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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Prioritizing Soft Skills to Improve the Performance of Government Organizations



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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

In the 21st century, the workplace is changing rapidly and technical skills alone can no longer guarantee sustainable success (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). According to the World Economic Forum's "Future of Jobs 2020 Report," which studied 15 industries in 26 advanced and emerging economies, up to 50 percent of workers will need some degree of "reskilling" by 2025 (World Economic Forum, 2020).

By reviewing the studies conducted in this field, three study trends can be found. Some have studied it with an approach of literature and ancient values, and some have tried to search for it in religious texts and the lives of religious leaders with a religious perspective. We see many works in this field, especially in domestic works. Some, such as Alizadeh Majd et al. (2010) and Viorella Gramma et al. (2024), have also sought a new range of skills in order to identify the gap in organizations that have failed to invest in technical and hard skills. In the past, it was thought that the presence of hard skills in individuals guaranteed their success in various jobs; but the passage of time has shown that, in fact, hard skills are necessary for obtaining a job, while soft skills are necessary in addition to obtaining a job, to maintain it (Naeem, 2017). A search of studies conducted in this field shows that a precise and comprehensive classification that is generally agreed upon has not been presented to date regarding soft skills. Critical thinking skills (Lopez et al., 2023), emotional intelligence (Austin et al., 2007), creativity (Yusuf, 2019), effective communication (Bridmore, 2019) and collaboration (Tronhill Miller, 2023), emotional intelligence (Kumar et al., 2019), teamwork skills (Polakova et al., 2023) have been emphasized and discussed more than others.

Mintzberg (1973) first mentioned the concept of soft skills. After that, scientists in their research focused on developing the skills needed by managers and the necessity of them going beyond technical and hard skills. In the 80s, some such as Axline (1981), Parsloe (1983) addressed this concept. The main attention in this period was on raising the issue of soft skills and giving examples of it.

After that, during the nineties, the direction of scientific works such as Jones & Goss (1990 and 1991), Moran & Richard (1991) was more focused on the importance of soft skills in intercultural interactions, the impact of soft skills on the issue of quality (Shamwell et al., 1998), the criteria for measuring the effects of these skills on organizational performance (Clarke, 1996) and the search for the relationship between traditional management concepts and this new concept (Hill et al., 1998).

In the early decades of the 21st century, along with the advancement of technology and the standardization of traditional skills and the focus on soft skills more than before, thinkers such as Middleton (2000) studied the obstacles to the efficiency and

effectiveness of using information technology due to the lack of familiarity with soft skills and the effects of soft skills on technological creativity in medium and small enterprises.

During the second decade of the 21st century, scholars such as Fasion (2011) and Kumar and Sharma (2019) continued to identify and introduce new soft skills and their effects on organizational performance. In domestic works, we also witness more attention and review research in this field during this period.

With the emergence of the phenomenon of artificial intelligence and metadata management at the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, researchers such as Lopez et al. (2023) and Jain et al. (2021) also paid attention to the relationship between soft skills and concepts such as new technologies, fifth-generation industries, digital workplace, and artificial intelligence in the subject of soft skills.

With the review, it is clear that the need to identify the required skills up-to-date in view of the changes in the technological world and to prioritize them in order to design efficient tools for measuring performance and their results is a research gap in this field, which is addressed in this article.

Methodology

In the initial phase of the research, the authors conducted an in-depth search of library resources, which resulted in the identification of 50 main indicators related to soft skills. The aforementioned indicators were distributed among the members of the experts in the form of a Delphi expert panel using a questionnaire with a 5-level Likert scale in order to eliminate undesirable sub-criteria. The statistical population of the research included the managers of the civil registration offices of Guilan province, from which 23 experts were selected in order of priority based on relevant education and higher executive experience. In the first round of Delphi, effective sub-criteria in designing a model for evaluating soft skills in the organization were extracted. A one-sample t-test was used to compare the mean of the criteria with the standard value of 3. In the second phase, the fuzzy analytic hierarchy process (FAHP) was used to prioritize the extracted criteria. The validity of the judges' views and the degree of consensus were determined using the Kendall coordination coefficient.

