

2017

# Critical Soft Skills to Achieve Success in the Workplace

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Gloria Meeks

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2017

Abstract

Critical Soft Skills to Achieve Success in the Workplace

by

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MA, Webster University, 2008

BS, Colegio Mayor de Antioquia, 1992

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this study was a problem identified by human resources directors and managers in a medium sized community in the southeast of the United States. The problem was that some college graduates are not equipped with the necessary soft skills to be successful in the workforce. Executive directors and human resources managers brought this problem to the attention of the career center directors in the community. Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence was the theoretical framework to ground this study. This study involved purposeful sampling to select 9 human resources directors from local companies. To investigate soft skills in college graduates, these 9 human resources directors and managers responded to a semi structured interview with questions focusing on the problem of the study. Once the interviews were transcribed, the information was analyzed by using manual coding and computer-assisted coding. Among the 6 themes that emerged from the data analysis, participants most often pointed out communications as the most important soft skill and the foundation for other skills. From the perspective of human resources directors and managers, soft skills were found to be lacking in some college graduates. There was a consensus among the participants of the study that higher education leaders need to incorporate different approaches to teach skills; therefore, a 24-hour professional development program for faculty was developed as a solution for improving the learning of soft skills of college students. The social change expected from having well-equipped college graduates with soft skills will be more successful professionals with better opportunities to have upward mobility, and more meaningful careers that will benefit their families and their organizations.

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## **Dedication**

To my loving husband, Gregory, who was always on my side despite the difficulties I encountered with this project study.

## **Acknowledgments**

I want to thank my husband for supporting me in this endeavor and accepting that during the last few years he had just a part-time wife. To Dr. Elizabeth Ann Bruch, who encouraged me every time I got disheartened or wanted to give up and always provided me with valuable advice by telling me stories about her past professional life. To my Walden classmate and role model, Dr. Denise M. McCory, who was always available to listen to me and offered great recommendations when I was writing this project study. Finally, I want to thank all the participants of this project study, who were extremely generous to share with me their professional experiences with honesty and without reservations.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **Introduction**

Having a college diploma or a technical degree does not guarantee that a person has the competencies to be successful in the work environment, nor does it guarantee a job. Although a degree is important to employers (Association for Talent Development [ATD], 2012; Eisner, 2010; Jackson, 2009), a degree is not always a guarantee that a person is fully equipped with the skills to meet the needs of the job market (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006). Employers are looking for people who can offer hard skills as well as soft skills. According to the literature review, significant evidence demonstrated that soft skills are competencies that can help an individual better meet the needs of a particular job and help an individual advance in his or her career (Cobo, 2013; Robles, 2012; Zhang, 2012). Data derived from the literature review also indicated that soft skills are important for labor market outcomes (ATD, 2012).

Moreover, new technology and changing organizational aspects have made soft skills more important at work (Borghans, Weel, & Weinberg, 2014). Brungardt (2011) noted that today's workers have less repetitive job tasks and need more autonomy and superior soft skills due to the flattening of the organizational structure. The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of human resources directors and managers in a medium-sized community located in the southeast of the United States regarding soft skills that need to be further developed so that college graduates are better equipped to enter the workforce. I initially planned to interview 12 participants from the three main industries in the area, which included technology, healthcare, and general business.

However, saturation of the data collected occurred after interviewing nine participants, who provided significant information on the needed soft skills to achieve success in the workplace and the lack of soft skills in some college graduates.

### **Definition of the Problem**

Some college graduates from a medium-sized community in the southeast of the United States are lacking soft skills, which is a problem that is affecting their performance in the work environment. Executives and human resources directors from different industries and sectors expressed in business education meetings (personal communication, January 22, 2015) that college graduates are well equipped with hard skills to meet the needs of the labor market in the area; however, they are missing important soft skills that would make them more effective employees. The human resources directors specifically noted the following types of soft skills as deficient: interpersonal skills, leadership skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and teamwork skills (personal communication, January 22, 2015). The directors of career centers in the area and the career center director at the state college have received similar feedback from business executive directors and human resources directors in the area (personal communication, November 8, 2014).

The business leaders in this community expressed what national leaders have also stated, which is they are not concerned about the technical skills students are acquiring in higher education; however, they identified a problematic soft skills gap (ATD, 2012; Society of Human Resources Management [SHRM], 2014). In an Adecco survey of 1,500 companies worldwide, the findings indicated that 92% of the executives

interviewed stated that there is a skills gap in the American workforce, and approximately 44% of the participants believed that the gap exists in soft skills (ATD, 2012). Also, in the same survey, 59% of the participants held higher education responsible for the soft skills gap among recent college graduates (ATD, 2012). Similarly, Jackson (2009) recommended that higher education institutions worldwide should be held accountable if they graduate professionals who are lacking the soft skills important for productivity and innovation in the workplace.

### **Rationale**

#### **Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level**

The public 4-year college that serves this southeastern community offers more than 100 combined certificate programs, associate's degrees, and bachelor's degrees. This institution serves approximately 25,000 students each year, a population comprised of 36% traditional and 64% nontraditional students. Nearly 1,600 students graduate each May and December. Nontraditional students are returning to college because they want to upgrade their professional skills or because they never finished their degree and/or have lower skill level employment (College website, n.d.).

The community in which the institution is located has numerous industries in different fields, including technology, healthcare, finance, aerospace, aviation, and manufacturing. Although this community was severely affected by the recession of 2008, leaders from different industries and sectors have worked together to formulate strategies to bring new industries and job opportunities to the area. The college has supported these new initiatives by creating academic programs that meet the requirements of these new

enterprises and retrain people who can benefit from these new job opportunities (vice president of academic affairs, personal communication, 2014). Despite the college's efforts, such as creating new academic programs, some college graduates still lack soft skills, a problem that affects their performance in a work environment (president workforce development, personal communication, February 2015).

In 2013, the SHRM conducted a survey to identify the skills gap among job applicants from the previous 12 months. From the 2,583 companies that participated in this survey across the country, professionals in the human resources field indicated that 40% of applicants were deficient in critical thinking, 38% were deficient in professionalism and work ethic, 34% were deficient in leadership, and 25% were deficient in teamwork (SHRM, 2014). The evidence from this survey shows the existence of soft skills' gaps in certain areas.

The primacy of soft skills for the effectiveness of an employee is not a new topic of research (Zhang, 2012). Numerous studies have been conducted to identify what traits make an individual a desirable asset for an organization (Beard, Schwieger, & Surendran, 2008; Brungardt, 2011; Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremmer, Greven, & Furnham, 2010; Cobo, 2013; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Hurrell, Scholarios, & Thompson, 2012; Zhang, 2012). While many scholars focused on the importance of preparing students with the theoretical and practical skills to be productive in the workplace, there is more evidence that a combination of industry core skills plus a broader set of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, including effective communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, and critical thinking are a must for any individual who wants to have a place

and be successful in the workforce (Aggarwal, 2008; McNamara, 2009). Also, studies conducted from 1986 and 2006 showed that the abilities known as soft skills would be essential to professional success in the future (Brungardt, 2011).

However, the definition and perception of soft skills can vary in different settings. Soft skills do not always have a consistent definition between different cultures, places, and hierarchies. (Dharmarajan, Pachigalla, & Lanka, 2012). Moreover, there is inconsistency from one organization to another with regard to what description best encompasses the meaning of soft skills (Jackson, 2009). Borghans et al. (2014) asserted that since people skills are considered one of the components of soft skills, it is likely that racial, ethnic, and linguistic differences can impede the performance of tasks that require soft skills.

While having a college diploma does not guarantee that a person has the competencies to be successful in the work environment, nor guarantee a job, a degree is still important to employers (ATD, 2012; Eisner, 2010; Jackson, 2009). However, employers are looking for people who bring hard skills as well soft skills. In addition to industry skill gaps, employers are observing that today's American workforce is missing important soft skills, which include good communication skills, the ability to work with others, and the ability to think critically (ATD, 2012). Moreover, this gap in soft skills continues to exist even with the country's level of unemployment and underemployment (ATD, 2012). In 2010, The ATD surveyed 2,000 executives from different industries and 90% of the executives indicated that soft skills are vital for business expansion and that

an imbalance in soft skills can produce negative effects on human capital performance and business performance.

Soft skills are becoming more and more important. The Association for Career and Technical Education (2014) reported that The Arizona Department of Education, The National Network of Business Industry and Association, The U.S. Department of Labor, and The University of Tennessee indicated that the worker of the 21st century will need well developed interpersonal and intrapersonal skills that allow them to negotiate and solve conflicts, respect individual differences, and exercise leadership. The findings in the 2015 job outlook report by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2014) indicated that the most important attributes that human resources executives are looking for during the hiring process are leadership, interpersonal skills, teamwork skills, flexibility, and adaptability.

The 260 companies that participated in the NACE Job Outlook Survey selected the most important three qualities in a worker and scored them from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest. These qualities were the ability to work on teams (4.61), the ability to solve problems and make decisions (4.61), and the ability to communicate (4.6). However, the same group of employers also expressed that when some graduates are hired, they score very low in leadership skills, verbal communication skills, work ethics, and teamwork skills. The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of human resources directors and managers in a medium-sized community located in the southeast of the United States regarding soft skills that need to be further developed so college graduates are better equipped to enter the workforce.

## **Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature**

Education in America has significantly evolved from the initial stages during the colonial period when people learned ideas and concepts from a community preacher or leader (Cohen & Kisker, 2010); however, today more and more skills are required. Cohen and Kisker (2010) described that for youngsters, family was the first source of education in social mores, morality, and general behavior. Initially, education in America had a religious connotation because colonists wanted to build communities that integrated religion and society (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). The mission of these first institutions was to acculturate the young. However, in many cases, young people did not attend college because those institutions did not offer programs that aligned with their aspirations (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Moreover, Cohen and Kisker noted that people learned skills and abilities through apprenticeships and imitation; therefore, college degrees were not in significant demand among people who wanted to acquire skills to make a living. American higher education has evolved from important events in the economy and society that marked the initiation of each new era, such as the colonial, emergent nation, university transformation, mass higher education, consolidation, and contemporary or post-modern eras (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Education in America is continually evolving to meet societal needs.

The contemporary or postmodern era has been marked by fiscal cutbacks, privatization of higher education, and the Great Recession of 2008; therefore, a new direction in education has taken place (Geiger, 2010). Obama (2015) stated that during his administration, major interest had been placed in providing cheaper and faster degrees

through community and state colleges. Possessing a college credential is now almost a requirement for any individual who wants to have a job in the growing economy.

(Obama, 2015). However, some community colleges now have taken the onus to raise the quality of the programs they offer and create programs that align with the needs of the economy (Obama, 2015). Obama asserted the American economy needs a skilled and adaptable workforce that is prepared to compete in a globalized economy.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), employment in the U.S. economy is expected to grow by 10.8% in the decade from 2012 to 2022, adding 15.6 million jobs for a total of 161 million. More than 5.3 million job openings will be offered in healthcare, healthcare support, construction, and the personal care field. The future of the U.S. labor market will include high-education professional jobs with considerable abstract tasks and fewer routine tasks. Therefore, more jobs will demand analytical and service skills (Hilton, 2008).

Moreover, Darr (2006) pointed out that industrially advanced societies, such the United States and Europe, are more consumers of services rather than industrial goods. Darr (2006) explained that in the past, the work environment of an engineer was in isolation with minimum interaction with coworkers and clients. Today an engineer has to be in ongoing communication with clients and other coworkers, which means that he or she must have interpersonal as well as technical skills to perform his or her job (Hilton, 2008). It becomes evident that workers accomplish less productive work in isolation in the modern environment (Davis & Muir, 2004). All employees must be skilled at team

collaboration and affirming others (Davis & Muir, 2004). Today's workplace requires personnel who can operate in a team environment and interact effectively with others.

Hilton (2008) also provided an example of a significant lack of soft skills from professionals in biotechnology. Hilton emphasized that doctoral training in the field provides limited opportunities to work with others and to develop teamwork skills. Biotechnology training takes place in a personalized and individualistic environment. Hilton explained that although professionals in biotechnology are trained to be highly skilled and competitive, they are not trained to have a thorough understanding of the wide range of the marketable applications of biotechnology. The lack of soft skills for scientists in the biotechnology field may create some problems since today's biotech positions require highly developed skills in a complex mix of social networking, interpersonal relations, and technical ability.

Employees need to be skilled at managing conflict and creating inclusion for improved team performance and for collaboration in generating innovative ideas (Sultana, 2014). Employees that possess skills that allow them to negotiate solutions or reformulate work processes by taking a systems approach make them more effective contributors (Davis & Muir, 2004). Having a college diploma does not guarantee that a person possesses all the competencies to be successful in the work environment; employers are looking for people who bring hard skills as well soft skills (John, 2009). According to Wats and Wats (2008), a person's success in the work environment depends 85% on soft skills and only 15% on hard skills.

More evidence is illustrated in the Business Higher Education Forum (BHEF), composed of chief executive officers of Fortune 500 companies, leaders of college and universities, and other leaders, which provided further illustration of the deficiency of soft skills (BHEF, 2010). These leaders indicated that a significant gap exists between what future employees learn in postsecondary education and the skills that are required to meet the needs of the job market (BHEF, 2010). The lack of soft skills is not a problem related to only one region or industry. There is abundant evidence from the professional literature regarding the skills gaps of American workers and workers in other developed countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia (Brungardt, 2011; Eisner, 2010; Shramm, 2013).

Numerous scholars have described the importance of soft skills but still there appears to be a lack of soft skills in graduates for all industries. Researchers have described the soft skills gap in graduates from different industries, such as in business/accounting programs (Andrews & Higson, 2008), IT professionals and engineers (Zhang, 2012), and biotechnology professionals (Hilton, 2008). Furthermore, entities other than industry sectors or individual organizations experience the consequences of the skills gap. When people lack the right set of skills for critical jobs, entire geographical regions and nations are affected since there are not enough individuals with the soft skills to meet the demands of the job market. (ATD, 2012).

Hart Research Associates (2006) demonstrated evidence of the importance of soft skills in a survey involving 305 executives and 510 recent college graduates. Executives expressed that they were concerned because college graduates were missing important

skills such as teamwork, problem solving, a work ethic, and communication skills. These skills would make them more competitive individuals with a broader set of skills that is not limited only to hard skills (Hart Research Associates, 2006). Also, recent graduates stressed that colleges need to place emphasis on integrating knowledge and skills to real-world settings.

The change in the organizational structures from pyramidal to broader hierarchies has made it necessary for employees at all levels to be more proficient in soft skills like interacting with others, solving problems, and making decisions (Brungardt, 2011; Dwyer, Millet, & Payne, 2006). Organizations such as The American Association of Colleges and Universities, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Hart Research Associates provide information stating that the nation's colleges and universities still have significant room for improvement in preparing college graduates to meet the needs of the globalized economy (Brungardt, 2011).

Nealy (2015) noted that leaders now are more aware how soft skills contribute to employment productivity and consequently, they expect employees to have well-developed soft skills. Researchers have suggested that soft skills indicate job performance just as well as hard skills (Brungardt, 2011; Robles, 2012). In fact, Zhang (2012) asserted that this set of skills is not a new concept in relation to higher education; educational accrediting agencies have been recommending soft skills training for over a half a century.

However, it appears that in some higher education institutions soft skills training is poorly done, leaving graduates with weaknesses in facing the demands of the

workforce (Cappelli, 2015; Ingols & Shapiro, 2014). Nealy (2005) suggested that because the 21st century workforce and classroom demographics have changed, faculty members preparing future business leaders need to undergo a transformation in order to provide students with skills that meet business and industry demands. From an alternative perspective, Loughry, Ohland, and Woehr (2014) suggested that today's traditional age undergraduates, as compared with previous generations, seem to have less well-developed social skills that are used in face-to-face interaction with others because they have grown up in the era of the Internet and social media.

### **Definition of Terms**

In the context of this study, the following terms are defined.

*Employability:* Knight and Yorke (2002) defined employability as the required set of professional skills, personal characteristics, and knowledge that allow an individual to obtain a job and be a successful professional.

*Hard skills:* Hard skills are described as those “technical or administrative procedures that can be quantified and measured” (Dixon, Belnap, Albrecht, & Lee, 2010, p. 7).

*Nontraditional students:* Jinkens (2009) defined nontraditional students as those who postpone college enrollment until after the age of 24, who have dependents and require employment to maintain the family, who can attend college only part time, and who have faced life challenges.

*Skills gap:* A skill gap is the difference between an organization's current competencies and the skills an organization needs to succeed (ATD, 2012).

*Skills mismatch:* Skills mismatch is defined as the discrepancies between the general and specific skills that an employee has and those that the position requires (Cobo, 2013).

*Soft skills:* Perreault (2004) defined soft skills as special characteristics and abilities that distinguish a person from other individuals who have similar professional backgrounds and experience. Also, soft skills include character traits, behaviors, and attitudes, instead of technical aptitude or knowledge (Robles, 2012). Hurrell et al. (2012) stated that soft skills are interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities that help individuals master performance in particular social contexts.

*Traditional students:* Jinkens (2009) stated that the most common definition of traditional students refers to those who begin college full-time immediately after high school, who are between the ages of 18-24, who receive financial support from parents, and who live on campus.

### **Significance of the Study**

The goal of many college graduates is to find a job at a company in which they can utilize their hard skills and knowledge. However, based on the literature and the problem that has been reported at the study site, it is perceived that college graduates also need to have soft skills to stay and succeed at their work sites (Aggarwal, 2008; Anthony & Garner, 2016; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Hilton, 2008; Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010; Robles, 2012). Soft skills are critical not only to a person's success in the workplace but also to the company's success and increased productivity (DeKay, 2012; Jackson, 2009). In an organization, a process can be irrelevant if people cannot work

together or communicate; therefore, high turnover and an unstable working atmosphere can jeopardize the working environment (Dutton, 2012). The first step in the process of improving the readiness of recent college graduates is to determine from human resources professionals what soft skills are required from these college graduates to meet the needs of the labor market.

The significance of this study is three-fold. First, it is an opportunity to create awareness among college administrators and faculty about how employers perceive the work-readiness of college graduates. Second, this research may produce a better understanding of which soft skills are a priority for employers. Third, it is anticipated that the findings from the study may result in strategies to increase the development of soft skills while students are still in college. The identification of the soft skills that recent college graduates are lacking is imperative to enhance productivity, boost economic growth, and reduce unemployment (Jackson 2009; Robles, 2012). The concern is not about the number of graduates, but about the quality of these graduates and whether they have the skills essential for competing in a globalized economy (Jackson, 2009). According to the American Management Association (2010), soft skills are often harder to teach and quantify than technical skills, but they are the skills most sought after when recruiters are assessing college graduates for open positions. More and more organizations worldwide are looking to hire graduates who add immediate value to the organization and require less training (Jackson, 2009).

The evolution of a global economy has produced myriad changes in the way business is accomplished. The significant advances in technology have made today's

workforce experience substantial changes in the way it functions and interacts (Mitchell et al., 2010) and with those changes, new skills are necessary. People are looking to gain new hard skills that make them more desirable and competitive in the labor market. However, they appear to be forgetting that along with these skills, they need to have the competencies to deal with people from different backgrounds, resolve conflicts, work in difficult situations, make ethical decisions, display integrity and honesty, and demonstrate the ability to work in teams (McLester & McIntire, 2006). According to the National Business Education Association (2015), the needs of the dynamic workforce include more than academics and hands-on career skills; therefore, in order to guarantee success for individuals entering the 21st-century workforce, employees must possess nontechnical soft skills (Mitchell et al., 2010).

### **Research Questions**

In addition to hard skills, there is a set of skills, soft skills, that practitioners and educators have highlighted as mandatory to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century (Brungardt, 2011; Cobo, 2013; Hilton, 2008). Significant numbers of researchers in the United States and Europe have worked to identify how well equipped college graduates are to meet labor market needs. ATD and the SHRM, two of the largest human resources organizations in the United States, have independently conducted six research studies to assess soft skills and hard skills of college graduates. These studies have not been limited to just one group of participants and included executives from a variety of industries, faculty from a various colleges and universities, and even college graduates. The findings from these studies have indicated that the gap in soft skills is

evident; however, these researchers did not focus on identifying solutions to help address the gap.

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of a group of human resources directors and managers regarding soft skills that need to be further developed so college graduates are better equipped to enter the workforce. The study took place in a medium-sized community located in the southeast United States. It was initially proposed to interview 12 participants, but data collection ceased after nine participants had been interviewed because saturation of information occurred at that point.

The research questions included the following:

1. How do human resources directors define soft skills?
2. What are the most important soft skills that make a graduate a successful employee?
3. What are the soft skills that graduates are missing in today's business world?
4. What strategies are recommended to improve the teaching of soft skills?

### **Review of the Literature**

Numerous strategies and resources were utilized to obtain scholarly articles to write the review of the literature. First, I looked for peer-reviewed articles through Google Scholar, which is an engine that can search for scholarly articles, books, and other academic resources worldwide. Because many articles were not available from Google Scholar, and in many cases only the abstracts and citations were visible, I listed from Google Scholar all possible articles that were a match with my research topic to find them at the local college's library and Walden's library. Second, I went to the Walden

Library and the local college's library to begin looking for different materials through different disciplines, including education, behavioral and social sciences, and business, by utilizing engines such as EBESCO, JSTOR, ProQuest, and Sage. Third, following the instructions of Walden University, I limited my search to a timeframe of 5 years; however, in some cases, I had to expand the timeframe to 7 years.

The topic of research that I selected, soft skills, was a difficult subject for which to find scholarly articles; therefore, I used other terms to expand my search, such as *interpersonal skills, work readiness, emotional intelligence, job skills, and social intelligence*. Through my search, I was able to identify around 80 articles, plus I collected information from websites, including ATD, SHRM, NACE, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and books on emotional intelligence. The purpose of including some books and scholarly articles on emotional intelligence was to substantiate the framework of this research. Some of the foundational articles and books that supported the conceptual framework were published in the years 1920, 1975, 1993, 1998, and the early 2000s.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study was based on the theory of emotional intelligence as conceptualized and expanded by Goleman (1998). However, before analyzing the emotional intelligence concept, it is necessary to explain that initially, Salovey and Mayer (1990) studied and elaborated on the theory of emotional intelligence based on prior studies of social intelligence from Thorndike. According to Thorndike (1920), social intelligence allows a person to assess and manage his or her circumstances,

emotions, and behaviors as well as the circumstances, emotions and behaviors of other individuals, and react accordingly.

Salovey and Mayer (1993) defined social intelligence by describing it as an expression of emotional intelligence. This definition provides a framework for an individual to satisfactorily face challenging situations with others based on the evaluation of verbal communication, body language, and the management of one's own emotions, as well as other people's emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1993). However, Goleman (1998) was the first person who openly started applying the theory of emotional intelligence to the effectiveness of job performance. According to Cotê and Miners (2006), several organizations have been incorporating the concept of emotional intelligence into the program of employee development and a company's goal achievement. Goleman explained that intelligence quotient (IQ) alone does not help an individual significantly achieve high performance at work. When a person's IQ is correlated with the job performance and career advancement, the IQ score counts only 25% (Goleman, 1998). The other 75% should be attributed to emotional intelligence, which is a person's ability to relate with others and understand others and one's own self (Goleman, 1998). IQ does not have significant leverage in determining who will succeed or fail (Goleman, 1998). To be successful in today's world, employees must have an aptitude for interacting positively with colleagues and customers as well as being able to analyze information.

IQ factors are important assets when enrolling in academic programs, such engineering, law, and medicine, in which academic and professional selection relies heavenly on the IQ factor; however, once in the work environment, people do not

compete with others with very high IQs, but with people who have high levels of emotional intelligence, which gives them a very high competitive advantage (Goleman, 1998). Thus, Goleman (1998) stated that emotional intelligence gives the skills in the soft domain that make an individual more competitive in the work environment. Soft skills are even more critical for success in difficult fields (Goleman, 1998). To be a top performer, emotional intelligence skills must be in synergy with the cognitive skills (Goleman, 1998). The research questions that guided this study all focused on soft skills and soft skills are an integral component of emotional intelligence.

According to Salovey and Mayer (1993, p. 433), “the five components of emotional intelligence are self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, internal motivation, and social skills.” Goleman (1998) divided these five components of emotional intelligence into two categories, personal competencies and social competencies. In the personal competencies, self-awareness is the ability to recognize one’s internal states, preferences, reactions, resources, and intuitions (Goleman, 1998). Self-regulation is the ability to manage one’s resources, internal states, and impulses (Goleman, 1998). Motivation is the emotional tendency to guide and facilitate goal achievement (Goleman, 1998). It includes commitment, initiative, and optimism (Goleman, 1995). Personal competencies contribute to a person’s ability to function and achieve on an individual level.

In the social competencies, Goleman (1998) stated that empathy is the ability to identify other people’s feelings, needs, and concerns. It also encompasses helping others to develop skills and abilities and the ability to understand diversity (Goleman, 1998).

