UNVEILING THE POWER OF SOFT SKILLS: NAVIGATING SUCCESS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT: *In an era characterized by technological advancement, globalization, and evolving workplace dynamics, soft skills have emerged as a critical component of personal and professional success. This paper provides a comprehensive exploration of soft skills, encompassing their definition, relevance, and profound impact on various domains. Drawing on extensive research, case studies, and expert opinions, it examines the role of soft skills in economic development, education, recruitment, and overall individual success. Soft skills are increasingly sought after by employers in diverse industries, making them a fundamental requirement for thriving in the 21st century. This paper offers insights into the multifaceted landscape of soft skills, highlighting their diverse manifestations and providing tools for assessment and enhancement. It serves as a valuable resource for individuals and institutions looking to harness the power of soft skills to navigate the complexities of the modern world.*

KEYWORDS: *soft skills, professional success, interpersonal competencies*

INTRODUCTION

As society undergoes constant transformation, technological advancements, the effects of globalization, and ever-evolving workplace dynamics, the traditional metrics of success have also undergone profound transformation.

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For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic, which started in 2020, proved to everyone, more than ever, that the marketplace is deeply influenced by VUCA characteristics – Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA-WORLD, 2022). This has meant an acceleration of the digitalization process both within private companies and public institutions. Citizens of all ages found themselves needing to develop new digital skills as well as soft skills to fit in, work, and generally survive while learning online, working from home, using internet banking, or eGovernment.

According to research undertaken in the USA (Brynjolfsson & McAfee 2014), only five years were needed for humanity to use smartphones at a similar level of popularity as it took the landline to reach in 50 years. By comparison, according to a Digital Information World study (Digital Information World 2020) a huge 8% leap, which took place during four months of the pandemic, skyrocketed the use of social media to 49% of the world population.

According to a survey conducted by BestJobs in 2019, more than half of the employees who were interviewed believed that their jobs were threatened by robotization and automation. Twelve percent of them thought that robots and automation would replace them within the next 5 years, 14.6% considered this possible within 5-10 years, 11.3% within 10-15 years, and 14% within at least 20 years. At the same time, 48% believed that automation would never be able to fully replace their jobs (Noja–Pânzaru 2021).

While academic qualifications and technical proficiency remain crucial in this context, there is an undeniable shift towards the recognition and prioritization of a different class of abilities – soft skills. These interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies encompass a wide spectrum, from effective communication and emotional intelligence to adaptability and teamwork. Collectively, they empower individuals to navigate the complexities of the modern world, foster harmonious relationships, and excel in various professional domains.

The significance of soft skills is increasingly acknowledged across diverse sectors, from business and healthcare to education and policymaking. As the boundaries between industries blur and the global economy becomes more interconnected, the demand for individuals equipped with these skills has never been higher. Employers are no longer solely interested in academic qualifications or technical prowess; they seek individuals who can communicate persuasively, collaborate seamlessly with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances.

This academic paper seeks to explore the multifaceted landscape of soft skills, delving into their definition, relevance, and profound impact on personal and professional growth. Drawing on a wealth of research, case studies, and expert opinions, it aims to shed light on the evolving role of soft skills in

today's society. It examines how these skills influence economic development, transform educational paradigms, shape recruitment practices, and contribute to an individual's overall success.

As we navigate the complexities of the 21st century, it is imperative to recognize that the mastery of soft skills is not a supplementary endeavor but a fundamental requirement for thriving in an ever-changing world. This paper serves as a comprehensive exploration of soft skills, their diverse manifestations, their critical role in various professions, and the tools available for individuals to assess and enhance these competencies.

In the subsequent sections, we will delve into the various dimensions of soft skills, explore their practical implications, and highlight the challenges and opportunities associated with their development. Ultimately, this paper underscores the essential nature of soft skills, serving as a beacon for individuals and institutions seeking to harness the power of these competencies to navigate the complex and dynamic landscape of the 21st century.

LITERATURE REVIEW: DEFINING SOFT SKILLS

The general concept of skill can be very difficult to define. There are numerous definitions of it, most of which try to differentiate it from other similar concepts, such as knowledge, competencies, tasks, or labor (Lowry et al. 2008; Siekmann–Fowler 2017).

