

Who is responsible for soft skill development?

by

Adina Lipsett

M.S. Nova Southeastern University, 2006

B.A. University of New Brunswick, 1998

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Education

in the Graduate Academic Unit of Education

Supervisor: Jeff Landine, PhD, Faculty of Education, UNBF

Examining Board: Beth Keyes, PhD, Faculty of Education, UNBSJ

José Domene, PhD, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary

This thesis is accepted by the
Dean of Graduate Studies

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

February 2021

© Adina Lipsett, 2021

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research sought to answer four questions: what soft skills are perceived as important in Atlantic Canada, how are they learned, who is responsible for teaching them, and who is best suited to teach soft skills. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data from 15 semi-structured interviews with members of 6 stakeholder groups and a number of themes were conceptualized from the participant's responses. The results indicated that the soft skills deemed most important included communication, teamwork, and problem solving/critical thinking, as well as workplace and interpersonal skills. The majority of the participants felt parents were responsible for passing on soft skills to their children, with the educational system offering ongoing support to the foundation provided by the parents and adjusting the support as the individual progresses into high school. Regarding who is best suited to teach these skills, again, participants felt that parents had the most influence, coupled with the school system in the role of building on the parent's foundation or lack thereof.

Key words: soft skills, employability, stakeholders, skill development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey has been transformational, personally and professionally. Four years ago, I had no idea what a soft skill was, let alone how impactful they are or who is responsible for teaching them. Then I met a professor; one of the good ones.

The first day we met, I put my foot in my mouth in a monumental way. As I was sitting there humiliated, he handled the situation with grace and tact. Further, he was still willing to work with me on my soft skills journey and I will be forever thankful for that.

Therefore, the first person I want to thank is Dr. Jeff Landine, my thesis supervisor. His passion and expertise in the field of soft skills and career development was inspirational. Through his guidance, I was exposed to a new concept that has changed my life and led to this research. Thank you Dr. Landine. Not only did you tolerate my idiosyncrasies, you provided unwavering support and invaluable guidance that has made this work what it is.

I want to thank my committee members, Dr. Beth Keyes and Dr. José Demone. You both brought very unique expertise to this process, which was vital to the final thesis. I am very thankful for the time and effort you volunteered towards my journey. I also want to extend a special thank you to my research assistant for your time and effort. Thank you.

I would like to thank my parents, Frank and Phyllis Lipsett, who stood their ground about my education despite my objections at the time. I would like to extend a special thank you to my stepfather, Louis Budovitch, for always cheering me on and

celebrating my educational accomplishments. I would also like to thank my fiancé, Brian Corbiere, for his understanding, support, and patience throughout this process. I could not have done it without any of you.

Last but not least, I want to send my heartfelt gratitude to my participants. Without you, this would not have been possible, and I am very humbled and thankful that you trusted me to share your experiences and views. I felt a shared passion about the importance of soft skills with many of you. My hope is that this thesis is a starting point for a collaborative intervention that will evolve the soft skills conversation.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Chapter One: Introduction and literature review	1
Introduction	1
Literature review	3
The relevance of soft skills	3
Top skills	5
Why are soft skills important?	7
How are soft skills taught or can they be taught?	9
Challenges to teaching soft skills	12
Class influences	13
Cultural influences	14
Context influences	14
Context influences	14
Who is responsible?	15
Post secondary institutions	15
Grade school	19
Parents	20
Employers and the labour market	21
Student responsibility	23
Government	25
Objective of this research	26
Chapter Two: Who is responsible for soft skill development	39
Abstract	39
Introduction and background	40
The present study	43
Method	44
Participant recruitment	44
Data collection	45

Data analysis	45
Trustworthiness and authenticity	46
Research findings	47
Valued soft skills.....	48
Workplace skills.....	48
Interpersonal skills	49
Theme 1: All experiences are an opportunity for soft skill development	50
Theme 2: Societal changes interfere with soft skill development.....	52
Theme 3: Parents bear primary responsibility for soft skill development	54
Discussion	57
Conclusions.....	60
Limitations	60
Future research directions	61
Chapter Three: Implications for counselling and related fields	70
All experiences are an opportunity for soft skill development	72
Societal changes interfere with soft skill development.....	74
Responsibility for soft skill development	76
Conclusion.....	77
Appendix A.....	80
Appendix B	81
Curriculum Vitae	

Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

Malcolm Gladwell (2008) defines success as a combination of ability and opportunity. Adhering to Gladwell's formula, individuals can work on increasing their abilities, in order to be prepared for opportunities when they present themselves. Anthony Robbins says people must be specific and mindful about their goals, with the ability to be flexible and reach out for help as needed (Robbins, n.d.). The skills he refers to are soft skills; skills that are presently in demand by employers across North America. In fact, according to one study, having the requisite soft skills was found to be the most important factor in increasing employability (Seetha, 2014). Soft skills are also referred to in the literature as non-cognitive skills (Lievens, 2011), entrepreneurial skills (Jackson, 2013), and non-technical skills (Jackson, 2012). They can include personality traits (Clarke, 2008), work ethic (Robles, 2012), and people skills (Battel, 2018). Research demonstrates that the development of soft skills improves a graduate's employability (Anderson, 2014). In turn, employees with these soft skills have the potential to achieve organizational change and improve personal well-being (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Finally, individuals with soft skills are more likely to be hired (Robles, 2012). While not everyone has these skills, they can be learned and mastered to increase the potential for career success (Gibb, 2014; Ibrahim et al., 2017; Saunderson, 2017; Seetha, 2014; Susilawati et al., 2020).

Employers are looking for these skills now more than ever before. Employees with existing soft skills are better able to adapt and fit into new work environments (Succi, 2019). Soft skills enhance employee performance, which in turn enhances organizational success (Robles, 2012; Seetha, 2014). If employers can hire students that

already possess soft skills, they do not have to worry about filling the soft skills gap with training, that they often have to pay for. One could also argue that attending a post-secondary institution is a form of work where soft skills are learned and practiced. Research suggests having these skills enhances a young person's transition to post-secondary programs and, again, enhances their ability to become employed after graduation (Anderson, 2014; Kaburise, 2016; Seetha, 2014).

There are many parties that have a vested interest in soft skill training and development. Included in this list are parents who want to see their children succeed and become self-sufficient. Post-secondary institutions (PSI) want to provide students with both the hard and soft skills they need to become successful, not only in their careers, but in life. Post-secondary institution administrators have the added motivation of maintaining their ratings as an institution in public rankings, which influence applications and the amount of funding received. Employers are looking for employees who have the necessary hard and soft skills for the positions available. Also, society has an interest in knowing that there will be enough teachers, for example, to meet the demand from their schools, and these teachers, in order to be successful, need more than the content knowledge in their particular subject area. One could say that soft skills training can, potentially, be provided by all the above stakeholders.

Recently, a significant amount of focus has been directed towards soft skills research. Futureworx, an organization in Truro, Nova Scotia, has developed a tool to address the assessment of soft skills (Futureworx, 2019). Their Employability Skills Assessment Tool (ESAT) was developed based on literature (Gibb, 2014) supporting the importance of formative assessment in the development of soft skills. In 2016, a task force was developed in New Brunswick with representation from the province's

universities (with the exception of the UNB Fredericton campus), business associations, government and student groups to increase graduate employability through experiential learning initiatives, which are known to increase soft skill development (Government of New Brunswick, 2016; Saunderson, 2017). Students need both hard and soft skills to become employable, with increasing emphasis on and demand for soft skills (Anderson, 2014; Boutilier, 2019; Weiss, 2019). Soft skills are important in many disciplines and work environments (Raman et al., 2015). For example, in the IT industry, software testers need to be flexible, be able to problem solve, and to manage stress (Florea, 2018).

The literature points to increasing recognition of the importance of soft skills to young people and their future careers (Jackson, 2013; Succi et al., 2019; Weiss, 2019). However, the research is not in agreement about who is responsible for teaching them (Hurrell, 2015; Tran, 2015). The goal of the present research is to review the positions of some of these stakeholders to gain a better understanding of, according to Atlantic Canadians, which soft skills are considered important, how soft skills are learned, and to determine who they believe, if anyone, is responsible for teaching soft skills.

Literature review

The following literature review will discuss many aspects of soft skill importance and development. This will include a discussion on how soft skills are learned and the challenges that impact learning. The existing literature on six stakeholder groups (students, public school, employees, government, employers, PSI's, parents) will be considered in this exploratory study.

The relevance of soft skills

Amy Edmondson, a professor of leadership and management at Harvard, wrote, "The soft skills are the hard skills" (Kalman, 2012, p. 1). These skills are also referred to

in the literature as professional skills, core skills, generic skills, key skills, people skills, non-technical skills, transferable skills, employability skills, entrepreneurial skills, and essential skills (Anderson, 2014; Clarke, 2007; Jackson, 2013). Soft skills have been described as a “combination of interpersonal and social skills” (Dixon et al, 2010, p. 35). Hard skills, in contrast, refer to the technical skills learned through PSIs in specific fields; skills such as changing the alternator in a car or doing a tax audit. Hard skills are necessary for employment, but some say soft skills enhance the hard skills, promoting success in the workplace (Anderson, 2014). As the labor market continues to change, the importance of soft skills has increased, and they have become equally, if not more so, important to hard skills (Robles, 2014; Weiss, 2019).

There is little agreement on a universally accepted definition or list of ‘soft skills’ (Trann, 2015). In fact, the definition of ‘skill’ is being challenged with the inclusion of more interpersonal characteristics (Bailly et al., 2013). However, for the purpose of this research, we will use the term ‘soft skills’ because it encompasses the many interpersonal skills people deem important and it is the most frequently used term in the literature, especially when comparisons are made to hard skills. The chosen definition of soft skills used for the purpose of this research is as follows:

Soft skills refer to a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviors, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals. These skills are broadly applicable and complement other skills such as technical, vocational, and academic skills (Lippman et al., 2015, p. 4).

Some studies have also included personality attributes and physical features, including appearance and dress, in their definition (Bailly et al., 2013; Hora et al., 2018).

There is a wealth of existing research related to which skills constitute soft skills. The skills identified in these studies include, but are not limited to: oral communication, team work, customer service, and self-presentation (Hurrell, 2016; Kaburise, 2016; Murthy, 2020); critical thinking, problem solving, self-management (Kaburise, 2016; Murthy, 2020); adaptability, self-awareness, time management, leadership skills, doing things in a culturally appropriate way, flexibility, creativity (Murthy, 2020); positive attitude, strong work ethic (Gravelle, 2015); entrepreneurship (Ferguson, 2010); citizenship (Manuti et al., 2016); strategic influencing, relationship building and maintenance, being a quick study, tolerance for uncertainty, passion, and optimism (Martino, 2011). While this is not a comprehensive list, it serves the purpose of demonstrating the range and variability of what constitutes a soft skill.

Top Skills

There is a great deal of variability, evident in both the academic and professional literature, in opinions about which soft skills are considered to be the most important. Express Employment Professionals surveyed twenty-two Canadian companies nationwide asking which soft skills they felt were most important (Refresh Leadership, 2016). The top five skills they identified were dependability/reliability, motivation, communication, teamwork and commitment. Another study found that communication ability predicts both academic and employment success (Kaburise, 2016), making communication skills, in their opinion, a particularly valuable skill. Deloitte's 2018 global Chief Information Officer (CIO) survey explored the evolving mandates of CIO's and what is required to achieve them. More than 1400 people responded to the survey, representing 71 countries and 23 industries (Deloitte Global, 2018). The CIO's were asked which soft skills they would most look for when hiring for their workplace and the

top three soft skills identified were creativity, cognitive flexibility and emotional intelligence (Kark, 2019). Increasingly, cultural awareness and being able to behave in a culturally appropriate way are also being considered as soft skills that are necessary in the changing work world (Murthy, 2019).

Variables of context, culture, and stage in life may all contribute to the determination of which soft skills are most important. For example, effective communication skills for a nurse would be different from what would be expected as effective communication skills for a programmer. Further, some generations may value more, or different, soft skills as compared to other generations, whether due to the mores of their generation or life experience. The factors of context, culture and generational differences contribute to considerable inconsistency across lists, making the determination of a universal, 'most important skills' list difficult at best (Jackson, 2013).

The influence of culture and context can be seen in the results of a Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC) survey (Gravelle, 2015). Canadian business leaders were surveyed to assess their recruiting practices and the training/career development opportunities that they provide to employees in relation to soft skills. Five hundred business leaders were surveyed and, interestingly, when asked which soft skills were important to them, differences emerged based on the region, the location and the size of the business. Atlantic Canadian businesses valued a positive attitude as most important, with communication skills, teamwork skills, and a strong work ethic following in order of importance. Surveyed businesses endorsed teamwork skills as a higher priority in urban centers than with rural-based businesses, while a positive attitude was found to be of greater importance in businesses with fifty employees or less. When asked about the provision of soft skills training, British

Columbia emerged as the leading province with 30% of the businesses surveyed offering soft skill training, and the Atlantic provinces ranked second with 21% of businesses providing soft skills training to employees. Smaller businesses tended to focus more on hard skill training and tended to value positive attitude in the area of soft skills (Gravelle, 2015). Despite the wide variance in definition and scope of soft skills in both the academic and professional literature, there appears to be little disagreement about the importance of soft skills to employers, schools and new employees.

Why are soft skills important?

Soft skills are emerging as imperative to obtaining employment, as a result of organizational and demographic changes in the workforce (Jackson, 2013). The world has moved from depending primarily on an industrial workforce to an office-focused and service-oriented one. Therefore, humans need to possess the soft skills that are required in that context and the skills that cannot be replaced by the machines that are increasingly prevalent in the industrial sector. Organizations are downsizing and restructuring (Bridgestock, 2009; Clarke, 2008). Many companies outsource to other countries (Clarke, 2008). There is now more short-term, contract work being offered, as opposed to long-term employment (Anderson, 2014; Bridgestock, 2009; Clarke, 2008). New ways of working are emerging, such as working from home, complicating things further (Bridgestock, 2009). With all these changes occurring at such an accelerated rate, a post-secondary diploma or degree is no longer enough to guarantee employment after graduation (Weingarten, 2016). The new workforce will require new skills and skills for managing the many changes cited here.

Graduate employability, simply defined, is the ability to become employed after graduation, and is certainly linked to the acquisition of soft skills (Clarke, 2018).

Graduates being able to obtain work after graduation has always been a goal of post-secondary institutions, but it has become an even more significant focus when considering the alleged labor force skills gap (Hora et al, 2018). Employers feel that there is a lack of sufficiently skilled workers to meet their workforce needs (Adecco Staffing, 2013; Clarke, 2008). They rate soft skills as crucial and ascribe them even higher importance than the hard skills developed in post-secondary education (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017).