The last component of social competencies is social skills, which is the ability to induce desirable responses in others (Goleman, 1998). Social skills should not be understood as manipulation but as the ability to build bridges among people through teamwork, open communication, conflict management, negotiation, and leadership (Goleman, 1998).

Social competencies contribute to a person's ability to function and contribute as part of a group.

The subject of soft skills has been analyzed by numerous scholars under the framework of emotional intelligence since a direct relationship appears to exist between them. To illustrate, people with high emotional intelligence are more prone to develop abilities that are part of the soft skills set, such as teamwork, effective communications, and successful social interactions (Goleman, 1998). Bar-On (2006) defined emotional intelligence as a combination of social and emotional skills that allow us to understand ourselves, express ourselves, understand and interrelate with others, and cope with life's challenges. Job performance is enhanced when a person has optimism, the ability to perceive emotions and has the proper social skills (Moon & Hur, 2011). People with these skills are more able to accept challenges and overcome obstacles, solve work-related problems (Slaski & Cartwright, 2002, 2003) and relate better with other employees. People with the abilities to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in themselves and others are predisposed to achieve high job performance (Slaski & Cartwright, 2002, 2003).

Emotional intelligence has received a significant amount of attention from professionals and experts in the organizational behavior, human resources, and

management fields as a great predictor of performance in areas such as academic performance, job performance, leadership, family conflict resolution, and negotiations (Goleman, 1998; O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011). In the work environment, soft skills help graduates become highly mobile individuals, who can respond to the constantly evolving needs of the contemporary workplace (Andrew & Higson, 2008). In the academic environment, emotional intelligence may contribute to increased performance in completing teamwork projects and on ratings of leadership (Offerman, Bailey, Vasilopoulos, Seal, & Sass, 2004). Emotional intelligence seems to be a critical attribute for personal and professional success.

### **Soft Skills**

Different scholars have seen the list of soft skills in different contexts; however, the skills have the common outcome of aiding personal growth, learning, and employment success (Gibb, 2014). A wide variety of soft skills are required to be successful in a job and achieve professional advancement (Brungardt, 2011; Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010; Marques, 2013; Robles, 2012). Brungardt (2011) posited that today's workers from all industries have less repetitive tasks and much more autonomy in their work environment, which means that they have to make more decisions, interact with more people, and communicate effectively with people at different levels. Brungardt identified four soft skills necessary for any employee: (a) teamwork, (b) problem solving, (c) decision making, and (d) communication. However, Brungardt noted that the term soft skills is used in reference to teamwork skills. This scholar's explanations could be

understood to mean that all other soft skills, such as decision making, problem solving, and communication, are crucial to effective teamwork skills.

According to Remedios (2012), there are two categories of soft skills, the “must have” skills and the “good to have” skills (p. 1,289). The “must have” are the soft skills and the “good to have” are a subset derived from the soft skills. There are seven soft-skills: (a) communication skills, (b) critical thinking and problem solving, (c) lifelong learning and information management, (d) teamwork, (e) entrepreneurship, (f) leadership, (g) work ethics and morals, and (h) leadership (Robles, 2012). The set of subskills or “good to have” appear to be more a description of all the different abilities that make up the soft skills.

To illustrate, the soft skill of communication is described by a subset of soft skills, such as the ability to clearly articulate an idea orally or in writing; to listen actively and respond; and to articulate a message that is appropriate to the audience (Remedios, 2012). Remedios (2012) presented a description of soft skills in a very organized and simple way. Additionally, Remedios expanded the description further than Brungardt. Brungardt’s (2011) list did not include lifelong learning, work ethics, leadership, and entrepreneurship. When considering what skills and characteristics companies are looking for in a new employee, it appears valid that these four skills should be part of the set of soft skills. For example, Remedios posited that entrepreneurial skill is the ability to pursue business opportunity, develop risk awareness and to create and innovate, all of which could be valuable for an employee.

Lim, Lee, Yap, and Ling (2016) identified a set of soft skills that are highly rated by employers: (a) analytical skills, (b) strong decision-making process, (c) oral and written communication skills, (d) problem solving, (e) teamwork skills, (f) ability to gather information, (g) and ability to work under pressure. Among all of these skills, written and oral communications skills were the most important skills that employers identified as necessary for any new employee to be successful (Lim et al., 2016). The desirable skills associated with oral communication were listening attentively and performing well in client interviews and presentations. Written communication skills included being able to create clear and useful reports, memos, and business correspondence.

Other scholars, such as Zhang (2012) and Beard et al. (2008), conducted independent studies to identify what soft skills IT professionals and engineers are required to have to be effective in their job performance and what the appropriate methodology is to assess soft skills while people are still in college. Both studies identified a similar set of soft skills; however, each skill was listed in a different order of importance by assigning values from 1 to 5, with 1 having the lowest value and 5 the highest value. Zhang (2012) listed the following in order of importance: (a) honesty and integrity, (b) communication skills, (c) analytical skills, (d) teamwork, (e) interpersonal skills, (f) motivation, (g) flexibility and adaptability, (h) creative thinking, and (e) organizational skills. Beard et al. (2008) listed, in order of importance: (a) communication, (b) work ethics, (c) teamwork, (d) interpersonal skills, (e) problem solving skills, (f) analytical skills and (g) flexibility and adaptability. Although the

rankings are different, the basic set of skills is similar, with communications ranking high in both studies.

When comparing both lists, an interesting difference is evident since Beard et al. (2008) did not include organizational skills and motivation. The valuable part of these two studies is that both were independently conducted and reported similar findings regarding the needs for soft skills in the job performance for IT professionals and engineers. Regarding assessing soft skills, both studies from Zhang (2012) and Beard et al. concluded that the assessment of soft skills during the academic years is challenging but extremely necessary. College students need to develop their skills before entering the workplace to facilitate job performance.

The teaching of soft skills should be integrated into the curriculum and evaluated independently from other goals in the curriculum since more employers are demanding graduates who are better prepared with soft skills. However, Anthony (2014) noted that educators have to face significant challenges when integrating the teaching of soft skills into courses to avoid sacrificing important course content. Also, the educational needs of the typical college student and the corporate employee are continuously changing; thus, educators and external stakeholders need to stay up to date on the needs and required skills (Beard et al., 2008). Jackson (2013) added that one challenge of curriculum design is bridging the gap between learning and the application of the skills. Some researchers have begun to try to determine what skills employers look for in graduates.

Robles (2012) evaluated what top executives perceive as the top 10 critical skills that an employee or a college graduate must have so colleges and universities can prepare

students properly and increase their employability. Robles recognized these soft skills in the following order of importance: (a) integrity, (b) communication, (c) courtesy, (d) responsibility, (e) interpersonal skills, (f) professionalism, (g) positive attitude, (h) teamwork, (i) flexibility, and (j) work ethic. Robles appeared to go further than some other scholars when she proposed that the set of soft skills could be divided into two components: interpersonal or people skills and personal or career attributes. Interpersonal or people skills include things like patience, a sense of humor, friendliness, self-control, empathy, and warmth (Robles, 2012). Personal or career attributes include qualities like customer service, teamwork, time management, leadership skills, likeability, and organizational skills (Robles, 2012). Career attributes are associated with working in a professional team environment; however, all the skills are important for employability.

Bailly and Léné (2013) conducted research in France in which 100 human resources executives from lodging, restaurants, and retail industries participated to identify what skills employees need to bring to those industries. The participants unanimously expressed that in customer-service centered industries the need for soft skills has increased over the past 3 decades (Bailly & Léné, 2013). Bailly and Léné noted that interviewees identified three categories of soft skills: (a) social and interpersonal as the ability to communicate, (b) emotional skills as the ability of empathy and (c) behavioral attitudes as a sense of service, involvement, and taking initiative. Bailly and Léné also asserted that employees in these industries should have the ability to adjust to others' feelings, to recognize others, and to influence others without annoying them. This conclusion strongly aligned with the emotional competence framework composed of

personal and social competencies, as posited by Goleman (1998). In their study, Bailly and Léné highlighted that relational and interpersonal skills are regarded as critical in these industries, and the lack of soft skills could affect a person's chances of getting employed in one of these industries. Bailly and Léné also reported that interviewees in this study emphasized that people who work in these fields need to match and reflect the image of the company, sound right, and look right. Furthermore, employers expressed that soft skills are something that a person either has or does not have, and they are an intrinsic trait of the individual and thus cannot be developed or changed (Bailly & Léné, 2013). This claim reflects some prejudice, and employers who believe it could use the argument that soft skills are an intrinsic trait as an excuse to disqualify a person for a job opportunity.

Marques (2013) contributed to the discussion of soft skills when he stressed that soft skills are critical to individuals who want to achieve leadership positions in their organizations. To elaborate on this statement, Marques explained that world-wide known leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Pope John Paul II were spiritual and/or political leaders who were noted for their soft skills or who were well equipped with soft skills. Additionally, Marques noted that soft skills are gaining importance, not just in the United States, but also in other countries, including the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Canada, India, and Malaysia. According to Marques, soft skills are seen by companies to provide a competitive advantage over competitors.

Robles (2012) stated that soft skills are more than people skills. If the two components of the soft skills are present in an individual, they could produce a positive

impact on job performance. In the component of personal skills, certain attributes such as positive attitude, empathy, customer service, responsibility, and self-confidence should be present in an individual. Robles also emphasized that although soft skills could be learned and acquired, they are more difficult to obtain than hard skills. Moreover, Robles explained that many companies do not want to invest in providing training in soft skills since it is extremely challenging to quantify the return on investment (ROI) of this training and create an effective methodology to measure soft skills. However, Gibb (2014) posited a different view regarding how interested employers are in assessing employees' soft skills. Gibb asserted that the measurement and evaluation of soft skills should be a mechanism created by the employers and educational institutions to assess if an individual has the needed soft skills. This measurement should be a priority to ensure compliance and exercise social control (Gibb, 2014).

While hard skills and products may be outsourced, soft skills are not something that can be quickly acquired or outsourced. As did other scholars, Marques (2013) included the following list of soft skills based on the result of his study: (a) concern for others, (b) motivation, (c) honesty, (d) integrity, (e) inspiration, and (f) teamwork. This list seems to be more in alignment with the social competences of emotional intelligence illustrated by Goleman (1998), which included recognizing others' feelings, needs and concerns, and being able to induce desirable responses in others. Following identification of the soft skills, researchers turned their attention to determining how to assess these skills in people.

## **Soft Skills Assessment**

Given the value of soft skills to employers and employees, it is critical to explore how well equipped graduates are with soft skills and how much they are able to bring these attributes to the workplace. Gibb (2014) noted that the assessment of soft skills is an increasing concern among employers; however, Chamorro-Premuzic et al. (2010) asserted that many academics refuse to acknowledge the importance of assessing soft skills and consider them a distraction from other academic priorities.

Chamorro-Premuzic et al. (2010) asserted that some scholars and practitioners highlighted the difficulty in assessing soft skills due to two important factors: (a) the list of soft skills is very diverse from one study to another, and (b) in many cases, soft skills may be assessed in a subjective way since there is not an objective test to evaluate all the different soft skills. Similarly, Zhang (2012) pointed out that the challenge of assessing soft skills is that no quizzes or tests can accurately measure interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Although Chamorro-Premuzic et al. and Zhang asserted that the assessment of soft skills should not be avoided due to challenges in using preestablished methodologies, it is valid not to discard less conventional methodologies to assess soft skills. Chamorro-Premuzic et al. stated that the goal of assessing soft skills is to understand how well college students learned what companies expect them to know.

In the field of soft skill assessment, Gibb (2014) considered the application of three different theories: (a) control theory, (b) goal setting theory, and (c) attribution theory. Gibb posited that stakeholders have expressed valid concerns about the impact of soft skills assessment on an individual and about the cognitive and emotional dimensions

of soft skills learning. Gibb explained that the assessment of soft skills is based on feedback, which can produce a positive or a negative reaction in the individual. For instance, Jawahar (2010) posited that performance feedback produces positive or negative reactions, which could influence future performance.

**Control theory.** Gibb (2014) noted that this theory explains behaviors in terms of “feedback and control loops” (p. 459). An assessment based on control theory compares a reference level of performance to the actual measured level of performance. The feedback is formulated with information that intends to minimize the gap between the expected level and the measured level (Gibb, 2014; Jawahar 2010). Gibb (2014) also asserted that the effectiveness of soft skills assessment using control theory can be affected by the lack of understanding of what soft skills are and whether the individual possesses self-regulatory strategies to assimilate the feedback and create an action plan. Gibb’s explanation of control theory and soft skills assessment appears to be a complex situation for people who could feel threatened by the feedback and have a negative reaction. To ease this paradox, Winterton (2009) suggested a reference level of performance should be given in advance to an employee and the assessment should be made as quantitative as possible. Clarity on soft skills expectations and definition could reduce the negative reactions in any feedback on performance (Winterton, 2009). However, since Gibb (2014) noted that soft skills cannot be measured as concretely as hard skills, it is important that the person who is evaluated has some ability to see and evaluate himself or herself and has self-evaluation abilities. Control theory can be useful for soft skills assessment as long as limitations are understood and addressed.

**Goal setting theory.** Gibb (2014) also referenced goal setting theory as an option to assess soft skills. Goal setting allows the evaluated person and the evaluator to determine in advance what goals to achieve (Tews & Tracey, 2009). Goal setting has a social dimension since both parties, subordinate and supervisor, need to reach a consensus on which goals comprise the aim (Gibb, 2014). Goals must be achievable, but they must offer a certain level of difficulty to stretch performance. Gardner (2011) noted that low goals lead to less effort than higher goals, and in many cases, public commitment to achieve goals can increase the interest of a person to achieve that goal. Because of the nature of soft skills, it is also possible to predict some challenges when trying to achieve the goals that are difficult to measure. To minimize some of the challenges, Gardner explained that the evaluator should provide ongoing feedback to help the evaluated individual stay focused on the goals.

**Attribution theory.** Gibb (2014) also explained that according to attribution theory, success or failure may be attributed to internal or external circumstances. To illustrate, unfavorable results are due to external attributions and favorable results are attributed to internal attributions. Gibb highlighted that in the attribution theory, self-validation and self-improvement receive strong emphasis. Self-validation and self-improvement can be positive strategies to improve soft skills (Gibb, 2014). However, for those individuals who have negative perceptions of their skills, the possibility is high that they might negatively reinforce their learning by constant failure (Gibb, 2014).

Gibb (2014) noted that professionals in the human resources field have exhibited an increasing interest in identifying the most appropriate methodology to assess soft skills

in employees. Based on the literature, it appears that there is no perfect methodology for assessing soft skills. Each company should evaluate which methodology is most appropriate to the organization depending on the corporate culture, the nature of the industry, and the working conditions of the employees.

### **Description of Soft Skills**

There is no one trait or personal characteristic that makes a person more successful than another; however, there are certain nonacademic attributes or soft skills that give a person a competitive advantage in the labor market (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010). In the past, professional qualifications were sufficient to secure a position in a company (Jones, Baldi, Phillips, & Waikar, 2016; Sultana, 2014). To be successful today, it seems it is necessary to have a personality compatible with the organization's culture, the right attitude to deal with people and complex situations, as well as the appropriate academic credentials or technical skills (Sultana, 2014). Based on the review of the literature, the right attitude and the capacity to deal with people and difficult situations are better performed when the individual has soft skills, including teamwork, communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, leadership skills, and conflict management (Brungardt, 2011; Cobo, 2013; Robles, 2012).

**Teamwork skills.** An increase in team-based structures in organizations has rendered teamwork skills a requirement in higher educational curriculums. Teamwork skills are essential for graduates from different disciplines due to demands of employers and the search for better team performance (Loughry et al., 2014). The ability to work with people from different socio-cultural and academic backgrounds appears to be a

simple task; however, it is a complex task in reality. Remedios (2012) noted that an individual who possesses good teamwork skills can build good rapport and interact with others, can be a leader or a follower, can recognize and respect differences, and can communicate and listen well. Troth, Jordan, Lawrence, and Tse (2012) asserted that successful team players display high emotional intelligence and that emotional intelligence has positive or negative impact depending on how much team members use their emotional intelligence.

To illustrate, Troth et al. (2012) asserted that good communication among team members is a basic requirement for successful team performance and a fundamental element of how teams work together. Good communicators recognize and manage their own emotions, as well as those of other people. This recognition and management of emotions is what Troth et al. defined as a multilevel paradigm of emotional skills' performance relationship in a team setting. In this multilevel model, every team member recognizes and manages his or her own emotions and also is aware of other team members' emotions and acts and communicates to positively manage other people's emotions (Troth et al., 2012). Successful team performance comes from good communication, a team's resources, the processes in which the members engage, and the skills possessed by each team member (Troth et al., 2012). The demand for teamwork skills has increased because organizations are using more lateral coordination than direct supervision (Loughry & Tosi, 2008). Additionally, more companies are formulating strategic alliances with other companies and organizations, which require people to work together on committees, cross-teams, and joint ventures (Loughry et al., 2014).

**Communication skills.** One of the most desired attributes in an employee is the ability to communicate and convey complex ideas orally, in writing, and interpersonally (Reinsch & Gardner, 2014). Moreover, with the increase in technical jobs, more diverse workplaces, and more cross-functional teams, communication skills are an essential trait of any individual who is looking for a job (Clokic & Fourie, 2016). Remedios (2012) asserted that communication skills include not only conveying ideas but also practicing active listening, responding, and maintaining the conversation, which means not monopolizing the conversation. Good communication skills are a good resource to influence others and have mature conversations (Reinsch & Gardner, 2014).

Effective communication can create a positive effect on a team's performance and on professional and personal goal achievement (DeKay, 2012). Proper communication avoids violating the governing rules of the communication context, which means that the behavior is effective and appropriate to the moment (Troth et al., 2012). Communication skills are more effective when an individual has a higher level of emotional intelligence since such an individual will engage in positive interpersonal behaviors (Troth et al., 2012). Goleman (1998) stated that being able to share ideas, express personal feelings, and work out differences with others are essential elements of the ability to relate and work with other people.

Complementing what Goleman (1998) stated about the value of good communication, Awad and Alhashemi (2012) noted that for any organization, communication is the lifeblood necessary to maintain the health of the organization. Moreover, Awad and Alhashemi asserted that communication is the primary resource for

managers and leaders to deliver and receive information, convey strategies, and articulate solutions. If communication does not exist, the organization will not be successful. Even more important, without personal communication skills, interpersonal and professional relationships will not flourish (Reinsch & Gardner, 2014). Thus, it seems that healthy interpersonal communication among people in an organization is the foundation of positive relationships among coworkers and between subordinates and supervisors, as well as a necessity for the success of an organization.

According to Reinsch and Gardner (2014), the importance of good communication permeates all areas and members of an organization; therefore, any weakness in the communication skills of an employee should signal difficulties for individual's professional performance that affects the entire organization. Furthermore, Moore and Morton (2017) pointed out that major emphasis needs to be placed on skillful written communication, which is a top requirement in the workplace but one that college graduates often lack. The ability to communicate is one of the most important attributes that determine promotions (Reinsch & Gardner, 2014). More and more employers express significant interest in candidates who have well developed communication skills since advanced communication skills facilitate negotiation and conflict resolution (Schramm, 2013).

**Critical thinking skills.** The transformation of knowledge is significantly different from the application of knowledge (Flores, Matkin, Burbach, Quinn, & Harding, 2012). Transformation of knowledge requires the application of critical thinking, and critical thinking means to analyze objectively. Furthermore, the lack of critical thinking

skills may be demonstrated in the inability to integrate multiple perspectives (Flores et al., 2012). Critical thinking allows an individual to use analytical skills to assimilate and evaluate information and then produce a response based on the analysis (Bloch & Spataro, 2014).

The disposition to critical thinking emerges from a culture of critical thinking and it is an ability that needs to be developed. Critical thinking cultures provide prospects for an individual to explore and grow their skills by examining other viewpoints, perspectives, and possibilities (Bloch & Spataro, 2014). While some scholars believe that critical thinking is a general skill, others posit that an individual must develop critical thinking skills. Flores et al. (2012) asserted that critical thinking skills need to be developed through formal education, or a person may experience negative consequences related to how effectively and efficiently they can lead and perform at work. In fact, a person might demonstrate poor critical thinking skills by not being able to integrate multiple perspectives that contain a variety of facts and then decide the proper response or make an adequate decision. (Flores et al., 2012). Well-developed critical thinking skills allow an individual not only to assess difficult and complex situation but also to reach feasible solutions and make logical and pragmatic decisions.

**Leadership skills.** Based on Northouse's (2010) definition, leadership is defined as the ability of an individual to inspire a group to achieve an objective. Burke and Ng (2006) asserted that leadership, as a process of influence, is available to everyone and reaches everyone in an organization. Shuck and Herd (2012) noted that since leadership is a process available to everyone, it is not limited to just a few people, and everyone can

exercise leadership. Conversely, Marques (2013) noted that employers' perception of leadership skills has evolved. In the past, employers considered qualities such as charisma, eloquence, and extroversion to be important qualities for a leader; however, these traits are no longer considered sufficient for leadership. Marques indicated that a new set of leadership skills has emerged. The researcher explained that a study conducted in Europe identified the following set of subskills that comprise good leadership: (a) integrity, (b) caring for others, (c) ethics, and (d) accepting other people's opinions.

Moreover, other theorists have described leadership and the traits required for a leader. The great man theory, for example, assumes that a leader is born and not made. Supporting the great man theory, Muammar (2015) referred to the traits theory, which states that leaders are gifted individuals with personal qualities that set them apart from other people. In contrast, behavioral theory indicates that leaders are made, not born. Previous findings suggested that scholars have not reached an agreement on which theory best defines a leader and his or her traits (Allio, 2012; Shooter, Sibthorp, & Paisley, 2009); however, some employers have started focusing on traits that have gained significant importance in the leadership skill sets (Marques, 2013).

In the process of identifying traits that make a successful person, Goleman (1995) postulated that emotional intelligence and the components present in an individual with high emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, social skills, and empathy, are key traits of a successful leader. However, Beard et al. (2008) stated that communication skills, teamwork skills, critical thinking skills, self-motivation, and professional poise are all present in a good leader, and all of these skills

are directly related to emotional intelligence. Sadri (2012) noted that a study of 40 managers showed emotional intelligence to be related to a number of traits of a leader and people with high emotional intelligence are likely to be good leaders. Hence, it appears that a leader needs not only to have a high emotional intelligence but also to know that regardless of his or her position in an organization, he or she can be a leader.

### **Implications**

Although many scholars have conducted research to understand the importance of soft skills in an individual's job performance, it is inaccurate to assume that everything about soft skills has been stated and concluded. As Goleman (1995) stated, the rules of work are dramatically changing, and employees are measured not only by their knowledge or expertise but also by their emotional intelligence, which has been defined as well as soft skills or personal competencies. In the last five years, some professional organizations as well as several scholars, such as ATD (2014), Brungardt (2011), Eisner (2010), SHRM (2104), and Zhang (2012) pointed out that the soft skills gap in college graduates creates a competitive disadvantage for them in the work environment. Moreover, Eisner (2010) posited that the uncertainties of the modern age make it even more important to be able to identify the competencies new college graduates should have.

Once this study is concluded, I will share the findings with the industry advisory board at the local career center and the local state college. This advisory board may use the findings of this study to advise the curriculum coordinators at the local state college. The findings may also be of interest to the participants' companies, which may be

interested in producing contingency plans to close the soft skills gap among their employees. A professional development program for faculty is a practical solution to improve soft skills of graduates. The professional development program will benefit both faculty and students; faculty will be better prepared to assist students in getting ready to meet the needs of the ever-changing labor market. Additionally, more students will be positively impacted if this training becomes a part of college curricula because more faculty could have access to this professional development program.

Furthermore, the findings of this study could lead to some other practical recommendations. Although it will not be possible to generalize the results of this study, they could be tools to make human resources directors and higher education administrators aware that educational institutions should adopt the training and evaluation of soft skills as a priority to ensure compliance and exercise social control (Gibb, 2014). As stated earlier, other practical solutions are possible, such as the development of a soft skill curriculum and a soft skill manual for the local career center, available to all the clients at this center.

### **Summary**

Understanding how well college graduates are prepared to enter the labor market is a concern for human resources directors and managers in various countries, including the United States (Chell & Athayde, 2011; Dunne & Rawlins, 2000; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011; Nickson, Warhurst, Commander, Hurrell, & Cullen, 2012; Winterton, 2009). The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of 12 human resources directors in a medium-sized community located in the southeast of the United States regarding soft

skills that need to be further developed so college graduates may be better equipped to enter the workforce. It is anticipated that the social change might start happening when the findings of the study are shared with the industry leaders and the local state college administrators. There is a significant potential for the findings of this study to ultimately result in an action plan with the goal of colleges better preparing students with soft skills. It is expected that college graduates who are well equipped with soft skills will be improved communicators, work together more effectively, have more meaningful careers, and be more efficient and competent employees who can contribute to the growth of the organization and the economy. College graduates who go on to become community leaders would benefit from enhanced soft skills by being more effective communicators, more ethical, and more engaged with the public.

