

# Soft Skills for Professional Success

**Dr. SUKHADA TAMBE**

*Associate Professor, Department of Human Resource Management  
IES's Management College and Research Centre, Mumbai*

## Abstract

*Soft skills are an integral and an indispensable part of one's professional life. Soft skills go a long way in contributing towards an individual's professional success. Professional courses pay adequate attention to the technical knowledge, academic credentials and hard skills of the students. In addition to the technical know-how, soft skills are an important aspect for enhancing the employability of students and their professional success. This study was conducted in Mumbai region and the respondents were undergraduate students pursuing professional courses viz. engineering, pharmacy, architecture and management studies. The purpose of this study was to understand the extent and degree of soft skills possessed by the students as perceived by them and also ranking of various soft skills in order of importance; as perceived by the students, for professional success. A united effort by the academic institutions, employers and most importantly the students to sharpen their soft skills will help them to adapt to the dynamic global environment and their professional success.*

**Keywords:** *soft skills, employability, professional success, student perception, employer, professional courses, academic institutions*

## Introduction

It is said that soft skills predict the success in life (Heckman and Kautz, 2012). Soft Skills are very crucial for the professional success of an individual. Soft skills as defined by Moss and Tilly (1996) refer to 'Skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behaviour rather than to formal or technical knowledge.' When students graduate from various professional courses, it is taken without saying that they would possess the technical skills and expertise. Hard skills are indeed necessary, but not sufficient for success in the professional world. In addition to the hard skills, much of the professional success is ensured through soft skills. Soft skills are hard to learn. The role of the academic / educational institutions is to enhance the employability of the students. Some people are blessed to have inherent soft skills, but most of them have to learn and imbibe soft skills. Given the dynamic work environment, it is not possible to work in silos. People have to work in teams. At work place human interaction is an imperative which no one can escape. Klaus (2010) in his study revealed that 75% of professional success of an individual in the long run, depends on his people skills and only 25% depends on his domain knowledge. These days mere technical skills are not a criterion for hiring an individual, adequate emphasis is also placed on soft skills.

The purpose of this research was to study the perception of the students from various professional courses about their present level of competence of the given soft skills through self-evaluation and also to understand the importance of various soft skills for success in professional life as perceived and ranked by them.

## Literature Review

Study of soft skills possessed by students is one of the favourite topics of the researchers across the world and studies have been conducted in North America, Europe and Asia. Pereira & Costa (2017) have addressed the academic curriculum and soft skills required by the undergraduate students to adapt to the labour market. The study further emphasized the importance of soft/transversal skills for individual and organizational success. Ramlan & Ngah (2015) studied the perception of engineering students in Malaysia towards soft skills. The study revealed that students perceived soft skills very important for education and employment and absence of soft skills was found as one of the factors contributing to unemployment amongst graduates in Malaysia. Patacsil & Tablatin (2017) conducted a study in Philippines wherein they studied the perception of IT graduates regarding soft skills and found that according to them, teamwork and communication skills are most important.

Shekhawat & Bakilapadavu (2017) focused their research on engineering students and studied the multifarious soft skills which the engineering students need to focus and various ways in which these skills are imparted to them. This was a case study of Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani (Rajasthan). Majid et. al. (2012) studied the perceptions of undergraduate business management students from four universities in Singapore with regard to the importance of soft skills for their education and employment. The results revealed that soft skills were perceived to be useful for social interaction and career advancement. However, the students were of the opinion that these skills do not contribute considerably to their academic performance. Meeks (2017) conducted a study in US, wherein he interviewed human resource directors and managers to understand their assessment of soft skills possessed by the students. It was found that majority of the students were not sufficiently equipped with the required soft skills. Laari and Dube (2017) conducted a study of nursing students in Ghana, wherein they found that though the students appreciated the value of soft skills, they were not aware what soft skills they would need to help in their career development.

### Methodology

For the purpose of this study, primary data was collected through survey method. Based on the literature review, 30 soft skills which are important for professional success were identified. The respondents were asked to evaluate themselves on each of the given soft skill and were also asked to rank the given 30 soft skills in order of importance, for professional success. The study was conducted in Mumbai region. Total number of respondents were 157. The respondents were undergraduate students pursuing various professional courses viz. engineering, architecture, pharmacy, management studies.

**Table 1 Demographic Profile of Respondents**

		No. of Respondents	Percentage
Professional Course	Engineering	56	37
	Architecture	21	13
	Pharmacy	12	7
	BMS/BMM	68	43
Gender	Male	85	54
	Female	72	46

### Findings

The participants were given the list of 30 soft skills and they were asked to evaluate themselves on a scale of 1-4, on their present level of competence on these given soft skills, where 1 being the lowest and 4 being the highest. The results are shown in the following table.