Soft skills have been shown to improve an employee's performance on the job. In turn, competent employees improve an organization's success, which makes the candidates who come with soft skills already developed highly attractive to employers (Ibrahim et al., 2016; Lister, 2019). If the incoming employees have the requisite soft skills, employers have one less task and one less expense to incur before the new employee is work-ready (Bridgstock, 2009; Clarke, 2007; Finch et al., 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2016; Kaburise, 2016; Linn et al., 2012).

Soft skills have a definite connection to graduate employability. One study of this relationship sought to explore employers' perspectives on soft skills and the factors influencing graduate employability (Hairi et al., 2011). Employers from one hundred and fifty different industries in Malaysia were surveyed, using a five-point Likert scale. Three hundred and nine employers stated that a lack of soft skills was the biggest factor effecting graduate unemployability. The second most common reason cited as negatively effecting the employability of Malaysian university graduates was a negative attitude, described as including such behaviours as demanding a high salary, being choosy, and a lack of initiative. Further, the researchers interviewed Dr. Mohd Selleh Abu, the Dean of the Faculty of Education at the Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, whose

research interest is soft skills. He believes that the soft skills of the graduates of his institution do not meet the needs of employers, and this deficit is one of their greatest challenges to employability (Hairi et al., 2011).

The literature is clear regarding the importance of soft skills to employability in the modern workforce. Employers are claiming there are not enough qualified candidates to meet the demand. The question then becomes one of how to identify and narrow the gap, through training and other forms of learning. This direction, however, is dependent on understanding how soft skills are learned.

How are soft skills taught or can they be taught?

Soft skills are generally thought to be learned through life experience and are closely related to interpersonal abilities (Saunderson, 2017; Susilawati et al., 2020). Traditionally, we obtain soft skills through experiences and opportunities in our environment, such as school, extracurricular and community activities, and social circles (Saunderson, 2017; Susilawati et al., 2020). We also learn these skills from our parents (Khoirunnisa et al., 2020; McDaniel & Radesky, 2018). If our society does have a soft skills gap, perhaps our traditional soft skill development opportunities are not providing our youth with the skills they need, or there are other intervening factors impacting the transfer of soft skills, leading us to question how these skills can be taught.

Susilawati et al. (2020) surveyed junior high school teachers in Indonesia about the importance of soft skills, the soft skill components required for junior high science learning, and strategies to integrate soft skill training in the existing science curriculum. They identified five strategies to integrate soft skill development with junior high science students: conventional teaching, community engagement, extracurricular activities, modeling, and integration in the learning process, with the latter being

evaluated as the most effective approach. All of these avenues provide opportunity to develop soft skills.

Additional ways that grade schools are trying to incorporate soft skill training include inclusion in their curriculum by recognizing opportunities for students to learn how to work in a group and develop communication skills and problem-solving skills (Susilawati et al., 2020). Some teachers hold youth accountable, by expecting students to be on time and to take responsibility for completing their work in an effort to enhance self-efficacy (Adams, 2012). Some school counsellors teach goal setting, advocacy and other behaviors needed to become successful (Adams, 2012). Schools are also supporting parents, through parenting courses, and by encouraging them to let their children develop these skills by doing for themselves, such as suggesting an allowance where children learn to manage money and a responsibility to contribute to their home by doing chores (Adams, 2012).

Post secondary institutions are offering elective courses in soft skill development (Weiss, 2020), such as the ‘Critical Thinking’ course offered by the Department of Philosophy at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton (UNBF). Students learn the complexities of language, how to develop and evaluate an argument, and common mistakes people often make through inductive and deductive reasoning (University of New Brunswick, 2020a). St. Thomas University (STU) has a page directed at students on their website for ‘Learning skills’, such as critical thinking and oral communication, with definitions and helpful tips (St. Thomas University, 2021). Many programs integrate soft skill learning opportunities into the curriculum, through group work, oral and written communication, and presentations.

Not all of those who work with students in PSIs, however, recognize the value of teaching soft skills. Some believe that soft skills are innate characteristics and therefore one either has them or they do not (Bailly, 2013). A study conducted in the United Kingdom found that soft skills are not a priority for faculty of academic programs as they are more dependent on personality than training and detract from more academic activities (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010). Ngang (2015) concluded that a number of factors, including large class size, insufficient time allotted for training, academic focus and the belief that soft skills are personal characteristics and therefore can not be enhanced, contribute to the failure of soft skill training and development at the post-secondary level.

Organizational approaches to developing soft skills use similar techniques. They often employ a situational learning approach, where the employee can learn, practice, and master the new soft skill. Some examples of situational learning include the use of mentors, internships, group activities and game-based virtual learning (Saunderson, 2017). There is some evidence that time spaced learning is ideal (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Time spaced learning is training that is offered in smaller segments and is spaced out, so that individuals can practice and integrate these new skills in the workplace. Employees learn faster and retain more information from this type of training than from other methods (Ibrahim et al., 2017). An article in Forbes magazine suggested the usefulness of a simple learning platform and online network where employees can connect and get advice and access smaller modules of learning for skill development (Chakreverty, 2018). One study found that there was strong empirical evidence to support the relationship between time spaced learning and an employee's work performance after the training, resulting in a 15.9% increase in employee performance (Robles, 2012).

Trainer demonstrations, discussions, debates, lectures, role playing, case studies and games have also been used in organizations. Some organizations match new employees with older, more experienced staff to enhance the new employees' soft skills (Robles, 2012). Some argue that soft skills are tied to emotion and therefore, the best place to learn and develop them is through human interaction (Chakraverty, 2018). Gibb (2014) suggests that constructive feedback is beneficial to those employees invested in self-improvement.

The changes in the demographics in New Brunswick, such as an increasingly older workforce, has led the province to develop a task force to investigate how to keep graduates in the province. One of their suggested action items is to provide students with experiential learning opportunities to gain career experience. Offering experiential learning opportunities enhances a student's learning and skills as they can learn and develop soft skills that may help students to avoid becoming unemployed or underemployed (Government of New Brunswick, 2016). UNB offers experiential learning opportunities through co-op learning opportunities, summer placements, and internships (University of New Brunswick, 2020c).

Challenges to teaching soft skills

A discussion of the complications with teaching soft skills would begin with the complexity of identifying a soft skill and what it means to be successful in that soft skill. Issues of context, culture and generation complicate the establishment of a universally accepted definition. As a result, any training would have to consider the context and culture of where the soft skill would be used and design the training around that environment.

Susilawati et al. (2020) found four primary challenges to soft skill development that can be found in grade schools: a lack of support from the school and/or parents; the fact that soft skills are not a learning objective in the curriculum; teaching materials that are not soft skill related; and the reality that some teachers and parents lack understanding of how soft skills are developed. Further, they found that 63.5% of the teachers surveyed felt their lack of understanding about how to teach soft skills and where to integrate the training into the curriculum was the largest challenge to teaching soft skills (Susilawati et al, 2020). Other research studies stated that in order to learn and integrate soft skills, an individual requires opportunities to practice in real life environments, whether through educational forums or organizational initiatives (Hora et al., 2018; Ibrahim et al., 2017; Susilawati et al, 2020).

Ibrahim et al. (2017) recognized that there is still an onus on the individual employee to integrate soft skill training into their lives. Employees need to make a commitment to lifelong learning to increase or maintain their level of employability and to further develop their soft skills. Unfortunately, not everyone is open to constructive feedback for self-reflection and improvement (Gibb, 2014). Further, opportunities for soft skill development are presented from grade school up to and throughout the time spent in the workforce, but it is up to individuals to access these opportunities.

Individual differences can have an impact on soft skills training and the transfer of those skills to the workplace (Clarke, 2008). An employee's prior experience, as well as their confidence about their ability to learn and implement soft skills, can impact training outcomes. Organizations can have an impact on the individual, through their struggle to identify necessary training objectives and have that training relate to their specific organizational context. There is also recognition that a repetitive job or a

negative work environment may lead to soft skill withdrawal (Hurrell, 2016). Therefore, resistance, whether from an organizational or individual standpoint, can have an impact on the transfer of soft skills training (Laker et al., 2011).

Class influences

One criticism that surfaces in the existing research is that soft skills are most often indicative of the skills valued by the middle and upper classes (Hora et al., 2018). Concerns include the belief that employers can use these skills to assess where employees are from and whether they belong in their organizational culture (Hora et al., 2018). In other words, if the employer does not see the soft skills they are looking for during an interview, they may reject a candidate, assuming that because they lack the desired soft skills, they will not fit into the company culture. This action can exclude those from low-income families and different ethnicities, as the preferred soft skills are essentially reinforcing the practices of middle- and upper-class families. While rejecting a candidate for a perceived lack of soft skills, employers may not recognize the other skills the candidate may have that can contribute in a positive way to the organization (Hora et al., 2018).

Cultural influences

Ethnic differences influence soft skills as well. Murthy (2019) stated that the ability to do things in a culturally appropriate way was an important consideration for immigrants seeking employment in Canada. She talked about the necessity to fit in, not only at work, but also socializing outside of work with colleagues. Regarding immigrants moving to Canada, she suggested becoming comfortable with small talk that Canadians relate to, being a good listener and talking about the other person's interests as all being beneficial (Murthy, 2019). Within Canada, there is a lot of diversity as well.

For example, with Indigenous people, looking directly into someone's eyes is considered disrespectful, but, to the western world, it is interpreted as showing honesty (Willingham, 2012). Therefore, consideration of the influence of culture is very important.

Context influences

There is a lack of understanding that soft skills need to be considered within the context of the work. For example, the critical thinking skills of a lawyer would be different from the critical thinking skills of a taxi driver. While some wish to view soft skills as transferable, they appear to be anything but, in terms of context (Hora et al., 2018).

Graduates do not necessarily have all the soft skills that serve to increase their employability and success in the workforce. While there are some challenges in soft skill training, there are a variety of ways individuals can learn and develop soft skills. However, now that soft skills are being deemed important, some are questioning who is responsible for ensuring employees have the necessary soft skills and who is in the best position to teach those soft skills.

Who is responsible?

Soft skills are becoming increasingly important to personal and career success. Several stakeholders have emerged in recognition of the perceived soft skills gap, voicing who they feel is responsible for the soft skill training necessary to close that gap (Hairi et al., 2011; Hurrell, 2016; Jackson, 2012). This review will consider the perspectives of post-secondary institutions (PSI), public schools, parents, students, employers, and government on the issue of responsibility. Each stakeholder group has its own perception about who is responsible for teaching our young people these soft

skills. Further, each stakeholder group faces challenges and obstacles in fulfilling the responsibility for soft skill development.

Post-secondary institutions

Traditionally, people sought a university education as a gateway to employment (Ortlieb, 2015). While a degree certainly opens doors, it is no longer enough to guarantee employment after graduation (Weingarten, 2016). However, it has been recognized that higher education is a significant predictor of employability (Jackson, 2013), therefore post-secondary institutions are part of the soft skill conversation.

Universities need and want to provide students with the skills necessary to obtain work after graduation (Bridgstock, 2009, Ibrahim et al., 2016). Faculty want to assist their students to develop the skills to reach their career goals and administrators seek high graduate employability to increase their ratings and rank (Bridgstock, 2009). Post-secondary institutions also seek to identify any skills gaps in their graduates as they are moving into the workforce (Clarke, 2008; Thurner et al., 2012). For example, instructors provide constructive criticism on assignments in an effort to help students improve academically, but this is also a learning opportunity for the acquisition or development of the skill of receiving and accepting feedback.

Universities expect first year students to struggle a little as they adapt to this level of learning (Thurner et al., 2012). They are finding, however, that more and more students entering post-secondary institutions have low basic soft skill levels (Thurner et al., 2012). Some of the evidence of underdeveloped skills includes failing to ask questions about things that they may not fully understand for an assignment, taking constructive criticism personally and resisting, failing to be on time, not using salutations and closings in correspondence, and providing inappropriate email addresses

(Turner et al., 2012). One could argue that universities and other post-secondary institutions are not responsible for teaching the soft skills that youth lack due to their upbringing and/or their public school experiences, placing the responsibility on parents and public school educators. However, the assumed goal of post-secondary educators is to provide students with the skills necessary to obtain a career in their chosen program area. Therefore, if PSI's want to assist students in their success and foster a reputation of having high employment rates, soft skill training in post-secondary education is also important to PSI's (Ibrahim et al., 2017).

Universities are, in some ways, well suited to provide soft skill training and many have already taken the initiative to integrate soft skill training in an effort to meet employer demand (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015). Universities offer specific courses in essential skills, such as the Critical Thinking course offered at UNB (University of New Brunswick, 2020a). In this particular course, students learn the complexities of language, developing an argument, and common mistakes in reasoning, providing students the opportunity to develop their critical thinking skillset. Soft skill academic courses are also offered at universities like Harvard, Yale, Columbia and Stanford (Weiss, 2019). St. Thomas University (STU) has a page directed at students on their website for 'Learning Skills', such as critical thinking and oral communication, with definitions and helpful tips (St Thomas University, 2020). Further, PSIs offer opportunities for soft skill development in hard skill/academic classes. For example, students complete group work, through which they learn how to work as a team, how to communicate, and how to problem solve collaboratively, though this aspect of skill development is not necessarily explicitly stated.

University and post-secondary institutions sometimes offer experiential learning opportunities, such as a co-op placement or internship requirement. Students are provided an opportunity to practice their hard and soft skills in an employment environment prior to graduation. In fact, some students feel that there are skills that can only be learned through experience (Anderson, 2012). They have the opportunity to receive feedback from an employer, who in most instances is best suited to help identify any skills the student needs to work on. The impact of these opportunities to increase and integrate soft skill development is significant when considering graduate employability (Billet, 2011; Lowden et al., 2011; University of New Brunswick, 2020c).

Criticisms of PSI's include the perception that they are failing in their ability to create graduates who are ready for the workforce (Tran, 2015). There is a perception that PSI's recruit the best candidates, but that does not necessarily translate to graduates that are workforce ready (Suleman et al., 2018). Lashley (2009) stated that "higher education is out of touch with what is colloquially known as the real world" (Lashley, 2009, p. 43). The authors of one study recognized the shift of training responsibility from the employer to post-secondary educators as shifting the investment from employers to taxpayers, seemingly placing more responsibility on higher education institutions (Hora et al., 2018). They state that the poor infrastructure and outdated teaching methods and curriculum of PSI's are to blame. Further, some PSI faculty are reluctant to acknowledge the importance of soft skills at all (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010).

