




Employers' perception of young workers' soft skills

Gabriella Horváth-Csikós ^{1*} , Tímea Juhász ²  and Tamás Gáspár ³ 

1 Department of Languages for International Business, Faculty of International Management and Business, Budapest Business School. Budapest, Hungary

2 Department of Methodology for Social Studies, Faculty of International Management and Business, Budapest Business School. Budapest, Hungary

3 Department of International Economics, Faculty of International Management and Business, Budapest Business School. Budapest, Hungary

* Correspondence: horvath-csikos.gabriella@uni-bge.hu

Abstract: It is no question today that human capital is one of the most important corporate assets that employers need to manage wisely and in line with the company's objectives. Businesses are seeking to employ people with the skills that best match employers' expectations. In the past, companies focused primarily on hard skills, but today there is also a growing focus on the soft skills of employees, which are not easy to acquire or develop. The present study deals with the soft skills that employers expect from their employees, and what employees would do to develop such skills in line with the employees' and the company's goals. Our research results show that, based on a questionnaire survey of 416 Hungarian enterprises, firms, based on size, ownership structure or knowledge orientation, do not differ significantly in terms of their perception of the soft skills of their young employees. Furthermore, the survey also revealed that employers are aware of the need to develop the soft skills of their employees, and that most of them support such efforts even financially.

Keywords: human resources; hard skills; soft skills; development

1. Introduction

There have been many studies on the factors that influence the competitiveness of companies, but there is much less research on the impact of intercultural skills and soft skills on the business success of companies: namely, whether employees who are excellent team players, have great time management skills, are brilliant organisers, are critical thinkers or have above-average empathy skills can increase competitiveness. Does the company benefit from having employees who speak more foreign languages or when they are more flexible and open-minded, or does the company benefit from having more motivated and cooperative employees?

Both to gain a competitive advantage and to meet the changing challenges of the workplace, all organisations – regardless of their size, nationality, or profile – need to develop the knowledge and skills of their employees. The competitive bottom-line advantage is nothing more than finding a balance between human capital and appropriate skill sets.

According to a 2018 World Economic Forum study (WEF, 2018), by 2022, no less than 54% of all workers will need significant retraining in areas such as analytical thinking, innovation, and digitalisation to keep pace with digital transformation.

It is now well-established that people in specific fields, and within them in specific professions, need to have a particular skill set: i.e., a set of soft and hard skills to perform the tasks assigned to them at the highest possible level of competence. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution for designing a competence development programme for companies, there are some key areas that should not be overlooked when planning what knowledge and skills employees will need to succeed in the future. Technical skills, also known as hard skills, vary from position to position and from function to function, but there are soft skills that all

Citation:

Horváth-Csikós, G., Juhász, T., & Gáspár, T. (2023). Employers' perception of young workers' soft skills. *Prosperitas*, 10(1), 1. Budapest Business School.
https://doi.org/10.31570/prosp_2022_0021

History:

Received: 15 Jun 2022
Last Revised: 4 Aug 2022
Accepted: 22 Aug 2022
Published: 23 Sep 2022



Copyright:

© 2023 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC) license.

employees need regardless of their role or level in the organisation; therefore, soft skills are deemed transferable.

The aim of this study is to empirically investigate which soft skills employers believe their employees possess. What they would do to develop these skills in line with their employees' and the company's goals.

The following questions were formulated in the scope of our broader research project:

- How do employers perceive the soft skills of young people (high school and university graduates) working for them?
- What soft skills do employers expect young people to have based on the completion of various levels of education (secondary and tertiary)?
- To what extent do young people meet employers' expectations concerning soft skills based on various levels of schooling?
- Where do employers rank soft skills in their ranking of employee skills?
- How do employers assess development opportunities with regards to soft skills?
- What tools do enterprises use to support the development of employees' soft skills?

This paper focuses on the first and last research questions.

2. Literature background and hypotheses development

In the age of digital economy, competition is a driving force for organisations to constantly look for new ways to improve their competitiveness. More and more researchers and representatives from different disciplines emphasize the importance of soft skills in achieving competitiveness in the labour market in different professional fields (Chulanova, 2020). Soft skills have always been important, but nowadays they are increasingly becoming vital. Despite the rise of automation and artificial intelligence, the right combination of soft skills is increasingly necessary for success in the workplace.

Hard skills are about the ability of employees to perform a task, while soft skills are more about how adaptable, collaborative, problem-solving and decision-making employees are in specific situations. Robles (2012) argues that soft skills encompass traits, attitudes and behaviours and do not reflect technical aptitude or knowledge. Soft skills are harder to define and are more difficult to articulate than hard skills, as they are less tangible, non-technical and are not personality-specific skills. Hard skills are easier to define and measure than soft skills (Sopa et al 2020).

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

Of course, soft skills in combination 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).

Reliable performance at work is the result of the right combination of soft and hard skills. According to a Harvard University study (National Soft Skills Association, 2015), eighty-five per cent of workplace success is due to soft skills, while only fifteen per cent is due to hard skills. According to LinkedIn Global Talent Trends 2019 (LinkedIn, 2019), 92 per cent of experts think that soft skills are as important or are more important than hard skills. Also, 89 per cent of experts said that if a new hire does not live up to expectations, it is because they do not have or do not exhibit the necessary and critical soft skills.