**Table 2 Self-Rating by Students for Various Soft Skills**

	1 (Lowest)		2		3		4 (Highest)	
	Nos. of Respondents	Percentage						
Adaptability	17	11	52	33	32	20	56	36
Agility	12	8	81	52	29	18	35	22
Body language	15	10	59	37	34	22	49	31
Business etiquette	22	14	52	33	38	24	45	29
Communication skills	10	6	40	25	42	27	65	42
Conflict management	11	7	70	45	32	20	44	28
Creative thinking	20	13	46	29	32	20	59	38
Critical thinking	23	15	61	39	29	18	44	28
Decision making	19	12	29	18	42	27	67	43
Dependability	9	6	24	15	37	24	87	55
Emotional intelligence	20	13	37	24	40	25	60	38
Empathy	16	10	10	6	59	38	72	46
Flexibility	22	14	30	19	39	25	66	42
Interpersonal skills	7	4	72	46	33	21	45	29
Innovation	24	15	18	11	41	26	74	48
Leadership	13	8	43	27	56	36	45	29
Managing people	11	7	47	30	43	27	56	36
Multi-cultural skills	26	17	33	21	37	24	61	38
Negotiation skills	22	14	36	23	57	36	42	27
Networking	17	11	27	17	61	39	52	33
Positivity	8	5	24	15	25	16	100	64
Presentation skills	31	20	26	17	48	30	52	33
Problem solving	17	11	18	11	47	30	75	48
Risk taking	24	15	32	20	34	22	67	43
Self-management	10	6	24	15	52	34	71	45
Stress management	26	17	21	13	67	43	43	27
Team work	11	6	12	8	78	50	56	36
Time management	33	21	51	32	42	27	31	20
Work ethics	18	11	9	6	60	38	70	45
Working under pressure	20	13	54	34	54	34	29	19

Most of the studies on this topic are done from employer's perspective. The current study is amongst the few which is from the students' perspective. As seen in

Table 2, the students have come up with very honest and candid evaluation of themselves on various soft skills.

In the second part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to rank the soft skills; as perceived by them, in order of importance to be successful in the professional life. The results are shown in the following table.

**Table 3 Ranking of Soft Skills in Order of Importance**

Rank	Soft skill
1	Interpersonal skills
2	Communication skills
3	Positivity
4	Self-management
5	Team work
6	Working under pressure
7	Leadership
8	Managing people
9	Problem solving
10	Networking
11	Time management
12	Conflict management
13	Dependability
14	Creative thinking
15	Decision making
16	Work ethics
17	Critical thinking
18	Adaptability
19	Emotional intelligence
20	Empathy
21	Agility
22	Business etiquette
23	Risk taking
24	Innovation
25	Presentation skills
26	Flexibility
27	Negotiation skills
28	Body language
29	Stress management
30	Multi-cultural skills

According to the respondents, interpersonal skills are most important for professional success, followed by

communication skills, positivity, self-management and teamwork. In the similar study conducted in Singapore by Majid et al (2012), the top five important soft skills identified by the students were teamwork and collaboration, decision-making, problem-solving, time management and critical thinking skills. Hairi et al. (2011) in their research found that the top five soft skills rated by the employers are communication skill, creative and critical thinking, teamwork, program and project management skill, decision making and problem solving. In another study conducted by Majid et al (2019), the most important soft skills as per the students were positive attitude, oral communication, self-motivation and self-direction, and problem solving. In the same study, the soft skills desired by the employers to be possessed by fresh graduates were positive attitude, teamwork, good ethics, and problem solving.

The bottom five soft skills as rated by the respondents in the current study were flexibility, negotiation skills, body language, stress management and multi-cultural skills. Since the respondents were undergraduate students, in their perceptions, the given skills constituted the bottom five. The skills would have definitely varied had the respondents been from post-graduation.

### Discussion

In many countries education is usually associated with developing hard skills and as a result, there is an unequal development of hard skills and soft skills (Balcar, 2016). As pointed out by Hairi et al (2011), the performance of the students on soft skills is below the expectation as per employer's perception and lack of soft skills is an important factor leading to unemployment of graduates. Similarly, a study conducted by British Chamber of Commerce (2014) stated that young graduates lacked the soft skills required for employment. In the era of industry 4.0 the expectations of the employers have changed and individuals need to possess soft skills to face the competitive world (Adhiatma et al, 2019)

Connecting classroom to industry is the need of the hour. Most of the academic institutions have industry experts on their governing board who help them to bridge the gap between academics and industry requirements. Furthermore, while framing the syllabus industry experts

are invited to make the syllabus contemporary and make the students industry ready. Institutions can pay extra attention towards soft skills of the students. Academic institutions engage students in various co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Such activities hone numerous soft skills of the students, viz. communication skills, team work, interpersonal skills, flexibility, time management, etc. to name a few. Additionally, as observed by Sethi (2016) a blended approach to integrate soft skills with subject matter can be an effective way to impart soft skills. Colleges are adopting collaborative learning for student engagement. Peer learning is also an effective way of enhancing the soft skills of students. As a part of the curriculum most of the professional course have an important component of internship. This is a good window for students to the world of work and connecting theory to practice. During their internship, they also get to develop several soft skills like communication skills, adaptability, networking, work ethics, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, multi-cultural skills.

### Conclusion

Enhancing the employability of students in professional courses is an important concern for the educational institutions across the world. This study brings to fore the fact that the youngsters who are on the verge of starting their career in the corporate world are certainly not oblivious about the importance of soft skills for professional success and when asked, they made an objective evaluation of themselves on various soft skills. Developing and sharpening soft skills is not a one-time activity. It is a continuous process. The best investment an individual can make for his career is strengthening his soft skills. This would go a long way in his career development and professional success. Academic institutions should make a deliberate effort to groom the students to be multi-skilled, culturally adaptive, flexible individuals well equipped with requisite soft skills to compete in the global scenario. This endeavor of the academic institutions should be well complemented by the employers through appropriate training and hand holding. In this VUCA world, professional courses must equip their students with necessary soft skills and throughout their employment, the students / professionals should continuously update and upgrade their soft skills to stay relevant and to be successful

professionally. Job market is dynamic. Soft skills may not assure life time employment but soft skills do assure lifetime employability.

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