Universities and community colleges often face a shortage of funding and resources, such as instructors, which is a challenge for PSIs implementing new programs to address soft skills development (Hora et al., 2018). Some argue that adding soft skill

development to post-secondary curricula takes away from the teaching of academic content, the primary focus of higher educational institutions (Kreber, 2006). Post-secondary institutions are not just about producing a labour force, but they are also about the evolution of society, through research (Suleman et al., 2018). Employability after graduation has been the primary test of a university's value, but perhaps the true test of employability after graduating from university should be how graduates fare over their career lifetime, as opposed to simply obtaining employment immediately after graduation (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015).

The mission statements that PSIs adopt often provide insight into the professed goals of the institution. UNB's mission statement is as follows: "Our mission is to create the premier university environment for our students, faculty and staff in which to learn, work and live. We will provide an exceptional and transformative education for our students, by encouraging initiative and innovation, unlocking their creative potential." (University of New Brunswick, 2020b). The New Brunswick Community College's vision statement is, "Transforming Lives and Communities" (New Brunswick Community College, 2020). While there is a societal expectation that education beyond high school will increase employment opportunities, these mission statements do not guarantee that, suggesting there is more to post-secondary education than obtaining a job after graduation.

Grade school

Public schools recognize that many teenagers lack the soft skills necessary to successfully navigate the transition to post-secondary education or the workforce successfully. Further, they feel young people are more successful in grade school when

they have soft skills. Therefore, kindergarten to grade twelve educators also have a voice in the soft skills conversation.

The public-school system sees value in incorporating soft skill training into their curricula and have taken initiatives to include soft skill content in the classroom. Similar to post-secondary institutions, teachers can integrate soft skill training through, for example, group work because it teaches students how to work as part of a team, how to communicate, how to problem-solve collaboratively, and how to debate. One study that evaluated soft skill integration in a science curriculum in middle school found that soft skills greatly improved student performance and determined academic success and future employment success (Susilawati et al., 2020).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) has demonstrated very positive outcomes in K-6 students (Shanker, 2014). The goal of these programs is to enhance the ability of young people to make good decisions and effectively engage in life, which includes the development of soft skills. The program's aim is to develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills, ethical decision-making skills and responsible behavior, all of which are listed as soft skills above. Research has found that these programs are most effective when they are well integrated into regular school routines and classroom instruction (Boutilier, 2019; Canadian Mental Health Association, 2020; Shanker, 2014).

The Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) Framework has been developed in New Brunswick to better coordinate and meet the needs of youth in the province (Government of New Brunswick, 2015). One arm of this initiative is to improve academic achievement and success, school to work transitions, and collaborative partnerships within the community. Through this framework, several government

departments collaborate to effectively support students in any area in which they are struggling (Government of New Brunswick, 2015).

Some of the challenges identified for teachers in soft skill training include a lack of collaboration from the various other stakeholders including parents, school administration and government policy makers (Susilawati et al., 2020). One research study also found that larger class sizes, an academic focus, and short periods of training led to ineffective soft skill integration in the classroom and that a few years in school is insufficient for teaching soft skills (Ngang et al., 2015). Teachers often lack the knowledge, resources and time to integrate soft skill training into an already busy school day.

Parents

The school system is unable to train youth in soft skills on their own (Adams, 2012). Parents play a pivotal role in soft skill development. Therefore, they are also included in the soft skill conversation. The role of parents is included in the New Brunswick ISD framework and social emotional benchmarks for students in the NB public school system in recognition of their impactful role in soft skill development. Through parenting classes and coaching, parents are encouraged to provide opportunities where soft skills can be learned, so that youth eventually are able to manage adult responsibilities. Parents are able to provide soft skill learning opportunities at home. Parents can also provide opportunities through modeling behaviors, explaining tasks and involving children in chores, such as budgeting or meal planning, talking with them and allowing them to make their own mistakes (Adams, 2012; The Center for Parenting Education, 2020).

Employers and the labor market

Employers feel that students entering the workforce lack the skills they require, claiming a skills gap that needs to be addressed. Employee performance and organizational success are pivotal for businesses to survive (Boutilier, 2019). Therefore, employers are also included in the discussion of soft skills training and responsibility.

The workforce is an effective place for soft skill learning and training to take place. Paid bridging, mentorship and internship programs can close skills gaps or allow new graduates to demonstrate that they have these skills in the workplace (Ontario Commission for Human Rights, 2020). Organizations have the opportunity, by implementing these initiatives, to acclimate new employees to their unique culture, policies, and procedures. While soft skills are necessary, meshing them with specific organizational culture is also important. In fact, some employers prefer to hire someone they have trained through these opportunities (Suleman, 2018).

Some organizations are reluctant to offer these options, despite the evidence of their effectiveness (Kaburise, 2016). A 2019 Adecco Group poll found that 89% of employers cited cost as the primary reason for not implementing mentorship and training programs (The Adecco Group, 2019). While some employers do offer internships for students to put their new skillsets into practice, often students are given menial tasks and are not subjected to work that would develop the skills employers are seeking (Tran, 2015). Employers are also reluctant to invest in training new employees, especially when there is high turnover, or the work involves a short-term contract.

The return on investment in soft skills development is questioned by employers, partially because of the cost, but also because of the challenges inherent in assessing the effectiveness of development initiatives. Specific training provided to fix any soft skill incompetence in new hires can take twelve to twenty-four months, at a considerable cost

to the employer and the government, which contributes to this reluctance to engage in training (Hairi et al., 2011). There is research, however, that demonstrates the value of training, despite the costs. A Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan experiment found that a one-year training program in soft skills enhanced the employee team's performance by 250% in a factory setting (Boutilier, 2019). As soft skills increase employee performance, the organization is more successful and competitive. Massaro et al. (2016) found that soft skills enhance the ability of employees to be creative and innovative, improving organizational success and bringing about positive changes in the work environment.

Organizations are affected by their own bias and politics when alleging skills deficits in new graduates (Hurrell, 2016). It has been argued that a negative work environment can lead employees to withdraw soft skills, termed “emotional misbehavior” in the workplace (Vincent, 2011, p. 1). Research has found that some employers do recognize that poor colleague relationships and poor work environments can affect soft skills (Hurrell, 2016). Other managers recognize that personal issues and a repetitive job can also lead to a decrease in soft skills use. One study found that businesses with low turnover reported a smaller soft skill gap than those with high turnover, implying that a positive work environment has a role to play in the presence of soft skills (Hurrell, 2016).

Arguably, employers need to balance many factors when hiring. Some hiring managers are focused on filling a specific position with any person, rather than looking for specific qualifications and finding the most appropriate candidate (Chakraverty, 2018; Hurrell, 2016). The acceptance and understanding of the impact of soft skills can lead to a different evaluation of potential employees and therefore impact hiring

decisions (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Careful screening of applicants, consideration of training styles, job satisfaction and treating employees well, including providing recognition, will all enhance soft skill use and development and keep employers competitive (Chakraverty, 2018, Hurrell, 2016).

There are programs available to assess an employee's soft skills prior to the interview, such as *LinkedIn's Skill Assessment* (Lister, 2019). Behavioral and situational interviews can assist an employer in identifying a potential employee's soft skills. Employers can also present the interviewee with a hard skills task, while integrating an issue requiring soft skills, to see how they manage in both forums. Employers also need to be specific in determining which soft skills are a requirement to meet the responsibilities of particular jobs. Flexibility might look very different in a government office from the flexibility shown by someone working in retail. If they are unable to pinpoint those skills in their own employment context, they may have trouble finding the right employee (Lister, 2019).

Student responsibility

Students apply to post-secondary institutions for a variety of reasons, one of which is to increase their likelihood of obtaining employment after graduation. They are investing in their future and view their investment as a transaction toward becoming employable. While there is some research that questions how much of a voice students have in this debate, as future employees, they are the focus of the discussion and therefore have a place at the table.

Students recognize the link between effort and the available resources, and that the attainment of professional knowledge is, in fact, in their hands (Tran, 2015). In one study, students revealed that, while professors often offered help and encouraged them

to come to them for further assistance, the students did not often take them up on the offer. Tran (2015) discussed the challenges associated with the transition from high school, where young people are accountable to their teachers, to university, where young people are largely independent. Some of them felt the transition from high school to university allowed them to be more passive with their education. Sharma (2018) found first year students lacked emotional maturity, and had difficulty adapting to the change. Others felt that students wanted to enjoy the university experience after being accepted, and therefore, they were more interested in that freedom (Tran, 2015).

Skill development requires the student to commit to lifelong learning and to seek opportunities for their own evolution (Ferguson, 2012). In a United Kingdom study, one participant stated, “It’s like having nine pieces of cake. Each skill is listed on one piece. All of the pieces of the cake are there and it’s up to you how much you want to eat” (Andrews et al., 2012, p. 40-41). The results of this study indicated that universities should teach soft skills in regular academic classes. While many universities do teach courses that develop soft skills as electives, students rarely take them (Weiss, 2019).

Students do need to accept some responsibility for developing their portfolios (including hard and soft skills) and managing their careers. Seeking a PSI degree or diploma is one step in the path to future career success. However, as stated above, this is no longer sufficient. Individuals can determine what they need to achieve in order to become employed in their area of interest and then seek training to obtain the skills necessary for that career choice (Chakraverty, 2018). Engagement with community, participation in school clubs and activities and volunteer activities can all enhance a resume, which is the responsibility of the student. In fact, one study found that freshmen

did not seem to understand the link between extracurricular activities, in class activities and the enhancement of soft skills (Tran, 2015).

Stating that employability is determined solely by a student's soft skills and hard skill ability is unfair. This argument does not consider the changes in the world that are beyond a student's control (Jackson, 2013). As stated above, the world has moved from an industrial workforce to a service-based, office-focused one. Organizations are downsizing, restructuring and offer more short-term, contract work, as opposed to long-term employment (Anderson, 2014; Bridgestock, 2009; Clarke, 2008). New ways of working are emerging, such as working from home, complicating matters further. These changes have led to more competition. While many people may have an Engineering degree, for example, a potential employee with the degree and developed soft skills may be more rare. Therefore, having hard skills is not enough to be guaranteed a good job after graduation. An individual commitment to lifelong learning is necessary to continually evolve and maintain employability (Hora et al., 2018; Tran, 2015; Weiss, 2019).

Government

The government has a slightly different role in terms of soft skills training. While they are invested, they have a more external role. Regarding PSIs, the government provides funding to support their activities. With public schools, the government again provides financial support (Canadian School Board Association, 2020). Government funded programs are developed to assist individuals in furthering their skill development in an effort to become employable. One example is the Essential Skills Achievement Pathway (ESAP) Program offered in high schools in New

Brunswick, providing training in essential skills (Government of New Brunswick, 2020c).

Post-Secondary Education Training and Labour (PETL), one division of the New Brunswick provincial government, offers a program intended to develop workplace skills in those seeking work. The Workplace Essential Skills (WES) program provides training directed towards various career contexts for employees and employers looking to train their staff. For example, people who seek careers in customer service sectors or retail can take the WES training tailored to their desired career context. People who are under-employed or unemployed can take the course to enhance their skillsets. The nine skills that are addressed in the WES program include: numeracy, document use, digital literacy, writing, reading, oral communication, thinking, continuous learning, and working with others. Participants are screened prior to beginning the training to determine their capability in each essential skill, such as numeracy. The screening results in a score from one to five and the goal of the program is to increase the participant's relative score on each skill by the end of the training. When employers initiate training for their staff, the program is tailored to meet the objectives of the employer (Government of New Brunswick, 2020a).

The New Brunswick government appears to recognize the effectiveness of experiential learning in the skill development process. The NB 2016 Economic Growth plan states it is important to “significantly expand the number of post-secondary students that gain relevant career experience while attending school” (Government of New Brunswick, 2016, p. 13). As noted above, internships, co-op placements, or volunteer opportunities assist the transition to the workforce and provide cost effective alternatives for employers. In fact, PETL offers a wage subsidy to businesses offering

apprenticeship opportunities to youth through their Student Employment Experience Development (SEED) program (Government of New Brunswick, 2020b). They also offer apprenticeship financial support for those who have successfully completed part or all of their program. These programs seek to actively intervene and provide opportunities through the government for people to develop their skills through training and experience (Government of New Brunswick, 2020b).

Objective of this research

Business leaders and some researchers have claimed Canada will see a shortage of employees due to a skills gap (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015). Adding to the difficulty, a universally accepted definition of soft skills has yet to be determined. New soft skills are being added to the list of necessary skills, such as the ability to behave in a culturally appropriate way. As the global economy continues to change at a rapid pace, the soft skills that are considered most desirable will also continue to change. As these skills are increasingly in demand, one must question who is responsible for teaching them. Considering how soft skills are learned and developed is a key variable in the question of who is responsible and best suited for teaching and developing soft skills.

The purpose and projected outcomes of this research were to begin to explore the abovementioned stakeholder groups' perceptions of soft skills. The project generated a list of the soft skills deemed important by these stakeholder groups in the Atlantic provinces. The question of how soft skills are developed was investigated in an effort to understand who the participants felt was responsible for soft skill development and who was in the best position to teach them. Further, the data gathered contributes to the growing body of literature about soft skills generally, as well as initiating the study of soft skills in the Atlantic provinces specifically. Thus, the research questions

investigated were: 1. What soft skills are important, 2. How are soft skills learned, 3. Who is responsible for teaching them to young people, and 4. Who is best suited to teach them.

References

Adams, C. (2012). 'Soft skills' seen as the key element for higher education. *Education week*,

32(12), 4-14.

Adecco Staffing (2013). State of the Economy and Employment. Retrieved on January 25, 2021

from <http://blog.adeccousa.com/the-skills-gap-and-the-state-of-the-economy/>

Anderson, B. (2020, February 4). Soft Skills Training: 6 skill sets which provide

employees a solid base. *Human Resources*. Retrieved February 4, 2020 from

https://www.hr.com/en/magazines/personal_excellence_essentials/august_2014_personal/soft-skills-training-6-skill-sets-that-provide-emp_hysvwq7p.html.