The above research describes that, based on interviews with company executives and discussions with experts, it was able to identify three trends that could influence current labour markets. The three variables are: soft skills, job flexibility and pay transparency. LinkedIn's Global Talent Trends report presents a survey of more than 5,000 professionals, with data from a total of thirty-five countries.

Andreas (2018) describes in his study that both businesses and recent graduates he interviewed attribute the lack of "soft skills" to the inability of universities to prepare students

for the labour market. The study offers an alternative hypothesis as to why recent graduates lack soft skills: namely, that the loss of social capital affects graduates' ability to acquire these skills. This is so as in the process of building social capital, students acquire the behaviours and cultural information they need to acquire soft skills, and therefore it is possible that students no longer have access to this experience. Therefore, businesses and graduates suffer the consequences of the loss of social capital. This may be due to a decline in building social capital through personal interactions rather than universities' failure to prepare graduates for success in the business environment.

In her study, Rumiantseva (2021) states that currently the requirements that employers place on university graduates are being meticulously observed, with an apparent emphasis on soft skills requirements. The issue of updating university curricula or developing new curricula that include the development of soft skills as part of university education is relevant. In the study, a great selection of world best practices is presented in leading articles on soft skills development in education.

As technology allows workers to more extensively share and to access more information, employers are demanding more from their employees.

Candidates with strong soft skills are in high demand for a wide variety of job types. What are the skills that are typically valued by all employers and can be the secret to an employee's long-term success in the workplace? They are as follows.

Communication: communication skills are essential skills in every job. In the course of their work, all employees will need to communicate with people, whether they are customers, clients, colleagues, employers, or suppliers. They need to be able to communicate clearly and politely in person, on the phone and in writing, because employers are looking for employees who can communicate with people from diverse backgrounds and who cannot only communicate their own ideas but can also listen empathetically to others. In addition to verbal and non-verbal communication, communication skills include negotiation, non-verbal communication, persuasion, presentation, public speaking and reading body language.

Creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving are necessary soft skills whatever the job: employers are looking for candidates who can analyse situations and make informed decisions, who are not afraid of tasks, who can solve challenging problems without being anxious to understand them. Critical thinking and the ability to develop solutions in the most effective way are skills associated with problem-solving also includes curiosity, adaptability, critical observation, planning, the desire to learn, flexibility, innovation, resourcefulness, thinking creatively, and tolerance of change and uncertainty. While many people associate creativity only with art or design, this soft skill can be applied, is necessary and can be developed in almost any job. The demand for creative labour will continue: a recent McKinsey study claims that with the rise of automation, the demand for creativity in the labour market is certain to increase, with a steep rise forecast by 2030.

Leadership, management skills: while not all jobs involve a management role, most employers want to know their prospective employee's decision-making skills, sense of responsibility to society and ability to handle conflicts. Employers are looking for prospective employees who can face a tricky situation and help resolve it. They are also looking for people who are keen to become leaders and who are 'born leaders'. Other skills related to leadership include the ability to solve problems and conflicts between people, delegate tasks, facilitation, mentoring, giving clear feedback, inspiring colleagues, managing meetings, project management and talent management.

Positive attitude: companies want employees who are compassionate, friendly with others, enthusiastic about their work, and generally a pleasure to be in the company of. Positive attitudes include confidence, cooperation, courtesy, enthusiasm, honesty, humour, patience, respect, and teamwork.

Work ethic: employers are looking for candidates with a strong work ethic. These people arrive at work on time, complete tasks on time, stay focused and stay organised.

Problems in job interviews are not only due to the relative difficulty of identifying and measuring soft skills but may also be connected to a shortage of soft skills currently available in the market. When a company wants to select the best possible candidate for a given position, the IQ (intelligence quotient), the emotional quotient (emotional intelligence quotient/EQ) and the so-called curiosity quotient (CQ/curiosity quotient) should be assessed and measured. People with high EQ can make all their decisions more consciously, because they can identify when they are feeling exactly what they are feeling, what effect this has on

them, and they can more easily form good and meaningful relationships with their fellow human beings. People with a high EQ undergo less stress and anxiety, which enables them to handle situations well even under greater pressure, and to make good decisions consistently. A high EQ also indicates strong interpersonal skills, which are essential for managing and leading a team, working well with colleagues, and building further useful relationships. EQ plays a key role in leadership skills (Haddon, 1999).

Speaking at the annual conference of the World Economic Forum in Davos-Klosters, 23-26 January 2018, Jack Ma said that it is only through reforms in education that can students compete with machines and robots: it is well-known that by 2030, around 800 million jobs will be taken over by robots. Education is the biggest challenge now, and if we do not change the way we teach now, we could be in big trouble in 30 years. What we are teaching students today is outdated and knowledge based. We cannot teach students how to compete with machines because machines and robots are smarter. Teachers must no longer teach knowledge, but something much more unique, something that even robots cannot compete with. These are soft skills, such as independent thinking, teamwork, caring for others, faith, and trust. That is why Jack Ma believes it is important to teach sports and the arts, and to integrate them into other subjects, because that is where soft skills can really develop. And we can be sure that we can be better than robots at those skills; and robots will beat us in everything else that is knowledge-based.

It is far more obvious that education plays an important role in developing soft skills of future generations. In Zaslavskaya and Malafiy's (2021) research it has been found that certain identified and given organisational, pedagogical, and educational conditions influence the development of professionally significant qualities of university students (the would-be entrants of the labour market), which serve as a basis for productive competitiveness in the field of professional activity.