In many studies, skills and their levels are defined using various combinations of education, training, and experience (Machin–Van Reenen 1998; Constanti–Gibbs 2005; Green et al. 2007). This approach has also been adopted by numerous national statistical agencies to classify and define occupations and collect data about the labor market. Thus, rankings of skills have been created based on the amount of time a person needs to invest in training before starting a job in the respective field or the duration of practice required at the workplace to achieve high levels of a particular skill (Toner 2011). Unlike hard skills, which are clearly defined, considered technical, and specific to each sector of activity, formulating a definition for soft skills is much more challenging.

Firstly, the difficulty arises from semantic reasons. The expressions used in English and Romanian to talk about "soft skills" vary greatly. Instead of the adjective "soft," which does not even have a suitable translation in Romanian, adjectives such as "generic," "basic," "key," "personal," "transferable," "vocational," "emotional," and the list goes on, are used. In place of the noun "skills," somewhat imperfectly translated as "abilități" in Romanian, nouns such

as "competențe" (*competencies*), "atribute" (*attributes*), "calități" (*qualities*), "capacități" (*capacities*) are often used (Bennett et al. 1999; Leveson 2000; Chamorro-Premuzic et al. 2010; Kechagias ed. 2011; Dolce et al. 2019).

Secondly, "soft skills" comprise a long list of abilities, ranging from specific to general and from operational to interpersonal. These can include communication skills, teamwork, decision-making, problem-solving, conflict management, working under pressure, empathy, and critical thinking (Dolce et al. 2019).

Soft skills, in contrast to hard skills, are often used to express emotional intelligence (EQ), as opposed to IQ (Goleman 1995). They are also referred to as life skills (Birrell Weisen et al. 1994), social skills, generic competencies, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, transversal competencies, key competencies for lifelong learning (European Parliament 2006), social competencies, or meta-competencies (Le Deist and Winterton 2005; Shalini 2012; Succi 2019). Furthermore, the topic of soft skills sometimes intersects with that of 21st-century skills (Ananiadou et al. 2009), or skills for the future of work, at which point they are connected with digital skills.

Another definition is proposed by Haselberger et al. (2012): "Soft skills represent the dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive, interpersonal, intellectual, and practical skills and ethical values. Soft skills help people to adapt and behave positively so that they can effectively face the challenges in their professional and personal lives on a daily basis" (Haselberger et al. 2012: 67).

Heckman and Kautz defined the concept of "soft skills" with a focus on personality. They referred to the "Big Five" factors: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability Heckman–Kautz 2012; Dolce et al. 2019). Moss and Tilly defined soft skills as "the skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than formal knowledge or technical expertise" (Moss–Tilly 2001: 44). The most frequently mentioned soft skills in the literature are communication, problem-solving, conflict resolution, goal-setting, planning, or task coordination (Stevens–Campion 1999; Muzio et al. 2007; Watson Mitchell 2008; Jolly 2012; Robles 2012).

According to Papoutsoglou et al. (2017), soft skills are defined as "the ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations, as well as for personal and professional development" (Papoutsoglou et al. 2017: 109). Hard skills are defined as "the ability to implement knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems." Furthermore, González-Eras and Aguilar (2019) consider competencies as something "that can demonstrate the application of a generic skill on knowledge" (González-Eras and Aguilar 2019: 2). Based on these

definitions, many scientists believe that soft and hard skills are interchangeable, depending on the context, and what is a soft skill in one context becomes a hard skill in another. For example, the ability to sing is, for most people, a soft skill. However, for someone whose profession is singing, this becomes a hard skill.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND FINDINGS: IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS FOR THE INDIVIDUAL AS WELL AS FOR THE JOB MARKET

The research design of this study involved a systematic review of literature conducted through quantitative analysis to understand the role and impact of soft skills comprehensively. Thus, we conducted a comprehensive review of 60 articles regarding soft skills in order to identify definitions, contexts and the perceived importance of soft skills in various domains.

According to our findings, soft skills, encompassing attributes such as communication, empathy, adaptability, and teamwork, are essential for both individual development and success in the job market. According to Marin-Zapata et al., who conducted a systematic review of 119 articles referring to soft skills, despite the widespread use of the term "soft skills" since 1990, only 13 out of 119 (11%) articles provided a definition of soft skills (Marin-Zapata et al. 2022). Moreover, there is no unified vision regarding the definition of "soft skills," and experts have not agreed on its dimensions. However, researchers concur about their importance for almost every job and level within an organization, particularly in positions requiring significant interpersonal interaction and customer-oriented thinking (Stapleton 2017). Empirical studies highlight that these skills significantly influence employability and career progression, with employers valuing attributes like maturity, communication, and teamwork highly. Thus, fostering these skills is crucial not only for personal and professional success but also for broader economic and social advancement.