The conceptual framework for this study was the emotional intelligence theory developed by Goleman. Goleman (1998) revealed that top performers in any job are individuals with high levels of emotional intelligence, which permit them to have five important traits: self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, empathy, and adaptability. As Goleman stated, emotional intelligence is not about being nice and/or freely expressing feelings without measuring consequences. It is the ability to interact with others in a proper and effective way by managing feelings without suppressing them. Goleman also noted that people with high emotional intelligence have better communication skills, teamwork skills, critical thinking skills, and leadership skills because emotional intelligence equips an individual with self-awareness, motivation, empathy, self-regulation, and adaptability.

For this study, a thorough review of literature revealed what other scholars have found regarding soft skills and provided a solid background on and context of the problem. More than 80 peer-reviewed articles and studies were found using numerous Boolean search strategies, and 35 scholars were cited and referred to in order to produce the literature review. More than 80% of these scholars agreed that a lack of soft skills in recent college graduates is evident, and it is more tangible in graduates with engineering degrees. As Robles (2012) noted, the lack of soft skills in recent college graduates is gaining importance because companies do not want to invest in providing training sessions on soft skills since it is very difficult to quantify the return on investments (ROI) of the training.

Additionally, the literature review includes a detailed analysis of four of the most often cited soft skills from all the different scholars quoted in this study. These four soft skills are teamwork skills, critical thinking, communication skills, and leadership skills. To complement this literature review, there are suggested methodologies that employers have used to assess soft skills in employees, such as control theory, goal setting, and attribution theory.

The value of this study is to provide a perspective of what needs to be done to identify soft skills gaps and better equip students to become more successful employees and managers of companies. The details of this qualitative case study will be expanded in the methodology section.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of nine human resources directors in a medium-sized community located in the southeast of the United States regarding soft skills that need to be further developed so college graduates are better equipped to enter the workforce. This study was conducted by implementing a case study, which is a qualitative methodology. To conduct this study, nine human resources directors participated in a semi structured interview with open-ended questions. In Section 2, a detailed explanation of the different steps will cover the following: (a) reasoning to select case study as methodology, (b) process to select participants, (c) steps to collect data, (d) data analysis, and (e) strategies to increase the creditability and validity of the study.

### **Research Design and Approach**

To select the appropriate methodology to conduct this study a few important areas were considered, such as the purpose of the study, the nature of the problem, the questions that will be asked to address the problem, and the information learned from the review of the literature. As Creswell (2014) noted, the literature review and the questions that address the problem were crucial determinants of the choice between a quantitative or qualitative study. Sawicki and Sloan (2010) pointed out that graduates may be acquiring specific knowledge, but they are not developing other capabilities which employers consider essential for career success. This lack of soft skills has been shown to degrade organizational effectiveness (Gibb, 2014).

The literature review suggested that while many scholars focused on the importance of preparing students with theoretical and technical skills, significant evidence indicated that hard skills must be accompanied by soft skills, such as teamwork, communication skills, critical thinking, and conflict resolution, just to name a few (Aggarwal, 2008; McNamara, 2009). The literature also suggested that it is very challenging for recruiters to evaluate how well prepared a person is with soft skills during the hiring process (NACE, 2014). Additionally, because of the nature of soft skills, it is problematic to quantify them. Chamorro-Premuzic et al. (2010) asserted that soft skills must be assessed in a subjective way since no objective test is sufficient to evaluate them.

Due to the nature of the topic, the selected methodology that best fit the study was a qualitative approach. Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010) stated that the difference between a quantitative and a qualitative study is that the first one proves trends by summarizing results with numbers, while the second one explains or provides deeper understanding of a phenomenon. For this study, the objective was to learn about the students' preparation in soft skills based on the information provided by human resources directors. A qualitative study can respond to the *how* and *what* questions of the soft skills matter, providing deeper understanding (Lodico et al., 2010). Moreover, Merriam (2009) noted that through qualitative research, it is feasible to understand how people live and access their personal experiences.

From the four different approaches of qualitative methodology, the selected approach was a case study; however, the other three approaches, (a) ethnographic study, (b) grounded theory, and (c) phenomenological study, were considered as well. In an

ethnographic study, the researcher focuses on understanding the interaction of people in a small group or community (Lodico et al., 2010). In this study, the purpose was not to understand the interaction of a specific group. Moreover, this study's aim was not to understand a cultural perspective or cultural-behavior patterns; therefore, the ethnographic methodology was not applicable.

Additionally, grounded theory was not the ideal approach since the purpose of the study was not to develop a theory based on the findings. Merriam (2009) asserted that grounded theory is ideal when the researcher seeks to build a theory based on the results of the findings. Lastly, many scholars assume that a phenomenological methodology is applicable to any qualitative research since all qualitative studies are phenomenological (Merriam, 2009). This type of study is more appropriate to understanding personal experiences, behaviors, and beliefs about one particular event, as Lodico et al. (2010) noted. Since the purpose of this study was not to analyze personal experiences and emotions, this methodology did not seem to meet the needs of the study.

However, a phenomenological approach is very similar to a case study and could have been a suitable approach for this specific context. Ultimately, case study was the most suitable methodology since the intent was to acquire deep understanding, seek meaning, and comprehend the situation of how human resources professionals perceive college graduates' preparation in soft skills, which in this case was a phenomenon. Three other valid reasons to select a case study over a phenomenological approach are: (a) it is impossible to manipulate the behavior of participants, (b) no clear boundary exists between the phenomenon and the context (Yin, 2003), and (c) this study addressed a

bounded system. Merriam (2009) noted that one of the most important features of a case study is that the focus of the case can be framed and meet the guidelines of being bounded.

Furthermore, the type of case study was a descriptive case study, which can describe a specific phenomenon (Yin, 2003). This descriptive case study was a tool to provide a detailed description of the human resources directors' perceptions of college graduates' soft skill preparedness. For this particular study, I set the boundaries by selecting participants from only three industries in a specific geographic area and recruited participants from companies from these industries located in a radius no farther than 45 miles away from the state college that serves the area. Of the many industries and companies in the area, the three industries selected for this study were the ones that employed a larger number of people from the county.

### **Participants**

To be selected for this study, participants met two conditions: (a) they needed to be located in the local community within a radius of 45 miles of where the study was taking place, and (b) participants needed to be professionals in the human resources field and working as directors or managers of human resources. Purposeful sampling was the strategy to select participants for this study; it is one of the most used approaches in qualitative studies (Lodico et al., 2010). Creswell (2014) described purposeful sampling as an approach in which the researcher deliberately selects participants and sites. I created an extensive database of employers from the area, including descriptions of the different industries and human resources vice presidents, directors, or managers. From this list,

nine human resources professionals volunteered to participate in the study. The participants for this study met the following criteria:

- They were human resources directors and/or managers from medium or large companies (300 or more employees).
- The human resources directors had direct involvement in the selection and evaluation of employees.
- The human resources directors' companies hired graduates from the local state college.
- The human resources directors were from the industries of healthcare, technology, and local government.
- The human resources directors had at least 2 years of experience in their current company and the local communities.

These criteria ensured that participants had in-depth knowledge and could provide valuable information about the subject of study. According to Creswell (2014), when conducting a qualitative study, researchers should not have a large number of participants because it could create problems when collecting and analyzing the information. The more participants who provide information, the more superficial the results of the analysis may be. Merriam (2009) noted that it is very difficult to determine a right number of participants; however, reaching the point of data saturation or redundancy may indicate the right number.

For this research, I focused on a number of participants that could provide sufficient information on the topic based on their experience in the field that the point of

saturation or redundancy could be achieved (Patton, 2002). However, if saturation was not reached after 12 interviews, additional participants would have been recruited and interviewed until saturation was reached. Ultimately, data saturation occurred after nine participants completed the interviews. Participants who were willing to be a part of this study responded to a semi structured interview that lasted no more than 60 minutes, a length of time in which it is possible to achieve a saturation of information.

### **Selection**

As discussed, participants were preselected from a database that I created from my personal networking and from the industry phone book. However, to successfully make contact with participants a series of steps were followed. First, a preselected group of participants received an exploratory and introductory e-mail that presented the purpose of the study, role of participants, and benefits of the study (Appendix B). Second, participants indicated whether they were interested in participating in the study and responded to the verification questions (Appendix B). Third, once participants expressed their interest in being part of the study, they received an informed consent form in the mail. Fourth, participants returned the signed form via mail to me, via prepaid postage and self-addressed envelopes. However, some participants returned the consent form the day of the interview. Fifth, once the consent forms were received, I contacted each participant to schedule a date and time for the interview.

Participants who were not selected received an e-mail (Appendix C) to let them know that I reached the capacity for participants and that if a space became available they would be contacted for an interview. During the interview process, I reassured each

participant that the information would be kept confidential and that names of participants and organizations would neither be revealed nor included in the final report for the study. Also, I encouraged participants to provide honest answers and respond candidly. Any participant who did not feel comfortable with the interview was free to withdraw from the study.

### **Ethical Protection of Participants**

Several strategies helped to protect participants from harm. I completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application from Walden University to conduct this case study. The purpose of completing the IRB was to certify that the study was conducted ethically and with integrity according to the guidelines established by Walden. By following the guidelines from Walden, the identity protection of participants and their organizations is ensured to minimize the risks to them. Moreover, the informed consent form provided participants with the purpose of the study and an outline of the possible risks to which they were exposed. As discussed, I asked each participant to complete the informed consent form. Per Walden's instructions, all information collected, plus all informed consent forms have been properly stored and secured for 5 years. No one has access to any files but me. There were rigorous steps made to guarantee that participants were well informed about the study and did not feel any pressure to be a part of the study.

Once Walden's IRB granted authorization, I proceeded with contacting participants. As noted, participants received an exploratory and introductory e-mail (Appendix B) that presented the purpose of the study, role of participants, and benefits of the study. After participants expressed their interest in participating in the study by

completing the verification questions in the e-mail, they received an informed consent form in the mail. They returned this form to me and I signed it as well. In case the potential participant forgot the form, an extra form was available for review and signature prior to the interview. This formed consent form adhered to the guidelines provided by Walden. Walden approved the consent form with the number 04-12-16-0366755. It was reiterated in the Informed Consent form and during the interview that participants could withdraw from the study at any time. Moreover, participants were made aware that they could refuse to respond to any or all questions.

As the researcher, I did not share any information with people outside the study nor did not share information between participants. Data remain safely secured in a locked file in my home office. After 5 years, all hard copy data will be shredded. Also, any information on the computer has been saved in files with security passwords that only I know, and these files will be destroyed as well after 5 years.

### **Data Collection**

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of human resources directors in a medium-sized community located in the southeast of the United States regarding soft skills that need to be further developed so college graduates are better equipped to enter the workforce. Data collection proceeded through semi structured, face-to-face interviews. According to Lodico et al. (2010) and Merriam (2009), interviews are good tools to collect data when the observation of behaviors, emotions, and feelings are not feasible at the moment they happen. In this particular situation, it was not possible to observe soft skills performance of employees from different industries. It was an

unrealistic strategy for me, as a researcher, to be with and observe every employee. As discussed earlier, a semi structured interview was the best choice for this study because this structure provided predetermined questions and also had some flexibility to go beyond the initial protocol (Lodico et al., 2010).

### **Procedures**

The interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to express their opinions and perceptions. To better conduct these interviews, there was an interview protocol outline to facilitate the process and ensure that all interviews were conducted correctly. The interview protocol (Appendix E) helped to keep a specific order without being inflexible. To ensure that participants were providing substantial information, I asked participants to give examples or anecdotal descriptions to better validate their responses. The importance of asking for examples was to avoid vague responses or unclear statements. Interviews took place at locations of each participant's choice; each interview lasted 50 to 60 minutes. The arrangements for interviews were made in advance according to the availability of each participant.

To collect the information, each interview was audio recorded and notes were taken as well. However, the audio recordings took place with the prior authorization of each participant. Field notes are valuable tools, since they allow the researcher to record body language, expressions, and/or spoken statements from participants (Merriam, 2009). The goal was to take notes immediately after the interview to preserve the accuracy of the information provided during the interview. Merriam (2009) also suggested that post-interview notes allow the researcher to monitor the data collection and begin analyzing

the information. The information collected through note taking complemented the information from the audio recordings and became a second source of data collection for this study. To increase the chance of producing more accurate information, researchers should write the notes immediately after the interview has concluded (Merriam, 2009).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As noted by Merriam (2009), the primary role of the researcher in a qualitative study is to be the main instrument for data collection and analysis. However, by being the primary instrument, the researcher has the onus to monitor for bias and avoid it at every stage of the study (Merriam, 2009). As a strategy to be aware of my own bias, I requested that a colleague ask me the interview questions and record my responses so I was aware of my specific preconceptions and opinions. Through this work to increase self-awareness, I became mindful of these biases when interviewing and analyzing the data. My relationship with the study sites and participants was minimal. I had no influence on the human resources personnel who participated in this study, nor did I work at any of the companies the participants represented. I was aware of the companies as major employers because I created my own personal list from different networking meetings and from the industry directory available at the chambers of commerce in the local area.

Human resources directors and managers did not perceive me having any work-related conflict of interest performing the study because I was no longer affiliated with any college. Moreover, my no longer being part of the local state college eliminated any potential conflict of interest between participants and me. As a higher education professional with more than 8 years' experience in directing career centers and forming

strong partnerships with external stakeholders, I was aware that my own perceptions and opinions of the subject of study could constitute an obstacle to my producing an unbiased analysis. However, since I was no longer working with any college or university, I did not have any reason to have any particular preference or bias when presenting the results of the study.

Additionally, I made sure to implement different strategies to reduce bias and increase credibility. These strategies were explained in the data analysis section. Merriam (2009) noted that in qualitative methodologies, it is difficult to prove the congruency of the findings with reality: In qualitative studies the reality cannot be described as a single event. The reality is always in evolution and has multiple dimensions. (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, my ethics as a researcher were a condition, along with other strategies, to minimize any negative effects on the validity and credibility of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of qualitative data is an inductive process that covers particular information collected, transcribed and/or recorded, to create general codes or themes as Creswell (2014) stated. Merriam (2009) indicated that qualitative studies are emergent since the researcher does not know what direction the study will take, and generally the researcher has no knowledge about the information that will be collected. For this study, I implemented Creswell's (2014) and Merriam's (2009) recommended steps to analyze the data and increase validity and credibility.

## **Procedures**

First, after each interview was completed, I began transcribing the information collected. This process started the day after the interview if possible or within the three days after the interview at a maximum. Every recorded and transcribed interview was properly labeled so it was easier to file on the computer. Following Creswell's (2014) recommendations, I kept duplicates of the transcribed interviews. Once I reviewed the transcribed information for each interview, I wrote up a summary from each interview.

Second, I shared the summary with participants via e-mail, so he or she could have the opportunity to verify that the information was accurate, modify initial responses, or add any new information. By asking participants to read and review the summary of the transcribed information, I used member checking strategy, which Creswell (2014) recommended to verify the accuracy of the information. Then, I sent another e-mail to all participants to offer a second phone interview to clarify any parts of the first interview. Six participants declined a second interview based on the accuracy of the summary; however, three participants wished to make clarifications and/or additions. Therefore, phone call interviews were scheduled with them according to their availability.

As expected, the second interview lasted between 5 to 10 minutes. Immediately after the second interview, I made any corrections and reread the corrected summary and compared the summaries. Merriam (2009) noted that data analysis is a process that requires going back and forth between the pieces of collected information; it is not a static process and entails inductive and deductive reasoning.

Third, before analyzing the data, it was necessary to code the data. Coding the information was a process of segmenting and categorizing all the different texts by groups or topics. The coding process can be demanding and time consuming if it is conducted without the assistance of software. For this research, I used a combination of manual coding and computer-assisted coding software, MAXQDA12. This software helped me speed up the process; however, as a researcher, I had to analyze all the different codes and groups and reduce them to between 25 and 30 codes.

Merriam (2009) pointed out that the process of coding is like a conversation between the researcher and the data and consists of asking questions, making comments, and regrouping. The purpose of creating codes is to produce themes. Creswell (2014) affirmed that codes need to be reduced to five to seven themes because from themes information emerges to answer the questions guiding the study. It is better to provide detailed and richer information on a few themes than general information on more themes.

Fourth, as an important step of the data analysis, Creswell (2014) recommended layering or interrelating themes to add more rigor and insight to the study. For this study, I had the opportunity to layer themes and organize them from basic to more refined themes. The goal was to produce themes that represent the findings in a structured way and demonstrate in-depth understanding of the topic of the study.

### **Credibility and Accuracy**

As a researcher, my role was to produce valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner (Merriam 2009). There were three different strategies to enhance the

validity and credibility of the qualitative research, including member checking, external auditing and triangulation (Creswell, 2014). Another important recommendation from Creswell is that the researcher practices self-reflection regarding how the research is conducted as well as how any possible external and personal influences impact the study.

The first strategy to improve validity and credibility of the study was to use member checking or respondent validation. As discussed earlier, after I completed transcribing the recorded information from each interview, I asked each participant to review the summary of the transcribed information of his or her interview to verify that the information accurately reflected what they stated at the interview. As I noted earlier, I performed this member checking via phone call. Also, I requested feedback from some of the participants on the findings. Merriam (2009) recommended that respondent validation is a good strategy to be implemented throughout the course of the study and not only once.

The second strategy was external auditing. During this process, I asked one of my previous coworkers, who has extensive experience conducting research, to serve as external auditor for this study. The role of the external auditor was to read the paper at the conclusion of the study and point out any statement or expression that appeared to be biased or subjective. I asked the external auditor to sign a confidentiality agreement (Appendix F) to guarantee that any information from the study would remain private. The external auditor provided the service at the conclusion of the study.

The third strategy was triangulation. Triangulation is a process to corroborate the evidence from different participants, sources of data, and themes (Creswell, 2014). For

this study, I used triangulation by comparing responses from each of the participants. Saturation happens only when the same message is repeated numerous times and no new information is emerging (Merriam, 2009). I compared data from different participants to identify that saturation had been achieved. Finally, I looked for data that supported alternative explanations. Merriam (2009) noted that a researcher must always be looking for information that goes beyond the expectations and emerging findings. My goal was to openly disclose the findings that supported other alternatives regarding the findings on soft skills and articulate them properly.

Finally, as a researcher, I needed to be aware of my own possible biases and personal assumptions; therefore, I consistently reflected on my expectations regarding the study and the findings, as Merriam (2009) suggested. Moreover, as discussed earlier, I requested the external auditor ask me the interview questions and record my responses so I was aware of my own biases through my responses. In addition, I asked this person to review the findings and look for biases or any information that was not represented accurately.

### **Research Findings**

This study focused on the perceptions of the nine human resources directors and managers regarding soft skills that need to be further developed so college graduates are better equipped to enter the workforce. Through a semi structured interview of 17 questions, these participants provided ample information to address the four questions that guided the study.

1. How do human resources directors and managers define soft skills?

2. What are the most important soft skills that make a graduate a successful employee?
3. What are the soft skills that graduates are missing in today's business world?
4. What strategies are recommended to improve the teaching of soft skills?

All participants had extensive experience as human resources directors or managers in the local area for a medium or a large company or agency that had between 150 and 2000 employees. The interviewee with the least amount of experience in the human resources field had 4 years, and the person with the most experience had 31 years. The rest of participants had between 4 and 25 years of experience in the human resources field. All the participants were involved in the personnel selection in their companies, performed or supervised performance reviews, and planned professional developed programs for employees. Participants seemed to be engaged in their interviews, expressed interest in the study, and felt that the topic of the study needed special attention. They seemed to be pleased be part of the study. Also, they were optimistic about their experience in the human resources field and that their backgrounds were relevant to the study.

The process of initially contacting participants was lengthy and difficult due to their limited availability and concerns with the confidentiality of the information. I initially sent 188 e-mails to invite participants. From that group, only 20 people expressed interest, and only 13 volunteered to be part of the study. Of those 13 people, nine people participated in the study since the saturation of the information was achieved after nine interviews. To minimize participants' concerns regarding being part of the

study, I provided them with information about the goal of the study and an explanation of interview process. Once participants agreed to participate in the study, they received and signed the consent form with the approval number 01-12-16-0366755 from Walden.

To code and analyze the information, I implemented some of the Saldaña's strategies regarding coding qualitative data as well as the use of MAXQDA 12 software. Saldaña (2013) stated that the process of coding and analyzing qualitative information requires meticulous attention to detail and deep reflection on the emerging patterns. The coding process did not happen effortlessly. Immediately, after each interview was transcribed, revised, and read at least five times, I began doing manual precoding. Saldaña recommended that the coding process should start as soon as the data collection begins and should not wait until all the fieldwork has been completed. The manual precoding improved my understanding of the collected information and helped me better organize the drafts of the interviews. I did not only rely on the manual coding; I also used MAXQDA 12 as a tool to facilitate the coding process. The software by itself did not code the information, but it helped to organize and sort the information in a more effective way by displaying the information in tables, charts, and diagrams.

In summary, the coding was a detailed process. The first step was to transcribe. The second step was to share a summary of the transcribed interview with each participant in the study and add changes suggested by participants. The third step was to implement manual precoding. The fourth step was to code the data by using MAXQDA 12. After numerous cycles of reading, coding, and recoding the transcribed information, six themes emerged: (a) soft skills definition, (b) evaluation of soft skills, (c)

communication skills, (f) individual behavior, (c) lack of soft skills, and (g) training of soft skills. All of the emergent themes aligned with the four questions that needed to be answered.

### **Emergent Themes from the Data Analysis**

The focus of sorting the data by themes was to provide significant information on answering the guiding questions of the study. All the themes that emerged from the data analysis are described below.

#### **Soft Skills Definition**

All participants provided very similar definitions of soft skills; however, every one added a special distinction to his or her definition, depending on the industry in which he or she worked. Also, all participants provided similar examples of soft skills. For the human resources directors in the technology industry, soft skills are those skills that allow employees to interact with other people, such as communication and teamwork. P08 defined soft skills as the things that allow a person to do his or her job and how a person does his or her work. She added that a person's communication capacities and abilities to work in teams are soft skills. Furthermore, P08 noted that at her organization, "soft skills are based on the organization's values, which include integrity and teamwork."

Similarly, P02 defined soft skills as the ability to have effective communication and being able to work in teams. Soft skills are "everything but doing the hands-on work" (P02). Other participants provided more thorough information to define soft skills. For example, P05 stated, "soft skills are about human relations, how you interact with people,

how you get along with others, and how you present yourself.” P06 provided a similar response on soft skills and defined it as “the ability to work with people, have respectful and professional conversations, and be able to solve conflicts.” Other participants from the health industry, such as P04 and P07, agreed that bedside manner, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, and empathy are the most important soft skills for employees in that industry. Building upon her earlier response, P07 added that other “soft skills in the health industry, such as dedication, commitment, and professional posture, are matters that cannot be taught, and these skills are must-haves in the industry.”

For participants in government and general business, soft skills seemed to be specially related to communication skills and customer service skills. Participant P01 noted that the definition of soft skills is related to an individual’s behavior, for example, how a person behaves or acts in the workplace and in their personal life. P01 asserted that people demonstrate good soft skills in the work environment when treating superiors and coworkers with respect.

Participant P05 provided a definition similar to P01’s. P05 defined soft skills as how one interacts with other people, how one gets along with others, and how one presents oneself. Important soft skills in her organization are writing skills, following directions, and collaboration (P05). All participants provided a definition of soft skills by giving some examples of soft skills. However, all of the participants included communication skills as a requirement on their lists of soft skills. Also, participants indicated that communication skills are the core of other skills, such as conflict resolution and leadership.

## **Evaluation of Soft Skills**

The evaluation of soft skills was one of the topics that participants discussed during the interviews. Many of the companies did not have any formal process in place to assess an employee's soft skill during the interview process or once the person was hired by the company. Participant P01 stated that in her organization it was very difficult for a manager to evaluate soft skills because the organization did not have a program in place. She explained that during the interview process, they just want to find out if the individual has the qualifications to perform his or her duties. P01 said that they focus their efforts in finding the person with the right hard skills or technical knowledge.

Participant P09 provided a similar but more elaborate response. He said that his organization had no system in place to evaluate soft skills. During the interview process at his organization, P09 stated an assessment of soft skill is limited to the perceptions of the panelists who are conducting the interview and to the human resources director, who is the last person who interviews the three finalists for a position. The focus of the assessment during the interview is based on the hard skills, not on the soft skills. Moreover, P09 asserted that after the person has been hired is when they realize that the individual has communication skills problems, behavioral problems, time management problems or other issues. These problems are visible after receiving formal complaints from coworkers, supervisor(s), and external clients.

Participant P06 reflected that although there is no system in her organization to evaluate soft skills, managers just evaluate a job applicant's soft skills based on the statements in the job application. These statements, such as reasons for leaving a previous

organization, the job history, and job promotions could be perceived as warnings.

Participants P06 and P04 made similar statements that the performance review is a way to evaluate communication skills, but their organizations really do not do anything to evaluate soft skills.