In their study, Hadiyanto et al. (2021) developed a model of soft skills, hard skills, and competitiveness (SHC) for students and graduates and performed user validation following the development process. The development process uses the ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Implementation, and Evaluation) model. Their study contributes to the preparation of graduates with employability skills in challenging and complex work environments.

Organizations hire people for hard skills but end up firing them for lack of soft skills (Wheeler, 2016). Wheeler argues that emotional intelligence is the foundation of what is commonly referred to as soft skills, and that although for some people these skills are innate, they can be developed and improved over time. In his writing, Wheeler uses personal anecdotes to illustrate how emotional intelligence has also improved his own professional life.

Some companies have a performance appraisal system that grades not only hard skills but also soft skills. In 2006 Shapiro wrote about the ways some universities began to assess both "hard skills" (such as accounting, finance, and strategy) and "soft skills" (such as leadership, teamwork, and ethics) in university MBA programmes. In terms of research findings, the data from the soft skills assessment that students were required to master within the Organizational Behaviour courses quickly revealed a performance gap between what the faculty hoped students would learn and what students demonstrated they could do (Coyle-Shapiro & Morrow, 2006).

The practical application of emotional intelligence skills becomes a strategy for improving the ability of individuals and organisations to assess the impact and consequences of decisions, while improving the quality and efficiency of the decision-making process (Hess & Bacigalupo, 2011).

How we respond to challenges expresses our emotions and interacting with others is more than a gut reaction. Our reactions are key skills we can use to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others. These skills are called "emotional intelligence" or "EI". Psychologist and author Daniel Goleman defines EI (Goleman, 2008) as the ability to recognize and manage our own emotions and the ability to recognize, understand and influence the emotions of others.

Tulgan's (2015) research shows that being successful in the workplace today does not guarantee that one will remain successful tomorrow or soon. Suddenly, the work environment can change, the strategy of the company can change. Suddenly, you must work with different people, different age groups, using different time management. Therefore, the key question is not whether those entering the labour market have the skills that are necessary and essential

for the situation now, the question rather is whether they will be able to learn new skills and adapt to the changed circumstances (Tulgan, 2015).

Although technical knowledge, educational attainment, hard skills, and other performance indicators can get you a job, research in the literature shows that it is soft skills that will allow you to move up the job ladder and have a successful career. Nevertheless, this does not mean at all that employee success is predetermined already. It is up to the organization to develop the missing soft skills of the employees.

Individuals, employees but also institutions and companies can do a lot to develop the soft skills of employees. On the one hand, the staff can take part in several high-quality online courses where they can develop a myriad of soft skills, from project management to negotiation techniques and creativity. It is important to be aware of your own strengths and weaknesses, and it is even worth doing a SWOT analysis of yourself. Highly qualified coaches are also available to help you improve your skills. Situational exercises, so-called role-plays, are useful, as they allow you to practice and rehearse tasks in a real situation, and there is always a discussion and feedback at the end of the situation. However, the source of the skill set is not only the qualifications acquired in formal education and training certified by certificates and diplomas, but also the constantly changing and enriching fields of knowledge and skills acquired in non-formal and informal learning areas (Tribble, 2020).

3. Methods

In 2020, researchers and academics from the Budapest Business School University of Applied Sciences launched a multi-stage research project to assess the supply and demand for soft skills in the Hungarian labour market from both the perspective of employees and employers.

First, the authors surveyed the domestic supply side and based on a questionnaire completed by five hundred employees, the researchers found that employees see that certain soft skills (such as flexibility, communication, teamwork) are more strongly demanded by employers than hard skills (such as professional skills). Studies have also shown that employers' expectations of soft and hard skills are less correlated, and employees believe that firms value and expect these skills from their employees as non-systemic, closely related skills (Horváth-Csikós & Juhász, 2022).

In the second round of the research, the authors involved the employer side. In the scope of this, the authors also conducted a questionnaire survey and 416 enterprises participated in the study. The employer survey was conducted in 2021-2022. This paper presents some results of this survey.

The survey, based on the objectives and research questions formulated in the introduction, has the following target structure (see Figure 1).

