Ready or Not? Do High School and College Graduates Have the Essential Soft Skills Needed to be Successful in Today's Workforce

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many employers consider job candidates' soft skills as critical for professional success as traditional hard skills, especially in today's global marketplace. Some High School and College graduates are increasingly confident of their soft skills, believing these interpersonal, non-technical competencies enhance their value as prospective employees, while others are not so sure. Recent studies, however, show a widening gap between employer expectations and college graduate abilities. This paper reviews desired soft skills of employers, along with high school and college students' self-ratings of these same competencies; explores how employers and job candidates 'signal' the need for and/or presence of these skills; and suggested tips and strategies proposed to close this "soft skill gap."

SOFT SKILLS DEFINED

Soft Skills, or human skills, connect people and foster collaboration, such as communication, relationship building, and teamwork. These skills are vital in the modern workplace. In fact, according to LinkedIn's 2019 Global Talent Trends report, 89 percent of recruiters say that when a hire does not work out, it usually comes down to a lack of soft skills.

DISTINCTION FROM HARD SKILLS

The main difference between hard skills and soft skills is how they are acquired and the nature of the skills themselves.

Hard skills are acquired through education, training, or hands-on-experience. They are concrete abilities that can be measured and are often listed on a resume. Examples of hard skills include accounting, computer programming, data analysis, graphic design, and project management.

Soft skills are unique to each person and come naturally. They are important for career advancement and building professional relationships. Examples of soft skills include communication, adaptability, teamwork, problem-solving, time management, leadership, and conflict-resolution.

In other words, **hard skills** are job-related competencies and abilities that are necessary to complete work, while **soft skills** are personal qualities and traits that impact how you work.

INTRODUCTION

HIGH SCHOOL

While many high school graduates do develop some soft skills, research indicates that a significant portion lack the level of soft skills employers expect, with studies showing employers often report a gap between the soft skills high school graduates possess and what is needed for the workforce; however, the extent of this gap varies depending on the individual and the specific soft skill in question.

Employers want college graduates who have "soft skills," such as being a good listener or thinking critically, but they have difficulty finding such candidates, according to the latest research. [Source: *Inside Higher Education*, Jeremy Bauer Wolf, 2019]

The survey was conducted online by Morning Consultant for Cengage, and educational technology and services company, among more than five hundred hiring managers and 150 more human resources professionals. More than 1,500 current and former high school students now in two- and four- year institutions were also surveyed.

The companies found that the most in-demand talent among employers was ***listening skills*** – 74 percent of employers indicated this was a skill they valued. This was followed by attention to detail (70 percent) and effective communication (60 percent).

About 73 percent of the employers said that finding qualified candidates was difficult. One-third of the employers (34 percent) indicated that both high schools, along with colleges and universities, have not prepared students for jobs.

The students reported finding jobs was challenging. About 65 percent of the students said getting a job is more difficult for them than for their parents' generation. About 77 percent also expressed concerns about whether they had the soft skills needed for a job.

From an employers' perspective, there is a need for more soft skills training, both in public education, college and on the job; and today's learners and graduates must continue to hone their skills to stay ahead. Michael Hansen, chief executive officer of Cengage, said in a statement, "The onus is on everyone – students, high schools, colleges, employers and industry partners like Cengage – to make learning more accessible, relevant and affordable."

Employer expectations and High School Graduation Gap

The Problem: The "employer expectations and high school graduates gap" refers to a significant discrepancy between the skills and abilities employers <u>expect</u> from recent high school graduates and the actual preparedness level of those graduates, with many employers finding high schoolers lacking in essential soft skills, critical thinking, and technical proficiency needed for entry-level jobs, even when compared to the basic academic knowledge acquired in high school.

Key points about this gap:

Skill Deficiencies
Employers often report high school graduates lacking in crucial skills like written communication, problem-solving, adaptability, digital literacy, and professional demeanor, even when possessing the necessary academic qualifications.

Soft Skills Concerns
While technical skills may be taught in school, employers often place a high emphasis on soft skills like teamwork, initiative, and effective communication, which can be less developed in high school graduates.

Industry Specific Needs
Different industries may have varying expectations for high school graduates, with some requiring more specialized knowledge or technical skills than others.

Impact on Employment
This gap can lead to difficulties for recent high school graduates finding suitable employment, potentially limiting career opportunities, and impacting their earning potential.

Should High Schools be Doing More?

Soft skills. Everyone has heard of them, but many people cannot define them. They are called durable skills, professional skills, life skills, enduring skills, career readiness skills and a host of other names. Research shows these skills lead to health, happiness and more success in school and life. Most schools, however, do not have a comprehensive strategy to build soft skills or a way to measure them in students, so they continually face persistent and stubborn equity gaps in student outcomes.

The top five reasons why schools should work to design a sound strategy for developing soft skills in their teachers and students are:

1. Soft skills improve academic outcomes

> ➢ The Society for Research in Child Development notes that soft skill training for students can increase GPA and academic performance by 11%. The Global Labor Organization found that student soft skill training increases graduation rates by 30% and increases math testing scores in boys by 7.5% and in girls by 10.7%. Soft skills training also increases assignment completion and performance by 9.3%. Including soft skills training in the *Tier 1MTSS plan is an easy decision!*

2. Teacher soft skills impact student outcomes

> ➢ ¾ of employers say they cannot find employees with sufficient soft skills and the educator sector is no different. Because teacher preparation programs do not focus on soft skill development, teachers do not necessarily have the skills they need to collaborate, implement curriculum, or build relationships with students and this 'skills gap' impacts students' outcomes. The National Bureau of Economic Research reports that teacher soft skills directly impact student dropout rates and graduation rates. It also found that teacher soft skill ability directly explains the variance in student absences, suspensions, and GPA.