The importance of soft skills in the job market

Soft skills are more necessary in certain positions than in others. For example, employees who interact with customers, those who personalize products or services, and those who resolve customer complaints need soft skills more than those who write programming codes or assemble parts in a factory (Christou 2002; Bailly–Léné 2013).

This understanding highlights the context-dependent nature of soft skills and their critical role in positions that require a high degree of interpersonal interaction, adaptability, and customer-oriented thinking. It underscores the evolving nature of the workforce, where soft skills are increasingly recognized as essential for effective performance and customer satisfaction.

According to data collected within the Northwestern Mock Job Interview project involving 535 African American and Hispanic students in the USA, the students' soft skills were extremely important when HR professionals determined their chances of obtaining a job (Hirsch 2017). The most significant predictors of success in job acquisition turned out to be the students' level of maturity and their communication skills. Additionally, alongside communication skills, the ability to work in a team was what differentiated subjects who scored high from those who scored low in terms of their chances of obtaining a job (ibid.). This finding underscores the critical importance of soft skills in the job market, particularly for young people entering the workforce.

Challenges faced by young job seekers

Swiatek studied the differences between the level of soft skills developed by students by the time they finish school and the level required by most employers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, recent graduates did not leave school with the necessary "emotional knowledge" to meet the standards set by their potential employers (Swiatek 2000; Tsirkas et al. 2020).

Cousins and Goleman are not alone in asserting the importance of soft skills. Research conducted by Harvard University, Carnegie Foundation, and Stanford Research Institute, cited by The Protocol of Washington, DC, has shown that technical skills and knowledge account for about 15% of the reason an individual gets a job, keeps a job, or advances in a career. The remaining 85% is based on the individual's "interpersonal skills" (Crosbie 2005). Similarly, in the book entitled *People Skills*, author Robert Bolton argues that 80% of people who fail at work do so not because of a lack of technical skills but rather because of their inability to relate to other people (Bolton 1979).

Borghans et al. approach the idea of social capital (meaning the social networks and connections individuals have as a result of investing in personal relationships, personal contacts, and participation in social or community groups), arguing that it significantly influences success in the labor market. The authors examine in detail underrepresented groups in the labor market, such as ethnic minorities or low-income individuals, investigating the type of social

capital these people possess and how it affects their employment prospects and professional progress (Borghans et al. 2006).

Grugulis and Vincent approach skills as a form of capital, arguing that soft skills can be considered a form of social or cultural capital. They conclude that access to soft skills is often restricted and segmented in the labor market. This can lead to increased inequality among workers and the formation of workgroups with different skill sets, influencing individuals' employment opportunities and professional advancement. They also address the effects of this polarization on society as a whole, highlighting that it can contribute to increasing inequality between individuals and affect social mobility (Grugulis–Vincent 2009).

During the study conducted by Deborah Dutta et al. (2023) on reskilling youth for a sustainable transition in agri-food systems, the students participating in the study declared that, besides learning about chemical agriculture and nature farming at the field level, they also had to learn to develop technical and communication skills.

In their study on the Ritz-Carlton hotel chain, multinational company Accenture, and the Hospital Corporation of America, Lynch D. and Worden J. discovered that when recruiting staff, these employers focus more on the skills held by candidates rather than on their completed studies (Lynch–Worden 2010).

The significance of emotional labor in various professions

Soft skills used in the workplace are defined by some experts as "emotional labor" (Hochschild 1983). Emotional labor implies that the added value of services provided by an employee is due to the emotional connections that the employee manages to create with their clients. Such added value can be found in IT&C service providers who receive their "stars" based on how they interact with clients to solve technical problems, but it is largely found in professions such as flight attendants (Williams 2003), tour guides, and nurses (Mcqueen 2004). James argues that the formula "care = organization + physical work + emotional labor" is illustrative of the caregivers at the nursing home he observed in his study (James 1992). Around the concept of "emotional labor," a series of new professions have emerged, such as the image consultant (Wellington–Bryson 2001) and the call center employee (Furnell 2008). Also, people who practice long-established professions, such as hair stylists or beauticians, are beginning to identify their work much more as emotional labor (Sharma–Black 2001). They maintain that their most important mission is not to make women look better, but to feel better. For this reason, having attended specialization courses is necessary but not sufficient to survive in the industry (Tether et al. 2005).