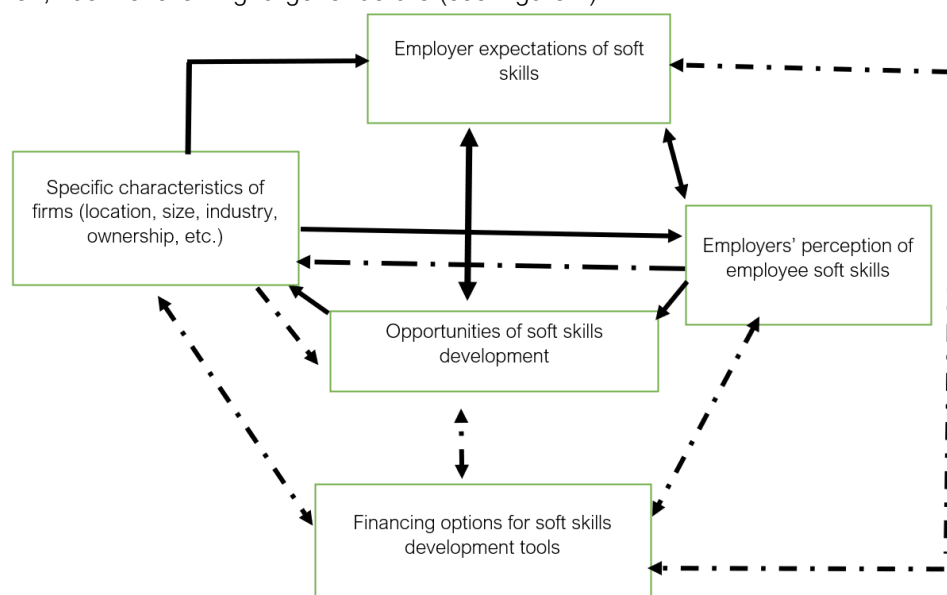


Figure 1. Research objectives. Source: own work

In Figure 1, solid arrows represent direct effects, while dashed arrows possible effects. Employers' expectations of soft skills are influenced by firm-specific characteristics, employers' perceptions of skills and the range of opportunities to develop them.

This situation also raises the question of 'sacrifice' that firms are willing to make to develop these skills. This also depends on the specific characteristics of the firms and how firms value the importance of soft skills. And this also depends on what means they consider to be important for development.

In the present study, the authors test the following two hypotheses:

- **H1: Firms' perceptions of the soft skills of employees with various levels of education depend on organizational size, organizational ownership, and the importance of knowledge to the firm.**
- **H2: Firms believe that it is in the workplace environment that employees' soft skills can develop best and are willing to support the improvement of skills even financially.**

In approaching the employer side, the authors sought to include as many regions in Hungary as possible in the research. The questionnaire was available online for companies to access and complete. The enquiries took three forms: in person, by e-mail and through various social media platforms. The method of sample collection was the snowball method, and although the sample is not considered representative, the authors believe that the sample can provide a picture of the expectations and experiences of domestic employers with soft skills.

The questionnaire used in the research consisted of twenty-seven questions, one of which was open-ended, and the others closed. The latter consisted of nominal and metric variables. The structure of the questionnaire is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of the questionnaire. Source: Own work

Question group 1: Employers' specifications	Question group 2: Employee soft skills characteristics and employer expectations	Question group 3: Soft skill development opportunities
Location of the organisation	Characteristics of young people's soft skills	Areas for soft skill development
Organisational size	Employers' expectations of soft skills	Factors affecting the development of soft skill
Organizational field of operation	Perception of the importance of soft skills	Role of trainers/coaches in the development of soft skills
Ownership of the organisation		Financial benefits of soft skill development
Knowledge priority in the organisation		

Before sending out the questionnaires, the authors carried out a test survey. The ten companies responding to this survey did not indicate any problems of interpretability when filling in the questionnaire, so the authors sent out the questionnaire without effecting in changes. It was not possible to measure willingness to fill in the questionnaire on the social media platform, and close to 30% of participants responding in person or by email filled in the questionnaire.

The questions of the questionnaire were evaluated with the help of statistical software SPSS Version 28 using univariate and multivariate statistical methods. The authors thus performed frequency and mean tests, ANOVA, correlation, cross tabulation, and a factor analysis.

4. Results

The authors started the analysis of the sample by specifying the sample. Table 2 summarises the sample characteristics. 416 enterprises participated in the survey.

Table 2. Sample characteristics. *Source: Own work*

Sample characteristics	Frequency (%)
Location of organisations	Northern Hungary: 18.8%
	Northern Great Plain: 4.1%
	Southern Great Plain: 5.3%
	Central Hungary: 63.2%
	Central Transdanubia: 3.8%
	Western Transdanubia: 2.9%
Organisational size	South Transdanubia: 1.9%
	Micro enterprise (2-8 persons): 8.7%
	Small company (9-49 persons): 22.4%
	Medium enterprise (50-249 persons): 27.6%
Organisational field of operation	Large company (250 people or more): 41.3%
	Agriculture and forestry: 6.0%
	Mining: 0.5%
	Manufacturing: 4.3%
	Electricity, gas, steam, and water supply: 4.8%
	Construction: 7.9%
	Trade and repair: 12.0%
	Accommodation and food service activities: 4.8%
	Financial activities: 12.0%
	Transport, storage, post, and telecommunications: 6.0%
	Real estate, business activities: 3.8%
	Public administration, defence, etc.: 8.7%
	Human health and social work activities: 2.4%
Other: 17.8%	
Ownership of the organisation	Exclusively Hungarian-owned: 61.1%
	Joint venture: 20.9%
	Wholly foreign owned: 18%
Perception of the importance of knowledge	Knowledge-based operation: 58.4%
	Labour-intensive operation: 35.1%
	Capital-intensive operations: 5.5%
	Other: 1%

From the specification it is clear that firms in Central Hungary are over-represented in the sample. The largest number of respondents (63.2%) was from this region, while the smallest number (1.9%) were from South Transdanubia.

By size of business, the largest proportion (41.3%) was made up of large firms, while the smallest proportion (8.7%) was made up of micro firms.

The authors used the Hungarian Central Statistical Office's definitions for industry classification. The sample consisted of service providers with a significant size. The largest proportions of micro enterprises (22.2%) and small enterprises (16.1%) were from the trade and services sector, while medium-sized enterprises (10.4%) and large enterprises (17.4%) were from the financial sector. In terms of organisational ownership, Hungarian-owned enterprises were the most represented in the survey. Based on the Chi-square test (Chi-square: 39.856 df: 6 sig.: 0.00 $p < 0.05$), there was a correlation between ownership structure

and firm size in the sample. While 91.7% of micro firms, 68.8% of small firms, 61.7% of medium firms and only 50% of large firms were Hungarian owned among the organizations in the study.

