

INTEGRATION OF SOCIAL SKILL TRAINING IN EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract

The need for the integration of social skills into employment continues to grow as the economic market becomes more competitive. Technical trainings are no longer sufficient to meet the employers' needs and the markets' demands. The need for better social integration in the workplace has formed into a type of trainings known as soft skill trainings. Within the last two decades research has been done, incorporating soft skill trainings into the work environment and the results show the trainings to be conducive to higher productivity and better social integration.

Keywords: soft skills, hard skills, employment, social integration, skills training

Introduction

As the economic market grows increasingly competitive, companies, educators, individuals, and even countries strive to develop positive attributes that allow them to be top competitors. Assessments and evaluations are carried out in order to ensure that they are doing the best they can to stay in the game. As a result of these assessments and evaluation, new policies are developed and put into place. More training is being offered to ensure that everyone and everything is up-to-date and working at full potential. Trainings for "hard" and "soft" skills are no exception as companies seek that top position.

Vocational/Technical training

Vocational training, apprenticeships or other forms of technical training (hard skills) have existed for years. Evidence of apprenticeships dates back to the Middle Ages. Many cultures and countries have adapted a variety of technical trainings throughout the years. The United States (U.S.) is no exception. It is the most pervasive type of training within the United States (Laker & Powell, 2011).

Dating back to the early years of the country's history, apprentices and even indentured servants came to the U.S. and learned a trade. Over the years the process of learning hard skills has become more refined as is evidenced by the many vocation-specific schools that have been established across the U.S.

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These schools pride themselves in teaching a specific skill or trade. Often the training programs are shorter than the university or accrediting college programs and focus specifically on one thing rather than giving the individual a liberal education. Examples of this can be seen in cosmetology, auto-mechanics, dental hygiene, and many other professions. Even within the larger universities and colleges, technical skill training is incorporated into the curricula. Nursing students are required to go through clinical trainings; medical doctors must complete a residency where they are involved in direct contact under supervision while other programs require extensive internships in which the student receives specific training in their field of concentration. The idea of skills training, otherwise known as “hard skills”, is essential and is part of education everywhere.

Secondary schools are seeking to incorporate hard skill (technical) trainings as more employers and higher education institutes are requiring at minimum, an adequate level of these skills (Grummon, 1997). In some areas, students undergo testing to evaluate their skills and potential to be employed after graduation. Programs are developed and consequently evaluated on their ability to produce these technical or hard skills as they are often referred as.

Hard skills were recognized as being so important; that a number of policies were put into place to allow people, students in particular, to get the necessary hard skills training they needed for the workplace. One such act, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act was put into place in 1984 and reauthorized for the second time in August of 2006 by George W. Bush to be in effect until 2012. Under the Perkins Act, almost 1.3 billion dollars are given for these technical education and vocational programs within the United States. The Congress also passed the School-to-Work Opportunities Act in 1994 to give all students an opportunity to receive career training. The act particularly seeks to assist students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds to prepare for the workforce by offering them job training as well as preparing them for college (H.R. Res. 2884, 1994).

Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) was developed in 1991. It focuses on five competencies including: resources, interpersonal skills, information, systems, and technology. Under these five competencies, its foundation is based on three areas: basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities (Grummon, 1997). This combines the idea of hard skills with a relatively new phenomenon. Within the last few decades, there is a new type of skill requirement being recognized that is growing in popularity known as “soft skills” (Georges, 1989). SCANS has incorporated the idea of soft skills training within hard skills program training. However, more and more research is being conducted showing the importance of soft skills as a separate entity from hard skills.

Emergence of “Soft Skills” training

The term soft skills was coined to cover the aspects of socialization and interpersonal skills as they relate to the job. As stated earlier, SCANS organizes under the idea of thinking skills and personal qualities. Soft skills are recognized by how individuals handle their emotions and perceptions on the job. Soft skills are related to active listening and acknowledging others and their ideas, as well as personal confidence and motivation. Personality, personal habits, friendliness, social awareness, teamwork and communication are also key components. Curran (2010) describes soft skills as ranging from “emotional intelligence and problem-solving, to readiness to work, motivation and behavior, with communication skills mentioned at all levels. Key to soft skills is confidence in oneself and in learning, enabling people to become motivated and effective learners who will continue to learn in different areas of their lives” (p. 31).

Some soft skills training is designed to be focused towards people seeking administrative and leadership positions as these positions tend to require a higher degree of management of soft skills (Berman & West, 2008; Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003; Palmer et. al., 2001; Georges, 1989; Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Tews & Tracey, 2008). However, soft skills training is not limited to those seeking administrative positions. Soft skills are increasingly recognized as necessary and crucial for every employee. Administrators who hire are looking for individuals who display competency in this area. This poses a problem to certain groups of people. The idea of adequate soft skills becomes especially problematic for individuals who are raised in poverty and are not exposed to suitable environments where they can learn how to appropriately develop soft skills (Georges, 1989).