Andrews, G. & Russell, M. (2012). Employability skills development: strategy, evaluation and impact. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 2(1), 33–44. <https://doi.org/10.1108/20423891211197721>

Battel, J. (2018). Teaching soft skills for employability. *TESL Canada Journal*, 35(1),

p.78+ Retrieved on January 11, 2020 from [https://link-gale-](https://link-gale-com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/apps/doc/A570439725/CPI?u=fred46430&sid=CPI&xid=96dec8e)

[com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/apps/doc/A570439725/CPI?u=fred46430&sid=CPI&xid=96dec8e](https://link-gale-com.proxy.hil.unb.ca/apps/doc/A570439725/CPI?u=fred46430&sid=CPI&xid=96dec8e)

- Bailly, F., & Alexandre, L., (2013). The personification of the service labour process and the rise of soft skills: A French case study. *Employee Relations*, 35(1), 79–97. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425451311279429>
- Billet, S. (2011). *Curriculum and pedagogical bases for effectively integrating practice-based experiences – Final report*. Strawberry Hills, Australia: Australian Learning and Teaching Council.
- Boutilier, K. (2020, June 19). *A hard look at soft skills*. Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation (CEDEC). <https://cedec.ca/a-hard-look-at-soft-skills/>.
- Bridgstock, R. (2009). The graduate attributes we've overlooked: enhancing graduate employability through career management skills. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(1), 31-44. DOI: 10.1080/07294360802444347
- Canadian Mental Health Association (2020). *What is SEL?* Canadian Mental Health Association (CHMA), Nova Scotia division. Retrieved on July 14, 2020 from <https://novascotia.cmha.ca/what-is-sel/>.
- Canadian School Board Association (2020). Public education in Canada. Retrieved January 29, 2021 from <https://www.cdnsba.org/all-about>
- Chakraverty, J. (2018, June 24). Why your company should prioritize soft skills. *Forbes*. Retrieved June 3, 2020 from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/voicesfromeurope/2018/09/24/scaling-soft-skills-to-submit/#59021fb31466>.
- Chamorro-Premuzic, T., Arteche, A., Bremner, A. J., Greven, C., & Furnham, A. (2010). Soft skills in higher education: Importance and improvement ratings as a

- function of individual differences and academic performance. *Educational Psychology, 30*(2), 221-241.
- Clarke, M. (2018). Rethinking graduate employability: the role of capital, individual attributes and context. *Studies in Higher Education, 43*(11), 1923–1937.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2017.1294152>
- Clarke, M. (2008). Understanding and managing employability in changing career contexts. *Journal of European Industrial Training, 32*(4), 258-284.
- Deloitte Access Economics, (2017). *Soft skills for business success*. Retrieved on June 3, 2020 from
<https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Economics/deloitte-au-economics-deakin-soft-skills-business-success-170517.pdf>
- Deloitte Global (2018). Manifesting legacy: Looking beyond the digital era. 2018 global CIO survey. *Deloitte Insights*. Retrieved January 25, 2021 from
<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/leadership/global-cio-survey-2018.html/?id=us:2pm:3oo:ciosurvey:awa:cliexp:090518:cioj>
- Dixon, J., Belnap, C., Albrecht, C., & Lee, K. (2010). The importance of soft skills. *Corporate Finance Review, 14*(6), 35–38.
- Drummond, D. & Rosenbluth, E. K. (2015). *Competencies can bridge the interests of business and universities*. University of Ottawa. Retrieved June 17, 2020, from
<https://ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/33200>.
- Ferguson, J. (2010). An overview and discussion of research supporting the concept of a generic 'soft' skills framework in tertiary education towards bridging the gap

- between education and employment. *New Zealand Journal of Applied Business Research*, 8(2), 59–74.
- Finch, D., Hamilton, L., Baldwin, R., & Zehner, M. (2012). An exploratory study of factors affecting undergraduate employability. *Education & Training*, 55(7), 681-704. doi:10.1108/ET-07-2012-0077
- Florea, R., & Stray, V. (2018, May). Software tester, we want to hire you! An analysis of the demand for soft skills. In *International Conference on Agile Software Development* (pp. 54-67). Springer, Cham.
- Futureworx (2019). *Building a Pan-Canadian Soft Skills Framework*. Futureworx, Inc. Retrieved January 28, 2020 from <https://futureworx.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Soft-Skills-Framework-Report.pdf>
- Gibb, S. (2014). Soft skills assessment: Theory development and the research agenda. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 3(4), 455-471.
- Gladwell, M. (2010). *Outliers*. New York, NY: Bay Back Books.
- Government of New Brunswick (2015, September). *Framework for the delivery of integrated services for children and youth in New Brunswick*. Government of New Brunswick. Retrieved June 24, 2020 from <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Corporate/pdf/ISD/en/ISDFramework.pdf>
- Government of New Brunswick (2016, November). *Final Task Force on Experiential Education*. Government of New Brunswick. Retrieved July 14, 2020 from <https://stu.ca/media/stu/site-content/documents/policies-and-reports/FinalReportoftheTaskForceonExperientialEducation2016.pdf>

Government of New Brunswick (2020a, July 10). *Workplace essential skills program*.

Government of New Brunswick. Retrieved July 10, 2020 from

https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/services/services_renderer.200971.html

Government of New Brunswick (2020b, July). *Student Employment Experience*

Development (SEED) program. Government of New Brunswick. Retrieved July

29, 2020 from [https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/post-](https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/post-secondary_education_training_and_labour/Skills/content/FinancialSupport/SEED.html)

[secondary_education_training_and_labour/Skills/content/FinancialSupport/SEE](https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/post-secondary_education_training_and_labour/Skills/content/FinancialSupport/SEED.html)

[D.html](https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/post-secondary_education_training_and_labour/Skills/content/FinancialSupport/SEED.html)

Government of New Brunswick (2020c). *Essential Skills Achievement Pathway (ESAP)*

Program. Government of New Brunswick. Retrieved January 28, 2020 from

[https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/k12/content/esap.ht](https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/k12/content/esap.html)

[ml](https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/education/k12/content/esap.html)

Gravelle, M. (2015). *How hard is it to find employees with soft skills?* Canadian

Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC). Retrieved on June

19, 2020 from [https://ceric.ca/fr/2015/01/how-hard-is-it-to-find-employees-with-](https://ceric.ca/fr/2015/01/how-hard-is-it-to-find-employees-with-soft-skills/)

[soft-skills/](https://ceric.ca/fr/2015/01/how-hard-is-it-to-find-employees-with-soft-skills/).

Hairi, F. B., Toe, M. N. B. A. & Razzaly, C. W. B. (2011). Employers' perception on

soft skills of graduates: A study of Intel Elite soft skill training. *International*

conference on teaching and learning in higher education. Retrieved on February

12, 2020 from <http://eprints.uthm.edu.my/id/eprint/2191/1/EDC243.pdf>

Hora, M. T., Benbow, R. J., & Smolarek, B. B. (2018). Re-thinking soft skills and

student employability: a new paradigm for undergraduate education. *Change:*

The Magazine of Higher Learning, 50(6), 30-37.

- Hurrell, S. A. (2016). Rethinking the soft skills deficit blame game: Employers, skills withdrawal and the reporting of soft skills gaps. *Human relations*, 69(3), 605-628.
- Ibrahim, R., Boerhannoeddin, A. & Bakare, K. K. (2017). The effect of soft skills and training methodology on employee performance. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 41(4), 388-406.
- Jackson, D. (2013). Student perceptions of the importance of employability skill provision in business undergraduate programs. *Journal of Education for Business*, 88(5), 271-271.
- Jackson, D., & Chapman, E. (2012). Non-technical skill gaps in Australian business graduates. *Education & Training*, 54(2/3), 95-113.
doi:10.1108/00400911211210224
- Kaburise, P. (2016). Improving soft skills and communication in response to youth unemployment. *Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter- and transdisciplinary*, 11(2), 87-101.
- Kalman, F. (2012). Has executive education gone soft? Chief Learning Officer.
Retrieved July 12, 2020 from
<https://www.chieflearningofficer.com/2012/12/17/has-executive-education-gone-soft/>
- Kark, K. (2019). Help Wanted: Tech talent with soft skills. *Wall Street Journal*.
Retrieved June 20, 2020 from <https://deloitte.wsj.com/cio/2019/10/09/help-wanted-tech-talent-with-soft-skills/>

- Kreber, C. (2006). Research-based teaching in relation to academic practice: some insights resulting from previous chapters. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 107, 109–114. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.250>
- 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.
- Lashley, C. (2009). The right answers to the wrong questions? observations on skill development and training in the united kingdom's hospitality sector. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 9(4), 340–352. <https://doi.org/10.1057/thr.2009.21>
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D. & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance [Monograph]. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45, 79-122.
- Lievens, F. & Sackett, P. (2012). The validity of interpersonal skills assessment via situational judgement tests for predicting academic success and job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97(2), 460. DOI: 10.1037/a0025741
- Lin, C., Tsai, Y., Joe, S. & Chiu, C. (2012). Modeling the relationship among perceived corporate citizenship, firms' attractiveness, and career success expectation. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 105(1), 83-93.
- Lippman, L. H., Ryberg, R., Carney, R., & Moore, K. A. (2015, June). Workforce connections: Key “soft skills” that foster youth workforce success: Toward a consensus across fields. Washington, DC: Child Trends Inc.
- Lister, J. (2019). Corporate Canada is facing a soft-skills deficit – what can we do about it? *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved June 20, 2020 from

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/careers/leadership/article-corporate-canada-is-facing-a-soft-skills-deficit-what-can-we-do/>

- Lowden, K., Hall, S., Elliot, D., Lewin, J., (2011). Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates. Edge Foundation, London, England.
- Manuti, A., Impedovo, M. A. & Davide De Palma, P. (2016). Managing social and human capital in organizations: Communities of practices as strategic tools for individual and organizational development. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 29(3), 217-234.
- Martino, Gail, & Bartolone, J. (2011). Soft skills for open innovation success. In P. Sloane (Ed.) *A Guide to Open Innovation and Crowdsourcing: Advice from leading Experts* (1st ed, pp. 98–105). London, UK: Koganpage.
- Massaro, M., Bardy, R. & Garlatti, A. (2016). A soft skills training model for executive education. In *Human Centered Management in Executive Education: Global Imperatives, Innovation and New Directions* (pp. 222-241). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Murthy, M. (2019). 10 Soft skills that can help you get ahead. *Canadian Immigrant*. Retrieved June 20, 2020 from <https://canadianimmigrant.ca/careers-and-education/softskills/10-soft-skills-that-can-help-you-get-ahead>.
- New Brunswick Community College (2020, June 17). Our vision, purpose and values. New Brunswick Community College (NBCC). Retrieved June 17, 2020 from <https://nbcc.ca/strategic-plan/vision-purpose-and-values>.
- Ngang, T. K., Chan, T. C., & Vetriveilmany, U. D. (2015). Critical issues of soft skills development in teaching professional training: educators' perspectives. *Procedia*

- *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 205, 128–133.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.09.039>

Ontario Commission for Human Rights (2020, June 19). Common questions: Policy on removing the “Canadian experience” barrier (fact sheet). Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC). Retrieved June 19, 2020 from

<http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/common-questions-policy-removing-%E2%80%9Ccanadian-experience%E2%80%9D-barrier-fact-sheet>

Ortlieb, E. (2015). *Just graduating from University is no longer enough to get a job.*

The conversation. Retrieved July 14, 2020 from <https://theconversation.com/just-graduating-from-university-is-no-longer-enough-to-get-a-job-36906>

Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labor (n.d.). Financial services. *Government of New Brunswick*. Retrieved June 12, 2020 from

https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/post-secondary_education_training_and_labour/Skills/content/FinancialSupport.html#16

Refresh Leadership (2020, June 20). *New survey results: Most important hard and soft skills*. Retrieved June 20, 2020 from

<http://www.refreshleadership.com/index.php/2016/03/survey-results-important-hard-soft-skills/>

Robbins, T. (n.d.). *How to be successful*. Retrieved July 14, 2020 from

<https://www.tonyrobbins.com/how-to-be-successful/>.

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>

- Saunderson, R. (2017). Talent tips making soft skills easy with situational learning. *Training, 54*(5), 62–63.
- Seetha, N. (2014). Are soft skills important in the workplace? A preliminary investigation in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 4*(4), 44-56.
- Shanker, S. (2014, November). Social/emotional learning: Measuring what matters domain paper. People for Education. Toronto, ON. Retrieved July 15, 2020 from <https://peopleforeducation.ca/report/sel-domain-paper/>
- Sharma, V. (2018). Soft skills: An employability enabler. *The IUP Journal of Soft Skills, 12*(2), 25-32.
- Sheu, H. & Wang, X. T. (2019). Social cognitive career theory: Overview and practical applications. In N. Arthur, R. Neault & M. McMahon (Eds.), *Career Theories at Work: Ideas for Practice* (1st ed., pp 379-389). Toronto, Canada: CERIC.
- St. Thomas University (2020). *Learning strategies*. St. Thomas University (STU). Retrieved July 14, 2020 from <https://stu.ca/learningstrategies/>
- Succi, C., & Canovi, M. (2019). Soft skills to enhance graduate employability: comparing students and employers' perceptions. *Studies in Higher Education, 45*(9), 1834–1847. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1585420>
- Suleman, F. & Costa Laranjeiro, A. (2018). The employability skills of graduates and employers' options in Portugal: An explorative study of anticipative and remedial strategies. *Education and training, 60*(9), 1097-1111.
- Susilawati, Aznam, N., Paidi, Ngadimin, (2020). Teachers' perspectives toward soft skills in science learning. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series, 1460*(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1460/1/012111>

- The Adecco group (2019). *Future proofing the workforce: Accelerating skills acquisition to match the pace of change*. Retrieved on January 26, 2021 from https://future-skilling.adecgroup.com/downloads/Adecco_-_Future_skilling_report__2018.pdf
- The Center for Parenting Education (2020, June 24). *Parents as teachers*. <https://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/responsibility-and-chores/teaching-children/>
- Turner, V., & Böttcher, A. (2012, April). Expectations and deficiencies in soft skills. In Proceedings of the 2012 IEEE Global Engineering Education Conference (EDUCON) (pp. 1-7). International Conference on Electrical and Electronic Engineering (IEEE). <https://doi.org/10.1109/EDUCON.2012.6201197>
- Tran, T. T. (2015). Is graduate employability the whole-of-higher-education-issue? *Journal of Education and Work*, 28(3), 207-227.
- University of New Brunswick (2020a, June 17). *Critical thinking*. College of Extended Learning. <https://www.unb.ca/cel/credit/online-courses/open-entry-courses/phil1101.html>
- University of New Brunswick (2020c, July 14). *Career connections*. <https://www.unb.ca/careerconnections/>
- Vincent, S. (2011). The emotional labour process: An essay on the economy of feelings. *Human Relations*, 64(10), 1369-1392.
- Weingarten, H. P. (2016). Postsecondary education and jobs: It`s a question of skills. *Higher Education Quality Counsel of Ontario* (HEQCO). Retrieved December 21, 2019 from <http://blog-en.heqco.ca/2016/11/harvey-p-weingarten-postsecondary-education-and-jobs-its-a-question-of-skills/>

- Weiss, L. (2019). Viewpoint: The case for soft skills. The Society for Human Resource Management (*SHRM*). Retrieved June 15, 2020 from <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/organizational-and-employee-development/pages/viewpoint-the-case-for-soft-skills-.aspx>
- Willingham, E. (2012). Low eye contact is not just an autism thing. *Forbes*. Retrieved on July 14, 2020 from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emilywillingham/2012/10/16/low-eye-contact-is-not-just-an-autism-thing/#4abe0c327f5c>

Chapter 2: Who is responsible for soft skill development?