According to the knowledge-based activity, more than half of the firms referred to it in their operations. There was a significant difference between the participants based on company size and knowledge preference (Chi-square: 15.430 df: 6 sig.: 0.017 $p < 0.05$). That is, larger firms had a higher proportion of those that based their operations on knowledge (51.4% of micro firms, 50.5% of small firms, 52.2% of medium firms, 69.8% of large firms). There was no significant correlation between ownership structure and knowledge orientation (Chi-square: 8.613 df: 4 sig.: 0.072 $p > 0.05$). For all three ownership structures, the largest share was found in the knowledge-oriented firms (57.3% of Hungarian-owned firms, 52.4% of joint ventures and 72.0% of foreign-owned organisations).

In the scope of the survey, the authors asked the organisations about what is typical of the soft skills of a young person with a high school diploma or a young person with a university degree, and how they value these skills. On a scale of one to five, respondents were asked to rate how typical the listed attributes are of young people. One meant 'not at all typical' and five means 'completely typical'. The mean and standard deviation of the responses to this question are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Characteristics of students leaving secondary and tertiary education (mean, standard deviation). Source: Own work

Features	Young persons leaving <i>secondary</i> school		Young people leaving <i>higher</i> education	
	Mean	Deviation	Mean	Deviation
Ability to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds	3.23	0.836	3.90	0.733
Having an intense sense of responsibility towards society	2.84	0.905	3.64	0.818
A born leader	2.27	1.014	3.07	0.829
Can solve challenging tasks	2.94	0.840	3.69	0.738
Would like to become a leader	2.95	1.029	3.76	0.837
Can be compassionate	3.30	0.871	3.65	0.735
Not afraid of new tasks	3.19	0.865	3.83	0.771
Admitting making mistakes	3.04	0.982	3.66	0.785

Briefly, the data show that statements related to soft skills have higher mean and lower standard deviation values for those with higher levels of education.

Concerning high school graduates, respondents perceive graduates' empathy and communication skills to be strong, and they are open to getting assignments. However, they still need to learn leadership, they have little life experience (this is of course also due to their age), and this is also due to the need to develop their problem-solving skills. There was no unanimity among respondents concerning these characteristics, with several cases showing a variance of more than one.

Students leaving higher education are more communicative, not afraid of challenges, ambitious, although they do not yet have mature leadership skills, but would like to hold a senior position in organisations. The scatterplots show that businesses had relatively similar views of young people who had obtained higher education qualifications and had a workplace.

It is interesting to compare these data with national and international findings. According to a Hungarian study (Kárpátné Daróczi, 2014) focusing on non-degree vocational training in economics, companies require the following from business graduates: primarily reliability, precision, practical application of skills, autonomy, problem-solving, workload

management and work capacity, i.e. companies are looking for employees with up-to-date competences who can be a driving force in the company with their creativity and problem-solving skills. The results of the research show that there is a gap between the competences students perceive as necessary and those expected by employers with respect to problem-solving skills, practical application of skills, communication skills, foreign language skills, organisational skills, stress tolerance, analytical skills, analytical approach, flexibility, and the ability to motivate others. In other words, students perceive these competences as more important to employers than they actually are.

In his study, Seetha (2013), drawing on the experience of developed countries, points out that employers are more likely to hire and support people who are resourceful, able to work well independently and, of course, have soft skills. She also stresses the need to integrate soft skills into training programmes and curricula highlighting the different teaching methods to be used in the development of soft skills. To further assess the variables, the authors of the present study grouped the characteristics into factors for both groups of workers. All but two of the variables (social responsibility, completing challenging tasks) in the case of high school graduates and one variable (solving more challenging tasks) in the case of college graduates were suitable for factor training. Looking at the secondary level, the Bartlett's test scores for the KMO Bartlett's test were .812, the Khi-square was 781.412, df: 15, sig. 0.000. The explained variance ratio is 67.071%. Concerning those with tertiary education, the KMO Bartlett test Bartlett test scores are .841, the approximate Khi-squared is 1054.481, df: 21, sig.: 0.000. The explained variance ratio: 63.701%.

In both cases, the rotation of factors was done using the Varimax method. The factors are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Factors influencing the perception of young workers. Source: Own work

	People with <i>secondary</i> education		People with <i>tertiary</i> education	
	1	2	1	2
Admitting making mistakes.	0.840		0.804	
Not afraid of new tasks.	0.802		0.740	
Can be compassionate.	0.749		0.702	
Ability to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds.	0.692		0.744	
Having an intense sense of responsibility towards society.			0.786	
Would like to become a leader.		0.906		0.923
A born leader.		0.717		0.570
<i>Cronbach Alpha</i>	.809	.618	.848	.481

Note: The factors are named as follows: Factor 1: Emotional and task-solving maturity;
Factor 2: Leadership compatibility

The internal consistency between items is indicated by Cronbach's Alpha values, which is low for the second factor, i.e., higher education. The study also looked at the perceptions of young workers at secondary and tertiary levels to see what clusters could be created from the sample. Table 5 shows the final cluster centres of the clusters formed using the K-means procedure.