3. Soft skills lead to a happier life

> ➢ The BESSI Research group reports that soft skills account for two-thirds of our general life happiness. Stress regulation, social warmth, teamwork, anger management, time management and other critical soft skills help us feel more in control of our life and allow us to manage our relationships, responsibilities, and emotions. They can even impact on our health! The University of Chicago found that student soft skills predict health problems in adulthood, even after accounting for social class origins and IQ, and soft skills are a better predictor of financial success and achievement of advanced credentials than social class or IQ.

4. Students cannot be future-ready without soft skills

> ➢ Soft skills are necessary in the workforce. LinkedIn's Global Talent Report reveals that 89% of recruiters say soft skills are the culprit for a bad hire. Fortune 500 CEOs report that 75% of long-term job success depends on soft skills, while only 25% on technical knowledge. To be ready for their futures, students need soft skills, and they will not learn them unless we have a strategic way of teaching and assessing them.

5. Teachers do not know how to teach soft skills

> ➢ Teachers report they do not have time and do not have the training they need to teach soft skills. SHRM reports that 51% of employers believe the education system has not helped close the soft skill gap. Schools need to have a mutual understanding of soft skills and used shared vocabulary and measurements to assess soft skill development. Kelvin, Murray, and Company report that only 20% of employees feel comfortable talking about soft skills in their performance reviews: Schools can help teachers and students learn soft skills together and build a culture where these skills are prioritized. The University of Chicago reports that soft skills are a 169% stronger predictor of academic achievement than IQ score, so creating a soft skills culture has a greater return on investment, improves school climate, and increases student achievement.

HIGHER EDUCATION

In a fast-evolving 21st century, it is becoming increasingly important for students to develop their soft skill competencies alongside technical skills required for their career. As more employers are seeking to employ graduates with a wide soft skills portfolio, it is crucial that educators integrate the teaching of these soft skills in their courses.

As the job market rapidly evolves, employers increasingly prioritize soft skills over technical expertise when hiring recent graduates, making the development of these interpersonal abilities crucial for successful career entry and advancement. This white paper examines the most essential soft skills needed by recent graduates, including *communication, critical thinking, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving*, highlighting the need for educational institutions to integrate comprehensive soft skills training into their curricula to prepare students for the modern workplace.

Are Colleges Doing Enough?

While college has proven to be indispensable for students looking to advance in their careers by teaching hard/technical skills, a recent study from the National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS), *The State of Higher Ed 2022,* found that students are lacking in a key area: soft skills.

Their study concluded that students are not developing three essential skills for the modern workplace: **communication, decision-making,** and **leadership.** This NSLS study surveyed 11,160 undergraduate students, graduate students, and administrators. The answers to their questions revealed this growing skills gap between colleges and employers.

CLOSING THE SOFT SKILLS GAP

The Problem: College students are not learning the vital soft skills, or human skills needed to transition into the workforce and move up in organizations. Ninety-six percent of higher ed faculty report that students can benefit from extra career training and leadership development.

Factors contributing to the gap:

> ➢ **Curriculum Focus:** Some argue that traditional high school and post-secondary school curricula may not adequately prepare students for the demands of the modern workforce, with less emphasis on practical application and real-world problem-solving.

> ➢ **Lack of Work Experience**: Some high school and college graduates may have limited work experience, making it difficult to demonstrate necessary skills to employers.

> ➢ **Perception vs Reality:** Employers may have higher expectations for soft skills and professional maturity than what high school graduates and recent college graduates are perceived to possess.

The Impact: The lack of soft skills development in higher education is causing talent shortage in the job market and leaving students behind. Ninety-three percent of employers say soft skills play a critical role in their decision about whom they want to hire.

The Solution: High Schools and Higher education institutions need to deliver real-world skills that set students up for success **through internship opportunities, leadership development, and experiential learning.** Ninety-five percent of students with an internship said that the internship prepared them for their career. [Source: The National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS), 2022] There needs to be a stronger focus on **Soft Skills Development**, incorporating programs that explicitly teach and develop soft skills like communication, critical thinking, and collaboration into the curriculum.

Benefits: Teaching soft skills in high school and college can help students develop skills that are important for success in school, college, and the workplace.

Recommendations: To effectively teach soft skills, prioritize creating a supportive environment where individuals can practice and receive feedback, use real-life scenarios, encourage self-reflection, model the desired behaviors, and provide opportunities for diverse perspectives through group activities, while tailoring the approach to specific soft skills like communication, teamwork, and adaptability based on individual needs.

Key strategies for teaching soft skills:

Identify specific needs:

Assess the individual or group's current soft skill level to tailor the training to their specific needs and areas for improvement.

Real-life scenarios and role-playing:

Use practical examples and simulated situations to allow individuals to practice soft skills in a safe environment.

Active listening and feedback:

Encourage active listening during discussions and provide constructive feedback on communication style and delivery.

Group activities and collaboration:

Facilitate group projects and discussions to foster teamwork, conflict resolution, and diverse perspectives.

Self-awareness and reflection:

Encourage individuals to self-assess their strengths and weaknesses, and provide opportunities for journaling or reflection on their soft skill development.

Modeling behavior:

Demonstrate the desired soft skills through your own actions and communication style as a trainer.

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