Soft skills trainings began emerging after World War II in the United States (Hunt & Baruch, 2003). Early efforts at establishing the importance of soft skills could arguably come from Chris Argyris, Professor Emeritus at Harvard Business School, in the 1960s. Argyris looked at organizational structuring and its effects within the business. Argyris inadvertently laid the groundwork for future soft skills trainers. Since the early development of the idea of soft skill trainings, it has been a highly contended issue. Scholars debate its effectiveness and transferability (Curran, 2010; Georges, 1989; Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Leyes, 2007; Powell, 2011; Dolash, 2006; Tews & Tracey, 2008; Tomer, 2003). Hunt & Baruch (2003) state that although program evaluations may not show immediate measurable effectiveness, they do have an impact in actuality. Although some may argue that there is no evidence of the effectiveness, the idea of soft skills training is growing as more and more companies seek to develop these skills in their employees. Furthermore, evidence shows that individuals with an increased set of soft skills promote an increased source of economic growth (Tomer, 2003). Although soft skill training seems to be a natural inclination to some, experience makes it evident that the concept of having well-developed soft skills isn't as inherent as it may seem (Hunt & Baruch, 2003). Due to this, knowledge of effective training, specific to soft skills, is valuable.

What trainings look like now

Over the years, trainings for soft skills have shifted from being taught haphazardly to being developed and controlled in an advantageous manner as outlined by successful research. There is a vital new surge in the integration of soft skills into vocational training (Hook, 2007). This may be evolving for several reasons including the most obvious one, cost effectiveness. However, research argues that the trainings should be kept separate for the best results. Soft skills training is more effective when it is held as a separate training with the emphasis being solely on developing the soft skills (Dolash, 2006; Georges, 1989; Laker & Powell, 2011; Tews and Tracey, 2008). Not only is it important to focus solely on soft skills, it is also crucial to have trainers specifically educated in teaching soft skills (Georges, 1989; Laker & Powell, 2011; Tews & Tracey, 2008). Higher transferability from training to the job will occur when there is one focus with a trained educator.

While training can never mimic actual life situations, there are steps that can be taken to increase their effectiveness in representing real life examples. Effective training needs several components. Soft skills are better learned when broken down into smaller steps or parts of a whole and practiced routinely to acquire specific goals (Georges, 1989; Hunt & Baruch, 2003). Learning soft skills is not like learning a hard skill which generally has one specific technique and desired outcome. Social environments include less predictable external factors that can affect situations causing them to yield different outcomes depending completely on the present environment. The way an individual handles

situations is determined by his/her level of soft skills. By breaking the situations down, it is easier to anticipate and prepare for a variety of outcomes to one stimulus.

Soft skills revolve around interactions with others. Trainings that include teamwork and support seem to result in high transferability. Soft skills training effectiveness builds with teamwork. Aspects within soft skills, such as conflict resolution, are managed well with teamwork training as well as an application of teamwork in an actual job setting (Curran, 2010; Dolash, 2006; Georges, 1989; Hook, 2007; Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Lewis, 2007; Gabel, Dolan, & Cerdin, 2005).

Along with teamwork, managerial support and managerial and peer feedback are imperative for the success of the soft skills trainings (Berman & West, 2008; Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Laker & Powell 2011; Tews & Tracey, 2008). The development of soft skills does not occur immediately after training but rather takes time to manifest. Consistent positive feedback shows an increase in the development of soft skills over time. Not only does it provide a positive environment for the individual to learn and grow; it also builds feelings of self-efficacy within the individual. Positive feedback, specifically from managers is a crucial part of positive individual development. Berman & West (2008) state that providing feedback, mentoring, and modeling are the key to increasing components of soft skills, while the actual training only has indirect effects.

Leadership and management can be determining factors in the successful transferability of soft skills training to the job. In order for leaders to effectively develop their employees' potentials, they must be competent themselves as they are very influential within their company or organization (Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003; Palmer et. al., 2001). It is important that managers and leaders also have training, not only in soft skills, but how to effectively give the feedback to their employees (Berman & West, 2008; Dulewicz & Higgs, 2003; Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Palmer et. al., 2001).

There are several potential barriers to soft skills training. Poverty can have a large impact on soft skills acquisition (Georges, 1989). Not only do individuals living in poverty lack appropriate soft skills due to the lack of structure during their developmental years, they also may have developed poor coping skills. Laker & Powell (2011) suggest that the general public may have built up poor reaction patterns or coping skills, but this applies even more directly to people living in poverty. These poor coping skills will act as a further deterrent for developing positive soft skills. These socially inadequate individuals may need complete retraining in reactions that are now instinctual in nature. People coming out of poverty or living in poverty trying to make their way out will also have fewer resources to draw from. Simple environmental factors could cause their stress levels to increase; causing their reactions to be more pronounced than the average person which could make it seem like their soft skill acquisition is limited. With limited or no education, their ability to learn may be different than the average person's causing a somewhat abstract concept, such as soft skills, extremely difficult to learn. Social class and environmental stresses should be considered when developing a soft skills training program as the design may have to be altered.