The authors of this study used correlation analysis to find a correlation between the perceptions of young people based on various levels of education. They found that the more likely they were to believe that high school graduates are emotionally and task-solving strong, the more likely they were to hold this view about those with a high school degree (Pearson correlation: .486 sig.: 0.00). They also hold the same perceptions about the managerial compatibility of graduates (Pearson correlation: .128 sig.: 0.00). At the same time, companies that more highly esteem the managerial skills of high school graduates also hold similar perceptions about the managerial qualities of college graduates (Pearson correlation: .374 sig.: 0.00).

Table 5. Cluster centres. Source: Own work

	Cluster		
	1	2	3
Secondary education/emotional and problem-solving maturity	-0.78678	0.8436	0.5977
Secondary education/management compatibility	0.11999	1.09375	-1.0812
	Cluster		
	1	2	3
Tertiary graduates/emotional and problem-solving maturity	-1.02896	0.47006	0.55793
Graduates/management compatibility	0.03891	-1.27931	0.64471

The authors then analysed whether perceptions of these factors depend on organisational size, firm ownership, and the importance of knowledge to the firm. Differences between variables were analysed by the authors of the study using ANOVA tests. In the table, they indicated whether there was a correlation between the variables, and in the case of which item the highest mean value could be seen.

Table 6. Employer perceptions influenced by company size, ownership, and knowledge relevance (ANOVA, p=0.05). Source: Own work

Factors	Company size	Where is it most typical?	Ownership structure	Where is it most typical?	Knowledge is important- the world	Where is it most typical?
Emotional and task maturity in tertiary graduates	F: .886. sign.: .448. <i>No sign. difference</i>	Strongest in micro companies	F: .695. sign.: .500. <i>No sign. difference</i>	Strongest in joint ventures	F: .683. sign.: .506. <i>No sign. difference</i>	Most typical of companies demanding capital
Managerial compatibility in tertiary education	F: .387. sign.: .762. <i>No sign. difference</i>	Strongest in medium-sized companies	F: 3.290. sign.: .038. <i>No sign. difference</i>	Strongest in joint ventures	F: .846. sign.: .430. <i>No sign. difference</i>	Most typical of companies demanding capital
Emotional and problem-solving maturity at upper secondary level	F: 1.335. sign.: .262. <i>No sign. difference</i>	Strongest in small companies	F: 2.546. sign.: .080. <i>No sign. difference</i>	Strongest in joint ventures	F: 2.641. sign.: .073. <i>No sign. difference</i>	Most typical of companies demanding capital
Managerial compatibility in upper secondary education	F: 2.782. sign.: .041. <i>There is a spec. difference</i>	Strongest in large companies	F: 2.084. sign.: .126. <i>No sign. difference</i>	Strongest joint ventures	F: 1.175 sign.: .310 N <i>No sig. difference</i>	Most typical of companies demanding capital

The results show that, when looking at firm size and ownership structure, significant differences between firms could be identified in terms of perceptions of managerial compatibility, but no difference could be pinpointed for knowledge preference.

Overall, the surveyed firms rated the soft skills of their employees based on education as follows. On the one hand, according to managerial aptitude and, on the other hand, according to emotional and task maturity supported by life experience. These perceptions are closely correlated across education levels. The participants in the study typically rated leadership skills differently.

A further question raised in the research was where and how employees' soft skills can be developed. The authors listed a few response options for respondents as to where employees' soft skills could be strengthened. These included the following options: at school (including university), in the family, among friends, among strangers, abroad, workplace at work, none of the above, and a non-item. Respondents could tick more than one of the variables provided. Figure 2 shows the frequency of responses.

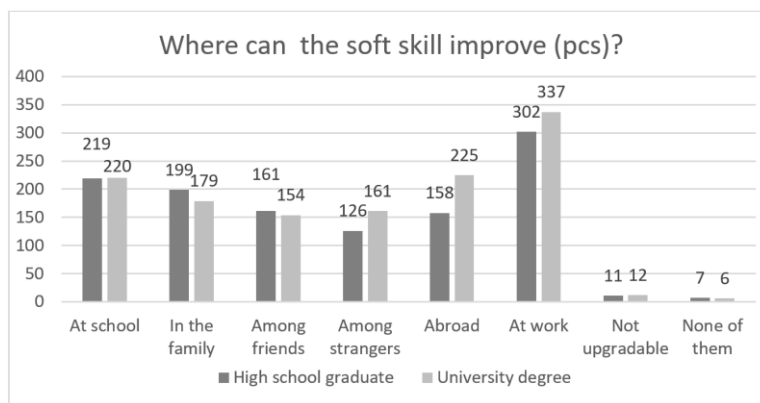


Figure 2. Where can soft skills improve? *Source: own work*

For both groups surveyed, the workplace was rated by respondents as the most successful place. School was also the key for many. The question is, however, to what extent the development of soft skills is included in the educational plans and tasks of the respective institutions. The responses suggest that employers expect students at schools to be equipped and to enter the labour market with good soft skills.

It is interesting to note that the variable 'abroad' also received a high number of votes from respondents, especially in the case of those with tertiary education. One reason for this may be that the United Kingdom, which is the main host area for the partial education of Hungarian students, has a greater tradition and practice of an education system based on cooperation, participation, and active learning than the Germanic and continental education tradition. Furthermore, in a different culture and in a different linguistic environment, individuals need to use their soft skills more effectively if they are to assert themselves and thrive in a world that is completely foreign to them. This can be achieved through exchange placements during the study period, where students can spend a shorter or longer period in another country, can get to know the culture, educational practices, and the daily life of people from another nation. The experience of meeting the challenges of a foreign environment is not only a life-changing experience for students, but also a great opportunity to learn soft skills.