Another participant, P03, mentioned that her company has no formal assessment to evaluate soft skills during an interview; however, during the interview, it is very easy to see if the person has the communication skills by noticing whether the person maintains eye contact, is fully listening to the questions, does not get easily distracted and constructs grammatically correct sentences. Moreover, P03 stated that a 90-day period is used to monitor and evaluate soft skill, mainly communication skills and customer service. P03 emphasized that “if during the 90-day period a person does not prove these skills, the person will not be retained.” Participant P07 made a similar statement and noted that during the first 90 days, they assess verbal and non-verbal communication skills, bedside manners and empathy.

P07 added that the beauty of the evaluation system is that after 90 days of employment, the employee has to do a self-evaluation, the immediate supervisor reviews the results, and together they create an improvement plan. Furthermore, she noted that in the health industry, technical skills are must for any employee, but the soft skills cannot be taken for granted; therefore, her organization exerts significant effort during the 90-day and six-month evaluations to help their employees meet expectations on soft skills. With more than 20 years in the human resources field, P07 has seen that for some people

soft skills are inherent, and for other individuals soft skills do not form part of their personal assets.

Participant P08 was the only one among all the interviewees who clearly stated that their organization employed a wide range of assessments to evaluate soft skills, both during the interview process and during a person's employment with the company. P08 also added that soft skills assessment does not occur only during the interviews or annual performance appraisals. Any employee can contact the human resources department and request a soft skills assessment at any time. These assessments can be implemented for a team or for an individual. P08 indicated that they implement 360-degree assessments, which give the employee the opportunity to evaluate how she or he sees himself or herself as well as how supervisors and coworkers see the employee.

Further, P05 claimed that they do performance reviews, but nothing in these evaluations assesses soft skills. This appraisal is about measuring how the performance of the individual is contributing to achieve the corporate objectives (P05). P02 asserted that it is a company policy to include in the performance review a component of soft skills, but it is just a formality. They just check boxes in the performance appraisals. This participant also indicated that internships are the best way to evaluate if a person is equipped with the necessary soft skills and hard skills for a particular job: "The beauty of internships is try it before you buy it" (P02).

P09 shared that their organization does not have a program to evaluate if a person has the right soft skills during the selection process or once a person is hired. Unfortunately, the only way they become aware that an individual does not have the soft

skills is when they start observing from that person some disciplinary issues or problems with coworkers. Furthermore, P09 said a disadvantage of the lack of evaluation of soft skills has been also reflected when they have promoted people into the wrong jobs. Many times, they have promoted people who have outstanding technical skills and numerous years of experience with the organization; however, after a few months, they want to go back to the previous job because they do not feel they have the proper skills to meet the job requirements, such as leadership, conflict management, and communication skills.

### **Communication Skills**

Communication was the skill that was present in all responses from all participants. Based on the participants' responses and statements, communication is the key skill among all of the soft skills and even more important than teamwork, time management, leadership, and organizational skills. Participant P08 emphasized that a person can be an exceptional scientist, but if that individual is not able to communicate effectively with others and put his or her findings in plain and simple language, the success of that individual will be very limited. Moreover, it will be very difficult for that individual to be a good team member due to the lack of communication skills.

Participant P02 expressed that communication skill is understanding an audience and knowing how to communicate a message and getting the message across. It is not only to have the knowledge of a particular topic but also to present and communicate it every time with different audiences. Similarly, P08 noted that to be a good communicator, an individual needs to be able to understand multiple stakeholders and multiple generations. Multiple generations and people from different backgrounds have

different communication styles; therefore, communication skills acquired more significance in the work environment. Additionally, P02 shared that good communication is to be able to clearly express ideas in an easy way, but also to be able to listen. Communication needs to be engaging and dynamic.

Participant P05 articulated that communication skills are the ability to convey meaning directly and succinctly to different audiences. She stated that in her organization, they have to communicate with technical people and engineers who in general “have a very black and white way of thinking.” You need to be able to explain to them what to do in a way that they can get it quickly and without misunderstandings” (P05). For professionals in her organization, communication is not only limited to oral communication but includes written communication. Also, P05 noted that in written communication, a professional needs to be able to clearly articulate the message that is coherent, with good grammar, and spelled correctly.

P01 asserted that communication is the most important skill from a supervisor to a subordinate and vice versa. Communication is not limited to conveying a message. It is the ability to know how to ask for information, when to ask, how to be a good listener, and when to avoid giving quick opinions. Similarly, P03 stated that since people are trying to multitask all the time, they are not being effective communicators because they are not being effective listeners. Moreover, P03 observed that people are missing important information because they are not good listeners, and consequently, they are not disseminating the right information. She also commented that in her industry, the success of the business depends on providing outstanding customer service; however, in her

company, customer service is directly affected by the communication among all employees. If an individual does not have superior communication skills, that person will not be able to provide good customer service and will not be a good team player.

Regarding communication skills, P04 emphasized that in the health industry, communication is a must. She observed that good communication skills get lost in the everyday running of the organization and continued, “our staff sometimes have a lot of struggles with coworkers and supervisors due to their lack of communication skills” (P04). As a human resources director for her company, P04 has been working with supervisors to assist them in communicating changes to subordinates. She stated that communication skills are a must to have good customer service and be an effective team member.

Similarly, P06 expressed that supervisors have the onus to create a healthy communication environment within their team and outside the team. She also said in her organization, they are selecting new managers based on their ability to communicate with other employees, ability to communicate difficult situations, and address performance issues. P07 asserted that in the health industry, communication happens among coworkers, supervisors and subordinates, and primarily with patients. Communication skills with patients are not limited to verbal communication skills but also include nonverbal communication skills.

### **People Skills and Individual Behaviors**

Along with communication skills, all interviewees stressed the importance of people skills/individual behaviors as being part of the set of soft skills. To illustrate, P06

noted that an individual's behavior is a soft skill since it represents their ability to understand others, value differences from others, and still to be able to work with others to achieve a common goal. A negative side of an individual's behavior is manipulation: "If we manipulate people, we are not creating a healthy environment" (P06).

Additionally, P06 asserted that people who do not express themselves when a situation is bothering them start presenting aggressive behaviors. From the standpoint of soft skills, an individual needs to have the ability to set aside emotions and not become a victim or take something personally: "I do not like them. They do not like me" (P06). Conversely, P06 observed that people may start presenting negative behaviors in the work environment after becoming disengaged because they do not receive enough support from managers. This negative behavior affects their relationships with coworkers and superiors. She asserted that managers have the obligation to reinforce within subordinates how to behave and how to do things. Moreover, P06 expressed that it is important to demonstrate what an acceptable behavior is and what it is not.

**Relations with others.** People skills and an individual's behavior are important to getting along with others: "It is leveraging diversity and understanding that each person has different values" (P08). P07 stated that she tends to believe that people who are higher in the hierarchy have a tendency to not have people skills because they want to step on others to advance their careers: "They use their emotional intelligence to try to manipulate the situation for their own benefit" (P07). She also stated that in the last 10 years, she has observed a significant change in how people behave and interact with others. Social media and reality shows are promoting wrong behaviors and also making

people believe that they deserve everything. Also, P07 added that when an individual starts making excuses to do something inappropriate, that is the first symptom that the person is getting desensitized and also when that individual is not able to differentiate between a right and a wrong behavior.

The use of social media and instant messaging in a company may create negative behaviors that erode healthy relationships in the work environment. P01 explained that it is very disrespectful to have coworkers always with their heads down facing their phones sending messages: “Likewise, it is a very negative behavior to use social media to talk about supervisors and coworkers. Wherever we are, we need to treat everyone with respect” (P01). P05 stated she has seen people in her organization who have the perception that the needs of others are not important, and when they do not want to respond to a coworker’s request, they ignore the individual. P05 described that “the type of job that we do here is about satisfying our customers; therefore, any of our employees must be able to interact with internal and external clients, and always acknowledge the customer.” P03 responded, “no request is a small request. All requests are important and we have to behave accordingly.”

**Managing conflict.** Regarding people skills and the individual’s behavior, P04 asserted that she recommends employees in her organization leave problems at home and do not let them surface when interacting with the patients: “No matter how bad your personal situation is, you need to reset yourself before going to the next patient” (P04). Finally, P06 added that people skills and communication are two important assets when conflict arises in the work environment. P06 opined that people must set aside personal

emotions and work through the process of solving a conflict without pointing out any particular person.

**People skills learned from parents.** Based on the coding during the analysis phase, one subtheme emerged from the data: that people skills and behaviors are initially learned from parents. As P06 asserted, people learn many soft skills at home, particularly those skills that are related to how to interact with others: “Unfortunately, we have many dysfunctional families and that our children are not taught how to treat others with respect and care” (P06). Likewise, P03 stated if a person was the type of child who did not care about what parents or teachers thought, that individual likely will grow up without caring so much about others, and that lack of concern will be reflected in their interactions with others.

Furthermore, interviewee P07 expressed that people are a sum of their life experiences, and those experiences are what they present when relating to others. P01 expressed no doubt that children learn the first lessons of soft skills from parents when “they are reinforcing positive behaviors in children, such as saying please, thank you, and treating other people with respect.”

### **Lack of Soft Skills in College Graduates**

P01 described a difference in soft skills between a person who just graduated from college with no work experience and a person who has been already working for a few years. Also, she noted that college students who do not have experience in the work environment do not understand punctuality and communication with supervisors and coworkers. They do not have the big picture of a business and do not comprehend the

importance of working as a team member. They do not know how to work to carry out the mission of an organization and do not understand that everything they do is connected to other departments (P01).

Comparably, P08 said that many college graduates with no experience in the work environment have some issues with timeliness because they believe that due to the company's flexibility, they can manage their schedule at their convenience. Also, P08 mentioned some formalities that the new employee needs to keep in mind when speaking or writing on behalf of the company. She thinks there is a little bit of a challenge in understanding that they do not represent themselves, but the organization.

Regarding the lack of soft skills in employees, P04 noted a significant gap in communication skills seems to be apparent in the health industry, not only from college graduates with no work experience but also from people with work experience. P04 described, "In my many years of experience in the human resources field, I have also observed that younger generations struggle with soft skills, primarily time management and communication skills." P05 also stated, the lack of time management is one of the soft skills that she has observed from college graduates with no work experience. P05 also stated that in her organization they are not very strict with their employees about being on time in the morning and give them some freedom. They expect all employees to be responsive and on time when an assignment has to be done. However, she has observed that people with no work experience tend to believe that project deadlines are just a formality and not a must. "In our company, the ability to meet the deadlines is what it makes us very successful" (P05). Her organization has no tolerance for people who do

not understand the importance of time management in regards of meeting those deadlines.

P03 and P07 expressed that the new generation is missing the loyalty piece in working for the betterment of the company and to build the company. Loyalty is not something that they bring with them: “They put themselves first; therefore, loyalty and strong work ethics are lacking qualities” (P07).

P06 asserted that the soft skills people are missing in today’s business world include the ability to handle difficult situations: “It seems that some individuals are not able to express that they feel manipulated and threatened.” According to P06, when a conflict arises is when their organization identifies that an employee is lacking soft skills. Grievances are an indicator of a problem in a particular area. Many grievances from a particular department are symptoms of an unhealthy situation, a communication issue, or a lack of leadership. Good communication skills are one of the many abilities of good leaders.

**Effects of the lack of soft skills.** P09 stated, “the lack of soft skills is not just something that can have a quick fix,” and P08 shared, “the lack of soft skills can tremendously affect individual performance as well as the company’s productivity.” Moreover, participants described that the opportunities for advancement could be very narrow if the individual does not have the right soft skills. “We need to have 50% of soft skills and 50% of technical skills” (P08). Participants expressed that the lack of soft skills could bring negative results for the employee or the company. P05 stated, “it can put the company in a bad light particularly for those companies that are customer service

oriented.” In general, all nine participants expressed that the lack of soft skills is something that affects an individual’s professional advancement as well as an organization’s productivity. P03 expressed no doubt that the lack of soft skills could have adverse effects on the company’s decision to retain an individual.

**Importance of soft skills.** All of the participants had a varying perspectives on the importance of soft skills. These different views seemed directly related to how much the lack of soft skills could affect a company’s productivity. P03 stated that the importance of soft skills in her industry, rated on a scale from 1 to 10, was an 11: “We would not be able to stay in business if our employees do not display good soft skills, particularly communication skills and customer service skills.” P06 suggested that the importance of soft skills related to the ability to work with what it is available in the organization and with everyone there. “Soft skills is the golden rule for any leader in any organization” (P06).

Furthermore, P04 indicated that good soft skills can help build a very positive image of the company with both internal personnel and external clients. She suggested that the culture of an organization dictates how soft skills will be seen in order of importance. P04 also stated that her organization currently has a CEO who is very people oriented and values people’s contributions, so soft skills receive a high ranking of importance within the company. In the past, they had a CEO who did not consider soft skills as an important asset of an employee and for the success of the company. Moreover P04 said that regardless of an individual’s perception of their importance, soft skills are needed for the success of any company.

P08 noted that any person that works in her company needs to be ready to impact the organization with the right balance of soft skills and technical skills. Technical skills alone do not help build successful companies and make productive employees. Moreover, P06 explained that soft skills acquire more relevance when managers have to deal with employees who have mental challenges.

### **Training of Soft Skills**

Two of the interview questions asked about the training of soft skills. One question was about what companies do to improve the soft skills of employees, and the second question was about what strategies higher educational institutions need to implement to teach soft skills. Participant P01 responded to the first question that her organization had no budget assigned to provide training on soft skills, and that all budgeted funds go to the training of hard skills. However, she mentioned that in the last two years, they have implemented two training initiatives. The first initiative was to provide customer service skills to all employees. The second initiative was for people in leadership positions; they implemented a personality training to help managers understand people's behavior and learn to have more positive interactions within the organization. That training had a positive effect for two weeks. P01 stated that in the long run, people need constant reminders of what has been learned to keep the positive effect of the training. For colleges, P01 recommended that higher educational institutions should create business environments in which students can play different roles and make decisions. The learning experience should not be limited just to books and team projects.

Students need to learn more skills early in their careers because the older they are, the harder it is to acquire those skills.

P06 suggested that colleges need to take a different approach to teaching soft skills. More than working on team projects, it would be beneficial to study team scenarios, evaluate different solutions to different problems, teach how to have difficult conversations, and teach how to redirect negative emotions into words instead of into negative reactions. P06 said that she is wondering how much administrators in higher education are assessing the soft skills of faculty. Conversely, she added that the training of soft skills is not on the company's list of priorities. Her organization does not allocate a lot of money to provide soft skills training. She also expressed that only starting last year, they started working on some projects to train managers on how to be better leaders and managers.

P02 expressed that although his organization has a very limited budget, they implement a few training sessions during the year for team building and managers' retreats. Also, he added that they have no way to measure the effectiveness of those training programs since they are not linked to any type assessment or improvement plan. Regarding training of soft skills at college level, P02 still expressed the perception that there is a long way to go, particularly at the local colleges. Colleges seem to be one-way communication: "There is not too much interaction—pass the test and get out" (P02).

P03 offered an interesting perspective on what colleges are doing to teach soft skills. She asserted that "virtual training is killing the learning of soft skills." She believes that people are not learning how to interact face-to-face due to online education.

However, P03 also stated that the problem also extends to the regular campus setting, because that educational experience focuses on bringing a book and passing a test: “Colleges need to have more students teaching students and more face-to-face interaction that challenges the individual to be out of the comfort zone” (P03).

P05 expressed that the teaching of soft skills needs to happen at home, at high school, and at college, as well. Soft skills is not something that can be taught in one semester. Colleges are putting too much effort on teaching technical skills “to look good on a resume” (P05). She also said that although colleges are incorporating the teaching of soft skills into the learning environment, perhaps colleges need to be more specific and precisely state them in the program description. Furthermore, P05 added that a person needs to develop other skills that are not part of their everyday duties, but they will make them more competitive in the workplace.

Similarly, P08 noted that colleges are providing good programs to equip students with technical skills; however, there appears to be a lack of awareness of the importance of soft skills. All the humanity classes equip students with knowledge that helps them with the development of soft skills and how to understand and relate to others. P08 also suggested that maybe colleges should insert in the last year of a degree classes that are more common knowledge and help students develop better soft skills. She stated that at her organization, they acknowledge the value of soft skills; therefore, they allocate substantial financial resources to train people based on their needs.

Furthermore, P09 noted that his organization allocates a substantial amount of money for training, particularly for technical skills. He expressed that his organization

does not provide any training in-house and nothing related to soft skills. The management team believes in the value of having a college degree; therefore, the organization gives tuition reimbursement to the employees as a way to support their professional development. P09 added they expect that a college degree is going to provide their employees with the 360° education, but so far that has not been the case. Based on their experience, once people finish their college degree, they still have many gaps in terms of their skills, especially soft skills.

### **Answers to the Guiding Questions**

The protocol for the interviews allowed the participants to provide data, which after being transcribed and coded, six themes emerged. Based on these six themes, information was available to address the four guiding questions for this research. What follows below is a summary of the findings pertaining to each of the four guiding questions. Also, the data relating to the fourth guiding question were used to recommend a faculty training program to aid the development of soft skills in college students.

The first question was: How do human resources directors and managers define soft skills? When human resources directors were asked to define soft skills, they had a range of responses. They provided their answers by listing the soft skills that were considered very relevant for the industry in which they worked. These included communication skills, the ability to interact with others, the ability to work in teams, integrity, respectful behavior, loyalty, customer service skills, good writing skills, the ability to follow directions, good collaboration skills, and the ability to resolve conflict.

Participants from the healthcare industry added a good bedside manner, nonverbal communication skills, and empathy to the list.

The second question was: What are the most important soft skills that make a graduate a successful employee? All participants were consistent in stating that communication skills, both verbal and written, are critical for employees. Five participants added that good communication skills are important because a message needs to be delivered clearly and concisely to eliminate misunderstandings. Furthermore, the responses indicated that good communication skills contribute to other soft skills, such as having good relationships in the work environment, working well in teams, being able to resolve conflicts. These skills were identified as integral to good leadership skills, and as part of good leadership skills.

The third question was: What are the soft skills that graduates are missing in today's business world? All participants asserted that good communication is the skill that college graduates are lacking the most.

The fourth question was: What are the strategies to improve the teaching of soft skills? Participants first mentioned three life phases in which strategies could be applied: precollege, college, and professional career. Participants indicated that soft skills are initially learned at home from parents. Soft skills are also then learned in K-12 from teachers and instructors. To address the soft skills deficit, participants believed that colleges and higher education administrators need to emphasize the teaching of soft skills by making faculty more aware of the importance of teaching soft skills, as well as by making students more cognizant of the significance of developing soft skills before

entering the workforce. Also, one participant stressed that it is important for college administrators to develop the soft skills of faculty. Eight participants stated that their organizations have little budget to allocate for the training of soft skills. Moreover, they are always expecting to hire college graduates who already have soft skills.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify the perceptions of a group of human resources directors and managers regarding soft skills that need to be further developed so college graduates are better equipped to enter the workforce. A total of nine participants were selected through purposeful sampling. It was initially established to interview 12 participants or to gather data until saturation was reached. Saturation occurred after nine interviews. The data collection proceeded through a semi structured interview of 17 questions. Once the data were transcribed and coded, six themes emerged: (a) soft skills definition, (b) evaluation of soft skills, (e) communication skills, (f) individual's behavior, (c) lack of soft skills, and (g) training of soft skills.

Based on the data collected, it seems that the most important soft skill for any individual entering the workforce is communication, and that appears to be the skill that college graduates entering the workforce are lacking the most. Furthermore, findings implied that good communication skills are the core for having good relationships in the work environment and for handling conflict resolution. In addition, participants indicated that soft skills are initially learned at home from parents and then at school and also at college from teachers and instructors. Nevertheless, participants perceived that colleges and higher education institutions need to emphasize the teaching of soft skills by making

faculty more aware of the importance of the teaching soft skills, as well as by making students more cognizant of the significance of developing soft skills before entering the workforce.

Since the data revealed that colleges can do a better job preparing students with the proper soft skills to meet the demands of the job market, two different projects may be considered to address the problem of the study. One is to create a curriculum called Soft Skills for Successful Employees. The focus of this type of curriculum would be to include this type of content during the second year of college. It would include the application of different assessments that would help students to identify their lack of soft skills and training sessions in real life scenarios to equip them with the missing soft skills.

The second option is to develop a training program for faculty. This program would equip them with the right tools and skills to incorporate strategies in their courses to identify the lack of soft skills in students, help students develop soft skills and/or improve their existing ones. This training session would also assist college faculty in being better role models of soft skills. Since all participants appeared to agree that colleges can play a more prominent role in the students' development of soft skills, it is anticipated that the second option, training of faculty, could have a more positive and a longer-lasting impact as a solution to facilitate the learning of soft skills. The teaching of soft skills could take place in any course of study and need not be limited to a particular class.

## Section 3: The Project

### **Introduction**

Based upon the findings of this case study, a professional development training program for faculty was determined to be the most beneficial project for this doctoral study. This recommended approach appears to be the most effective and practical manner to provide a new opportunity for faculty to learn more about soft skills training strategies in the classroom environment. This section includes a description of the project, goals, rationale, and a review of the literature. Additionally, it encompasses a list of resources, a timetable for implementing the project, potential barriers for the project, potential solutions to these barriers, and a project evaluation. This section concludes with a description of the possible social changes that will come as a result of implementing this project.

### **Description and Goals**

A professional development program for faculty is appropriate for this doctoral project because it will provide a practical solution to help faculty better prepare college students to meet the needs of the job market regarding soft skills. All participants of the study agreed and expressed that people learn soft skills from parents and instructors. However, college's leaders have significant responsibility in creating better programs to equip students with the necessary soft skills to meet the needs of the job market. While many different soft skills appeared in responses, the participants all mentioned communication skills as the most important soft skill and the core foundation for other soft skills. As the research participants affirmed, college's leaders need to be more

cognizant of their role of providing a holistic program that emphasizes producing professional graduates with hard and soft skills.

Every learning experience, inside or outside the classroom environment, must be an opportunity for a student to improve his or her soft skills, acquire new ones, and/or fill existing skill gaps. The three goals of developing a training program for faculty were (a) make faculty aware of their role in the development of students' soft skills, (b) increase faculty awareness of the importance of soft skills for graduates' employability, and (c) identify and apply teaching strategies to integrate soft skills learning into any academic curriculum regardless of the subject.

### **Rationale**

A faculty training program is the best option for this project since it appears to be the most effective and feasible means to facilitate the learning of soft skills for students while they are still in college and help them be ready to meet the demands of the job market. A training program for faculty will impact the most students since faculty from different disciplines will be equipped with the tools and the knowledge to integrate the teaching of soft skills into any curriculum. Therefore, the effect will be that more students will have the opportunity to expand and practice their soft skills in any class, as well as to integrate a holistic learning experience in the classroom environment so that learning is not limited to the acquisition of hard skills.

Faculty need to produce and cocreate learning experiences that are more aligned with the needs of the students. As Morris (2009) expressed, lectures are important for

implementing soft skills appropriate for the course; consequently, faculty need to innovate strategies for teaching soft skills.

### **Review of the Literature**

A thorough review of literature provided the theories and elements to substantiate the training program for faculty. The goal of this faculty development program is to provide faculty with the content and learning experiences to incorporate the teaching of soft skills into any academic curriculum. The terms used to conduct the review of the literature were *soft skills training*, *soft skills learning*, *cooperative learning*, *course design*, *soft skills course*, and *faculty development*. Scholarly articles were found through the Walden Library and Google Scholar. Searches were conducted through ERIC, EBSCOhost, Taylor and Francis, and SAGE premier. Since some of the articles were not completely accessible through Google Scholar, the search was redirected to the Walden Library. Approximately 55 peer-reviewed articles were found, but only 27 articles were selected to be part of the review of the literature. Most of the selected articles were within the timeframe of 5 years, but a few articles that were within 8 years.

### **Learning and Teaching Soft Skills**

To teach soft skills, faculty need to have enough knowledge and expertise on soft skills, as well as the ability to embed this subject into any other discipline they are teaching. According to Esa, Padil, Selemat, and Idris (2015), the lack of relevant knowledge among college instructors is one of the factors that impacts the teaching and learning of soft skills among college students. Higher educational institutions must be aware that they should be proactive in providing faculty with development programs in

soft skills (Pineteh, 2012). Esa et al. (2015) asserted that higher educational institutions need to add emphasis and effort in teaching soft skills; therefore, lectures should be innovative in integrating traditional methods of teaching and learning with technology, not only to help the teaching and learning process but also to contribute to improving soft skills among students (Pineteh, 2012).

Conversely, Hassan and Maharoff (2014) noted that although there is interest in soft skills, there is still no consensus on how soft skills can be “understood, defined, used, taught, and assessed in the education field” (p. 84). Also, these scholars supported that students could learn better when the instruction took place in meaningful situations. Further, a direct connection exists between how higher educational institutions train faculty to teach soft skills and how lecturers teach soft skills to their students; therefore, as Hassan, Maharoff, and Abiddin (2014) affirmed, lecturers and instructors must first understand and accept that they need to master soft skills before being able to properly teach them to students.