"Emotional labor" is increasingly recognized in various professions. It is not enough for a lawyer to know the laws well and bring the right arguments to the courtroom; a good lawyer also manages to create an emotional connection with the jury. For university professors, being experts in their research fields is no longer sufficient, as student feedback will not forgive a lack of engagement. Appreciated professors are those who offer dynamic and attractive presentations, not just educational ones (Ogbonna–Harris 2004; Tether et al. 2005).

In frontline roles, for those working in banks, call centers, aviation, and the hospitality industry, "emotional labor" is not limited to good manners. It includes communication skills, empathy, understanding problems from the customer's perspective, the ability to calm recalcitrant clients, problem-solving skills, the ability to work in teams with highly flexible job descriptions, and the ability to reflect on performance (Gorman 2000).

Solutions for bridging the gap between education and employment

Bacolod et al. analyze how the education level of the workforce and its skills influence the economic growth of urban areas and impact economic productivity. They demonstrate that cities with a more educated and skilled workforce tend to have higher rates of economic growth. They even go further, discussing the impact of labor migration on the unequal development between regions (Bacolod et al. 2009).

Data collected by CSIRO for TAFE Queensland revealed that the top three soft skills that enhance the employability of those who possess them are service orientation, negotiation ability, and active listening. Additionally, Payton suggests that basic skills should be supplemented with entrepreneurial skills and continuous learning (Reeson et al. 2016; Payton 2017; Siekmann–Fowler 2017).

According to a study conducted by Dolce V. et al. (2019) on the soft skills needed by accounting graduates and employees in this field, employers often prioritize soft skills over technical skills. When asked to list skills in order of priority, companies placed soft skills in the top 10 positions. Previous studies have reached the same conclusion (Hassall et al. 2005; Tan–Laswad 2018). In terms of soft skills, the top two mentioned were the ability to work in a team and communication skills (Morgan 1997; De Lange et al. 2006; Kavanagh–Drennan 2008; Siriwardane–Durden 2014; NACE 2016; Dolce et al. 2019).

The findings from this research highlight the importance of soft skills in both personal and professional contexts. They significantly influence employability

and career progression. Thus, there is a growing recognition of the need to incorporate soft skills development into educational curricula and training programs. This shift acknowledges that traditional academic qualifications alone may not adequately prepare individuals for the workforce.

HOW DOES ONE ACQUIRE OR IMPROVE SOFT SKILLS?

The most common obstacles to achieving the goal of developing soft skills are related to abilities ("Empathy doesn't come naturally to me. What should I do?"), mindset ("Why should I be responsible for supporting the personal needs of employees?"), and capacity ("I'm already overloaded. When will I find time for this?") (Gartner 2021).

According to estimates, when a person is trained for one job or spends time in that job, they acquire skills suitable for another 13 jobs (FYA 2016; Siekmann–Fowler 2017).

Soft skills are interpersonal and have a wide range of applicability (Chamorro-Premuzic et al. 2010), but they are difficult to teach (Cimatti 2016).

According to the findings of Lazíková et al., regarding the soft skills that are most absent among university graduates in the Slovakian labor market, there is a significant gap between the soft skills that are most in demand in the workplace – such as effective communication, responsibility, adaptability, teamwork, creativity, and problem-solving abilities – and those currently acquired by students at Slovakian universities across various disciplines. The issue is that certain skills, like behavioral competencies (e.g., owning responsibility), should be cultivated from early education stages, including primary and secondary schooling, and within familial environments. Conversely, skills such as communication, teamwork, creativity, and problem-solving could be substantially improved through experiential learning opportunities. These include engaging in in-game simulations, participating in real-world projects in potential employment settings, undertaking internships both domestically and abroad, and involvement in summer school initiatives and other practical educational experiences (Lazíková et al. 2022).