According to respondents, it is colleagues, employers and people in education who have the most influence on the development of soft skills of any age group.

41.1% of the companies surveyed would spend money on developing the soft skills of their mid-level colleagues, and more than half (53.4%) would do the same concerning the graduates employed by them. If companies were to hire a coach to strengthen soft skills, the skills that the external expert could help colleagues improve most are the following: communication, conflict management, time management, teamwork, and motivation. This is particularly interesting because in the case of the companies surveyed, it was not the skills listed above that were lagging or in need of development, but leadership skills.

It can be said that the companies included in the research are open to developing the soft skills of their colleagues, they see and know that one of the most important arenas for learning is the workplace itself. The companies in question have also assessed that they can rely on internal human resources, i.e., management and colleagues, to strengthen skills. The majority would invest financially in development and would also seek the help of external experts.

If we compare our results with the literature, we see that developing soft skills is not easy, and in many cases, it is quite costly in terms of time, money, and effort. The study by Laker and Powell (2011) looks in detail at the differences between the development of soft and hard skills, with a particular focus on the extent of knowledge transfer.

5. Conclusions

Based on the literature analysis, it can be stated that it is widely accepted that soft skills are one of the key elements to future performance and success. However, according to the experience of the companies surveyed, these skills are currently not yet strong among domestic workers, with the highest score on a scale of one to ten not even reaching an

average of four. At the same time, employees showed specific strengths in communication skills, compassion, and the ability to face challenging tasks, while leadership and responsibility are the areas where they lagged the most. This is particularly interesting given that young people leaving higher education also have leadership ambitions. These contradictions — leadership ambitions and skills versus challenge orientation and responsibility — are likely to become even stronger as generations (Z, Alpha) grow up. At the same time, however, the standard deviations also show that it is precisely in leadership skills and ambitions that the largest differences between young workers are found.

Studies also show that soft skills are maintained or strengthened during university studies. In other words, the higher education system, obviously building on age-related maturation processes, can do much to differentiate and develop soft skills.

The diverse pictures based on firm characteristics showed that soft skills are, even if not significantly but, more characteristic of firms with higher capital-intensiveness. This phenomenon also raises an important further research question: it is easy to show that more capital- and knowledge-intensive firms tend to be more efficient and successful in the market. However, the research may suggest that it is not merely capital intensity or knowledge that is the cause of better performance, but closely related soft skills “capital”. Furthermore, cognitive, and emotional maturity is more prevalent and important in smaller companies, while managerial compatibility plays a greater role in larger companies. This points to the fact that the size and complexity of communities and production networks require several types of cohesive soft skills: in smaller firms, problem solving, and emotional “aura” may be sufficient and effective, while as complexity increases, “professional” managerial expertise and skills are more extensively required.

The reason behind the fact that employees cannot or do not adapt to all the expected clear skill sets is because of individual differences: individual personality traits, the way employees approach given situations, and how they perceive and adapt to changes.

Our hypothesis that the perception of soft skills is clearly dependent on organisational size, ownership and the importance of knowledge can only be maintained through the results of these studies. Indeed, firm size showed a significant difference, but only for the managerial compatibility of those with higher education. Ownership structure also made a difference, but significantly only concerning the managerial ability of those with a secondary education. In these cases, therefore, there is limited plausibility. However, nowhere is the importance of knowledge in firms associated with substantial differences in the perception of soft skills. Here we clearly must reject the hypothesis.

The perception of soft skills is also intriguing in the sense that the literature shows that there are differences between the skills expected by domestic and foreign companies. The picture that emerges from the domestic research (precision, workload, workaholism, applied skills, etc.) resembles a machine, which rather needs strong, high ‘tensile strength’ and ‘self-tapping’ ‘screws’, while foreign organisational needs are more likely to prompt the development of a competitive enterprise based on motivational, organisational and communication skills. This does not primarily happen in a way that employees have these at a skill level, but rather in a way that they are willing to develop them.

In terms of development and improvement, the learning environment at the workplace is indeed seen as the most important factor by the companies surveyed, but in the national survey it is also expected that educational institutions provide the basis for the working environment. It is interesting to note that, in the case of secondary school graduates, the identification and development of soft skills in the family and then among friends is even stronger than in the case of university graduates, while the wider ‘foreign’ environment — especially abroad — becomes the main development factor for graduates. For the companies surveyed, managers and colleagues are the main sources of development in the workplace environment. This corresponds to the need to invest in the development of managerial skills, which is the area where companies are the most willing to invest resources in. All this leads us to the acceptance of our second hypothesis.