Consistent with the School of Graduate Studies' regulations and guidelines for manuscript style theses, Chapter 2 has been written in the form of a journal article manuscript. Specifically, it has been written to conform to the submission requirements of the *Canadian Journal of Career Development*, which can be found at <https://cjcd-rcdc.ceric.ca/index.php/cjcd/about/submissions#authorGuidelines>.

Abstract

This qualitative research sought to answer four questions: what soft skills are perceived as important in Atlantic Canada, how are they learned, who is responsible for teaching them, and who is best suited to teach soft skills. Thematic analysis was used to

analyze the data from 15 semi-structured interviews with members of 6 stakeholder groups and a number of themes were conceptualized from the participant's responses. The results indicated that the soft skills deemed most important included communication, teamwork, and problem solving/critical thinking, as well as workplace and interpersonal skills. The majority of the participants felt parents were responsible for passing on soft skills to their children, with the educational system offering ongoing support to the foundation provided by the parents and adjusting the support as the individual progresses into high school. Regarding who is best suited to teach these skills, again, participants felt that parents had the most influence, coupled with the school system in the role of building on the parent's foundation or lack thereof.

Key words: soft skills, employability, stakeholders, skill development.

Who is Responsible for Soft Skill Development?

Introduction and Background

The demand for soft skills has been increasing in the 21st century with the growth of occupations requiring soft skills on the rise worldwide (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). Soft skills are increasingly important to employers as they seek to develop their workforce and these skills have been shown to increase graduate employability and success in the workplace (Anderson, 2014; Lister, 2019; Succi, 2019). Much of the literature in this area suggests that the importance of soft skills is surpassing that of the

hard skills being taught in school and training opportunities (Anderson, 2014; Deloitte Access Economics, 2017). With soft skills assuming heightened status in the world of career development, the question of who bears responsibility for soft skill development is key to understanding and enhancing any efforts to improve youth employability. However, there is disagreement in the existing literature about who is responsible for soft skill development, with the current focus primarily on the roles of post-secondary institutions (PSI) and employers (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015; Ferguson, 2010; Hairi et al., 2011).

Soft skills are often broadly defined and may also be referred to as professional skills, core skills, generic skills, key skills, people skills, non-technical skills, transferable skills, employability skills, entrepreneurial skills, and essential skills (Anderson, 2014; Clarke, 2008; Jackson, 2013). The working definition for the purpose of this research comes from Lippman et al. (2015, p. 4):

Soft skills refer to a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviors, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals. These skills are broadly applicable and complement other skills such as technical, vocational, and academic skills.

Some examples of soft skills from the literature include, but are not limited to: oral communication, team work, customer service, and self-presentation (Hurrell, 2016; Kaburise, 2016; Murthy, 2020); critical thinking, problem solving, self-management (Kaburise, 2016; Murthy, 2020); adaptability, self-awareness, time management, leadership skills, doing things in a culturally appropriate way, flexibility, creativity

(Murthy, 2020); positive attitude, strong work ethic (Gravelle, 2015); and entrepreneurship (Ferguson, 2010).

The existing literature suggests that soft skills are learned through experiences navigating one's various environments, such as school and work, and social interactions, as well as from parents, and that they are closely linked to interpersonal abilities (Saunderson, 2017; Susilawati et al., 2020). Public school educators have begun to integrate soft skill development opportunities into their existing curriculum (Adams, 2012; Susilawati et al., 2020). Strategies for teaching soft skills that are mentioned in the existing literature include conventional teaching, community engagement, extracurricular activities, modeling, group work, goal setting, and collaboration with parents (Adams, 2012; Susilawati et al.; 2020). Post-secondary institutions (PSI) have offered elective courses to students, as well as provided information and opportunities for soft skill development and situational learning approaches through internships and co-op programs (Saunderson, 2017; St. Thomas University, 2020; University of New Brunswick, 2020a).

Despite the increase in interest in teaching soft skills, the literature also recognized several challenges to this enterprise that include the complexity involved in defining soft skills and identifying which ones are most important to teach. According to some authors, each soft skill has to be considered in terms of varying cultural norms, the context in which the skills are being employed, and values based on class and generational differences (Hora et al., 2018; Murthy, 2019). Faculty of PSI have also been implicated as presenting an obstacle to soft skill development due to a lack of training in how to integrate these skills into their classes (Hora et al., 2018) and resistance to acknowledging their importance (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010). Other

challenges to teaching soft skills in the existing literature included a lack of support from schools or parents, the lack of soft skill development material in the curriculum and teaching materials, and the lack understanding of how soft skills are developed on the part of both teachers and parents (Susilawati et al., 2020).

The recognition of the increasing importance of soft skills has led to some discussion in the literature as to who is responsible for teaching them (Jackson, 2012; Succi, 2019). The stakeholder groups most often represented in the literature in this regard are PSI's, public schools, parents, employers, and governments, with the majority of the existing research focused primarily on PSI's and employers as being most responsible for teaching soft skills (Ferguson, 2010; Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015; Hairi et al., 2011; Succi, 2019). In defence of the school system, the literature recognized that teachers in the public-school system cannot teach soft skills in isolation and that they require parental and government collaboration (Adams, 2012). Individual differences and a student's idiosyncratic ability to take charge of their own development also impact soft skill development and complicate the ability of teachers to educate students in these skills (Ibrahim et al., 2017; Laker et al., 2011). The government, for its part, has a voice in grade school administration and curriculum, as well as a role in offering essential skills training to enhance unemployed or under-employed worker's employment options (Government of New Brunswick, 2020). Further, the 2016 New Brunswick Economic Growth Plan states how important it is to "significantly expand the number of post-secondary students that gain relevant career experience while attending school" through internships in the workplace in order to offer practical opportunities to develop soft skills (Government of New Brunswick, 2016, p. 13).

The existing literature is quite clear in stating that youth and PSI graduates have greater employability and career success if they possess soft skills (Anderson, 2014; Kaburise, 2016; Robles, 2012; Seetha, 2014). Employers prefer workers with soft skills because they may, for example, already know how to communicate, work in a team, and problem solve (Florea, 2018; Succi, 2019). With the level of competition that currently exists for jobs, the acquisition of soft skills has become a necessary advantage in the world of employability (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017; Jackson, 2013).

The Present Study

The current research is an exploratory study directed at obtaining the opinions of Atlantic Canadians on the topic of soft skills, a relatively unknown perspective in the literature. Much of the research in this area has focused on whether PSI's or employers are responsible for soft skill development, with responsibility most often attributed to PSI's (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015; Hurrell, 2015; Ibrahim et al., 2016; Kaburise, 2016). There is little research available on the influence of government, public schools, or parents on the acquisition of soft skills by Canada's youth. Further, this researcher was unable to find one study related to soft skills that focused solely on Canada's Atlantic provinces. The research project described here employed Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012) to evaluate semi-structured interview data, in order to answer four guiding research questions: *What soft skills do Atlantic Canadian stakeholders believe are most important? How do they understand how soft skills are learned? Who do they view as being responsible for teaching them to young people? Who do they believe is best suited to teach them?*

Method

Career construction theory (Savickas, 2013) posits that individuals create their career by imposing subjective meaning on their experiences. Regarding the interviews conducted as part of this research, participant responses reflect their own career experiences and realities in relation, specifically, to the most important soft skills, how they are learned, and who is responsible for teaching them. A constructivist approach to conducting the research allowed participants to develop and construct their own awareness of soft skills for employability through interaction with the researcher (Rutt et al., 2013).

Participants and Recruitment

The process of recruiting participants began after receiving approval from the institution's Research Ethics Board. The researcher purposively chose to approach people from each of the stakeholder groups identified in the literature, while strategically seeking out participants that fell into more than one category. Snowball sampling was also used, in that the researcher asked a few of the participants if they could recommend another person who might be interested in participating (Glen, 2020).

The sample recruited consisted of fifteen participants, all from the Atlantic provinces: twelve from New Brunswick, two from Nova Scotia, and one from Newfoundland. Two had immigrated from other countries. There were ten women and five men, and they ranged in age from fifteen to eighty-two ($M = 33.5$). Eleven participants had a bachelor's degree, with five of them also having a second degree. Two student participants were in the fourth year of a degree program and one student was in grade ten. Eight participants were government employees or had previously been government employees. Five were presently or had, at some point in the past, been entrepreneurs. Ten of the participants were parents.

Data Collection

Fifteen semi-structured interviews, using open-ended questions with people from each stakeholder group, were used to gather the data. The interviews ranged in duration from eleven minutes and twenty-nine seconds to forty-seven minutes and fifty-three seconds in length, with a mean duration of twenty-six minutes and sixty-seven seconds. Each participant was emailed a brief summary of the research project and an informed consent form prior to the interview. Interviews were completed via Zoom and participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions they might have had, related to the project or their participation, at the beginning of the session. Demographic information was also gathered during the interview.

Beginning each interview, the researcher read the working definition of soft skills adopted for the purpose of this research, including some examples of soft skills as defined in the literature. The participants were asked a total of five questions (see Appendix A). The questions were purposefully general and open-ended so participants could answer them according to their own context and perspective or, perhaps, from multiple stakeholder perspectives. For example, it was expected that asking a parent what soft skills they felt were important for youth to have would generate a different response in their role as a parent from that provided in their role as an employer.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2012) six phase Thematic Analysis (TA) approach was used as the method for analyzing the data. This method of analysis is accessible and flexible and is especially well-suited for researchers who are new to qualitative research and are evaluating interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). The flexibility of TA provided the opportunity to evaluate the available data in its entirety. In other words, the process

employed was inductive, in that the data determined the coding and themes. The coding and theme development were based on the entire content of the interviews and reflected the explicit content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Each interview was transcribed and anonymized by the researcher and then reviewed multiple times, to familiarize the researcher with the data. The researcher printed hard copies of the transcripts and highlighted excerpts from the data using colored pencils in order to begin compiling repeated ideas among the transcripts and to create a list of codes. Initially, semantic codes were employed using the participant's own words. As the coding process was developed and modified, the researcher engaged in an interpretive or latent process to encompass the initial semantic codes in a more meaningful or accurate way. An excel spreadsheet was developed to begin organizing semantic codes from the data provided by the participants for each interview question.

The researcher developed a table documenting which skills were listed as important by participants, formulating the quantitative component of the first research question. All of the soft skills mentioned in the transcripts were listed and the researcher read through each transcript to check off which skills the participants mentioned. Using this approach, the researcher was able to conclude communication was the most cited soft skill. The data was then evaluated using TA to identify overarching themes using a latent approach, highlighting the ideas and patterns from the participant transcripts.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Nowell et al. (2017), citing Guba and Lincoln (1989), in reference to the credibility of a study, stated that credibility is established, "when coresearchers or readers are confronted with the experience, they can recognize it" (p. 3). Analyst triangulation was employed to enhance validity. To this end, a Research Assistant (RA)

was recruited to evaluate a portion of the anonymized transcripts. The RA chose the interviews to review, as opposed to the researcher choosing them, to minimize any bias on the part of the researcher. The RA read the transcripts to identify codes that might indicate agreement or possible codes the researcher missed. Once in agreement, the researcher sent the RA the write up of her themes to, again, seek agreement or offer suggestions of missing codes. The RA agreed with the researcher's identified codes and themes.

The researcher also engaged in member checking to add another layer of credibility to the results. The participants were emailed a summary of the themes and a description of each and were asked for feedback to determine if they agreed that the data was described and interpreted accurately. Five of the fifteen participants responded. Four said they would not change anything. A fifth participant felt that discussing the positive and negative effects of technology would be beneficial. As well, this participant wanted to reiterate, while mentioned in the findings, that individual responsibility was a key component of soft skill development and that encouraging people to take that responsibility would be beneficial.

Research Findings

The data gleaned from the 15 interviews was first organized into a list, with subcategories, of which soft skills the participants mentioned as being most valued. Once the response to this question had been organized, the responses to the three remaining questions related to how and where soft skills are typically learned and who is responsible for teaching them, provided a number of common areas of thought. The thematic analysis identified three broad themes in addition to the following list of valued soft skills.

Valued soft skills

Participants identified thirty-four different soft skills in response to the first question. The three most identified skills were communication, teamwork, and problem solving/critical thinking. In regard to the first skill identified, communication, thirteen participants made reference to oral, written, and nonverbal communication. Eleven participants listed communication as very important. Participant 9 said, “the ability to look someone in the eye and properly communicate, to allow them to hold your attention” was significant.

Eleven participants identified teamwork as a crucial soft skill for young people to have. Participant 7, a nursing student, said that, “if you’re going to get something done,... it may be better, may be faster, with a team. And then if you have more brains working on something, mistakes are more likely to get caught instead of missed too.”

Critical thinking and problem solving were a priority for ten of the participants. Participant 3 said, “We need to have our children think for themselves”. Participant 11 stated, “we teach them how to use the devices properly with critical thinking skills; then the world is theirs and they can go off and explore it”. Participant 14 incorporated teaching problem solving at a young age, asking the youth she works with, “the world wants you to become what? ... The world wants me to become a problem solver!” She encourages student exploration of possible solutions when faced with a challenge. The remaining thirty-one soft skills identified were grouped under the headings, workplace/cognitive skills and interpersonal skills.

Workplace skills

Workplace/cognitive skills, according to the participants, are the characteristics that make someone a good employee for an organization. When asked about what

makes someone a good employee, participants spoke of the ability to provide good customer service skills and to be able to follow instructions from an employer as important. In terms of work ethic, skills such as being motivated, reliable, and on time were endorsed as important by multiple participants. Three participants felt that time management and organization were key to success in both work environments and post-secondary institutions.

The career-related values of the participants also became evident in the skills offered in this category. The importance of networking and building relationships to one's career development was pointed out by Participant 1 in the statement that, at one time, the expectation was that one had "to work our way up the ladder" after starting at the bottom. In order to do that, this participant clarified that young people needed to be able to develop a network and build relationships as key skills for climbing the ladder. The value in becoming self-sufficient also became evident in the belief expressed by two participants that managing finances was an important soft skill for youth to have. Participant 6 described this in terms of the importance of, "Budgeting. Even just to take care of a home, and yourself."