Personality and personal cognitive skills may also affect the development of soft skills (Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Gabel et. al., 2005). Further research should be done on these topics to outline the possible impact personality and cognition play on the ability to develop soft skills.

Conclusion

While there is research done on the importance and effectiveness of soft skills training, there seems to be a limited amount of longitudinal data. Soft skills trainings are reported to need a longer period of time for actual success to be recognizable (Georges, 1989; Hunt & Baruch,

2003; Laker & Powell, 2011; Tews & Tracey, 2008). Future longitudinal studies done on soft skills trainings may demonstrate more effective techniques as well as potential barriers to soft skill acquisition.

With our world becoming more technologically inclined, there is a decrease in actual face to face contact. Our communication is more likely to be sent through the computer or phone via emails, facebook messages, tweets, and text messages. With a decrease in actual physical contact, it will remain to see how this affects the development of healthy, appropriate soft skills. One could hypothesize that with the advancement of technology, allowing for less actual contact, the development of soft skills will be stunted in some areas of employment.

Soft skills are a large part of daily life as they not only affect general social life, but they also can have an impact on a person's career. Possessing adequate soft skills are arguably as important as knowing a technical skill or trade. This emphasizes the need to continue to monitor and research the idea of soft skills.

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A SZOCIÁLIS KÉSZSÉGEK OKTATÁSÁNAK BEÉPÍTÉSE A FOGLALKOZTATÁSBA

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Összefoglaló

A piaci verseny növekedésével a szociális készségek foglalkoztatásban betöltött szerepe is egyre jelentősebb. A szakképzés, gyakornoki rendszer, vagy a szakmai képzés egyéb formái évek óta léteznek. A szakmai képzés önmagában már nem elegendő ahhoz, hogy a munkáltató igényeinek és a piac követelményeinek megfeleljen.

A jobb társadalmi integrációra való törekvés a munkahelyeken az úgynevezett soft skill-ek (puha faktorok, puha készségek) oktatásának bevezetését eredményezte. A soft skill kifejezést a szociális és interperszonális készségek munkával kapcsolatos vetületeinek elnevezésére hozták létre. A soft skill-ek abban mutatkoznak meg, hogy az egyének hogyan kezelik munkavégzés közben az érzelmeiket és az érzékelésüket. A személyiség, a szokások, az emberséges hozzáállás, a szociális tudatosság, a csapatmunka és a kommunikáció tartoznak a kulcsfontosságú elemek közé.

Az évek során a soft skill-ek fejlesztését célzó képzések a kezdetben előforduló eseti foglalkozásoktól a sikeres kutatások alapján fejlesztett és ellenőrzött jelentős előnyökkel járó képzésekké alakultak. A soft skill-ek fejlesztését célzó képzések akkor a leghatékonyabbak, amikor a szakmai tréningektől függetlenül tartják őket. A képzés kisebb elemekre és lépésekre bontott szituációkból áll, amelyeket csapatmunka alkalmazásával dolgoznak fel.

A vezetők támogatása, valamint a munkatársak és vezetők visszajelzései szükségesek a soft skill tréningek sikerességéhez; a folyamatos pozitív visszacsatolás hatása idővel a soft skill-ek kialakulásában és jelentős fejlődésében mutatkozik meg. Fontos, hogy a vezetők is részesüljenek képzésben, nem csak a soft skill-ek területén, hanem azt is el kell sajátítaniuk, hogyan adjanak minél hatékonyabb visszajelzéseket a munkatársaknak. A szegénység jelentősen befolyásolhatja a soft skill-ek elsajátítását: a társadalmi osztályt és a környezeti hatások okozta stresszhatásokat is figyelembe kell venni a képzési program kidolgozásakor.

Az elmúlt két évtized során folyó kutatások a soft skill-ek fejlesztését célzó képzések munkakörnyezetben történő megvalósulását vizsgálták és az eredmények azt igazolták, hogy az ilyen képzések eredményesebbek és sikeresebb társas integrációt tesznek lehetővé.

A soft skill-ek fontos részét képezik a mindennapi életnek, hiszen nemcsak a társas kapcsolatokat érintik, hanem az egyén szakmai előmenetelére is jelentős hatást gyakorolhatnak. Mivel a megfelelő soft skill-ek hasonlóan fontosak lehetnek, mint a szaktudás, vagy egy mesterség ismerete, folyamatos kutatásuk és figyelemmel kísérésük nagy jelentőséggel bír.

Kulcsszavak: soft skillek („puha” készségek), hard skillek („kemény” készségek), munkáltatás, társadalmi integráció, soft skillek oktatása

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