Concerning the limitations of this research, it must be noted that although the survey is not representative, the authors believe that the study reflects on the views of domestic employers on the issue examined.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

1. Andreas, S. (2018). Effects of the decline in social capital on college graduates' soft skills. *Industry and Higher Education*, 32(1), 47–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950422217749277>
2. Chulanova, O. L., & Bogdan, E. S. (2021). Research on Formation of Student's Soft Skills Ensuring Competitiveness in Digital Paradigm. In: Ashmarina, S.I., Mantulenko, V.V. (eds) *Digital Economy and the New Labor Market: Jobs, Competences and Innovative HR Technologies. IPM 2020*. Lecture Notes in Networks and Systems, 161. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60926-9_64
3. Coyle-Shapiro, J. A.-M., & Morrow, P. C. (2006). Organizational and client commitment among contracted employees. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 68(3), 416–431. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2005.10.002>
4. Goleman, D. (2008). *Érzelmi intelligencia [Emotional Intelligence]*. Háttér Kiadó
5. Hadiyanto, Noferdiman, Syamsurizal, Muhaimin, & Krisantia, I. (2021). Students' Soft Skills, Hard Skills, and Competitiveness (SHC): A Suggested Model for Indonesian Higher Education Curriculum. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 20(2), 218–234. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.20.2.12>
6. Haddon, P. F. (1999). *Mastering Personal and Interpersonal Skills*. Thorogood Ltd.
7. Hess, J. D., & Bacigalupo, A. C. (2011). Enhancing decisions and decision-making processes through the application of emotional intelligence skills. *Management Decision*, 49(5), 710–721. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00251741111130805>
8. Horváth-Csikós, G., & Juhász, T. (2022). A puha (soft) és a kemény (hard) készségek munkaerőpiaci szükségessége [The need for soft and hard skills in the labour market]. *Educatio*, 30(3), 532–542. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2063.30.2021.3.13>
9. Kárpátiné Daróczi, J. (2014). A kompetencia hatalom? Mit ér a gazdasági felsőfokú képzés, ha nem ad diplomát? [Is competence power? What is non-university higher vocational training in business worth if it does not give a degree?]. Doctoral dissertation. Pannon University. https://konyvtar.uni-pannon.hu/doktori/2016/Karpatine_Daroczi_Judit_dissertation.pdf
10. Laker, D. R., & Powell, J. L. (2011). The differences between hard and soft skills and their relative impact on training transfer. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 22(1), 111–122. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.20063>
11. LinkedIn (2019). Global Talent Trends 2019. Retrieved from <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/resources/talent-strategy/global-talent-trends-2019>
12. Mohd Rasli, M. A., Ghani, F. A., Razali, N. H. A., Abd Razak, S. F. F., Abd Razak, M. Z., Embong, F., Abu Salleh, N. S., Idris, R. S. N. R., & Rani, S. M. (2020). Do Soft Skills Really Matter?. In N. S. Othman, A. H. B. Jaaffar, N. H. B. Harun, S. B. Buniamin, N. E. A. B. Mohamad, I. B. M. Ali, N. H. B. A. Razali, & S. L. B. M. Hashim (Eds.), *Driving Sustainability through Business-Technology Synergy*, 100. European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences (pp. 427-435). European Publisher. <https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2020.12.05.46>
13. National Soft Skills Association (2015). *The Soft Skills Disconnect*. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalsoftskills.org/the-soft-skillsdisconnect/>
14. Robles, M. M. (2012). Executive Perceptions of the Top 10 Soft Skills Needed in Today's Workplace. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 453–465. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569912460400>
15. Rumiantseva, O. V. (2021). Soft Skills Research in Higher Education: Top 100 Scopus-Indexed Publications. *Integration of Education*, 25(4), 593–607. <https://doi.org/10.15507/1991-9468.105.025.202104.593-607>
16. Scheerens, J., van der Werf, G., & de Boer, H. (2020). Measurement of Soft Skills in Education. In: *Soft Skills in Education*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-54787-5_6
17. Seetha, S. (2013). Necessity of Soft Skills Training for students and professionals. *International Journal of Engineering, Business and Enterprise Applications (IJEBA)*, 4(2), 171–174.
18. Sopa A., Asbari, M., Purwanto, A., Santoso, P. B., Mustofa, Hutagalung, D., Maesaroh, S., Ramdan, M., & Primahendra R. (2020). Hard Skills versus Soft Skills: Which are More Important for Indonesian Employees Innovation Capability. *International Journal of Control and Automation*, 13(02), 156–175. <http://sersc.org/journals/index.php/IJCA/article/view/7626>
19. Tribble, L. S. (2020). The importance of soft skills in the workplace as perceived by community college instructors and industries. Doctoral dissertation. Mississippi State University
20. Tripathy, M. (2021). Relevance of Soft Skills in Career Success. *MIER Journal of Educational Studies Trends and Practices*, 10(1), 91–102. <https://doi.org/10.52634/mier/2020/v10/i1/1354>
21. Tulgan, B. (ed.) (2015). *Bridging the Soft Skills Gap: How to Teach the Missing Basics to Today's Young Talent*. Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171409>
22. WEF (2018). World Economic Forum Annual Meeting: A Conversation with King Abdullah II of Jordan. <https://www.weforum.org/events/world-economic-forum-annual-meeting-2018>
23. Wheeler, R. (2016). *Soft Skills - The Importance of Cultivating Emotional Intelligence*. 20 AALL Spectrum 28 (2016). https://scholarship.law.bu.edu/faculty_scholarship/130
24. Zaslavskaya, O. V., & Malafiy, A. S. (2021). Formation of soft skills in the educational process of higher education as a factor in the development of competitiveness of young professionals. *Perspektivy nauki i obrazovania – Perspectives of Science and Education*, 51(3), 115–126. <https://doi.org/10.32744/pse.2021.3.8>