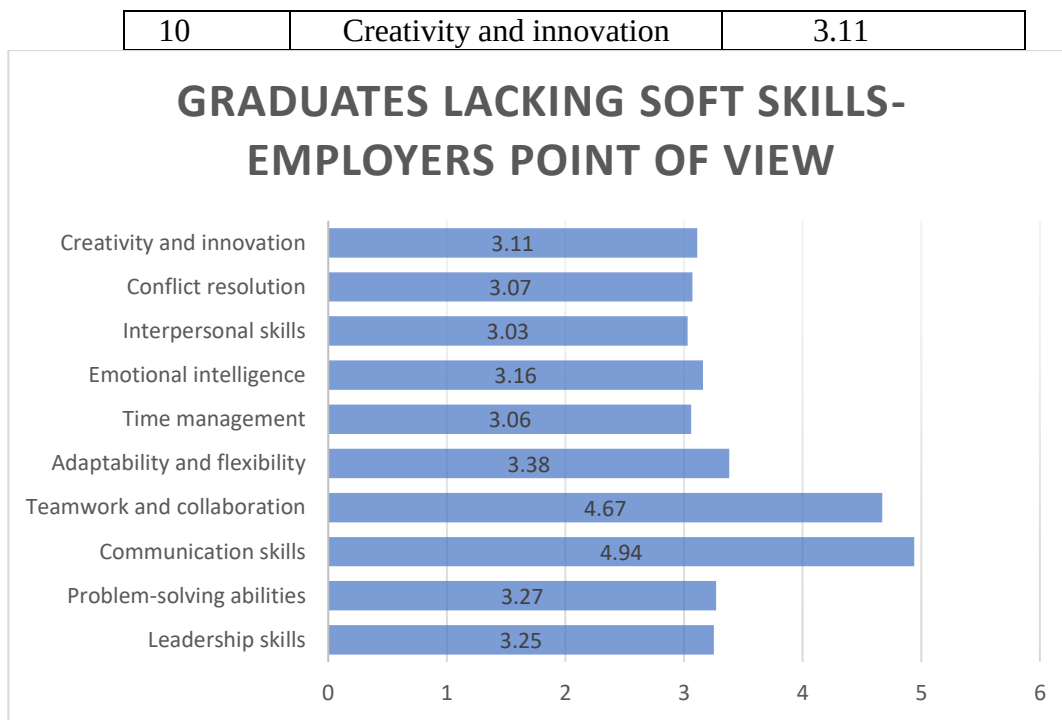


Fig 3- Employers Responses on Graduates Inadequate in Soft skills

From the data, it is evident that employers perceive communication skills and teamwork/collaboration as the most lacking soft skills among graduates, as indicated by their high mean scores of 4.94 and 4.67, respectively. These skills are crucial for effective workplace interactions and cooperative efforts. Additionally, adaptability and flexibility, time management, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills also received moderate mean scores, suggesting areas where graduates may need improvement to meet employers' expectations. Skills such as leadership, problem-solving, conflict resolution, and creativity/innovation were rated relatively higher but still have room for enhancement. Overall, the data reflects employers' concerns about graduates' soft skills and emphasizes the importance of addressing these areas for better employability and workplace success.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

According to a survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), communication skills consistently rank as the most sought-after attribute by employers, with 82% of surveyed employers stating that they look for strong communication skills in candidates.

The same NACE survey found that teamwork and collaboration skills are highly valued by employers, with 78% of respondents indicating that they prioritize candidates who can work effectively in teams.

A study conducted by LinkedIn revealed that 57% of senior leaders believe soft skills are more important than hard skills. Additionally, 80% of LinkedIn members stated that soft skills are increasingly important to business success. And also from the World Economic Forum report, "The Future of Jobs," it was projected that by 2025, employers will increasingly prioritize skills such as analytical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence, and leadership, alongside traditional technical skills.

A survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that 75% of HR professionals reported that their organizations struggle to find candidates with adequate soft skills.

These statistical data points underscore the broad acknowledgment by employers regarding the significance of soft skills in professional environments. They also emphasize the difficulties employers encounter when seeking candidates who demonstrate these crucial skills. Hence, these statistical findings

on soft skills and the challenges faced by employers regarding graduates' soft skills provide substantial support for this research.

Thus the data highlights significant areas where graduates are perceived to lack essential soft skills from the employers' and professors' standpoint. Specifically, communication skills and teamwork/collaboration emerged as top priorities, reflecting the crucial role of effective communication and cooperative abilities in modern workplaces. To address these gaps, educational institutions can integrate soft skills training into their curriculum, providing practical experiences and workshops focused on communication strategies and collaboration techniques. Encouraging students to participate in internships or industry projects can further enhance their soft skills through real-world applications. Additionally, promoting self-awareness and reflection among students and fostering partnerships with employers can ensure that graduates are better prepared to meet the demands of the workforce. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can bridge the soft skills gap and enhance graduates' employability and success in their careers.

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