Interpersonal skills

The remaining soft skills were subsumed under the heading interpersonal skills. In this group of skills, the values of the participants were again evident as a number of participants felt that these skills were, at one time, developed through discipline and structure in the "old-fashioned sense" (Participant 11). In fact, one participant said he was going to refer to soft skills as values, instead of soft skills (Participant 5). Many participants brought up the ability to show compassion, kindness, and empathy to others

as an important skill. Participant 14 went so far as to say, “A successful person to me is a person that spreads and emits kindness.”

Skills such as the ability to be resilient, persistent, consistent and committed, were viewed as important to the relationships at work, as well as in the contexts of education and extracurricular activities. Participant 13 compared the relative importance of communication and commitment by stating, “And commitment, you aren’t going to get anywhere unless you can commit, no matter how good you can communicate”. The ability to be open-minded and flexible in one’s thinking emerged as another important interpersonal soft skill, acknowledging the ability to see another person’s point of view and change your own.

The value of independence was also evident in this category of skills. Participants felt that the goal in life is, “to be able to look after yourself” (Participant 1), to “manage uncomfortable or challenging situations maturely” (Participant 4), and “the power to be self-reflective” (Participant 2). Maybe even more importantly, Participant 9 felt that, “coping with feedback, with failure, with disappointment” was a very important soft skill to have in any environment.

Once the most valued skills were identified, participants shared their stories of how they themselves had learned soft skills and how they felt youth can learn soft skills in their current milieu. Participants used the word opportunities often, suggesting that there are many possible ways that soft skills are learned. From participant responses, three prevailing themes were found in the participant transcripts.

Theme 1: All experiences are an opportunity for soft skill development

The majority of participants felt that any interaction is an opportunity to learn, develop, or practice a soft skill. Many participants felt that soft skill development was a

lifelong commitment and that opportunities to develop new skills were often presented in new environments, such as new and different employment opportunities. Participant 14 made this point quite succinctly, stating that soft skills are learned, “in pieces everywhere that you go”.

Participants acknowledged the importance of experience and role models as key means of learning soft skills. Participant 7 said, “soft skills are more so learned by example ... Maybe kids will recognize the good, like it made them feel good, so maybe they would like to make other people feel good too”, in reference to teachers modeling the behavior. When children try something new or practice a soft skill and see that it works, they will continue to use that skill (Participant 5).

One of the opportunities for trying new things, mentioned by more than half of the participants, was involvement in extracurricular groups offered opportunities. Three participants mentioned groups such as the Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Brownies, and Girl Guides as being important in a child’s development because of the exposure to role models, opportunities to try new things and interacting with peers. Five of the participants included membership in a church community as an opportunity for soft skill development, though Participant 14 acknowledged that churches don’t “have the same value in the community” as they once did because fewer people join a church community today. Almost all of the participants had themselves participated in an organized sport growing up and a number continue to play sports as an adult, as do their children. One specific skill, teamwork was mentioned repeatedly in the context of belonging to a sports team.

In addition to being open to new experiences, participants spoke about some new methods for teaching soft skills and some practices that they felt should be brought back

into the learning environment. Participant 2 discussed the role of peer-to-peer learning as helpful and Participant 5 pointed out that any program for developing soft skills had to be adaptable to each individual. In contrast, a few participants spoke of the importance of reintroducing cursive writing and more traditional methods of teaching children to read as important. While the older methods may not be as fun, the repetitiveness and dedication it takes to practice and learn these skills are also important skills to learn and obtaining them leads to a sense of achievement. The participants as a group appeared to embrace the value of incorporating new approaches to developing these skills, while still acknowledging the role of tried and true methods.

Finally, Participant 13 shared how he was working on teaching people how to learn as a coach, to provide them with a process or methodology for learning new things that could be applied anywhere. This conceptualization of soft skill development as part of a life-long learner mindset resonated well with the idea that all experiences have the potential to teach soft skills.

Theme 2: Societal changes interfere with soft skill development

A majority of the participants (12 of the 15 participants) expressed the belief that society has changed in the last few generations. The participants felt that young people's perceptions and beliefs about work and social interaction are different from those of older generations. Participant 4 acknowledged that each generation has its own unique core values and how important it is, "to find ways of working with the generations, aligning with their core values ... to find a compromise". Participant 1 said, "I think the biggest thing that we are going to be faced with the generations, not so much the x as much as the y and z, is they are very educated. They are very knowledgeable, especially when it comes to technology, but that social aspect, the

ability to communicate, the importance of building relationships” is not there. This participant believed that their expectations, based on their skills, are much higher and they don’t want to work their way up the ladder like the older generations have done (Participant 1).

Some of the specific changes expressed were the perceived inability of young people to accept no as an answer, the inability of adults to let children fail, and the lack of consequences when children do fail. Participant 1 said, “We coach, we assist, we don’t let”. Participant 14 felt we had to let children fail in order for them to learn how to problem solve. Participant 3 talked about how the teacher/student relationship had also changed. Where once the teacher might have taught one’s siblings, or other community connections might be evident, now there is distance and the relational history is often absent.

A common theme among the participants was the acknowledgement that some parents may not possess soft skills themselves and therefore are unable to teach their children these skills. Participant 2 put it this way: “Some parents would need to develop the soft skills themselves in order to teach them, and that can be a bit of a challenge.” However, the general tenor of the discussions was not how parents are failing but, rather, how all the various stakeholders have a role in filling the gap in soft skills and how parents can be supported in their efforts, including in the development of their own soft skills.

The majority of participants felt that technology was having a negative impact on soft skill development in youth. Participant 4 pointed out that, “They prefer not to speak to people”, as, this participant believed, they prefer texting or communicating via social media. As Participant 4 put it, “They’ve gotten to the point where they are making and

breaking up relationships through text... so they don't even know how to deal with uncomfortable situations.” Two participants, in fact, questioned the general impact of technology on all human beings. Participant 11 said, “with the technology, having sociological impacts that we can't even begin to understand, if we're part of the experiment. ... So, we're living in the experiment that we're supposed to be trying to analyze and figure out how it's impacting the next generation... we don't even know how it's impacting ourselves.” For a number of participants, there was clearly wariness about, “what is that (technology) going to do to us as humans?” (Participant 2).

Not all of the perceptions about technology were negative, however. Participant 2 was interested in how we could use social media to teach soft skills because youth are already connected and interested in this medium. Participant 11 felt that someone simply needs to, “teach them how to use the devices properly with critical thinking skills”. Participant 9, a teacher, said that, because of technology, she can observe who is actually doing the work and putting the time into their studies. Although the participants, as a group, readily identified some significant ways that society had changed and how these changes has negatively impacted the development of soft skill, they also were quick to point out solutions or examples of how the perceived change could be put to a positive use.

Theme three: Parents bear primary responsibility for soft skill development

Every participant felt that parents play a pivotal role in soft skill learning and development. The home was generally seen as the place where the foundation for current and future skill development was established. Participant 4 said, “I think a lot of it is learned at home and I think that it is a big responsibility for parents to really try to give their children enough skills that they are successful in life”. Participant 12 echoed

that with, “You can’t take away from the responsibility of the home. They’re our kids and we have to take responsibility for them”. The participants were clearly not blaming parents for any perceived deficits but, rather, acknowledging the challenges facing them and questioning how parents can be better supported to ensure success in developing these skills in themselves and in their children. Explaining the nature of this supportive relationship, Participant 11 said that, “there has to be a conversation with the parents where we ask, ‘What do you need?’”.

While the participants were clear in their assignment of responsibility to parents for establishing the foundation for learning soft skills, many recognized that the school system was seen as being in a position to effectively develop skills and build on the foundation of skills provided by the parents. Some participants acknowledged that parents may lack many of the requisite soft skills themselves and, while the school system cannot replace the impact of parents, they can intervene and play a role in the instances where parents are unable to fill the role. Participant 7 said, “sometimes kids lack that parental support, so I think that when it’s lacking, the school should pick it up. So, like having good and trained teachers.” The amount of time a child spends in school was viewed as a variable that shifted some responsibility in that direction. “You’re in school more than you see your parents sometimes, at least I was... Our teachers were the key” (Participant 3). This thought aligns with the belief that, in a society where parental influence is waning, schools are left to fill the gap.

Some participants were of the impression that teachers were in the best position to facilitate the development of soft skills because of their expertise; “Teachers are in the best position to teach soft skills because, as a parent, you’re not given training” (Participant 12). Teachers were seen as part of “the ready-made structure we have”

(participant 5) and are best suited, within that structure, to recognize and teach soft skills. Even so, participants still conceptualized the responsibility as a partnership between parents and the school system. Further, they felt there is a “partnership with the school system... The school system is the partner to the journey of these children. It’s not the sole responsibility of them (parents).” (Participant 5).

Participants were less willing to implicate the more traditionally accepted sources of soft skill education, in contrast to the prevailing sentiment that parents, and to a lesser extent, the school, were primarily responsible for teaching soft skills. Some participants, however, recognized the role of these other partners in the development of soft skills. Regarding PSI’s, Participant 9, a PSI educator, felt that some students arrived at university lacking the soft skills that contribute to success. As a result of that general perception at the university, a course had been developed to address the need to develop the skills that were seen as lacking. The student feedback on the course, however, was largely negative, as the students felt that they already had the skills the course sought to develop. Participant 8, a university nursing student, said, “I feel there are more specific soft skills for a job or something like that... then I believe it becomes the institution’s responsibility to make you aware, and if they aren’t teaching you , then I believe they should be providing resources of where you can go to achieve that goal”. The distinction here appears to be between general soft skills that are the responsibility of parents and specific, job-related skills that participants saw as falling to the PSI.

The government was implicated by some participants as filling an influencing or supportive role to the efforts of parents, schools, and potential employees on their own behalf. Participant 7 said, “it would be the government that is responsible for supporting these people who actually interact with the kids, like the daycare teachers, the k-12

teachers, the parents.” Participant 11 summarized the relationship of responsibility that became evident in the interviews, stating that, “Teachers, with help from the government as quickly as possible, putting as much responsibility as possible on the parents, but recognizing as a collective with government, as leadership of the collective of our society, we didn’t do a good job for a couple of decades on that, so it’s up to the government to fix it.”

Finally, the role of employers was only mentioned in passing by a few of the participants, and mostly in the context of providing opportunities for the work experience they viewed as integral to the development of soft skills. Participant 1 felt employment during the teenage years was beneficial in that youth learn the importance of getting “to work on time, doing a good job, hygiene, customer service, getting orders correct, and stuff like that”. Some participants expressed the belief that employers do bear some responsibility to their employees for acclimating them to their organizational culture through training, which would constitute some soft skill development.

Despite the clearly conveyed belief that parents bear primary responsibility for the development of soft skills, all of the participants, to varying degrees, expressed the belief that everyone bore some responsibility for teaching soft skills to young people. Participant 2 described the shared responsibility as, “It can’t just be one group. It can start with the parents and then it has to build on it through the educational system and I think the employers have a role to play”, but in the context of their own organizational culture. Simply stated, “we all play a role...it’s a shared, a very strongly shared stakeholder situation” (Participant 4).

Discussion

The results of this qualitative study of the views of 15 participants from stakeholder groups on the realm of employability and soft skills identified a list of what they considered to be the most important soft skills. They also provided insight into how and where stakeholders felt that these skills are learned, the challenges that exist to teaching soft skills, and who they felt was responsible for teaching these skills to the next generation of students. Three themes were evident from the transcripts of the interviews with these 15 Atlantic Canadian participants.

The participants listed over thirty soft skills that they felt were important for young people to have today. The resulting list of soft skills did not deviate from the lists described in the existing literature. Further, communication, teamwork, and problem solving/conflict resolution, the three most commonly identified soft skills by these participants, were identified repeatedly in the existing literature as important soft skills (Anderson, 2014; Hurrell, 2016; Murthy, 2020).

The first theme identified was “All experiences are opportunities for soft skill development”. Participants shared stories about where they had learned soft skills as they were growing up. Most participants felt experiences with parents and extracurricular groups, primarily organized sports, from when they were younger were key factors in learning soft skills, emphasizing that starting young was key. The existing literature provides support for this perspective in that soft skills are generally thought to be learned through life experience and are closely related to interpersonal abilities (Saunderson, 2017; Susilawati et al., 2020). Situational and experiential learning opportunities are thought to be another effective way to teach soft skills (Saunderson, 2017), which the participants also acknowledged.

Almost all of the participants described how they felt society has changed over the last few decades. According to the literature, communication skills in youth have diminished (Ehmke, 2020), individuals may say things online that they would not say face-to-face (Zimbler, 2011) and technoconference, defined as interrupting time spent together with technology, is interfering with parent/child interactions and quality time (McDaniel, 2017). Participants agreed, stating that young people are unable to effectively navigate uncomfortable or challenging situations. They do not see the impact of their words on other people and many youth spend a lot of time with a screen. Most participants felt that technology has had a significant impact on the deterioration of soft skills, with some recognition that the impact of technology on young people or adults, is not fully understood.

One of the main foci of this research was to inquire about who Atlantic Canadian's feel is responsible for soft skill development. The existing literature regarding who is responsible for teaching soft skills has focused primarily on PSIs and employers (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015; Ferguson, 2010; Hairi et al., 2011). Employers believe that students are not graduating from PSIs with the appropriate skillset to become employed (Anderson, 2014; Clarke, 2008; Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015). Some PSIs have tried to address the soft skills gap, but employers continue to decry the lack of soft skills in graduates (Boutilier, 2019; Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015). However, the data in this study reflected the perspective that two stakeholder groups bore most of the responsibility for soft skill development. Participants felt overwhelmingly that parents were the primary stakeholder group responsible for teaching soft skills. Public schools and early education opportunities, such as daycare, were cited as the second most influential stakeholder, either in relation to building on the

foundation the parents started or to narrow the gap if young people had few soft skills because the parents did not have the soft skills themselves. Furthermore, many participants felt that everyone had some individual responsibility and some of the existing literature does acknowledge that a collaboration between the various stakeholders would be most beneficial (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015; Jackson, 2012).

The results of this study align with the existing research in regard to the soft skills that are most often deemed important and in regard to the importance of experience. It adds to the literature, however, with the view expressed by this group of stakeholders that, in Atlantic Canada at least, all interactions, formal and informal, are opportunities to learn and develop soft skills. Most importantly, participants felt that soft skills should be taught at a young age and further developed as people move through life. Additionally, the focus on parents and grade schools, complimenting the importance of early learning, is in contrast to the focus on PSI's and employers evident in the literature.

Conclusions

The perceptions of these participants represent only a small window into how people in the Atlantic provinces view the value of soft skills, how they are learned, and the relative responsibility for teaching them. Nevertheless, important contradictions emerged between prior research identified in the literature review and the results of this study. Most notably, participants in this study overwhelmingly declared that teaching skills from a young age was imperative and, therefore, parents and early learning opportunities held the most responsibility in passing on soft skills.