In the book Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, psychologist Carol Dweck discusses the idea of a "fixed mindset" and a "growth mindset." A fixed mindset is the belief that people are limited to the abilities they were born with or acquired in childhood. People with a fixed mindset do not believe they have anything more to learn. They impose limiting conditions on themselves and deny themselves new experiences from which they could learn. A growth

mindset, however, is the attitude that our abilities, qualities, and knowledge are not fixed or finite but that we are capable of developing them (Dweck 2006).

Bambrick-Santoyo explains a successful technique for developing new skills that involves "breaking the whole into small pieces." The author believes that an avalanche of advice, even if useful and well-intentioned, only paralyzes the recipient, blocking them in the attempt to process it and decide how to act. Instead, the secret is to offer one piece of advice at a time and allocate sufficient time for the person to practice and improve that very small skill. Then, continue with another piece of advice, and another... until the exercises become habits (Bambrick-Santoyo 2012).

Paula Rodríguez-Rivera et al. explain how the concept of gamification, particularly through digital escape rooms, represents an innovative method for developing soft skills. The study highlights how digital breakouts, a form of escape room experience adapted for educational purposes, can effectively foster a range of soft skills crucial in today's dynamic social and professional landscapes. These immersive and interactive game-based learning environments are specifically designed to enhance skills such as problem-solving, creativity, teamwork, and communication. By engaging students in complex scenarios that require collaboration, critical thinking, and creative solutions, digital breakouts offer a practical and engaging approach to learning. They simulate real-life challenges, encouraging participants to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts, thereby bridging the gap between academic learning and real-world application. This method not only makes learning more enjoyable but also ingrains these essential soft skills in a manner that traditional classroom settings may not always achieve (Rodríguez-Rivera et al. 2023).

In Delaware, USA, middle and higher education institutions have partnered with the local council and small businesses to offer students the opportunity to experience various professions during internships. The project, named Pathways, has been very successful because it leads to advantages for all parties involved: young people develop soft skills relevant to the labor market and make career decisions more easily; companies receive additional help and, most importantly, recruit and develop future employees; the community manages to keep companies in the area by offering them a much-needed source of employees. Thus, the Pathways project can be considered a successful model in terms of preparing students for the labor market (Rothman 2017).

The European Skills Agenda outlines 12 actions, building on the 10 actions stated in the European Skills Agenda (2016–2020):
• An invitation to join forces in a joint action: Action 1. A Pact for Skills
• Actions to ensure that people have the right skills for jobs: Action 2. Strengthening skills intelligence: Action 3. EU support for strategic national

upskilling actions: Action 4. Vocational education and training for the future (VET): Action 5. Implementing the European Universities Initiative and upskilling scientists: Action 6. Skills to support the green and digital transition: Action 7. Increasing the number of STEM graduates, promoting their entrepreneurial and transversal skills: Action 8. Life skills.

- Tools and initiatives to support people in their continuous learning efforts: Action 9. Initiative on individual learning accounts for lifelong learning: Action 10. A European approach to micro-credentials: Action 11. The new Europass platform.
- A framework to unlock investment in skills: Action 12. Improving the framework to facilitate unlocking investment.

The EU investment for implementing the European Skills Agenda amounts to 85 billion euros through programs such as the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), Erasmus, InvestEU, the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund, the European Solidarity Corps, and Digital Europe (European Commission 2021).

Experts from INACO have provided in the document *The Guide to the Professions of the Future: Opportunities in the Labor Market in the World of Tomorrow* a multitude of study resources suitable for discovering one's personality type and own hard and soft skills, as well as for developing those necessary for individuals who wish to remain competitive in the labor market in the coming years. Among the sources mentioned in the guide are the "DISC" personality test, study platforms such as Udemy or Coursera, the identification of several professions of the future and correlating them with the suitable personality type, as well as identifying necessary qualifications for these positions in perspective. The guide also includes #PastilaDePublicSpeaking (*The Public Speaking Pill*) – a project by the Romanian Ministry of Education developed in partnership with Andrei Dunuță, representative of Speakings, best practices for one's podcast, rules for writing a traditional CV or making a video CV, as well as rules to follow when trying to build a personal brand starting from the early school years (INACO 2021).