Lecturers’ and instructors’ understanding of soft skills could effectively happen when they have gone through a formal teaching and learning practice (Hassan, Maharoff & Abiddin, 2014). Hassan et al. (2014) concluded that lecturers and instructors can master soft skills if they attend courses about soft skills, if they learn the guidelines on how to embed soft skills in any course, and if they learn how to assess soft skills and soft skills efficacy indicators. Also, to supplement their learning, instructors and lecturers need to know the components of soft skills. Esa et al. (2015) posited that instructors are effective in teaching soft skills to college students. The researchers also added that if

lecturers have access to a variety of teaching methods, they could be better prepared to teach and assist students in the learning process of soft skills. Gunersel and Etienne (2014) concluded in their research that instructors who underwent training programs not only planned to include new teaching approaches learned from the training programs but also were positive about integrating those approaches into their courses.

Gunersel and Etienne (2014) also indicated that instructional training programs for teachers should include teaching theories as well as applied teaching methodologies. However, after learning new teaching approaches, lecturers and instructors must face the dilemma of discarding old teaching frameworks by adopting new ones and/or revamping old frameworks by incorporating new strategies and methodologies (Gunersel & Etienne, 2014). Donche and Van Petegem (2011) affirmed educators' teaching conceptions influence their teaching approaches. Researchers have identified some of the pedagogical approaches best suited to teaching soft skills.

### **Methodologies to Teach Soft Skill to College Students**

Scholars agree that soft skills are a major asset for graduates when competing for job openings in addition to excellent academic results in hard skills (Che-Ani, Ismail, Ahmad, Ariffin, & Razak, 2014). Furthermore, Chadha (2006) affirmed graduates with "good degrees" (p. 20) are required to demonstrate their interpersonal skills to retain their jobs. Therefore, when assisting students in acquiring soft skills, researchers have suggested several methodologies, such as: (a) creating specific soft skills courses (Winstead, Adams, & Sillah, 2009), (b) implementing cooperative learning strategies (Ahern, 2007; Ahmad et al., 2015; Zhang, 2012), (c) implementing soft skills portfolios

(Mamidenna, 2009), and (d) embedding soft skills development strategies throughout the entire curriculum (Beard et al., 2008; Chadha, 2006; Levant, Coulmont & Sandu, 2016).

Devadason, Subramaniam, and Daniel (2010) noted that students can also develop their soft skills through coursework, internships, and academic and nonacademic experiences. These scholars asserted that instructors could combine several models to teach and learn soft skills as necessary. Consequently, higher educational institutions could develop their own models based on their resources. For example, South Carolina State University has implemented a course called the Leadership and Professional Development Program (LAPD). Winstead et al. (2009) explained that the LAPD program was designed to prepare students with the required soft skills to advance their careers. This program proceeds in three different courses and incorporates written assignments, self-assessments, team building projects, presentations, discussions, a web portfolio, time management, role playing, and service learning, among other initiatives. Each course assists students in developing specific competencies.

Another example of a model for developing soft skills among college students is the Malaysian approach, the embedded model (Devadason et al., 2011). Devadason et al. (2010) explained that this model combines three different elements: (a) formal teaching and learning approaches, (b) curricular and cocurricular activities, and (c) students' campus life. Devadason et al. asserted that this methodology must be more student centered and lecturers should be willing to change their traditional teaching and learning approaches. Therefore, this model requires that soft skills be embedded in each classroom

activity, that the teaching and learning activities be planned, and that soft skills be incorporated into each course.

Winstead et al. (2009) affirmed that academic and nonacademic stakeholders have not reached an agreement on how much emphasis should be given to the soft skills in an educational setting. As a result, the academic community is more than ever obligated to seek teaching approaches that respond to the diversity of learners and their learning needs (Chadha, 2006). Winstead et al. concurred that despite the obstacles, educators have the onus to create a curriculum that includes soft skills development.

Chada (2006) asserted that the teaching of soft skills can be developed using three different approaches, “embedding, bolting-on, and integrating” (p. 21). In the embedding approach, rather than making direct efforts to develop soft skills, the emphasis is on promoting the development of hard skills (Chada, 2006). In the bolting-on approach, Hassan and Maharoff (2014) noted that soft skills teaching and learning should be synchronized with learning of the core curriculum without significant changes to the curriculum; however, practicing soft skills can be neglected because of the primacy of the core course. In the integrating approach, the development and learning of soft skills are evident components within the core discipline (Chada, 2006). The same amount of emphasis should be placed on the development of both soft skills and technical abilities (Chada, 2006).

**Soft skills courses.** Because no consensus exists among higher educational professionals and employers on how best to incorporate soft skills into an academic setting (Winstead et al., 2009), educators have to face the challenge of developing

appropriate methods to prepare students with the soft skills they need. Suskie (2015) stated that regardless of the learning topic, educators can help a student learn and succeed by implementing two strategies: (a) student engagement in the learning process and (b) faculty and students must share responsibility in the learning process. In many cases, the teaching of soft skills is left to career development centers or ignored completely (Winstead et al., 2009).

In other cases, institutions have used extracurricular activities to teach soft skills. According to Lau, Hsu, Acosta, and Hsu (2014), some lecturers reported extracurricular activities as positively associated with helping students develop oral communication, decision-making skills, and teamwork; however, more than participating in extracurricular activities, students should have an instructor's guidance to better develop soft skills. Some institutions of higher education have implemented specific curricula to teach soft skills. For example, the South Carolina State University (SCSU) has developed a soft skills curriculum to equip all business major students with these abilities (Winstead et al., 2009). The University of Kebangsaan in Malaysia has implemented a similar initiative as a response to eliminate the soft skills gap in college graduates. Although there is no consensus in how to teach soft skills, institutions are beginning to incorporate soft skills learning as a part of their programs.

Winstead et al. (2009) stated that the current curriculum at SCSU resulted from 10 years of experimentation, and its administrators continue to be aware of the different related content initiatives. The curriculum was designed to guarantee that students were adequately trained to meet the challenges of their chosen profession. Winstead et al., who

are faculty of SCSU, explained that this is a very innovative curriculum consisting of four elements: (a) a leadership and a professional development session that enhances critical skills that contribute to career success, (b) an experiential learning component that teaches students how to handle pressure and disagreement, (c) an executive speaker series, wherein students have the opportunity to participate in round tables with community leaders and professionals from different fields, and (d) leadership development exercises on topics including business etiquette, conflict resolution, and business attire. To keep the program current, formal assessments of the students evaluate whether they have reached their learning outcomes. Additionally, the curriculum incorporates ongoing review to assure that the content reflects the requirements for soft skills as perceived by business leaders, government leaders, and employers.

Conversely, The University of Kebangsaan created a soft skills curriculum with an additional component, a learning contract approach. Che-Ani et al. (2014) noted that the learning contract helps the students complete the tasks within a timeframe. To be an effective tool, the learning contract should contain the objective, method, tasks, and assessment periods. Furthermore, Frank and Scharff (2013) expressed that a learning contract can be a way to get a student on the right path towards self-direction and commitment, and a contract can also modify a student's behavior. The learning contract creates a detailed description of what needs to be accomplished.

The University of Kebangsaan's program contains eight learning objectives: communication skills; information management and lifelong learning; social skills and accountability; leadership and teamwork; values, ethics and professionalism; creativity

and innovation; and management and entrepreneurship. Based on these eight learning objectives, the program has eight academic modules. Students are allowed to take only two modules per semester, and they can complete all eight in four semesters. Che-Ani et al. (2014) also noted that to assure a positive learning experience for all students, this soft skills course is based on eight principles: (a) mutual respect among students and lecturers, (b) comprehensive learning experiences, (c) flexibility, (d) originality, (e) fun, (f) learning through experiences, (g) students being self-driven, and (h) soft skills development.

Regarding soft skills courses, Rolfe (1996) asserted that these courses can bridge the gap between theory and practice; however, Che-Ani et al. (2014) explained that the effectiveness of the soft skill course depends on establishing clear learning objectives as well as delivering the courses based on these objectives. Some of the objectives of soft skills programs include cooperative learning activities, which have emerged as a trend in higher educational approaches.

**Cooperative learning.** Higher education is moving to an active pedagogy from a passive one (Tagg, 2003). Zhang (2012) asserted students undergoing passive learning do not play a dynamic role in the design and delivery of their learning experience, while in the active learning pedagogy, students participate in the learning experience and take full accountability for their learning.

Cooperative learning is one of the approaches that supports deep learning, which, according to Tagg (2003), is a learning that happens as a function of the understanding process that we use to define ourselves, other people, and the world. Cooperative learning

is a method that emphasizes group identification and teamwork (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Tlhoale, Suhre, & Hofman, 2016). Because the student takes an active role in cooperative learning, this method provides excellent opportunities for soft skills training (Ahern, 2007; Cheong, 2010; Esa et al., 2015). Tlhoale et al. (2016) explained that cooperative learning is effective in building knowledge and enhancing the understanding of a subject while looking for explanations to a work-related task. Additionally, it allows individuals to develop social skills and learn new concepts by sharing ideas and comparing concepts with other classmates and team members.

Moreover, Cheong (2010) stated that cooperative learning enables the learning and practicing of soft skills because it provides the student with an opportunity to simulate his or her future workplace. Zhang (2012) explained that group learning necessitates communication, sharing, trust, as well as conflict resolution more than learning from an instructor. In group projects, the communication and interaction goes from team member to team member and from team members to the class. Zhang also added that group success depends on the members' abilities to listen, organize, cooperate, and communicate. In the cooperative learning approach, the teacher's role is to facilitate student learning instead of providing information. Moreover, Çolak (2015) noted that cooperative learning is one of approaches best suited to help students develop soft skills because it requires a high level of social interaction. He added that the success of the approach depends on three factors; the instructor must (a) plan cooperative learning activities in advance, (b) consider basic principles of cooperative learning, and (c) ensure

an effective design for the teamwork discussions during the cooperative learning experience.

Many scholars support cooperative learning because it has a positive impact on a student's teamwork abilities and communication skills (Smith, Shepherd, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005). Other educators have reservations since they feel that cooperative learning demands a lot of time and supervision from faculty and instructors (Ahern, 2007). Furthermore, Dingel, Wei, and Huq (2013) noted that many instructors expressed difficulty in assessing cooperative learning or group work in an effective and equitable way because there is always one group member who does minimal or no work.

Conversely, Cheong (2010) suggested that on a physiological level, cooperative learning gives the students a sense of commitment and responsibility since each individual takes on a specific task. Also, since everyone is committed to help with other tasks, each individual can perform leadership roles by asking for support or by assisting others with their tasks. Cheong added that even though cooperative learning provides good scenarios to practice, gain, and improve soft skills, it is necessary to accompany the experience with an assessment to ensure that students do develop soft skills.

Since soft skills cannot be assessed by quizzes and exams, Zhang (2012) produced a type of assessment that not only evaluates students' commitment to the group project but also measures their soft skills learning. To illustrate, in the soft skills domain, it measures communication and interaction with team members, conflict resolution, attendance in meetings, participation in meetings, and task completion (Zhang, 2012). Once the assessment is completed, the individual can have a better understanding of the

areas that need further emphasis or improvement. The assessment includes two different sections: (a) class peer evaluation and (b) group peer evaluation. The assessment uses a Likert scale to measure all 32 different items. The assessment allows the individual to be evaluated by classmates, team members, and by him or herself. Both parts of the evaluation use the following Likert scale: 1-*very poor*, 2-*poor*, 3-*neutral*, 4-*good*, and 5-*excellent*.

Another example of cooperative learning is the affinity group model, which is a program designed to teach soft skills. The program was built around the cooperative learning approach and incorporates five basic elements of the methodology (Devadason et al., 2010). The five elements are (a) every member is crucial for success, (b) each member supports the others, (c) each member does a fair share of work, (d) the instructor teaches the group skills, and (e) all group members must reflect on how the group is functioning. Devadason et al. (2010) asserted that via these five elements, soft skills can be taken from the classroom environment to the workplace.

Furthermore, Tlhoale et al. (2016) expounded that the effectiveness of cooperative learning is based on four variables: (a) peer learning, (b) help seeking, (c) intrinsic motivation, and (d) deep learning. Peer learning and help seeking are positive strategies in which less competent students learn from more talented students; these techniques also help students monitor their own learning and ask for assistance when they need it (Tlhoale et al., 2016; Zhang, 2012). Intrinsic motivation, an authentic desire to learn that emanates from within, may derive from challenging activities. Deep learning helps construct knowledge by implementing teaching strategies that heighten curiosity

and share new concepts. Cooperative learning provides the format for an individual to play an active role in his/her learning experience while interacting with classmates.

**Portfolios.** In today's business world, soft skills have become necessary for an individual to effectively function in any organization (Anthony & Garner, 2016, 2009; Moore & Morton, 2017), not only for those companies wherein the jobs are designed to be performed in a team environment but also in those organizations that do not operate on a team basis. Mamidenna (2009) pointed out that regardless of the nature of an organization and the way it operates, a significant amount of interaction must take place among people to effectively perform a task. Therefore, Mamidenna proposes the use of portfolios as a methodology to complement the teaching of soft skills, as well as the assessment of these skills.

A portfolio is a way to demonstrate that the student has changed his or her behavior from a previous baseline. It is a visual representation of the student's progress and an effective tool to measure cognitive and learning skills as applied to different curricular activities (Simon & Forgette-Giroux, 2000). Kim and Yazdian (2014) stated that based on their experience, a portfolio helps demonstrate growth and student progress, facilitates communication and collaboration between the instructor and the student, and helps faculty understand an individual's needs and strengths. Qvotrup and Keiding (2015) asserted that a portfolio helps form environments in which students and teachers connect and collaborate as researchers and learners. If the portfolio methodology is properly applied, it is a significant formative tool that could help the individual conduct self-

reflection on his or her performance (McDonald, 2012) and help demonstrate how a student is becoming a lifelong learner (Blaszczynski & Green, 2012).

Mamidenna (2009) also asserted that the flexibility of a portfolio's structure allows an individual to demonstrate his or her abilities in a particular subject, but it also can be used as a demonstration of soft skills. A portfolio could help showcase a student's time management, organizational, and writing skills (Mamidenna, 2009). For example, McDonald (2012) expounded that the development of skills, such as innovation, creativity, lateral thinking, divergent thinking, introspection, and reflection are possible due to the implementation of a portfolio as a learning tool. Mamidenna further noted that a portfolio offers flexibility since the instructor and the student can determine its content. Indeed, a portfolio as an assessment tool and a learning methodology is not a new concept; it has been used by higher education institutions in different disciplines, including accounting, economics, mathematics, law, and writing, just to name a few (Mamidenna, 2009; Romova & Andrew, 2011).

Qvortrup and Keiding (2015) affirmed that a portfolio seems to have become one of the most popular learning tools since it is a new way to relate to students and student learning. Qvortrup and Keiding also added that a portfolio may serve in three ways: (a) to be an assessment tool, (b) to stimulate student learning, and (c) to influence students to have a more self-directed and reflective style of learning (Lam, 2014). Mamidenna (2009) highlighted four benefits of using a portfolio: (a) it is a personalized statement of student's achievements, (b) it facilitates collaborative learning, (c) it is an element of interaction by generating active involvement and continuous feedback, and (d) it helps

the instructor refine the criteria for assessment purposes. A portfolio is a tool that allows an individual to learn and demonstrate his/her academic progress.

**Embedding soft skills in a course.** Any approach of including soft skills teaching into a subject requires the lecturer to thoroughly know and understand soft skills (Hassan et al., 2014). The teaching and learning process should be meticulously planned by identifying what, how, and when the subject of soft skills will be integrated into a regular core course. Consequently, Devadason et al. (2010) asserted that implementing these teaching styles requires that the students actively participate in group activities, problem solving projects, presentations, and case study analysis, while the instructor serves as a facilitator of their work.

Supporting the concept of Devadason et al. (2010), Shakir (2009) articulated that lecturers should be heavily involved in deciding how to deliver the training and how to assess the learning experience. Researchers espouse different perceptions regarding what methodology could be more effective when teaching soft skills; however, Devadason et al. (2010) expressed that based on prior evidence, soft skills are better transferred when they are integrated into interdisciplinary courses rather than as a stand-alone subject. Conversely, Beard et al. (2008) indicated that embedding soft skills in a course does not always bring positive results if clearly defined goals and objectives are not in place, if no plan exists for activities and methods to achieve those goals, and if there is no system to evaluate and measure the learning outcomes. These two researchers added that at the end of the term, it is also necessary to have an improvement plan that could be implemented the next time the instructor offers the class.

A study conducted by Hassan et al. (2014) indicated that faculty suggested a few initiatives to overcome issues when integrating soft skills into core courses: (a) lecturers need to attend courses on soft skills; (b) teaching of soft skill must happen throughout the program curriculum; (c) soft skills guidelines, execution and indicators must be prepared; and (d) components in the soft skills must be explained.

Diamond (2008) affirmed that the student's characteristics can make a significant impact on how a particular topic needs to be taught; therefore, based on Shakir's (2009) statement, lecturers should be continuously trained on the learning and teaching approaches so they can further hone their teaching skills. Moreover, Hassan et al. (2014) asserted that the success of teaching is reflected in the teacher's ability to combine internal, external, and emotional components with intellectual components. In this particular case, soft skills as an element of emotional intelligence require special attention from educators and faculty who not only possess deep knowledge of the topic but also have mastered the learning and teaching approaches.

### **Faculty Development**

Professional development refers to the skills and knowledge that an individual acquires to advance his or her career (Lino, 2014; Saleem, Masrur, & Afzal, 2014). Saleem et al. (2014) explained that knowledge is not considered static. As the world changes, individuals must attain new skills and knowledge in order to survive and be productive members of the society. Conversely, the teaching strategies that lecturers and teachers applied several years ago may be outdated and not applicable to younger and future generations (Saleem et al., 2014). Consequently, lecturers should keep themselves

updated with the new skills and knowledge in order to ensure quality teaching and learning (Hibbert & Semler, 2015). Lecturers need to be able to adapt to the constantly changing demands of the learning environment by knowing what is working and not working in other classroom environments and by seeking opportunities made possible by trying and evaluating different teaching approaches (Rutz, Condon, Iverson, Manduca, & Willet, 2012).

Findings suggest that professional development programs influenced lecturers' teaching methods, including intended and adopted teaching approaches (Gunersel & Etienne, 2014). Saleem et al. (2014) explained that a faculty development program aims to modify beliefs and behaviors of faculties. Rutz et al. (2012) asserted that when faculty learn more about teaching, their teaching improves and in turn it benefits students' learning. To deliver faculty training, scholars recommended numerous approaches: (a) self-directed study, (b) on-line training, (c) providing or receiving in person career coaching, (d) on-site and off-site training, (e) classroom observation, (f) action research (g) peer-to-peer support, (h) school cluster projects, (i) personal reflection, and (j) experimental assignments (Lino, 2014; Saleem et al., 2014).

Schmid, Gillian-Daniel, Kraemer, and Kueppers (2016) developed the Madison Teaching and Learning Excellence (MTLE) program, which is an approach created to support faculty to be more effective and efficient in their teaching practices and to engage more students. The MTLE places emphasis on five principles (Schmid et al., 2016). First, participants should acquire the concept of learner-centeredness and how to apply it to their own instructional practice. Second, participants should have access to brief readings

that provide theoretical knowledge on their own instructional practice. Third, participants reflect on their teaching practices and the impact on the learning environment. Fourth, participants assess teaching materials and teaching methodologies based on their practice and experience. Fifth, participants share their experiences, consider the experiences of others, and implement new strategies.

The selection of the appropriate methodology to deliver the professional development training program is not the only factor required to produce successful training. Zwart, Korthagen, and Attema-Noordewier (2015) explained five principles that must also be included: (a) building on the needs and concerns of participants, (b) practicing in authentic situations, (c) promoting individual reflection, (d) enhancing/promoting transfer, and (e) promoting engagement at the team and school level.

### **Implementation**

A faculty development workshop series will be implemented to prepare lectures and instructors to understand, master, and develop soft skills. The workshop will be offered in four 1-day sessions available during the spring or fall semester and will take place over 4 weeks. The four sessions will total 24 clock hours of training. The minimum number of participants will be eight, and the maximum number of attendees will be 24. The training will be offered face-to-face since that format will help enhance communication skills and allows rehearsal of real situations that can address unpredictable human reactions and emotions (Charoensap-Kelly, Broussard, Lindsly, & Troy, 2016).

To produce effective workshops, Lino (2014) explained that they must be divided into different sessions by topic; they need to include theoretical and practical components; and they must create opportunities for teachers to reflect on and share better ways to implement the new ideas and knowledge. Faculty will be strongly encouraged to attend all the sessions to learn and deliver the knowledge on soft skills in the classroom environment. Faculty will be asked to actively participate in the different sessions through group activities, case studies, assignments, and classroom discussions. By participating in all the different activities, instructors will be able to better understand and appreciate the material through their own experiences and knowledge (Gunersel & Etienne, 2014).

### **Training Session 1**

The first day of the training will be a 6-hour session divided into two meetings, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Two goals will be established with the first day of training: (a) to provide participants with ample information on EI and soft skills and (b) to provide attendees with the findings on the soft skills study conducted in the local community.

The first goal will be achieved by providing participants with a thorough background on EI, the definition of soft skills, the difference between hard skills and soft skills, and the importance of soft skills in the workplace. According to Laker and Power (2011), although most people recognize the difference between hard skill and soft skills, those who train on hard skills are different from those who train on soft skills, and each trainer is usually unfamiliar with the training methodology applied by the other trainer.

The second goal will be accomplished by sharing with the participants the findings of the study of soft skills that I conducted in the local community. With this knowledge, participants will gain a better understanding of the importance of soft skills and how the lack of soft skills could decrease an employee's retention possibilities and/or effectiveness.

The first day's session will start with opening remarks and personal introductions from the participants. After the instructions, participants will receive the training agenda and the basic protocol to participate in the open discussion sessions. The guidelines for the protocol will be

- Group activities are time limited.
- Discussions are about experiences and not about particular individuals.
- Participants will respectfully agree to disagree.
- Participants will not monopolize the conversation and allow others to express their opinions.

To open the formal training session, participants will be asked to define in their own words soft skills and provide examples. These initial definitions and examples will be recorded on a white board to keep them as a point of reference on the topic and to initiate dialogs during the sessions. The trainer will do a presentation on soft skills and allow participants to practice self-reflection on their own soft skills. More than providing abundant knowledge on soft skills, participants need to master the topic before they can integrate it into their teaching.

During the first day of training, participants will be invited to reflect on soft skills and write down what soft skills they consider more important and why. Once they have completed their individual analysis, they will gather in groups of three members to

- Discuss their responses and agree upon, in order of importance, three soft skills that could make a student a successful employee.
- Based on previous experience in the classroom, identify situations that could be a symptom that a student has a problem with soft skills.
- Select a team spokesperson to present a 3-minute presentation summarizing the team's responses.

At the end of the day, participants will be asked to complete an evaluation of the first day of training. As an assignment for the upcoming training session, attendees will be asked to reflect on suitable approaches to incorporate the teaching of soft skills into their classrooms. Participants will record assignment responses in their training journals.

## **Training Session 2**

The second day of the training will be a 6-hour training session divided into two meetings, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The learning goals for this day will be (a) to provide participants with different methodologies to teach soft skills and (b) to encourage attendees to select an approach to teach soft skills that better matches their teaching environment.

Before starting the morning session, participants will be asked to share their assignment responses from the first training session. Opening the discussion among participants is a way to introduce the learning topic of the training session. During the

morning and afternoon sessions, participants will learn about (a) creating soft skills courses, (b) implementing cooperative learning strategies, (c) implementing soft skills portfolios, and (d) embedding soft skills development strategies throughout the entire curriculum. The trainer will present the different approaches to the teaching of soft skills; however, participants will be invited to take an active learning role by answering the questions below after the presentation of each methodology. The responses should be provided based on each participant's teaching environment.

- If you were to use this methodology, what would be the pros and cons?
- What resources would you need to implement this methodology?
- How long would it take you to implement this methodology?
- When would you like to start implementing this methodology?

To answer these questions, participants will have 10 minutes after the conclusion of each methodology. Trainees will be instructed to write down their answers in their training journals and will be invited to share some of their responses with the rest of the group.

For the last activity of this training day, participants will be instructed to work in teams of three people. Teams will meet two conditions: (a) the team must be different from the team in training Session 1 and (b) team members must be from similar teaching disciplines. Based on their teaching discipline and experience, teams will be instructed to outline a soft skills portfolio that can be used with their students. Once the activity has concluded, each team will present their portfolio in 3 minutes.

At the end of the training day, participants will be asked to complete an evaluation of the second day of training. As an assignment for the upcoming training

session, attendees will be asked to complete the checklist of factors that will help them make an informed decision on the appropriate methodology to adopt. The responses should be added to the training journal.

### **Training Session 3**

The third day of the training will be a 6-hour training session that will be divided into two meetings, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. The learning goals for this day will be (a) to learn three common methodologies that companies use to evaluate soft skills and (b) to assist trainees in adapting their own methodologies to teach soft skills that better meet their teaching environment and then create a pilot program.