Findings

In the first part of the study, using the Delphi method, 50 sub-criteria were identified, and the findings of the significant level in the first Delphi method stage ($0.05 < 0.001$) indicated that there was a consensus among the experts regarding them. Using the one-sample t-test, 17 sub-criteria with a mean less than the standard value of 3 were eliminated, and a questionnaire including the remaining 33 sub-criteria was distributed among the experts during the second Delphi phase. In the second stage, 3 other sub-criteria were eliminated, and 30 sub-criteria with a mean score higher than 3 were identified as soft skills sub-criteria. Given that in this stage ($0.05 < 0.001$), the assumption of the existence of a consensus among the experts was confirmed using the Kendall test.

In the second part of the study, the experts conducted pairwise comparisons between the soft skills criteria and sub-criteria and determined their scores relative to each other based on a nine-quantity table.

According to the final weights, the emotional intelligence criterion with a final weight of 0.315 includes the sub-criteria of trying to understand and empathize with colleagues (0.030), awareness of individual feelings and emotions (0.088), attention to individual emotions of colleagues (0.053), control of emotions when facing difficult situations (0.048), management of emotions in different situations (0.097), the communication criterion with a final weight of 0.286 includes the sub-criteria of appropriate social skills (0.057), willingness to exchange information with others (0.066), willingness to cooperate in teams and groups (0.054), control of emotions and feelings in communicating with others (0.047), negotiation and conversation skills with others (0.062), the creativity criterion with a final weight of 0.203 includes the sub-criteria of willingness to solve problems and accept problems (0.024), acceptance of criticism and opposing views (0.061), consideration of possible risks and consequences of implementing ideas (0.049), determination of blind and ambiguous points of the

problem for Others (0.069), the critical thinking criterion with a final weight of 125/, including the sub-criteria of deep thinking about the problem (0.009), avoiding judgment and prejudice (0.015), checking the validity of the information source (0.239), evaluating different solutions during decision-making (0.104), paying attention to the critical opinions and views of colleagues (0.028), making decisions based on logic instead of emotions (0.030), and the cooperation criterion with a final weight of 0.070 including the sub-criteria of high teamwork spirit (0.009), sharing information among team or group members (0.023), high responsibility in performing team tasks (0.012), prioritizing team goals over individual goals (0.025), were prioritized respectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the results of the research, emotional intelligence as the most important soft skill plays a vital role in the success of the organization. This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies, including Tronhill Miller et al., 2022) and (Hajipour, 2023). Which show that employees with high emotional intelligence not only establish more effective relationships with their colleagues, but also perform better in the face of challenges and can identify and control emotions in the workplace, which improves interpersonal relationships and reduces tensions.

Communication is in second place, because without strong communication skills, no team or organization can perform properly. This result is also consistent with previous research such as Chamorro et al. (2010) and Haselberger (2012). The ability to clearly and accurately convey ideas, as well as listening to the needs and opinions of others, are among the most important factors for creating successful collaboration and reducing misunderstandings.

Creativity, as the ability to generate new and innovative ideas and solutions, plays a significant role in the success of organizations. Although creativity may be more needed in some industries and roles, in general, it is recognized as a driver of growth and positive change.

In today's world of rapidly changing information, critical thinking allows employees to carefully evaluate data and information and come up with the best solutions. This skill helps organizations stay ahead of their competitors and take smarter actions when faced with emerging challenges. This finding is consistent with research results such as Hajipour (2023) and Garner & Anthony (2016).

As the fifth most important skill, collaboration is key to success in complex and multidisciplinary work environments. In today's world, where projects often require cross-team collaboration, the ability to collaborate effectively improves productivity. This finding is consistent with the results of Hajipour's (2023) study, which states that organizations should actively assess and strengthen these skills.

The results of this study showed that relying solely on technical skills is not enough for success and that special attention should be paid to developing soft skills in organizations; also, not all soft skills have the same importance and priority, and it is better to take executive steps in this area in accordance with the needs of the organization. To this end, designing targeted training programs, creating a supportive organizational culture, continuous evaluation and feedback, using technology to develop soft skills, and developing counseling and guidance programs were presented as the main suggestions of the study.

K E Y W O R D S

Emotional Intelligence, Cooperation, Communication, Creativity, Critical Thinking.



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