Additionally, we identified several free tools that are useful for better understanding one's own intelligence, personality, and predominant soft skills. Among these, we can mention:

- VIA Institute on Character: This source offers a free test that helps users identify the extent to which they exhibit each of the 24 positive character traits. This can be a valuable tool for personal development and understanding one's strengths (VIA 2024).
- Gifted (for) You Project: On the website of this European-funded project, there is a test with 80 questions that allows users to receive their own scores

for each of the eight types of intelligence identified by researchers (verbal/
linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical/
rhythmic, social/interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic intelligence)
(Gifted (for) You 2014–2016 2022).
• 16Personalities by NERIS Analytics: Researchers at Cambridge offer a
free test on *16personalities.com*, based on Raymond Cattell's 16-factor
personality test. What makes this test special is that it has been applied
longitudinally for over 10 years to a population of nearly 600 million
users, offering a high level of fidelity and accuracy, as well as many tips for
improving skills (NERIS Analytics 2024).
• Learning Architect: This website offers a test that helps users identify the
best methods through which they learn (practice/on-the-spot learning, social
learning, formal learning, synchronous learning, or asynchronous learning)
(Learning Architect 2022).

These tools can be extremely helpful for individuals seeking to gain insights
into their personality types, learning styles, and areas where they can develop
their soft skills. Understanding these aspects can be crucial for personal and
professional growth, helping individuals tailor their development strategies to
their unique profiles.

LIMITATIONS

The present study's limitations include several aspects. First, the availability
of certain potentially valuable sources was limited. Many sources that could
have enriched the research were inaccessible due to paywalls, copyright
restrictions, or not being digitized. This limitation restricts the breadth
of the literature review and potentially excludes significant findings and
perspectives that could have provided a more comprehensive understanding
of soft skills.

Secondly, there is significant variability in the definitions of soft skills across
different disciplines, industries, and cultures. This lack of a unified definition
complicates efforts to standardize soft skills and can lead to inconsistencies
in the data collected. For example, what one industry or culture considers a
critical soft skill might be viewed differently in another context. This variability
poses a challenge for researchers attempting to create a cohesive framework for
understanding and measuring soft skills, as it introduces a level of subjectivity
and ambiguity into the analysis.

Additionally, the rapid evolution of the job market means that information can quickly become outdated. Some of the sources reviewed here may not reflect the most current trends or the latest thinking about soft skills. The nature of work is continually changing, influenced by technological advancements, economic shifts, and emerging societal needs. Consequently, findings based on older data might not fully capture the current landscape or future directions regarding the importance and application of soft skills. This limitation highlights the need for ongoing research and updates to ensure that the understanding of soft skills remains relevant and up-to-date.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the analysis conducted by Siekmann and Fowler (2017), there is a discrepancy in how different countries around the world manage to integrate the results of analyses regarding future labor market needs and their educational offerings. At the top of the ranking is Switzerland, where all information derived from labor market analysis is immediately translated into the creation and modernization of existing educational program curricula. Conversely, countries such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States tend to leave the responsibility to individuals and training program providers to identify the most relevant skills for the future job market (ibid.).

On the other hand, there are numerous private initiatives for collecting data and mapping the soft skills of employees and job seekers, such as those developed by Pymetrics or HiredScore. The main objective of the software created by such companies is to reduce the time needed for the hiring process. They achieve this by using assessment center tests or personality questionnaires to identify each candidate's set of soft skills and match them with the most suitable job. Providers of these solutions claim that they guarantee a 75% reduction in the time required for the hiring process, a 100% increase in retention, and a 100% increase in diversity within the company (HiredScore 2024; Pymetrics 2024).

These same software solutions also offer the capability to map any organization by combining hard skills (elements found in each employee's resume) with soft skills (each employee's responses to the personality questionnaire). After collecting all the data, the software groups employees into personality clusters. Such data can inform coherent human resource policies with a high likelihood of impacting the organizational culture, but they can also signal individual cases of unmotivated and unproductive employees simply because they are not the "right person in the right place."

Furthermore, a number of skill mapping platforms have become popular worldwide. A relevant classification of platforms developed by various countries and organizations for mapping relevant skills in the labor market includes Skills strategy, Skills anticipation, O*NET, Skills Frameworks, Futures Programme, FutureSkills Lab, Skilling Overview, Skills anticipation activities, ESCO, SFIA, Real-time job data analysis, and the Capability framework. Among these, ESCO has become the most widely used skills taxonomy in academic research, given its LOD format, access to its own API, rich taxonomy, and high-level contributors to the project.