During the morning session, participants will be introduced to Gibb's theories regarding assessing soft skills. These theories will help participants understand different methodologies that supervisors in corporate America might apply in evaluating the soft skills of employees. Then, participants will be asked to select a person from the same discipline or a similar discipline to develop a pilot program with the selected methodology. According to Diamond (2008), a new curriculum or an academic initiative should be developed based on information collected in four areas:

- The student population's characteristics
- The society's needs and desires
- An institution's educational priority
- The requirements of the appropriate academic discipline

The rest of the day will be allocated to work on outlining a pilot program. This draft will not be the final product since each participant must submit the pilot program for

approval to their chair and/or campus provost. Participants will be encouraged to interact with other participants as well as with their project partners to get input on their initiative or to provide input to others. Once the training session has concluded, participants will complete the evaluation of training Session 3.

As an assignment, participants will be asked to share the draft of the pilot program with other faculty members at their institution as well as the department chair. When introducing the pilot program, they will inquire on recommendations for the pilot program and will record these recommendations. Participants are instructed to complete the pilot program project before the next training session since each person will be presenting the project in the last training session.

#### **Training Session 4**

Session 4 will be the last portion of the program. It will be a 6-hour training session in which all participants will present their final projects. Based on what they have learned at the training sessions and on recommendations provided by coworkers and supervisors, they will present the pilot program to the rest of the participants. The presentation will cover topics such as:

- Methodology selected based on the needs and resources available to ensure success of the initiative.
- List of resources available and needed, including academic, time, technology and funding.
- Foreseen obstacles or anticipated challenges that could delay the program's implementation.

- Faculty and staff who will be selected to act as an advisory board for the new program.
- Outline of the curriculum including goals and learning outcomes.
- Estimates of how and when the program will be evaluated once the program has been implemented.

Participants will prepare handouts for the rest of participants. Also, all presentations will be video recorded, so participants will have access to all the information that will be shared during the last day. Trainees will be invited to provide feedback and ask for feedback.

The last hour of the training day will be devoted to an evaluation of the last day of program, and participants will provide some recommendations on the training program to improve the learning experience for future participants. Also, participants will receive a certificate of completion to acknowledge their commitment to the training and participation in the program.

### **Potential Resources**

To properly deliver the workshop, numerous resources will be necessary, such as a large classroom with a sound system, a large screen, a data projector, a video camera, round tables, a Power Point presentation, notepads, binders, pens, pencils, markers, and highlighters. Each participant will receive handouts at the beginning of the session, as well as a letter-size envelope with the assignments of the day and week. Moreover, participants will receive a binder in which to file and save their notes from the training. After they have completed the training session, they will receive a CD with all the

materials and the video recordings of the group presentations and also a certificate of completion. Administrative support will be necessary at any institution that chooses to host the workshop series, including provosts, deans, and department chairs or any other administrative leader to whom faculty members report. Participants in the workshop will be selected by their immediate supervisors, and they will receive a formal online invitation to the soft skills workshop series.

### **Potential Barriers**

Several factors will constitute potential barriers to the offering and implementation of the training program, including the length of the program, availability of faculty to attend a 24-hour training since the majority is part-time faculty and they are committed to other institutions, allocation of financial resources to pay for the training, and priorities of the institution. Another important factor to take into consideration is that the training program needs to be in alignment with the professional development needs that are outlined in the strategic plan of the institutions. To assess the significance of the potential barriers, I will schedule individual appointments with the department chairs of business and communications departments from the local state college since I personally know these professionals. Having an initial contact with the department chairs will help me formulate the right strategies to promote the program.

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**

The proposal for the training program will be presented to two different institutions and to each campus provost in the last week of May, 2017 or the first week of June, 2017. The goal is to schedule these meetings before the annual revision of the

strategic plan and before submitting the annual budget for the fiscal year 2017-2018. If the program is approved, the program will be promoted among faculty during the in-service day before starting the academic year in August of 2017. The training schedule will be coordinated with the department chairs according to the academic calendar. The first three sessions will be held weekly for three weeks, and the last training session will be presented in the fifth week. Once the training program has been completed, I will share the results of the different summative evaluations of the training sessions with the department chairs and provosts.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of the Researcher, Faculty, and Students**

In my role as a researcher, I have the onus of sharing the findings of the study with the local career centers in the county as well as with the local state college leaders to whom I am going to propose the training program. Additionally, I will be developing and facilitating the professional development program. I will provide all the materials, including binders, handouts, classroom supplies, and any other materials that will be necessary for the development and presentation of the training program. I will need to coordinate with the department chairs to determine the training location and the dates for training.

Participants will be full-time faculty and adjunct instructors from different disciplines as approved by the campuses' leaders. Participating faculty will be active learners of the program and will also have the obligation to share their learning experience with their immediate supervisors and coworkers. Moreover, once the training program is completed, it is anticipated that they will adopt some of the soft skills content

from this professional development program in their own classrooms. Students will have an active role after the new soft skills teaching methodology is implemented. It will be expected that once a methodology is applied, students will have the chance to offer suggestions through the course assessment. Department chairs, associate provosts, provosts, along with trained faculty will be key stakeholders who will initiate the implementation of the new soft skills teaching methodology. Moreover, the success of the training program will come to fruition when the initiatives and strategies learned during the program are executed and results are evaluated.

### **Project Evaluation**

The evaluation of the training program will have three objectives: (a) to guarantee that the goals of each training session are delivered according to the initial plan, (b) to allow participants to provide input on their satisfaction with the program and the learning experience, and (c) to implement changes to the professional development program if the participants are not meeting the outcomes of the program. Summative evaluations (Appendix A) will be administered after each training session and at the end of the program. These evaluations will be used to determine the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement. The program evaluation will not conclude on the last day of training. If possible, I would like to administer another evaluation to those faculty members who have implemented a soft skills teaching methodology. This evaluation will take place a year after the initial training. The results of the evaluations will be shared with the college administrators and participating faculty.

### **Implications Including Social Change**

This focus of this project will be on addressing the lack of soft skills in some college graduates from a medium-sized community in the southeast of the United States; this problem affects students' potential performance in the work environment. The findings of the study provided significant evidence that measures need to be taken to properly train students in soft skills before they enter the job market. Therefore, a few initiatives were taken into consideration before deciding the soft skills professional development program for faculty. The soft skills professional development program was the best choice since a large number of students can be impacted if more faculty members have access to the training.

Once faculty members have attended the professional development program, they will be able to understand and teach soft skills regardless of the approach they adopt to teach them and regardless of their academic discipline. High quality teacher preparation is absolutely essential to equip students with the right skills (Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2010). Moreover, Diamond (2008) noted that as a result of these training efforts, students' learning can be significantly enhanced, and they will leave better prepared to face the challenges after graduation.

There are several potential social changes that may result if this project is implemented in the local community college to develop the soft skills of its students. More in-depth preparations in soft skills will increase college graduates' potential to obtain better jobs, to be retained, to be more innovative, and to more quickly advance their careers. Therefore, better prepared college graduates who obtain jobs in the area will

also help local companies be more productive and efficient and compete in the global marketplace since employees will have more effective professional and interpersonal skills. Moreover, college graduates who have improved soft skills could gain better job opportunities outside of the local community and act as role models. The social change expectation is that well prepared graduates will become more capable professionals; consequently, their employers will be able to contribute to a more robust economy. Also, those that become community leaders will be better able to engage with the local population to understand societal issues and be more able to produce positive social change. The success of this project in the local state college could serve as a model to be implemented in other higher education institutions.

During the second semester of 2017, the results of this project study will be presented to the director of the local career centers, directors and members of the four Chambers of Commerce, and the members of the local Economic Development Commission of the area. These individuals are very important in providing the impetus for social change because they have an active role in advising the local state college administrators on how current and future college graduates should be prepared. Furthermore, because these individuals are regularly assessing the demands of the workplace and adopting new initiatives to satisfy those demands, these leaders will be the appropriate group to ultimately advocate for the implementation of an action plan that could potentially benefit college students with a more holistic academic preparation. Also, the results of the project study will be presented to the administrators of the local state college and at higher education conferences in different parts of the nation. The goal

of these presentations is to start the conversation on how educators could implement more effective approaches to incorporate soft skills instruction into their curriculum to equip college students with the necessary soft skills.

### **Conclusion**

Section 3 included the rationale, the goals, the literature review, the implementation strategies, and a descriptive outline of a 24-hour training program for faculty. This program is the proposed project for faculty development; the overarching goal is to improve the soft skills learning for college students. The content goals of the professional development training program for faculty are (a) to make faculty aware of their role in the development of students' soft skills; (b) to increase faculty awareness of the importance of soft skills for graduates' employability; and (c) to identify and apply teaching strategies to integrate soft skills learning into any academic curriculum regardless of the subject content. The literature review provided a significant background on what strategies professionals in higher education have implemented to teach soft skills to college students, the implications of these strategies, and the results of these different initiatives.

Some of the potential barriers for the implementation of the program were the availability of faculty who have other commitments to attend a 24-hour training; the allocation of financial resources to pay for the training; and the priorities of the leaders of the institution regarding training and professional development. The evaluation of the professional development will be conducted after each training session, and it will be

suggested to perform another evaluation after the faculty have implemented any of the initiatives to teach soft skills.

This section also described the implications for social change associated with this program, such as better prepared college graduates who will be more successful professionals, be more innovative, and be more productive employees. This project could have long-lasting effects since it will benefit college graduates, local companies, and the local community. These local companies may be more productive and competitive in the global market since employees will have more holistic professional and personal skills. It is anticipated that college graduates who will be better prepared in soft skills will consequently go on to be more effective and engaged citizens. The next section of this study will include a discussion of (a) project strengths and limitations, (b) recommended alternative approaches, (c) reflections, and (d) applications, conclusions, and directions for future research.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

This section encompasses the last components of this study, including reflections, implications, limitations, and recommendations for alternative approaches. As the researcher conducting this study, I am including some personal experiences and reflections I had while I was conducting the study, as well as how much I have grown as a professional in higher education and as a community leader. This learning experience has shown me new ways to play an active role to initiate social change in my local community. This section will conclude with recommendations for future research.

### **Project Strengths**

Various strengths are evident in this project. The first strength of the program is the ability to identify applicable solutions to the problem initially described in Section 1. Professionals in human resources, including directors and managers, who participated in the study asserted that some college graduates are missing soft skills that could affect their success and professional productivity. However, these directors and managers seemed to agree that higher educational institutions could formulate and offer programs to help college graduates overcome the lack of soft skills.

The second strength of the project is its adaptability; each higher educational institution could adopt multiple solutions based on their individual financial resources and the availability and capability of their faculty. The third strength of this project is that the soft skills professional development program for faculty will equip participants with knowledge on the topic and valuable tools and resources that will hopefully prepare them

to be more versatile when they are ready to develop a soft skills program for their students. The fourth strength of the project is that it is grounded in active and in-depth learning approaches which will enable participants to be involved in multiple activities and develop initiatives in teams, as well as individuals. Finally, it is anticipated this project will benefit not only students but also faculty who will acquire current information and thus help their courses be more relevant for contemporary students. The faculty may also work more effectively together through the learning of soft skills.

### **Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations**

Two of the most significant limitations of this professional development program are the length of the training program and the cost of the program. A 24-hour professional development program will be a very demanding program if it is delivered weekly. Therefore, to provide another option, I will offer the participants the possibility of offering the training sessions every 2 weeks instead of every week. Also, the program gets more expensive if I take into consideration that faculty have to be paid for those hours of training, particularly adjunct faculty. However, the cost of the program should be considered as an investment that benefits the institution, the faculty body, and the students, who are the main reason the institutions must strive to remain competitive.

Ellis, Kisling, and Hackworth (2014) stated that market-responsive colleges should respond to information from employers indicating that college students need soft skills training. The strategy to remediate these possible implementation obstacles will be to start working in advance with department chairs and provosts before the annual budget is approved for the upcoming fiscal year. Moreover, I will share the results of the study

with faculty, department chairs, and industry advisory boards of the college before offering the training program to the institutions. It will be important to demonstrate, based on the findings of the study, that a real need exists to improve the soft skill preparedness in college students. The social change will be possible if local leaders and educational administrators take an active role in helping to implement effective solutions to equip college students with the soft skills.

### **Alternative Approaches to Addressing the Problem**

Various options exist to address the research problem, according to the findings that emerged from the study. The appropriate solution for each institution will depend on its interests and current programs that offer training in soft skills. The suggested recommendation is to develop a faculty training program that allows faculty to master the concept of soft skills as well as learn about different methodologies to incorporate the teaching of soft skills. This solution will be effective because more faculty members will be trained; therefore, more students will benefit. Further, the value of this approach is that more faculty would be able to incorporate the teaching of soft skill without disrupting the teaching and learning of existing course content topics.

An alternative approach would be for the institution to create a program similar to The First Year in College program, but instead have a program called The First Year at Work that teaches college students how to be successful in the work environment and what is expected from them once they are employed. This program could be run as a company lab. In this company lab, students would work and learn in an environment similar to a real company, where they would make decisions, collaborate with others,

manage their time, solve problems, and interact with superiors, coworkers, and external stakeholders. Throughout this program, participating students would have the opportunity to apply both soft and hard skills. At the end of the program, the instructors who are in charge of managing the company lab would evaluate the students.

A third approach would be to have two internship experiences. The first internship could be scheduled during the second year of college, and the second internship could be scheduled during the last year of college. The focus of the internship experiences would be established objectives with concentration on soft skills that are necessary for employees of the company. Additionally, formative and summative evaluations should be integral to the internship program.

A fourth approach would be a white paper which summarizes the findings of the study, along with a series of recommendations that would be presented to colleges. I expect that through this white paper college administrators and faculty could gain valuable information on the importance of soft skills. Also, they could formulate their own methodologies to teach soft skills.

Based on the findings of the study, it seems that curricular and cocurricular activities and programs could positively impact the learning of soft skills; therefore, the previous alternative approaches suggested could have been selected as projects for this study. However, the faculty development project seems to be the most appropriate solution considering the feedback from the human resources participants in the interviews. Additionally, if more lecturers have access to the soft skills development program, more students could benefit from it.

### **Scholarship**

Through this capstone project, I have learned discipline, persistence, courage, increasing my commitment to lifelong learning. However, the level of commitment and responsibility necessary for a project like this required me to go above and beyond any academic endeavor that I have completed before. It was important to have a daily schedule to meet my other life responsibilities. Moreover, it was essential to apply my time management and organizational skills to be able to accomplish everything. Sometimes, it seemed that the days were extremely short, and I barely had time to do what I had planned to do. Persistence probably was one of the most significant lessons during the research project since I lost my job while I was writing my proposal. I felt discouraged and wanted to give up due to this loss. Additionally, getting people to participate in the study took me at least 6 months because people were very concerned with the type of information that they would be asked and the confidentiality of the information. I learned how to remain positive despite receiving many negative responses from people who did not want to participate.

The interview process helped me be a better listener and communicator. Asking the right questions at the right time is one of the most valuable strategies to encourage people to talk and share their perceptions with the interviewer. Many times I had to remind myself to stay quiet because I wanted to say something while a participant was sharing their information with me. The first interview was my training session because I used it to evaluate through the audio recording how I interacted with the participant. Moreover, the note taking after the interviews helped to identify silent communications

that participants expressed through body language and facial expressions. These silent messages provided me with valuable information during the data collection.

The data analysis was another interesting exercise to learn how to be impartial and reduce biases. It is very difficult to separate oneself from the study; therefore, I asked a former coworker who had research experience in higher education to read the findings once the paper was completed and help me identify possible expressions and texts that conveyed any type of bias. Also, by allowing participants to read the summary of their interview and add changes to the summary, I was able to increase the accuracy and credibility of the information.

### **Growth as a Scholar, Practitioner, and Leader**

Because of this project, I have learned to be more analytical and to challenge myself and others in the reasoning process. When a professional discussion arises with my coworkers, I can better formulate logical arguments based on real and academically supported facts. I see myself as a more assertive person because this educational program has increased my confidence and knowledge. When working with students, I feel that I can provide them with high quality information regarding their professional and personal expectations. All the faculty members who have assisted me in developing and writing this study have helped me identify the strengths and weaknesses of my analytical and writing skills. Due to my instructor's guidance, I have been able to overcome many of the obstacles that affected my scholarly writing.

During this program, I have had the opportunity to meet outstanding professionals who were my classmates and now are my role models, friends, and mentors who have

helped me overcome professional and personal challenges. Without the support of these classmates, I would not have been able to continue this journey. Walden has equipped me with unique leadership skills and a broader view of the higher education field. Because I have increased my leadership skills, I feel better equipped with advanced analytical skills to perform complex assignments and professional projects. This study has benefited me, my students, and my present organization.

### **Growth as a Project Developer**

When I started working on this project, it was difficult to realize the magnitude of the endeavor. I divided the project into small steps to make it more manageable. The findings of the study and the literature review provided me with a solid framework from which to develop this training program. I took numerous elements into consideration to develop this project, including required resources, participants, content of the training, benefits of the training, potential beneficiaries, potential obstacles, and the characteristics of the local community.

I thought it would be important to develop a program in which participants would have the opportunity to learn, discuss, and apply the theories and methodologies learned. I produced a training content that I anticipate will be relevant to the participants and to the students that they serve. The program was developed by having in mind the needs of educators, college students, and local employers.

Although the project is a well-structured and well developed training program that offers significant benefits, I anticipate some obstacles that I will need to overcome when I am ready to propose the project to the local state college. By creating a list of the possible

barriers and by formulating strategies to respond to them, I feel that I will be more equipped when implementing this training program.

This training program will initially benefit the faculty who participate in it, the students who will be taught by the faculty, the local higher education institution which sponsors the training, and the local employers. As noted by Ellis et al. (2014), educators need to stay current with their programs by developing faculty, assessing current programs, and listening to local employers. It is very satisfying to have a draft of a training program because it represents my proposed solution to the problem of the lack of soft skills in some college graduates. I also see this training program as my contribution to other professionals in higher education and college students.

### **Project's Impact on Social Change**

Regarding the impact on social change, it is anticipated that this project may produce three significant effects. First, the training program could increase faculty awareness of how much they can positively impact the performance of college students as future employees. Through this training program, faculty could acquire the knowledge, skills, and tools to coach and train students to have successful careers and equip them with the needed soft skills to be more effective employees (Che-Ani et al., 2014). Moreover, Che-Ani et al. (2014) asserted that faculty members play an instrumental role in implementing the teaching of soft skills, and those positive relationships among lecturers and students could produce a positive effect during the learning process. According to the findings of this study, employers expect college graduates to have a holistic education that prepares them for the challenges of the globalized economy.

Second, college students who are better prepared with hard and soft skills will have more chances to be productive and efficient employees; consequently, companies will grow faster and will be more competitive. Finally, if companies are more productive as a consequence of better equipped employees, these companies could positively affect the economy of the entire geographical area. These potentially positive outcomes could be a benefit for the college students and employees. Also, for higher education leaders, the success of their school's college graduates could be also seen as their own success due to their institution's creating a more effective academic programs and better prepared graduates.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

The literature review revealed a gap in the research on soft skills in this country (BHEF, 2010; Devadason et al., 2010; Hurrell, 2016). Also, it revealed that industry leaders have been leading this research because they perceive that some college graduates, despite their degrees, are not able to successfully meet the demands of the job market due to their lack of soft skills (Freifeld, 2013). On the other hand, the literature review also demonstrated that great opportunities remain to explore and evaluate soft skills from different perspectives. Additionally, based on the findings of my study, significant research on soft skills from college students' perspectives may follow. College students' perceptions regarding their learning of soft skills and how much the learning experience of soft skills is equipping them with the needed skills would be beneficial information.

To implement the social change, industry leaders and local college administrators need to learn about the findings of the study and the suggested soft skill training approach. The social change could only begin if awareness strategies are implemented to capture the attention of these local community leaders. These leaders need to play an active role in endorsing the transformation on how soft skills are taught to initiate the social change. By incorporating new strategies to teach soft skills to college students, it will be possible to create a positive impact on the college graduates' performance since they will be able to obtain better jobs, have more successful careers, have upward mobility, have better work relationships, and potentially have better salaries. Moreover, this transformation could possibly impact the economy of the local communities and surrounding areas because employees could have a holistic education that prepares them to meet the demands of the workplace and perform their jobs effectively and efficiently. It is anticipated that this social change could positively affect college graduates once they are in the process of getting a job, benefit their family life, impact their companies, and consequently produce a positive effect in the local community and economy. Ultimately, teaching soft skills could affect and impact the local educators and the local state college because they will be proactively responding to the needs of the community regarding filling the skills gap in education.

College graduates and companies are directly affected by the persistent gap in soft skills. As expressed by participants in this study, higher education institutions are not the only ones responsible for teaching soft skills. Parents and K-12 teachers also have a role in educating tomorrow's employees by facilitating the learning of soft skills. Therefore,

future researchers could involve other groups of participants such as K-12 teachers, parents, and college faculty. The literature review revealed minimal research on soft skills in which K-12 teachers and parents could voice their perceptions.

Another opportunity for future research would be to conduct a study that focuses on interviewing college counselors, advisors, and career counselors who have interactions with students on their perspectives about current academic programs and relevant course content that incorporates the teaching of soft skills. Leaders in higher education have done a good job of listening to industry leaders regarding the hard skills that are in demand; however, these stakeholder should keep communication open on what needs to be done to enhance the ability of college students to learn soft skills (Ellis et al., 2014). Companies need excellent employees in order to be productive and achieve their goals; however, an employee must have great hard skills and well developed soft skills to be productive (Che-Ani et al., 2014). Moreover, these researchers asserted that excellent workers have more opportunities to have better chances for promotion and to earn higher salaries.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of Section 4 is to present a reflection on the study and the alternative approaches to address the problem. Also, it includes the strengths and limitations of the suggested project and my self-reflections as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer.

Based on the perceptions of local human resources directors and managers, the findings of this study suggested that some college graduates are lacking soft skills, which is affecting their retention and career advancement. Significant changes in the way

colleges prepare graduates will happen only if higher education leaders are willing to evaluate current educational paradigms and adopt new approaches that need to be in alignment with the marketplace. An ongoing assessment of what is being taught and learned at colleges is required to equip college students for the challenges of the constantly evolving job market.

Further, faculty members and lecturers at colleges have an important role in teaching soft skills, which are important in preparing college students for the job market. Therefore, a faculty development program emerged as a valuable concept to accomplish this goal, based on the findings from the data collection. Also, a faculty development program could ultimately impact course content and teaching strategies and ultimately impact a large number of students. Through this training, faculty could learn, understand, and apply appropriate methodologies to teach soft skills to college students which ultimately will benefit college graduates, local businesses and the local community.