The focus by participants on parents and the public-school system, along with a mandate for all stakeholders to share in the responsibility for teaching soft skills is quite dissimilar from where prior research placed responsibility. The existing literature focuses primarily on PSI's and employers, though some research does advocate for collaboration among stakeholders. The results here may differ from the existing research because, while many participants recognized the necessity of learning and developing soft skills in order to be successful in life, they felt that there were opportunities to impart soft skills at very early ages. As noted above, the focus on parents and public-school experiences in this theme complement the timing of when soft skills should be learned, according to the participants.

Limitations

Several limitations need to be acknowledged regarding the findings of this study. All fifteen of the participants resided in the Atlantic provinces, a part of the country that has a unique culture. The Atlantic provinces have few large cities and is, for the most part, rural, and the population is not very diverse. Eleven of the participants had completed a bachelor's degree, with seven of them having second or graduate degrees, which is approximately 73% of the participants. This figure is higher than the national majority of fifty four percent (Statistics Canada, 2016). It is possible that this selection bias may have had an impact on the results, in the sense that education may have an influence on the evaluating of soft skill importance, learning opportunities, and background.

It would be irresponsible not to discuss the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic that is occurring worldwide. Our world has changed significantly and the effects of the changes to our lifestyle are not yet clear. It is entirely possible that if this

study was conducted prior to the lockdown in March of 2020, the results may have aligned more closely with the existing research, rather than focusing attention on the role of parents. Prior to the lockdown in March, participants felt that people were busy working and raising children with little quality family time. After the lockdown, families spent more time together because they were confined to a single or double household bubble for months. Many participants felt that this provided an opportunity to refocus their priorities onto what is most important, namely families.

Despite the limitations of this research, the results provided a wealth of information about what soft skills are deemed important, how they are learned, and who the participants felt were responsible for teaching these skills to our children. The results were not intended to identify an exhaustive list of soft skills or to be generalizable to other populations, but rather to obtain the opinion of Atlantic Canadians on the topic of soft skills. However, they did highlight the idea that, perhaps, parents and public-school educators still have the greatest impact on the task of teaching and developing soft skills.

Future Research Directions

There are a number of exciting possibilities for future research that emerged from this undertaking. As this study's participant responses shifted focus to parents and the public-school system, additional research on the role of parents and the school system, as well as the timing of soft skill introduction, would be warranted. An investigation into the influence of attending a PSI on the acquisition of soft skills, whether through intentional instruction or as a by-product of the experience, would be intriguing. Another interesting exploration would be the consideration of technology's

influence on the deterioration of soft skills and whether or not technology can be used to teach youth soft skills.

Future research into valued soft skills and responsibility, related to the themes of this research, could be conducted outside of the Atlantic provinces or on a nationwide scale; perhaps a quantitative study that evaluates how well each stakeholder fulfills their role teaching soft skills. Further, investigating differences within Canada, and in comparison with other countries, exploring the impact of cultural diversity would be beneficial. As noted above, soft skills need to be considered in the context of cultural, class and generational differences. The importance of context was evident with Participant 4 who grew up on a small island in a very close-knit community. Her experiences growing up were similar to those of earlier generations on the island in that she played outside and went out on her bike to find her friends, rather than using a cell phone or social media, which she did not have until she was older. A case study examining the impact of soft skill instruction over a lifetime, acknowledging the influence of the community, would be fascinating. Finally, the influence of the pandemic on the results of this study is unknown. While the pandemic may or may not be the reason for participant focus on family, community, and youth, additional research into the influence of the pandemic and the participant's shifted focus would be enlightening.

To conclude, this research has a number of limitations and the suggestions of possible future research directions are substantial. As this study was meant to explore the experiences and perspectives of a small sample of the various stakeholder groups involved in soft skill development, more work is required in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relative value of soft skills in Atlantic Canada.

However, this research demonstrated an unexpected shift in focus from teaching soft skills at work or in PSI classrooms, to the necessity of teaching soft skills as early in an individual's life as possible, and shifting the focus of responsibility from later opportunities for soft skill development, to the key people influencing youth in their formative years.

References

- Adams, C. (2012). 'Soft skills' seen as the key element for higher education. *Education week*, 32(12), 4-14.
- Anderson, B. (2020, February 4). Soft Skills Training: 6 skill sets which provide employees a solid base. *Human Resources*. Retrieved February 4, 2020 from https://www.hr.com/en/magazines/personal_excellence_essentials/august_2014_personal/soft-skills-training-6-skill-sets-that-provide-emp_hysvwq7p.html.
- Boutilier, K. (2020, June 19). *A hard look at soft skills*. Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation (CEDEC). <https://cedec.ca/a-hard-look-at-soft-skills/>.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, ©2012 (pp. 57–71). <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>

- Chamorro-Premuzic, T., Arteche, A., Bremner, A. J., Greven, C., & Furnham, A. (2010). Soft skills in higher education: Importance and improvement ratings as a function of individual differences and academic performance. *Educational Psychology, 30*(2), 221-241.
- Clarke, M. (2008). Understanding and managing employability in changing career contexts. *Journal of European Industrial Training, 32*(4), 258-284.
- Deloitte Access Economics, (2017). *Soft skills for business success*. Retrieved on June 3, 2020 from <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Economics/deloitte-au-economics-deakin-soft-skills-business-success-170517.pdf>
- Drummond, D. & Rosenbluth, E. K. (2015). *Competencies can bridge the interests of business and universities*. University of Ottawa. Retrieved June 17, 2020, from <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/33200>.
- Ehmke, R., 2020. How using social media affects children. Retrieved on January 20, 2021 from <https://childmind.org/article/how-using-social-media-affects-teenagers/>
- Ferguson, J. (2010). An overview and discussion of research supporting the concept of a generic 'soft' skills framework in tertiary education towards bridging the gap between education and employment. *New Zealand Journal of Applied Business Research, 8*(2), 59–74.
- Florea, R., & Stray, V. (2018, May). Software tester, we want to hire you! An analysis of the demand for soft skills. In *International Conference on Agile Software Development* (pp. 54-67). Springer, Cham.

- Glen, S. (2020). Snowball sampling: Definition, advantages and disadvantages. Retrieved January 18, 2021, from [Statistics HowTo.com: Elementary Statistics for the rest of us!](https://www.statisticshowto.com/snowball-sampling/) <https://www.statisticshowto.com/snowball-sampling/>
- Government of New Brunswick (2016, November). *Final Task Force on Experiential Education*. Government of New Brunswick. Retrieved July 14, 2020 from <https://stu.ca/media/stu/site-content/documents/policies-and-reports/FinalReportoftheTaskForceonExperientialEducation2016.pdf>
- Government of New Brunswick (2020, July 10). *Workplace essential skills program*. Government of New Brunswick. Retrieved July 10, 2020 from https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/services/services_renderer.200971.html
- Gravelle, M. (2015). *How hard is it to find employees with soft skills?* Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC). Retrieved on June 19, 2020 from <https://ceric.ca/fr/2015/01/how-hard-is-it-to-find-employees-with-soft-skills/>.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hairi, F. B., Toee, M. N. B. A. & Razzaly, C. W. B. (2011). Employers' perception on soft skills of graduates: A study of Intel Elite soft skill training. *International conference on teaching and learning in higher education*. Retrieved on February 12, 2020 from <http://eprints.uthm.edu.my/id/eprint/2191/1/EDC243.pdf>
- Hurrell, S. A. (2016). Rethinking the soft skills deficit blame game: Employers, skills withdrawal and the reporting of soft skills gaps. *Human relations*, 69(3), 605-628.

- Ibrahim, R., Boerhannoeddin, A. & Bakare, K. K. (2017). The effect of soft skills and training methodology on employee performance. *European Journal of Training and Development*, 41(4), 388-406.
- Jackson, D. (2013). Student perceptions of the importance of employability skill provision in business undergraduate programs. *Journal of Education for Business*, 88(5), 271-271.
- Jackson, D., & Chapman, E. (2012). Non-technical skill gaps in Australian business graduates. *Education & Training*, 54(2/3), 95-113.
doi:10.1108/00400911211210224
- Kaburise, P. (2016). Improving soft skills and communication in response to youth unemployment. *Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter- and transdisciplinary*, 11(2), 87-101.
- 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.
- Lippman, L. H., Ryberg, R., Carney, R., & Moore, K. A. (2015, June). Workforce connections: Key “soft skills” that foster youth workforce success: Toward a consensus across fields. Washington, DC: Child Trends Inc.
- Lister, J. (2019). Corporate Canada is facing a soft-skills deficit – what can we do about it? *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved June 20, 2020 from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/careers/leadership/article-corporate-canada-is-facing-a-soft-skills-deficit-what-can-we-do/>

- McDaniel, B. T., & Radesky, J. S. (2018). Technoference: Parent distraction with technology and associations with child behavior problems. *Child Development*, 89(1), 100-109.
- Murthy, M. (2019). 10 Soft skills that can help you get ahead. *Canadian Immigrant*. Retrieved June 20, 2020 from <https://canadianimmigrant.ca/careers-and-education/softskills/10-soft-skills-that-can-help-you-get-ahead>.
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 16, 1-13. DOI: 10.1177/1609406917733847
- 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>
- Rutt, L., Gray, C., Turner, R., Swain, J., Hulme, S., Pomeroy, R. (2013). A social constructivist approach to introducing skills for employment to Foundation Degree students. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, v.18. DOI: 10.1080/13596748.2013.819268
- Saunderson, R. (2017). Talent tips making soft skills easy with situational learning. *Training*, 54(5), 62–63.
- Savickas, M. L. (2013). Career construction theory and practice. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.) *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (2nd ed., pp 147-186). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Seetha, N. (2014). Are soft skills important in the workplace? A preliminary investigation in Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 4(4), 44-56.

- Statistics Canada (2016). Census. Retrieved on January 24, 2021 from
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171129/dq171129a-eng.htm>
- St. Thomas University (2020). *Learning strategies*. St. Thomas University (STU).
Retrieved July 14, 2020 from <https://stu.ca/learningstrategies/>
- Succi, C., & Canovi, M. (2019). Soft skills to enhance graduate employability:
comparing students and employers' perceptions. *Studies in Higher Education*,
45(9), 1834–1847. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1585420>
- Susilawati, Aznam, N., Paidi, Ngadimin, (2020). Teachers' perspectives toward soft
skills in science learning. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*, 1460(1), 1-7.
<https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/1460/1/012111>
- University of New Brunswick (2020a, June 17). *Critical thinking*. College of Extended
Learning. [https://www.unb.ca/cel/credit/online-courses/open-entry-
courses/phil1101.html](https://www.unb.ca/cel/credit/online-courses/open-entry-courses/phil1101.html)
- Zimbler, M., & Feldman, R. S. (2011). Liar, liar, hard drive on fire: How media context
affects lying behavior. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 41(10), 2492–
2507. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2011.00827.x>

Chapter 3

Implications for Counseling and Related Fields

The findings of this study have important implications for counsellors, but also for other disciplines, such as education and business, as well as the various stakeholder groups, including parents, educators, and government policy makers. The primary goal of this research was to determine which soft skills were important to people in Atlantic Canada, how these skills are learned, and who is responsible for teaching them. The snapshot of information drawn from all stakeholder groups can impact how communities in the Atlantic provinces move forward to address the perceived soft skills gaps and how we can encourage soft skill development.

The results described here can be useful to practitioners working with youth on goal setting or career development initiatives, in creating programs and coaching adults, and in identifying individual strengths and weaknesses in their skills and abilities in order to maximize their impact and effectiveness. For example, a program could be developed to focus on the three most valued skills from these results: communication, teamwork, and problem solving/conflict resolution. Individuals could also complete an assessment to determine the areas that could be improved, thereby maximizing the impact of the program. Whether for young people or adults, however, the provision of structured opportunities to develop soft skills is imperative.

The results would be applicable to all individuals who embrace lifelong learning to continue to hone existing soft skills and to learn new ones. It would also be helpful to guidance counsellors assisting students, career counsellors, employers, and government in providing appropriate opportunities for developing specific soft skills, such as

communicating with a manager for example. Further, recognizing that a collaborative approach may be more impactful, practitioners can focus on ways to support and include other stakeholders in assisting young people to develop the soft skills necessary for life success.

The soft skills that were important to the participants of this study reflect the existing research in a couple of ways. No new soft skills were introduced to the list already present in the literature as a result of this study (Ferguson, 2010; Hurrell, 2016; Kaburise, 2016; Martino & Bartolone, 2011; Murthy, 2020; Robles, 2012). The literature provides no clear, comprehensive list of which soft skills are important across all situations as most studies are context specific. However, three skills were found as most important for the participants of this study, all of which were well-documented as valued skills in the existing literature (Gravelle, 2015; Kaburise, 2016, Murthy, 2020).

The soft skills identified in this thesis may provide insight for the stakeholders working in the Atlantic provinces. Considering the top three valued soft skills were communication, teamwork, and problem solving/critical thinking, any of the stakeholder groups could focus on initiatives for young people to obtain and develop these three skills. Businesses also may focus soft skill training on these top three skills. For example, some employers provide their employees with a short video or instruction on a new skill and then give their employees time to practice that skill in their work environment, which has proven to be effective (Ibrahim, 2016). Employers could develop their own training on these skills, guided by their knowledge of the needs of their employees, and the context of their organizational culture.

Another point of interest that emerged from the research was that soft skills may be very individual in nature. In other words, individuals develop soft skills according to

their unique environments and characteristics. As our environments are all different, there is no guarantee that specific soft skills will be taught in every environment.

Therefore, when counselling or goal setting with young people, an evaluation of their existing soft skills may be necessary in order to maximize the potential for effective acquisition and evolution of that individual's soft skills. Coaching and mentoring an individual on specific soft skills, where they require it, may be a more effective strategy than a blanket approach to soft skill learning and development aimed at a group of people. One study found that executive coaching was very effective at increasing self-efficacy in terms of management skills (Barin & Morin, 2010). In other words, not only did individual skills increase, but beliefs about their effectiveness also increased.

All experiences. are an opportunity for soft skill development

Participants shared many suggestions of opportunities for teaching soft skills. While the existing literature indicated that those opportunities occurred primarily through PSI and employment experiences, the participants felt that all interactions were an opportunity to develop soft skills throughout the lifespan and that everyone had a shared responsibility to embrace those opportunities. While not everyone will embrace teaching soft skills or lifelong learning opportunities to develop their own skill sets, with increased knowledge about soft skills and how they are taught, more people may be motivated to embrace these opportunities as they arise. Further, all participants felt that teaching soft skills should begin at a very young age.