Following an exhaustive analysis of our findings and a thorough review of recommendations from various experts and organizations (Manyika et al. 2017; Siekmann–Fowler 2017; ILO – OECD 2018; European Commission 2021; Noja–Pânzaru 2021), we propose a comprehensive set of actions to address the challenges posed by robotization and digitalization in the Romanian labor market:

- Identification of Essential Skills: Initiate a systematic process to identify the most critical hard and soft skills that will be in demand in the future job market.
- Standardized Soft Skills Assessment: Develop a universal standard for assessing individuals' soft skills and establish clear correlations between these skills and specific job roles.
- Common Skills Language: Create a standardized language for describing skills, ensuring consistent terminology across education and industry.
- Expanded Training Opportunities: Expand the range of training programs to facilitate both the green and digital transitions, providing accessible learning opportunities for all.
- Utilize EU Training Resources: Tap into European Union training resources to make lifelong learning accessible to a broad audience and support continuous skill development.
- Education and Professional Development (EPD): Establish a comprehensive training and learning system, focusing on preparing individuals for the jobs of the future, including those related to emerging technologies.
- National Online Learning Platform: Develop a secure and user-friendly national online learning platform, offering a wide array of online teaching resources and implementing robust quality control mechanisms.
- Educational Reform: Undertake legislative and curricular reforms tailored to online learning, adapting educational practices to the specific requirements of digital education.
- Public-Private Partnerships: Foster collaboration between the public and private sectors to create and implement relevant training programs that address industry needs.

• Technology Integration: Embrace technology-driven solutions to stimulate economic growth, generate surpluses, and stimulate increased labor demand in alignment with emerging trends.

These multifaceted actions aim to equip individuals with the skills needed to thrive in an increasingly digital and automated job market while fostering innovation, adaptability and sustained economic development.

CONCLUSIONS

The research findings emphasize the growing recognition of the critical role that soft skills play in an individual's success in various fields and their impact on the overall performance of organizations. Soft skills are no longer considered secondary but are integral to personal and professional development. Scholars, researchers, and professionals across different domains offer diverse perspectives on what constitutes soft skills. While there is no universal definition, common themes emerge, including communication, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and interpersonal abilities.

Our findings indicate that regions with a highly educated and skilled workforce tend to experience higher economic growth rates. Furthermore, the migration patterns of skilled workers can contribute to disparities in regional development. Moreover, different professions require varying sets of soft skills, but they universally contribute to professional success. For instance, in service-oriented industries like healthcare and hospitality, emotional labor is paramount, highlighting the growing importance of these skills.

Educational institutions and employers are recognizing the need to incorporate soft skills development into curricula and training programs. This shift acknowledges that traditional academic qualifications alone may not adequately prepare individuals for the workforce. Furthermore, employers in various sectors prioritize soft skills when making hiring decisions. Effective communication, teamwork, and adaptability are among the most sought-after soft skills. This trend reflects the belief that employees' ability to work well with others and adapt to changing circumstances is critical for organizational success.

While the importance of soft skills is widely acknowledged, their development can be challenging. Soft skills are often considered interpersonal and, therefore, difficult to teach in a traditional classroom setting. Strategies for developing these skills include experiential learning, mentoring, and ongoing self-assessment.

The concept of a growth mindset, as opposed to a fixed mindset, is vital in soft skills development. Individuals who believe they can develop and improve their skills are more likely to invest time and effort in honing their soft skills.

Soft skills are closely aligned with labor market demands. Individuals with a strong set of soft skills are better positioned to meet the evolving requirements of the job market, which increasingly values adaptability, communication, and interpersonal abilities.

Various tools and resources are available for individuals to assess and develop their soft skills. These include personality tests, learning style assessments, and online courses. These tools empower individuals to identify areas for improvement and tailor their personal and professional development plans accordingly.

In conclusion, soft skills are undeniably essential for success in the modern world. Their impact extends across industries and professions, influencing economic growth, employability, and personal development. As the workforce landscape continues to evolve, individuals and institutions must prioritize the acquisition and cultivation of soft skills to thrive in the ever-changing global environment. Soft skills are not just a complement to hard skills; they are integral to an individual's ability to adapt, collaborate, and excel in diverse contexts.

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