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## Appendix A: The Project

**Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success in the  
Workplace  
Faculty Training  
Session 1 (6 hours)**

Facilitator: Gloria A. Meeks

**Learning Objectives**

The learning objectives are formulated to help participants:

- Understand the theory of emotional intelligence as the framework of soft skills
- Learn about soft skills, including definition, importance of soft skills in the workplace, and different soft skills
- Understand the value of soft skills and hard skills from the employers' standpoint

**Training Resources and Materials**

- Large classroom with round tables and seating for 24 participants
- Sound system, screen, data projector, laptop and PowerPoint – 50 slides
- Video camera
- White board with markers and eraser
- 24 name tags
- 24 notepads/journal (3-hole punched)
- 24 pens, pencils, and highlighters
- 24 binders
- 24 sets of handouts of the Power Point presentation (3-hole punched)
- 24 training agendas
- 24 envelopes with the classroom activity forms
- 24 evaluation forms

**Training Agenda**

- Welcome remarks, participants introduction, and ground rules
- Training objectives
- Opening session – Activity No 1
- Soft skills introduction
- Emotional intelligence
- Break
- Study of soft skills in the local community
- Lunch break

- Soft skills set and importance of soft skills
- Activity No 2
- Q & A session
- Assignments for next training session

**Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success in the  
Workplace  
Lesson Plan - Training Session 1**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>
8:30 am– 9:00 am	<p><b>Welcome remarks, introductions, and ground rules,</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants will be provided with the needed information on the training</li> <li>• Participants introduction (name, teaching discipline, years of experience, and expectations on the training)</li> <li>• Ground rules will be described and participants will receive them in writing on the hard copies of the Power Point presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Group activities are time limited</li> <li>✓ Discussions are about experiences and not about particular individuals</li> <li>✓ Respectfully agree to disagree</li> <li>✓ Allow others to express their opinions</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
9:00 am – 9:20 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training objectives will be presented <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Understand the theory of emotional intelligence as the framework of soft skills</li> <li>✓ Learn about soft skills</li> <li>✓ Understand the value of soft skills and hard skills from the employers’ standpoint</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Participants will write their definition of soft skills – Activity 1</li> <li>• Participants will share their definitions of soft skills</li> <li>• Participant will write down their definitions on flip charts visible to everyone</li> </ul>
9:20 am.– 10: 00am	<b>Soft Skills Introduction and Emotional Intelligence</b>

	<p>Participants will be introduced to the concept of soft skills and to the concept of emotional intelligence as a framework of soft skills.</p> <p>Participant will be encouraged to participate and provide examples on these topics</p>
10:00 am – 10:10 am	<b>Break</b>
10:10 am – 11:00 am	<p><b>Emotional Intelligence</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Self- regulation</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Internal motivation</li> <li>• Social skills</li> <li>• Components of emotional intelligence</li> </ul>
11:00 am -12:00 pm	<p><b>Study of the Soft Skills in the Local Community</b></p> <p>The findings of the qualitative study that was conducted in the local communities will be presented to participants.</p>
12:00 pm – 1:00 pm	<b>Lunch Break</b>
1:00 pm – 2:00 pm	<p><b>Soft Skills Sets and Importance</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soft skills and hard skills</li> <li>• Communication skills</li> <li>• Critical thinking skills</li> <li>• Teamwork skills</li> <li>• Leadership skills</li> </ul>
2:00 pm – 2:10 pm	<b>Break</b>
2:10 pm- 2:30 pm	<p><b>Group Activity – Part 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select in order of importance three soft skills that could make a college graduate a successful employee</li> <li>• Based on previous experience in the classroom, identify a situation that could be a symptom that a student has a problem with soft skills</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Select a team spokesperson to do a 3-minute presentation</li></ul>
2:30 pm – 3:00 pm.	<p><b>Q &amp; Session, Complete Evaluation Form, and Assignment for Training Session No 2</b></p> <p>Assignment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reflect on suitable approaches to incorporate the teaching of soft skills in your classroom.</li><li>• Write down your reflections in your journal.</li></ul>

**Training Session 1**  
**Slides 1 to 50**

# Critical Soft Skills to Achieve Success in the Workplace

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TRAINING SESSION 1

FACILITATOR: GLORIA A. MEEKS

## Welcome to the Soft Skills Workshop

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1. Participant introductions
2. Description of the ground rules

## Ground Rules

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1. Group activities are time limited
2. Discussions are about experiences and not about individuals
3. Respectfully disagree
4. Allow others to express their opinions; do not monopolize the conversation

## Training Objectives

---

1. Understand the theory of emotional intelligence as the framework of soft skills
2. Learn about soft skills, including definition of soft skills, importance of soft skills in the workplace, and description of soft skills
3. Understand the value of soft skills and hard skills from the employers' perspective

## Opening Activity-Part 1

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1. Write down your definition on soft skills
2. Provide three examples of soft skills

## What is Said About Soft Skills

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1. Having a college diploma or a technical degree does not guarantee that a person has the competencies to be successful in the work environment, nor does it guarantee a job (Association for Talent Development, 2012; Eisner 2010; Jackson 2009).
2. A degree is not always a guarantee that a person is fully equipped with the skills to meet the needs of the job market (Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006).

## What is Said About Soft Skills

---

A person's success in the work environment depends 15% on hard skills and 85% on soft skills (Wats & Wats, 2008)

"Critical disjunctions exist between what is taught and learned in postsecondary education and the skills that are in high demand in the workplace" (Business Higher Education Forum, 2010, p. 4).

## What is Said About Soft Skills

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Soft skills training in some higher education institutions is poorly done, leaving graduates with weaknesses in facing the demands of the workforce (Ingols & Shapiro, 2014).

## Emotional Intelligence, Framework of Soft Skills

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Social intelligence is a person's ability to perceive and manage one's own states, motives and behaviors and other people's states, motives and behaviors and act optimally based on the perceived information" (Thorndike 1920, p.228).

## Emotional Intelligence, Framework of Soft Skills

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"Emotional intelligence is a type of social intelligence which includes the appraisal of verbal and non-verbal expressions, regulation of one's emotions and other people's emotions and the application of this information to solve a problem" (Salovey & Mayer, 1993, p 433).

## Emotional Intelligence, Framework of Soft Skills

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The conceptual framework of this study is based on the theory of emotional intelligence conceptualized and expanded by Goleman (1998).

He openly started applying the theory of EI to the effectiveness of job performance.

## Emotional Intelligence, Framework of Soft Skills

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When a person's intelligence quotient (IQ) is correlated with the job performance and career advancement, the IQ score counts only 25%" (Goleman, 1998, p. 3). The other 75% should be attributed to EI which is the ability of how a person relates with others, understand others, and oneself. IQ does not have significant leverage in determining who would succeed or fail (Goleman, 1998).

## Emotional Intelligence, Framework of Soft Skills

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Emotional intelligence gives the skills in the soft domain that make an individual more competitive in the work environment (Goleman, 1998)

## Components of Emotional Intelligence

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Salovey and Mayer noted five components of EI:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-regulation
3. Empathy
4. Internal motivation
5. Social skills

## Components of Emotional Intelligence

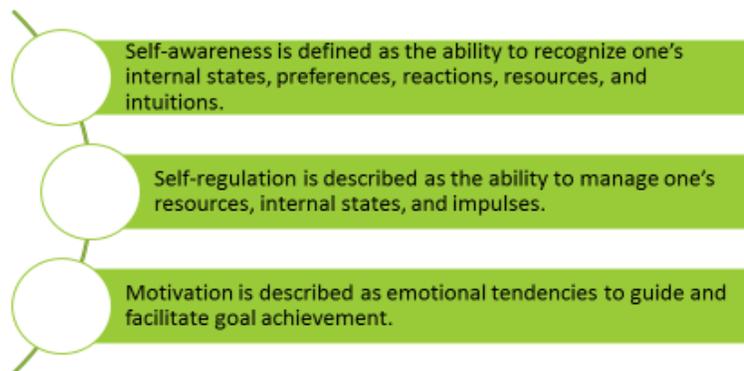
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Goleman divided these five components of emotional intelligence into two groups:

1. Personal competence (self-awareness, self-regulation, and internal motivation)
2. Social competence (empathy and social skills)

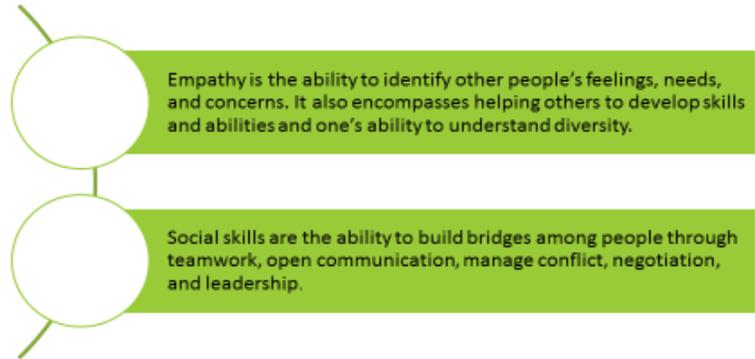
## Components of Emotional Intelligence- Personal Competencies

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## Components of Emotional Intelligence-Social Competencies

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## Emotional Intelligence

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People with high emotional intelligence (EI) are more prone to develop abilities that are part of the soft skills set, such as teamwork, effective communications, and skill in social interactions (Goleman 1998).

People with the abilities to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in themselves and others are disposed to achieve high job performance (Slaski & Cartwrite, 2002, 2003).

## Part 2

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THE SOFT SKILLS STUDY IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

### Purpose of the Soft Skills Study

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The purpose of this study to determine the perceptions of nine human resources directors and managers in a medium size community located in the southeast of the United States regarding soft skills that need to be further developed so college graduates are better equipped to enter the workforce.

## Soft Skills Study Questions

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1. How do human resources directors define soft skills?
2. What are the most important soft skills that make a graduate a successful employee?
3. What are the soft skills that graduates are missing in today's business world?
4. What strategies are recommended to improve the teaching of soft skills?

## Criteria for Selecting Participants

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1. They needed to be human resources directors and/or managers from medium or large size companies, 300 plus employees
2. These human resources directors had direct involvement in the selection and evaluation process of employees.
3. The human resources directors were selected from companies that hire graduates from the local state college.
4. The human resources directors were from industries including hospitals, technology, and local government.
5. The human resources directors had at least two years of experience in their current company and in the local communities

## The Findings – Soft Skills Definitions

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1. Soft skills allow you to interact with people for example, through communication and teamwork.
2. Soft skills are the ability to work with people, have respectful and professional conversations, and be able to solve conflicts.
3. Soft skills are about human relations, how to interact with people, how to get along with others, and how to present yourself.
4. Soft skills are commitment, dedication, professional posture, and empathy.
5. Communication skills are the core of other soft skills, such as conflict resolution, teamwork, and leadership.

## The Findings – Evaluation of Soft Skills

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It seems that many companies do not have any formal processes in place to assess employee soft skills during the interview process or once the person has been hired. Evaluation of soft skills during the interview process is left to the interviewer's perception.

*"After the person has been hired is when we realize that the individual has communication skills problems, behavioral problems, time management problems or other issues. These problems are visible after receiving formal complaints from co-workers, supervisor(s), and external clients" P06*

*"Our lack of evaluation of soft skills has been also reflected when we have promoted people into the wrong jobs" P09*

## The Findings – Communication Skills

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Communication is the key skill among all of the soft skills and even more important than teamwork, time management, leadership, and organizational skills.

*"A person can be an exceptional scientist, but if that individual is not able to communicate effectively with others and put his or her findings in plain and simple language, the success of that individual will be very limited" P08*

*"Since people are trying to multitask all the time; they are not being effective communicators because they are not being effective listeners" P03*

## The Findings- People Skills

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After communication skills, people skills/individual's behavior are the next priority of skills that an employee needs to have.

*"When an individual starts making excuses to do something wrong that is the first symptom that the person is getting desensitized and also when that individual is not able to differentiate between a right and a wrong behavior" P07.*

*People skills and an individual's behavior are important to getting along with others. "It is leveraging diversity and understanding that each person has different values" P08.*

## The Findings – Lack of Soft Skills

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There is a difference in soft skills between a person who just graduated from college with no work experience and a person who has been already working for a few years.

In general all nine participants expressed that the lack of soft skill is something that affects an individual's professional advancement as well as an organization's productivity.

## The Findings – Importance of Soft Skills

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1. We need to have 50% soft skills and 50% technical skills.
2. Soft skills is the “golden rule”, P06, for any leader at any organization.
3. The importance of “soft skills rated from 1 to 10 is an 11” P03.

*“Regardless of an individual's perception of soft skills importance, soft skills are needed for the success of any company”  
P04.*

## Significance

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According to the American Management Association (2010), soft skills are often more difficult to train and measure than technical skills, yet they are at the top of the list for competencies that recruiters seek when hiring college graduates.

## Significance

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Soft skills are life skills that will strengthen the link between education, employers, and career opportunities for students (Ellis, Kisling & Hackworth, 2104)

# Part 3

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## SOFT SKILLS

### Soft Skills Definition - Literature

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Soft skills are personal qualities, attributes, or the level of commitment that set a person apart from other individuals that have similar skills or experience (Perreault, 2004)

Soft skills are character traits, attitudes, and behaviors – rather than technical aptitude or knowledge (Robles, 2012).

Soft skills are interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities that help an individual master performance in particular social contexts (Hurrell et al., 2012)

## Hard Skills Definition-Literature

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Hard skills are described as those technical or administrative skills that can be quantified and measured (Dixon, J., Belnap, C., Albrecht, C., & Lee, K. 2010).

## The Hard Skills-Soft Skills Continuum

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**Soft Skills**  
 Ingenuity, sense of aesthetics, learning,  
 creativity, sense of timing,  
 communications

Problem solving, attitude, tool  
 development skill transfer, process  
 development

Designing, describing, planning,  
 preparing, organizing, endurance,  
 Strength

Formula use, tool use  
**Hard Skills**

“High End”  
 Soft Skills

“High End”  
 Hard Skills

Costin, (2002)

## Hard Skills Vs Soft Skills - Literature

“We differentiate between hard skills (technical skills that involve working with equipment, data, software, etc.) and soft skills (intrapersonal skills such as one’s ability to manage oneself as well as interpersonal skills such as how one handles one’s interactions with others” (Laker and Powell, 2011, p. 112)

## Set of Soft Skills

Brungardt (2011)	Remedios (2012)	Robles (2012)	Zhang (2012)
Teamwork	Communications	Integrity	Honesty and integrity
Problem solving	Critical thinking/problem solving	Communications	Communications
Decision making	Teamwork	Courtesy	Analytical skills
Communications	Lifelong learning	Responsibility	Teamwork
	Entrepreneurship	Interpersonal skills	Interpersonal skills
	Work ethics and moral	Professionalism	Motivation
	Leadership	Positive attitude	Flexibility and adaptability
		Teamwork	Creative thinking
		Flexibility	Organizational skills
		Work ethic	

## Communication Skills

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One of the most desired attributes from an employee is the ability to communicate and convey complex ideas orally, in writing, and interpersonally (Reinsch & Gardner, 2014).

Communication skills are more effective when an individual has a higher level of emotional intelligence since the individual will engage in positive interpersonal behaviors (Troth et al., 2012).

## Communication Skills

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The importance of communication permeates all areas and members of an organization; therefore, any weakness in communication skills of employees should signify difficulties for individual professional performance that affects the entire organization (Awan and Alhashemi, 2012).

## Critical Thinking Skills

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“Deficient critical thinking skills are manifested by the inability to integrate multiple perspectives with a multiplicity of facts and determine the best course of action” (Flores et al., 2010, p. 214).

## Critical Thinking Skills

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While some scholars believe that critical thinking is a general skill, other scholars believe that an individual must develop critical thinking skills.

The disposition to critical thinking emerges from a culture of critical thinking (Blotch & Spataro, 2014).

## Critical Thinking

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If critical thinking skills are not well developed through the educational system, there will be negative consequences on how effectively and efficiently an individual could perform at work and have the ability to lead (Flores et al., 2010).

## Teamwork Skills

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An increase in team-based structure in organizations is making teamwork skills a requirement in higher education curriculums.

## Teamwork Skills

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Some scholars have noted that an individual who possess good teamwork skills has the ability to build good rapport and interact with others; has the ability to assume the role of a follower or a leader; has the ability to recognize differences and respect those differences; and has the ability to communicate and listen to others.

## Teamwork Skills

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The increasing demand on teamwork skills is because organizations are using more lateral coordination than direct supervision (Loughry & Tosi, 2008).

## Leadership Skills

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“Leadership is defined as a process whereby an individual influences a group to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2010, p. 3).

## Leadership Skills

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Successful leaders have high emotional intelligence, including self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, social skills, and empathy (Goleman, 1995)

## Leadership Skills

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Communication skills, teamwork skills, critical thinking skills, self-motivation, and professional poise are all present in a good leader (Beard, Schwieger and Surendran, 2008)

## Group Activity – Part 2

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1. Select in order of importance three soft skills that could make a student a successful employee
2. Based on previous experience in the classroom, identify situations that could be a symptom of a student has a problem with soft skills
3. Select a team spokesperson to do a three-minute presentation summarizing the team responses

## Q & A Session

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## Two More Things

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1. Evaluation: Complete training evaluation form
2. Assignment: Reflect on suitable approaches to incorporate the teaching of soft skills in your classroom

**Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success  
in the Workplace  
Evaluation Training Session 1**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Item Description</b>	<b>Poor 1</b>	<b>Fair 2</b>	<b>Good 3</b>	<b>Outstanding 4</b>
Presenter was knowledgeable				
Presenter was engaging				
Presenter allowed enough time for interaction with other participants				
Presentation was interesting				
Content was valuable and useful				
Visual materials and handouts were effective				
Group activities were effective				
Home assignments were useful				
Training objectives were achieved				
Overall the training met my expectations				
		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Maybe</b>
I will recommend this training session to other faculty members				
I have learned something new and valuable				
What would you change or add to this training session?				

**Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success in the  
Workplace  
Faculty Development Training  
Session 2 (6 hours)**

Facilitator: Gloria A. Meeks

**Training Objectives**

The objectives are formulated to help participants:

- Learn different methodologies to teach soft skills
- Encourage attendees to select an approach to teach soft skills that better meet their teaching environment

**Training Resources and Materials**

- Large classroom with round tables and seating for 24 participants
- Sound system, screen, data projector, laptop and PowerPoint – 42 slides
- Video camera
- White board with markers and eraser
- 24 name tags
- 24 notepads/journal (3-hole punched)
- 24 pens, pencils, and highlighters
- 24 binders
- 24 sets of handouts of the Power Point presentation (3-hole punched)
- 24 training agendas
- 24 envelopes with the classroom activity forms
- 24 evaluation forms

**Training Agenda**

- Welcome remarks, participants introduction, and ground rules
- Training objectives
- Opening session – Activity No 1
- Introduction to methodologies to teach soft skills
- Soft skills courses
- Soft skills course – Activity No 2
- Break
- Cooperative learning approach
- Cooperative learning – Activity No 3
- Lunch

- Soft skills portfolio
- Soft skills portfolio – Activity No 4
- Break
- Embedding soft skills
- Embedding soft skill – Activity No 5
- Team project/Create a portfolio – Activity No 6
- Q & A session
- Complete training evaluation form
- Assignments for next training session

## Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success in the Work Environment

### Lesson Plan - Training Session 2

Time	Description
8:30 am– 8:40 am	<p><b>Welcome remarks, and ground rules,</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants will be provided with the needed materials on the training.</li> <li>• Ground rules will be reminded               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Group activities are time limited</li> <li>✓ Discussions are about experiences and not about particular individuals</li> <li>✓ Respectfully agree to disagree</li> <li>✓ Allow others to express their opinions</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
8:40 am – 9:00 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training objectives will be presented.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Learn different methodologies to teach soft skills</li> <li>✓ Encourage attendees to select an approach to teach soft skills that better meet their teaching environment</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Participants will share their reflections on suitable approaches to teach soft skills – <b>Activity 1</b></li> </ul>
9:00 am.– 10: 10 am	<p><b>Introduction to Methodologies to Teach Soft Skills</b> Participants will be introduced to the concept of teaching soft skills.</p> <p><b>Soft Skills Courses Approach</b> Participants will learn about soft skill courses as a methodology to teach soft skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to the Leadership and Professional Development Program</li> <li>• Introduction to the University Kebangsaan Soft Skills course</li> </ul>
10:20 am – 10:20 am	<b>Break</b>

10:20 am – 10:30 am	<p><b>Soft Skills Course – Activity No 2</b></p> <p>After learning the first methodology, participants will answer, write down in the journal, and share with others the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you were to use this methodology, what would be the pros and cons?</li> <li>• What resources would you need to implement this methodology?</li> <li>• How long would it take you to implement this methodology?</li> <li>• When would you like to start implementing this methodology?</li> </ul>
10: 30 am – 11:30 am	<p><b>Cooperative Learning Approach</b></p> <p>Participants will be introduced to the cooperative learning approach and different strategies to apply this methodology.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction to the Affinity Group Model</li> </ul>
11:30 am – 11:40am	<p><b>Cooperative Learning Approach- Activity No 3</b></p> <p>After learning the first methodology, participants will answer, write down in the journal, and share with others the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you were to apply this methodology, what would be the pros and cons?</li> <li>• What resources would you need to implement this methodology?</li> <li>• How long would it take you to implement this methodology?</li> <li>• When would you like to start implementing this methodology?</li> </ul>
11:40 a.m. – 12:40 pm	<p><b>Lunch</b></p>
12:40 pm – 1:20 pm	<p><b>Portfolio Approach</b></p> <p>Participants will be introduced to the portfolio methodology and will learn how it can be incorporated in any academic discipline.</p>
1:20 pm- 1:30 pm	<p><b>Portfolio Approach Activity – No 4</b></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you were to apply this methodology, what would be the pros and cons?</li> <li>• What resources would you need to implement this methodology?</li> <li>• How long would it take you to implement this methodology?</li> <li>• When would you like to start implementing this methodology?</li> </ul>
1:30 pm – 1:40 pm.	<b>Break</b>
1:40 pm – 2:15 pm	<p><b>Embedding Soft Skills Approach</b></p> <p>Participants will be introduced to the embedding soft skills approach and will learn how it can be incorporated in any academic discipline</p>
2:15 pm – 2:25 pm	<p><b>Embedding Soft Skills Approach Activity – No 5</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you were to apply this methodology, what would be the pros and cons?</li> <li>• What resources would you need to implement this methodology?</li> <li>• How long would it take you to implement this methodology?</li> <li>• When would you like to start implementing this methodology?</li> </ul>
2:25 pm – 2:45 pm	<p><b>Team Project/Create a Portfolio – Activity – No 6</b></p> <p><b>Participants</b></p> <p>Participants will be instructed to work in teams of three people. There will be two conditions to form the teams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The team must be different from the team in training session 1</li> <li>• The team members must be from similar teaching disciplines</li> </ul> <p>To complete this group activity team members need to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Select a topic</li> <li>✓ Identify objectives</li> <li>✓ Outline tasks and activities</li> <li>✓ Establish assessment methodology</li> </ul>

	<p>Participants are advised to select one person who will be presenting the outlined portfolio in 3 minutes.</p>
2:45 pm – 3:00 pm	<p><b>Q &amp; A Session, Complete Evaluation Form, and Assignment for Training Session</b></p> <p>The assignment for the next training session will be to complete the checklist factors form which is a tool that will help them to make an informed decision on the appropriate methodology.</p>

**Training Session 2**  
**Slides 1 to 42**

# Critical Soft Skills to Achieve Success in the Workplace

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TRAINING SESSION 2

PRESENTER: GLORIA A. MEEKS

## Training Objectives

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1. Learn about the different methodologies to teach soft skills
2. Select an approach to teach soft skills

## Classroom Activity – Part 1

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Share your responses from the last training assignment

What was your reflection on suitable approaches to incorporate the teaching of soft skills?

## Methodologies to Teach Soft Skills

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Four methodologies have been selected for this training session:

1. Soft skills courses
2. Cooperative learning
3. Soft skills portfolios
4. Embedding soft skills

## Teaching Soft Skills

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Scholars agree that soft skills are a major asset for graduates when competing for job openings in addition to excellent academic results in hard skills.

## Teaching Soft Skills

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Educators need to be able and should be expected to train the workforce of today and tomorrow in the soft skills as well as the hard skills needed by employers (Ellis et al., 2014).

## Teaching Soft Skills

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1. The learning of soft skills is not limited to four or five methodologies.
2. Students can also develop their soft skills through coursework, internships, academic, and non-academic experiences.
3. An institution could develop its own model based on its resources.
4. A methodology to teach soft skills could be a combination of different approaches.

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---

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2. Students can also develop their soft skills through coursework, internships, academic, and non-academic experiences.
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4. A methodology to teach soft skills could be a combination of different approaches.

## Teaching Soft Skills

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The notion that one size fits all is no longer acceptable and the academic community is obligated to make attempts to respond to the diversity of learners (Chadha, 2006).

## Teaching Soft Skills

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Chadha proposes three approaches to teach soft skills:

-  Embedding: no direct reference is made to the development of the soft skills and the emphasis is given to the technical skill.
-  Bolting-on (stand-alone): skills are developed independently of the core discipline and the learning of the skills becomes very explicit.
-  Integrating: skills are developed explicitly with the core discipline and the same amount of emphasis is placed on both sets of skills.

## Soft Skills Course

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Two examples of soft skills courses

1. South Carolina State University
2. University of Kebangsaan Malaysia

## South Carolina State University (SCSU)

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There is no consensus among various stakeholders, such as employers, scholars, academic student advisors, and students on the emphasis that should be placed on soft skills in the academic setting (Winsted et al., 2009).

## South Carolina State University (SCSU)

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There is no consensus among various stakeholders, such as employers, scholars, academic student advisors, and students on the emphasis that should be placed on soft skills in the academic setting (Winsted et al., 2009).

## (SCSU) Soft Skills Course

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In 2002, SCSU formally implemented the Leadership and Professional Development Program (LAPD) to equip students with the necessary soft skills to successfully “advanced their careers as responsible corporate and community citizens” (Winsted et al., 2009).

## SCSU Soft Skills Course

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The LAPD Model objective is the development of personal and professional skills based on multi-levels of leadership and accountability training, in which there is holistic growth of the individual.

## SCSU Soft Skills Course

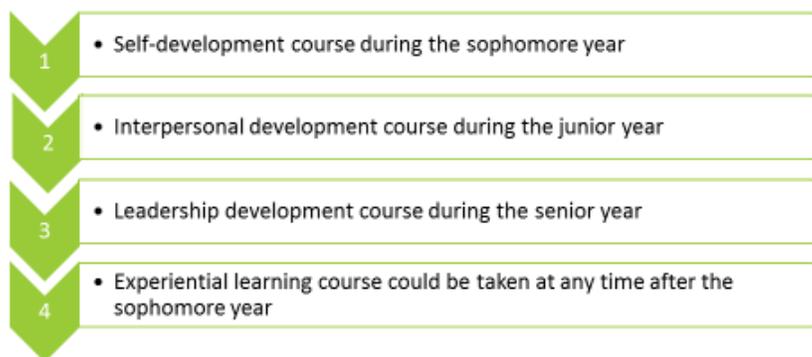
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The LAPD Model incorporates in the courses:

1. Written assignments
2. Team building projects
3. Presentations
4. Discussions
5. Web – portfolio
6. Time management
7. Service-learning projects
8. Ethics
9. Role playing
10. Mock interviews
11. *An Executive Speaker series*

## SCSU Soft Skills Course

### The LAPD Model Courses



## SCSU Course and Competencies

### Professional Development 1 – Self Development (Example)

Competency	Description
Self-Awareness	Ability to identify personal interests, values, strengths, weaknesses and preferences
Company and Career Research	Ability to locate and utilize information sources to conduct company and career search
Time Management	Ability to prioritize assignments and manage time effectively
Career Marketing	Ability to market one's skills and abilities
Image Consciousness	Ability to project a professional image
Ethics	Ability to build trust and internalize honesty and integrity

## University Kebangsaan Malaysia- Soft Skills Course

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The implementation of the soft skills development course is based on a learning contract approach.