Government agencies, educators, and role models may want to consider how they can integrate soft skill learning opportunities into programs and curriculums that target the youngest members of our population. For example, some schools in one area where some of the participants worked are using the Zones of Regulation program,

implementing colors to assist youth in identifying their feelings and learning to regulate them (Kuypers, 2011). This initiative creates a simplistic language that very young individuals can use to begin to develop self-regulation and to begin to learn how their behavior impacts others, both of which are related to communication, group work, and problem solving skills (Kuypers, 2011). In fact, one of the participants shared how she would ask her students to problem solve how to return to green, reflecting a happy and learning focused mood, and thereby embracing an opportunity for soft skill development (Participant 14).

The inclusion of parents in a collaborative discussion and relationship with the areas of government most connected to the workforce and education may also be beneficial and it is the hope of this researcher that these results provoke such a conversation and approach. With all of the stakeholders at the table, inclusive and proactive programs and initiatives can be developed to support all of them more comprehensively. Perhaps initiatives that include multiple stakeholders, such as including parents with their children in grade school environments, to enhance the soft skills of all three groups, would be more impactful. Collaboration may be the best way to develop a comprehensive plan for the future.

Practitioners working with older adults may find that encouraging a lifelong learning attitude may be impactful as well. Many participants felt that people continue to learn and develop soft skills throughout their lives. Perhaps underemployed or unemployed adults could benefit from soft skill coaching and mentoring on an individual basis, as the lack of soft skills contributes to under or unemployment (Kennedy & Chen, 2012). One study found that individuals that immigrate to Canada have a particularly difficult time with discrimination and obtaining employment.

Through individual work with a career counsellor, clients were able to create a narrative about their career goals and the counsellor was able to provide coaching on societal norms in Canada, including soft skills (Kennedy & Chen, 2012). Those working with immigrants may find this particularly helpful. Currently, the workplace essential skills (WES) program in New Brunswick does not specifically include teamwork, but it does include numeracy and digital literacy for example (Government of New Brunswick, 2020a).

Societal changes that interfere with soft skill development

The primary challenges to teaching soft skills, per the results of this study, include changes in society, including generational differences, and the influence of technology. Many participants felt that they learned soft skills from parents, school, and their community or extended family, but many felt that these resources have been less present for the current generation. For example, one study found that baby boomers and Generation X, overall, believed in moving up the corporate ladder, while Generation Y needed to be motivated to stay in one place and often moved from job to job (Busch et al., 2008). Moving forward, a modern, inclusive approach to correcting any existing soft skill gap and introducing opportunities for soft skill development as early as possible may include the reintroduction of these traditional methods to developing soft skills in youth, as well as minimizing the impact of other influences such as technology.

A couple of participants felt that there may be a perception that traditional methods would mean going back to 'spare the rod, spoil the child' but that is not the case. According to participants, regaining our ability to say no and rewarding accomplishments, two examples of things society used to do that have fallen by the wayside, might be helpful in reintroducing soft skill development. On a cautionary note,

the majority of participants were white and from the middle and upper classes of society. Some research has stated that the lists of valued soft skills come from these groups, thereby discriminating against other cultures and lower socioeconomic classes (Hora et al., 2018). Alternately, perhaps some individuals feel the way they were raised was correct and assume that people are no longer being raised the same way. Regardless, many participants felt that regaining our ability to say no, for example, could go a long way in reintroducing soft skill development within a family unit.

The results of this study provide an opportunity for practitioners to refocus our efforts on individuals from a very young age. There was recognition among participants that, perhaps, we have neglected teaching soft skills adequately in recent decades and therefore some parents do not have the soft skills themselves to pass on to their children. When any stakeholder is counselling or coaching parents, this potential obstacle needs to be taken into consideration. Future policy makers may ask, how can educators, the government, or a therapist include parents and best support them if they are lacking soft skills and, how can soft skill program development be inclusive and respectful of a parent's pivotal role in their children's lives? With a collaborative conversation, the parents could be asked what they need and how they can best be supported, respecting the fact that they are pivotal in moving forward. Further, as discussed above, programs and initiatives developed could also be made available to parents seeking to develop their own soft skills.

Many participants felt that technology has caused a disruption in the social/emotional learning that many among previous generations developed in their youth. For example, communication skills have deteriorated, according to the participants, because of technology. People can respond to others much more quickly

and may say things they would not otherwise say if they were face-to-face, largely due to anonymity (Emske, 2020; Zimbler, 2011). Perhaps communication coaching and mentoring could be initiated at a young age through programs and curriculum. One participant questioned whether we could use technology as a means to teach soft skills since youth are already inextricably intertwined in it. One study found that employing both lecture-based and e-learning opportunities can enhance learning (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2010). Web simulations can be used so that every student works through a problem scenario, as compared to only one or two students responding in a classroom setting (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2010). Therefore, employing social media as a vehicle to teach soft skills would be an important consideration.

Responsibility for soft skill development

Much of the existing literature focuses primarily on PSI's and employers (Ferguson, 2010; Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015; Hairi et al, 2011), yet the results of this study place the emphasis on the role of parents and the public-school system. Again, these results complement the belief that soft skill development should begin as early as possible in a person's life. Participants felt that, the earlier children are taught soft skills, the better off they will be in the future, as those skills continue to develop as they enter different contexts. They felt that if teaching these skills was delayed until graduation, PSI involvement, or an employment environment, they may be more difficult to learn.

The shift in focus from PSI's and employers to parents and grade school may encourage practitioners to employ a greater collaborative approach, not only in teaching soft skills, but in coaching, developing and providing resources for parents and early

childhood educators. The awareness that very young children have the ability to learn soft skills may encourage all of the stakeholder groups to embrace opportunities that arise while working with youth. While a few of the participants mentioned the strict discipline of the past in relation to soft skill development in past generations, they insisted that that approach did not work. An individual may have learned a skill, but fear-based learning was not viewed favorably. It was felt that there is a way to create a modern and inclusive approach that includes collaboration among the stakeholders in a way that everyone can share responsibility for developing skills in our future generations. Perhaps the results of this thesis can be a gateway to beginning that conversation.

Conclusions

The existing research clearly demonstrated that PSI's and employers have an important role in teaching and developing soft skills (Drummond & Rosenbluth, 2015; Ferguson, 2010; Hairi et al, 2011). While participants agreed that these stakeholder groups play important roles in the evolution of an individual in later years, the results of this study indicate that parents, early educational experiences, and society may have a greater influence and, therefore, role to play. Participants overwhelmingly felt that the early years in an individual's life are pivotal and soft skills should be introduced as early as possible.

Additionally, the results indicate that a collaborative approach is the ideal. Everyone bears responsibility for seizing opportunities to impart their soft skill wisdom to young people. The six stakeholder groups mentioned in this thesis, as well as the individual participants themselves, need to engage in a modern, inclusive conversation that supports everyone in developing an individual's foundation of soft skill

development. This raises the question, how can the various stakeholder groups, in the process of developing employable young people, best support and respect each other in an effort to best meet the needs of future generations? Participant 5 summarized the participants' perspectives on the importance of soft skills and their relationship to success in life, saying, "this is the exam of life. And if you want a good life, you better get to know it."

References

- Baron, L., & Morin, L. (2010). The impact of executive coaching on self-efficacy related to management soft-skills. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 31(1), 18–38. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01437731011010362>
- Busch, P., Venkitachalam, K., & Richards, D. (2008). Generational differences in soft knowledge situations: status, need for recognition, workplace commitment and idealism. *Knowledge and Process Management*, 15(1), 45–58.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/kpm.298>
- Drummond, D. & Rosenbluth, E. K. (2015). *Competencies can bridge the interests of business and universities*. University of Ottawa. Retrieved June 17, 2020, from <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/33200>.
- Ferguson, J. (2010). An overview and discussion of research supporting the concept of a generic 'soft' skills framework in tertiary education towards bridging the gap

between education and employment. *New Zealand Journal of Applied Business Research*, 8(2), 59–74.

Government of New Brunswick (2020a, July 10). *Workplace essential skills program*.

Government of New Brunswick. Retrieved July 10, 2020 from

https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/services/services_renderer.200971.html

Gravelle, M. (2015). *How hard is it to find employees with soft skills?* Canadian

Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC). Retrieved on June

19, 2020 from <https://ceric.ca/fr/2015/01/how-hard-is-it-to-find-employees-with-soft-skills/>.

Hairi, F. B., Toe, M. N. B. A. & Razzaly, C. W. B. (2011). Employers' perception on

soft skills of graduates: A study of Intel Elite soft skill training. *International*

conference on teaching and learning in higher education. Retrieved on February

12, 2020 from <http://eprints.uthm.edu.my/id/eprint/2191/1/EDC243.pdf>

Kaburise, P. (2016). Improving soft skills and communication in response to youth

unemployment. *Journal of African Renaissance Studies – Multi, Inter- and*

transdisciplinary, 11(2), 87-101.

Kennedy, T., & Chen, C. P. (2012). Career counselling new and professional

immigrants: Theories into practice. *Australian Journal of Career Development*,

21(2), 36–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/103841621202100205>

Kuypers, L. (2011). *The Zones of Regulation®: A Curriculum Designed to Foster Self-*

Regulation and Emotional Control. San Jose, CA: Social Thinking Publishing.

Martino, Gail, & Bartolone, J. (2011). Soft skills for open innovation success. In P.

Sloane (Ed.) *A Guide to Open Innovation and Crowdsourcing: Advice from*

leading Experts (1st ed, pp. 98–105). London, UK: Koganpage.

Murthy, M. (2019). 10 Soft skills that can help you get ahead. *Canadian Immigrant*.

Retrieved June 20, 2020 from <https://canadianimmigrant.ca/careers-and-education/softskills/10-soft-skills-that-can-help-you-get-ahead>.

Office of Disability Employment Policy (2010). Effective integration of technology and instructor led training to promote soft skills mastery. Retrieved January 24, 2021 from

https://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/agencywide/documents/defaultcolumns/dhs16_156028.pdf

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>

Appendix A

The chosen definition of soft skills used for the purpose of this research is as follows:

Soft skills refer to a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviors, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals. These skills are broadly applicable and complement other skills such as technical, vocational, and academic skills (Lippman et al., 2015, p. 4).

The above definition was read to the participants and they were provided with a number of examples of soft skills to initiate the discussion.

Interview questions:

1. What soft skills do you feel are most important for young people to have?
2. Do you feel that young people have the soft skills that employers are looking for or have you noticed a deterioration of soft skills?
3. How and where are soft skills learned and developed?
4. Who do you feel is responsible for teaching soft skills?
5. Who do you feel is in the best position to teach soft skills to young people?

Appendix B

CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

This project has been reviewed by the UNB Research Ethics Board and is on file as REB 2020-130.

Researchers:

The researchers for the thesis are Adina Lipsett, a current M.Ed. student at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, and Dr. Jeff Landine, PhD, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton.

Supervisor:

Dr. Jeff Landine, PhD., Faculty of Education, UNB, Fredericton – (506) 453-4839.

If you have any concerns about any part of this study, you may contact my supervisor or the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in Education, Dr. Ellen Rose at (506) 4526-125 or via email at erose@unb.ca.

The purpose of this research is to find out who is responsible for teaching soft skills and who is in the best position to do that. We invite you to take part in this research.

You would have an online interview with the researcher. The interviews will take place online through Zoom. There are certain risks to working online, such as our interview being hacked. It is best to use a secure internet connection. You will be emailed a link for the agreed upon interview time. You will be asked a total of five open-ended questions. The interview will be recorded through the zoom platform and downloaded to the researcher's computer. Each interview will be transcribed by the researcher.

The time commitment includes reading this consent form and the interview, which will be between thirty to sixty minutes.

Adina Lipsett will read the transcript from the interviews. Andrea Rivera, the research assistant, will read 25% of the anonymized transcripts. You may have a copy of your transcript.

There may be no direct benefit to you if you participate in this research.

We are not expecting any risks to you from participating in this research.

Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate, before or during the interview or withdraw the data from your

interview (recording and transcript), you may withdraw at any time without penalty. Any information collected from you will be destroyed.

The researcher will keep all information collected in a locked filing cabinet in Dr. Jeff Landine's office on the UNB Fredericton campus. The data will be kept for a period of two years following the completion of the research.

We will ask for the ethics board to review our request if we want to use any of the information in another study in the future. We will also ask them to review using the information for any analysis in the future.

Participant signature:

MINOR INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORM:

CONSENT FORM

This project has been reviewed by the UNB Research Ethics Board and is on file as REB 2020-130.

Researchers:

The researchers for the thesis are Adina Lipsett, a current M.Ed. student at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, and Dr. Jeff Landine, PhD, Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton.

Supervisor:

Dr. Jeff Landine, PhD., Faculty of Education, UNB, Fredericton – (506) 453-4839.

If you have any concerns about any part of this study, you may contact my supervisor or the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in Education, Dr. Ellen Rose at (506) 4526-125 or via email at erose@unb.ca.

The purpose of this research is to find out who is responsible for teaching soft skills and who is in the best position to do that. We invite you to take part in this research.

You would have an online interview with the researcher. The interviews will take place online through Zoom. There are certain risks to working online, such as our interview being hacked. It is best to use a secure internet connection. You will be emailed a link for the agreed upon interview time. You will be asked a total of five open-ended questions. The interview will be recorded through the zoom platform and downloaded to the researcher's computer. Each interview will be transcribed by the researcher.

The time commitment includes reading this consent form and the interview, which will be between thirty to sixty minutes.

Adina Lipsett will read the transcript from the interviews. Andrea Rivera, the research assistant, will read 25% of the anonymized transcripts. You may have a copy of your transcript.

There may be no direct benefit to you if you participate in this research.

We are not expecting any risks to you from participating in this research.

Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate, before or during the interview or withdraw the data from your interview (recording and transcript), you may withdraw at any time without penalty. Any information collected from you will be destroyed.

The researcher will keep all information collected in a locked filing cabinet in Dr. Jeff Landine's office on the UNB Fredericton campus. The data will be kept for a period of two years following the completion of the research.

We will ask for the ethics board to review our request if we want to use any of the information in another study in the future. We will also ask them to review using the information for any analysis in the future.

Participant signature:

Guardian signature:

Curriculum Vitae

Candidate's full name: Adina N. Lipsett

Universities attended:

- University of New Brunswick, Fredericton
May 2018 – February 2021
Master of Education, Counselling (Candidate)
- Nova Southeastern University
April 2002 – April 2005
Master of Science, Conflict Analysis and Resolution
- University of New Brunswick, Fredericton
September 1991 – April 1993; September 1995 – April 1998
Bachelor of Arts, Psychology and Law and Society