The learning contract is signed by the student and the instructor.

This course has eight main objectives that are accomplished through curricular and co-curricular activities.

## University Kebangsaan Malaysia- Soft Skills Course

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The contract includes the eight objectives, tasks, methods, timeframes, and assessment methods.

The theory learned in the classroom is practiced through the activities outlined and accepted in the contract.

## University Kebangsaan Malaysia- Soft Skills Course

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### Objectives

1. Social skills and accountability
2. Communication skills
3. Information management and lifelong learning
4. Values, attitudes, ethics, and professionalism
5. Critical thinking, problem solving and scientific approach
6. Leadership and teamwork
7. Management and entrepreneurship
8. Creativity and innovation

## University Kebangsaan Malaysia- Soft Skills Course Values

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## Soft Skills Course - Activity 1

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After completing the first methodology, please answer the following questions:

1. If you were to use this methodology, what would be the pros and cons?
2. What resources would you need to implement this methodology?
3. How long would it take you to implement this methodology?
4. When would you like to start implementing this methodology?

## Cooperative Learning

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Cooperative learning is defined as a “learning atmosphere that focuses on group identification and working with peers in a constructive manner” (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

## Cooperative Learning

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1. The student takes an active role in learning.
2. The instructor's role is to facilitate the learning experience instead of lecturing.
3. Activities are done in groups; therefore, it requires communication, trust, conflict resolution, and sharing.
4. It provides good scenarios to practice, gain, and improve soft skills.
5. It requires that the teacher and the student pay attention to what is going on in the groups and actively work to make the group more productive.

## Cooperative Learning

---

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4. It provides good scenarios to practice, gain, and improve soft skills.
5. It requires that the teacher and the student pay attention to what is going on in the groups and actively work to make the group more productive.

## Cooperative Learning

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Zhang (2012) proposes to use forms to measure soft skills learning.

1. Class peer evaluation
2. Group peer evaluation

## Cooperative Learning – Assessment Form

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Use Likert scale to measure each item: 1-very poor, 2-poor, 3-neutral, 4-good, 5-excellent

Class peer evaluation	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of reading and studying materials					
Content and clarity of the materials					
Delivery of lecture and presentations					
How well did you learn from the group?					
Overall evaluation of this group					
Overall evaluation of member 1					
Overall evaluation of member 2					

Note. Adapted from "Cooperative Learning and Soft Skills Training in an IT Course" by A. Zhang, 2012, *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, 12, p.78

## Cooperative Learning- The Affinity Group Model

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This model is built around the cooperative learning approach since it incorporates five basic elements.

1. Every member is crucial for the success
2. Each member supports the other
3. Each member does a fair share of work
4. The instructor teaches the group skills
5. All group members must reflect on how the group is functioning

## Cooperative Learning - Activity 2

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After completing the first methodology, please answer the following questions:

1. If you were to use this methodology, what would be the pros and cons?
2. What resources would you need to implement this methodology?
3. How long would it take you to implement this methodology?
4. When would you like to start implementing this methodology?

## Portfolio

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A portfolio is a way to demonstrate that the student has changed his or her behavior and that the change is visible.

If the portfolio methodology is properly applied, it is a significant formative tool that could help the individual conduct self-reflection on his or her performance.

## Portfolio

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It is an assessment tool and a learning methodology that has been used in higher education to teach in different disciplines.

## Benefits of Using Portfolios

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1. It is a personalized statement of a student achievement
2. It facilitates collaborative learning
3. It is an element of interaction by generating active involvement and continuous feedback
4. It help an instructor refine the criteria for assessment purposes

## Prototype of a Soft Skills Portfolio

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Topic	Content
Communication portfolio	Written, oral and non-verbal
Time management portfolio	Student activity log, prioritization lists, project diary
Conflict management portfolio	Reflective essay, group discussion-audio recording, role playing video recording
Stress management portfolio	Stress journal, case analysis, management game-video recording

## Portfolio - Activity 3

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After completing the first methodology, please answer the following questions:

1. If you were to use this methodology, what would be the pros and cons?
2. What resources would you need to implement this methodology?
3. How long would it take you to implement this methodology?
4. When would you like to start implementing this methodology?

## Embedding Soft Skills

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To guarantee the success of this methodology, the instructor must be an expert in the teaching discipline and in the soft skills subject matter.

Soft skills are better transferred when they are integrated into interdisciplinary courses than as a stand-alone subject.

( Devadson, Subramaniam & Daniel, 2010)

## Embedding Soft Skills

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Beard and Schwieger (2008) stated that to be a successful an approach needs:

1. To have a definition of objectives and goals
2. To have tailored activities to achieve those goals
3. To have an assessment system in place
4. To have an improvement plan after the evaluation

## Embedding Soft Skills

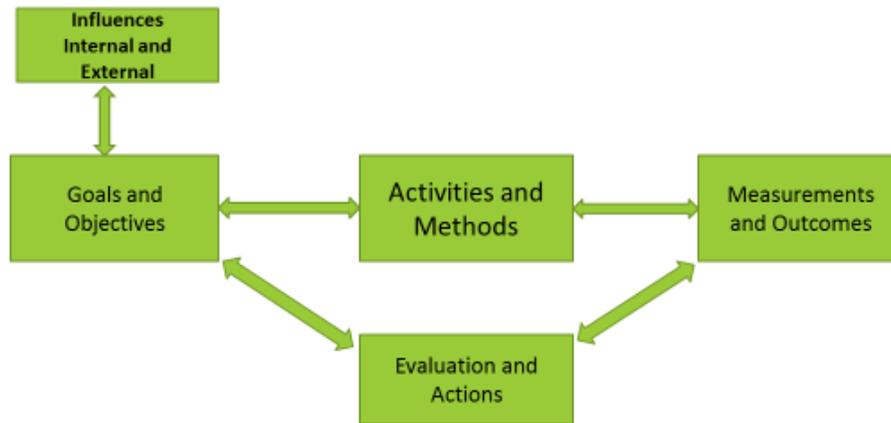
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According to Hassan et al., (2014) from the faculty standpoint the approach needs:

1. To attend courses in soft skills
2. To teach the soft skills across the curriculum
3. To prepare soft skills guidelines, execution, and components
4. To explain components of the soft skills

## Integration of Soft Skills Model- Beard and Schwieger

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## Embedding Approach - Activity 4

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After completing the first methodology, please answer the following questions:

1. If you were to use this methodology, what would be the pros and cons?
2. What resources would you need to implement this methodology?
3. How long would it take you to implement this methodology?
4. When would you like to start implementing this methodology?

## Team Project/Create Portfolio - Activity 5

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1. Select topic
2. Identify objectives
3. Outline tasks and activities
4. Establish assessment methodology

## Q&A Session

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## Two More Things

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1. Evaluation: Complete training evaluation form
2. Assignment: Complete checklist factors for selecting the right approach

**Checklist Factors to Implement a Soft Skills Methodology- Training  
Session 2-Assignment**

Item	Yes	No	Not Sure
There will be administrative support for the project			
The administrator supporting the project will be in place for at least two years			
Administrators will allow enough time for designing, testing, and revising the new approach			
There will be enough faculty from different disciplines willing to support and get involved in the project			
Participants in the project will be willing to follow the selected model			
There will be enough financial and structural resources to support the project			
Faculty involved in the project will have sufficient time to get trained			
There will be other enough people from student support services supporting the project			

**Comments**


**Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success  
in the Work Environment  
Evaluation Training Session 2**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Item Description</b>	<b>Poor 1</b>	<b>Fair 2</b>	<b>Good 3</b>	<b>Outstanding 4</b>
Presenter was knowledgeable				
Presenter was engaging				
Presenter allowed enough time for interaction with other participants				
Presentation was interesting				
Content was valuable and useful				
Visual materials and handouts were effective				
Group activities were effective				
Home assignments were useful				
Training objectives were achieved				
Overall the training met my expectations				
		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Maybe</b>
I will recommend this training session to other faculty members				
I have learned something new and valuable				
What would you change or add to this training session?				

**Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success in the Work  
Environment  
Faculty Development Training  
Session 3 (6 hours)**

Facilitator: Gloria A. Meeks

**Learning Objectives**

The learning objectives are formulated to help participants:

- to learn three common methodologies that companies use to evaluate soft skills
- to assist trainees in adapting their own methodology to teach soft skills that better meet their teaching environment and create a pilot program

**Training Resources and Materials**

- Large classroom with round tables and seating for 24 participants
- Sound system, screen, data projector, laptop and PowerPoint
- Video camera
- White board with markers and eraser
- 24 name tags
- 24 notepads/journal (3-hole punched)
- 24 pens, pencils, and highlighters
- 24 binders
- 24 sets of handouts of the Power Point presentation (3-hole punched)
- 24 training agendas
- 24 envelopes with the classroom activity forms
- 24 copies of Chapter 17, Designing the Learning Experience by Robert M. Diamond
- 24 evaluation forms

**Training Agenda**

- Welcome remarks, and ground rules reminder
- Training objectives
- Share assignment from Session 2 – Activity 1
- Introduction to Gibbs theories
- Break
- Gibbs theories
- Pilot program development
- Lunch break
- Pilot program development

- Break
- Pilot program
- Q & A session
- Complete training evaluation form
- Assignments for next training session

**Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success in the Work Environment**  
**Lesson Plan - Training Session 3**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>
8:30 am– 8:40 am	<p><b>Welcome remarks, and ground rules,</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants will be provided with the needed materials on the training.</li> <li>• Ground rules will be reminded               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Group activities are time limited</li> <li>✓ Discussions are about experiences and not about particular individuals</li> <li>✓ Respectfully agree to disagree</li> <li>✓ Allow others to express their opinions</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
8:40 am – 9:00 am	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training objectives will be presented.               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ to learn three common methodologies that corporate America implement to evaluate soft skills,</li> <li>✓ to assist trainees in adapting their own methodology to teach</li> <li>✓ to work on the pilot program to teach soft skills</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Participants will share the information recorded on the checklist form– <b>Activity 1</b></li> </ul>
9:00 am.– 10: 10 am	<p><b>Gibbs theories</b>            Participants will be introduced to the three different approaches to assess soft skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control theory</li> <li>• Goal setting theory</li> <li>• Attribution theory</li> </ul>
10:20 am – 10:20 am	<b>Break</b>
10:20 am – 11:00 am	<b>Gibbs theories</b>

1100 am– 11:45 am	<p><b>Pilot Program – Methodology Development</b></p> <p>Participants will be asked to identify a classmate from the same discipline or a similar discipline to develop a pilot program with the selected methodology that they would like to implement. Each participant will develop his or her own pilot program</p> <p>To develop this new initiative, based on information collected from these four areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Characteristics of the student population</li> <li>• The desires and needs of the society</li> <li>• The educational priority of the institution</li> <li>• The requirements of the appropriate field of knowledge</li> </ul> <p>All participants will receive a copy of Chapter 17, Designing the Learning Experience by Robert M. Diamond (2008).</p> <p>Participants will be invited to read this chapter before starting work on the methodology.</p>
11:45 am-12:45 pm	<p><b>Lunch Break</b></p>
12:45 pm- 2:00 pm	<p><b>Methodology Development</b></p> <p>Participants will continue working on the proposed methodology based on the conditions quoted before.</p> <p>The pilot program will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selected methodology</li> <li>• List of resources available and needed</li> <li>• Foreseen obstacles to implement this approach</li> <li>• Faculty and staff involved</li> <li>• Curriculum outline including goals and learning outcomes</li> <li>• Assessment tool to evaluate the program, including how and when the program will be evaluated</li> </ul>
2:00 pm – 2:10 pm.	<p><b>Break</b></p>
2:10 pm – 2:45 pm	<p>Participants will continue working on the proposed methodology</p>

2:45 pm – 3:00 pm	<p data-bbox="581 254 1382 331"><b>Q &amp; A Session, Evaluation Form, and Assignment for Training Session</b></p> <p data-bbox="581 384 1393 630">The assignment for the next training session will be to share the draft of the pilot program with other faculty members of the institution as well as the department chair. Participants will need to complete the pilot program before the next training session and produce handouts for the pilot program presentation.</p>
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**Training Session 3**  
**Slides 1 to 22**

# Critical Soft Skills to Achieve Success in the Workplace

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TRAINING SESSION 3

PRESENTER: GLORIA A. MEEKS

## Training Objectives

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1. Learn about the different methodologies that corporate America implements to evaluate soft skills
2. Redefine methodology to teach soft skills
3. Work on pilot program to teach soft skills

## Training Objectives

---

1. Learn about the different methodologies that corporate America implements to evaluate soft skills
2. Redefine methodology to teach soft skills
3. Work on pilot program to teach soft skills

## Classroom Activity – Part 1

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Share responses from last training assignment.

What were your findings based on the checklist factors?

## Methodologies to Assess Soft Skills- Gibb

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Gibb (2013) recommends three different methodologies to assess soft skills:

1. Control theory
2. Goal setting theory
3. Attribution theory

## Soft Skills Assessment - Literature

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Researchers have noted two roadblocks when trying to assess soft skills in the work environment:

- The list of soft skills is very diverse
- The assessment could be very subjective

## Soft Skills Assessment - Literature

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“The goal of assessing soft skills is to measure the congruency between what students learn at college and what companies are expecting from them after graduation”(Chamorro-Prezumic et al., 2010).

## Control Theory - Literature

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The assessment is produced by comparing a reference level of performance and the actual level of performance.

## Control Theory - Literature

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1. It produces feedback to close the performance gap
2. The individual could feel threatened by the feedback and could generate a negative reaction
3. The evaluated individual should receive a reference level of performance
4. It would be valuable to produce a clear definition on the soft skills that would be assessed

## Goal Setting Theory - Literature

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The assessment is produced based on goals that have been previously identified.

## Goal Setting Theory - Literature

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1. There must be consensus between the subordinate and supervisor on the goals
2. Goals must be achievable, but they still have some level of difficulty
3. The evaluator needs to provide on-going feedback to minimize challenges and help the individual stay focused

## Attribution Theory - Literature

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This theory is based on success or failure being attributed to internal or external circumstances.

**Success is attributed to internal circumstances**

**Failure is attributed to external circumstances**

## Pilot Program – Soft Skills Methodology

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The initiative must be developed based on collecting information from four areas :

1. Characteristics of the student population
2. The desires and needs of the society
3. The educational priority of the institution
4. The requirements of the appropriate field of knowledge

## Pilot Program – Student Population

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“To select the appropriate methodology it is necessary to seek information from students and characteristics of the population” (Diamond, 2008).

## Pilot Program – Student Population

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Different groups may require different objectives, procedures, and instructional elements.

## Pilot Program – The Society

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1. The needs could be considered at local or at national level.
2. We must anticipate the needs of future employers.
3. It is useful to seek information from employers, academic partners, and alumni.

## Pilot Program – The Society

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Quality employees will always need communication, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, and critical thinking competencies regardless of their fields and professional roles (Diamond, 2008).

## Pilot Program – Educational Priority

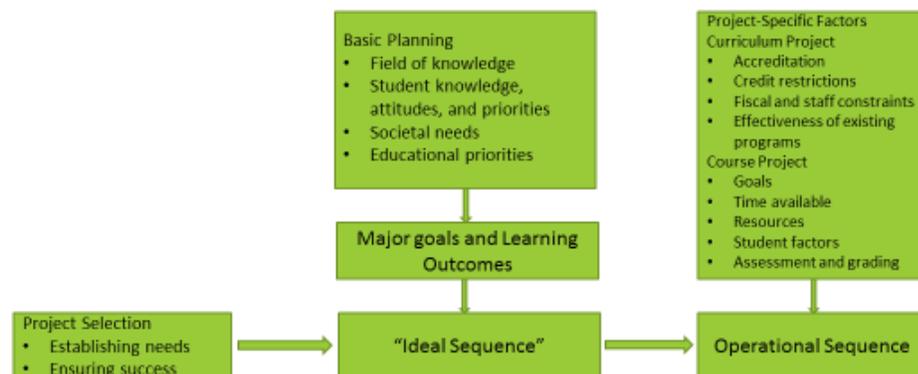
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1. Identify if the program will meet the academic mission and vision of the institution
2. Identify how the program will meet the academic mission and vision
3. Identify how the program will be impacted by the reviewing criteria of the accrediting agency or agencies

## Pilot Program – Field of Knowledge

1. Content of the program
2. Structure and time
3. Student factors
4. Related research
5. Evaluation

## The Model - Project Selection and Design



Note. Adapted from "Designing and Assessing Courses and Curricula" by Robert Diamond, 2008, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

## Classroom Activity – Part 2

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Based on the information learned and the selected methodology, create a pilot program to teach soft skills.

Follow the guidelines outlined on your handout.

## Q&A Session

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## Two More Things

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1. Evaluation: Complete training evaluation form
2. Assignment: Complete the pilot program for the next training session

**Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success in the Work  
Environment  
Faculty Development Training  
Session 4 (6 hours)**

Facilitator: Gloria A. Meeks

**Training Objectives**

The objectives are formulated to help participants:

- acquire a new perspective in teaching soft skills based on the pilot programs proposed during the final presentations
- assist participants in identifying strengths and weaknesses on the proposed methodology

**Training Resources and Materials**

- Large classroom with round tables and seating for 24 participants
- Sound system, screen, data projector, laptop and PowerPoint
- Video camera
- White board with markers and eraser
- 24 name tags
- 24 notepads/journal (3-hole punched)
- 24 pens, pencils, and highlighters
- 24 binders
- 24 sets of handouts of the Power Point presentation (3-hole punched)
- 24 training agendas
- 24 envelopes with the classroom activity forms
- 24 sets of handout of the final presentation
- 24 certificate of completion
- 24 evaluation forms

**Training Agenda**

- Welcome remarks, and ground rules reminder
- Presentations
- Break
- Presentations
- Lunch break
- Presentations
- Break
- Certificate of completion

- Q & A session
- Complete training evaluation form

**Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success in the Work Environment**  
**Lesson Plan - Training Session 4**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Description</b>
8:30 am– 8:40 am	<p><b>Welcome remarks, and ground rules,</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants will be provided with the needed materials on the training.</li> <li>• Ground rules will be reminded               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Group activities are time limited</li> <li>✓ Discussions are about experiences and not about particular individuals</li> <li>✓ Respectfully agree to disagree</li> <li>✓ Allow others to express their opinions</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
8:40 am – 9:00 am	<p>Training objectives will be presented.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• acquire a new perspective in teaching soft skills based on the pilot programs proposed during the final presentations</li> <li>• assist participants in identifying strengths and weaknesses on the proposed methodology</li> </ul>
9:00 am.– 10: 00 am	<p><b>Pilot Program Presentations</b></p> <p>Participants will have between 15-20 minutes to present the pilot program. Time presentation will be assigned based on the total number of participants.</p> <p>Participants will be asked to prepare a Power Point presentation and produce handouts with the most significant information.</p> <p>The pilot program presentation will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selected methodology</li> <li>• List of resources available and needed</li> <li>• Foreseen obstacles to implement this approach</li> <li>• Faculty and staff involved</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum outline including goals and learning outcomes</li> <li>• Assessment tool to evaluate the program, including how and when the program will be evaluated</li> </ul>
10:00am – 10:10 am	<b>Break</b>
10:10 am – 11:45am	<p><b>Pilot Program Presentations</b></p> <p>Participants will continue with their presentations.</p>
11:45 am-12:45 pm	<b>Lunch Break</b>
12:45 pm- 1:50 pm	<b>Pilot Program Presentations</b>
1:50 pm– 2:00 pm	<b>Break</b>
2:00 pm – 3:00 pm	<b>Certificate of Completion, Q &amp; A Session, and Evaluation Form</b>

***Creating Effective Soft Skills Training to Achieve Success  
in the Workplace***

Evaluation Training Session 4

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Location: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Item Description</b>	<b>Poor 1</b>	<b>Fair 2</b>	<b>Good 3</b>	<b>Outstanding 4</b>
Presenter was knowledgeable				
Presenter was engaging				
Presenter allowed enough time for interaction with other participants				
Presentation was interesting				
Content was valuable and useful				
Visual materials and handouts were effective				
Group activities were effective				
Home assignments were useful				
Training objectives were achieved				
Overall the training met my expectations				
		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Maybe</b>
I will recommend this training session to other faculty members				
I have learned something new and valuable				
What would you change or add to this training session?				

**Training Session 4**  
**Slides 1 to 9**

# Critical Soft Skills to Achieve Success in the Workplace

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TRAINING SESSION 4

PRESENTER: GLORIA A. MEEKS

## Training Objectives

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1. Present pilot program training
2. Receive a certificate of completion

## Presentations

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1. Each participant will have 20 minutes to introduce his/her soft skills pilot program
2. Participants will provide handouts to the rest of the attendees
3. Presentations will be video recorded

## Pilot Program - Topics Included

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- Methodology selected based on the needs and resources available
- List of resources available and needed, including academic, time, technology, and funding
- Foreseen obstacles or anticipated challenges that could delay the program implementation

## Pilot Program - Topics Included

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- Faculty and staff that will be invited to act as an advisory board for the new program
- Outline of the curriculum including goals and learning outcomes
- How and when the program will be evaluated

## Feedback Form

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Complete evaluation form and provide feedback to each presenter.

## Q&A Session

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## Two More Things

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- ❖ Complete an evaluation form
- ❖ Receive a certificate of completion

Thank you!

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## Appendix B: Emailed Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Study

Subject Line: Invitation to Participate in the Study of Critical Soft Skills in the Workplace to Achieve Success.

Dear Human Resources \_\_\_\_\_,

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting in the community. The study is part of my doctoral study at Walden University. I am researching the perception of human resources directors and managers regarding soft skills that need to be enhanced in college graduates for career success. I hope that by interviewing professionals in human resources, I can help identify strategies to better prepare college students to meet the needs of the labor market.

Here is an outline of what will take place during the study:

- If you confirm that you would like to participate in the study, you will receive a consent form in the mail in a provided postage pre-paid envelope. You will need to sign and return the consent form before we can proceed with the study. Once I receive it I will call you to schedule the interview.
- We will meet in person at any location of your preference for a 45-60 minute interview. One of the possible suggested locations to meet is at the public library closest to you. The interview will be recorded to ensure that the information is accurate. During the interview, you may refuse to answer specific questions or ask that I not use the audio-recording.
- After the interview, I will email you a transcription (written summary) of our interview. After you have had opportunity to review the summary, we will have a 10-minute telephone call where you can offer any additions to the summary or clarify anything that I may have misunderstood.
- I will write up the results of the study, which will include the information of 12 human resources professionals in total. Those results will be shared with Walden University. Furthermore, the study will be published. To protect your identity, your name will not be used in the study nor will the name of the company be included in this study.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Therefore, even if you agree to participate, you may withdraw at any time without consequence. Should you agree to participate in this study, your contributions may help future college graduates. In appreciation of your time, you will receive a \$10 gift card from a local coffee shop.

If you have any questions, please contact me via phone at [REDACTED] or by email at [REDACTED]. You may also contact at Walden University, [REDACTED] to talk privately about your rights as a participant.

If you are interested in the study, please respond to this email within the next three calendar days by responding to the questions below. Once I receive your response, I will mail you a consent form. The form must be returned (in a provided postage-paid envelope) within eight (8) days of the date on the form.

Participants who have not provided any response to this initial email may expect a second short email reminding them about this initial invitation. Also, it is possible to receive another email if I reach the maximum of participants for the study to inform you that the limit has been reached.

**Inclusion Criteria:**

- Must be a human resources director or a human resources manager
- Must have at least two years of experience in their current company and local communities
- Must have experience hiring and doing performance review at their current company
- Must be working in an industry which includes technology, health, and local government/general business

Please indicate your interest by answering Yes or No to each of the questions below. Kindly respond no later than \_\_\_\_\_.

1. Are you interested in participating in a study of Critical Soft Skills in the Work Environment?
2. Are you a human resources director or a manager?
3. Have you been in your organization for at least two years?
4. Do you have any involvement in the selection process of your company's employees?
5. Do you have any involvement in the performance review process of your company's employees?
6. Please provide the address where I should mail the consent form:
7. Please provide your telephone number and the best times to contact you:

Thank you for considering participating in this project.

Sincerely,  
Gloria A. Meeks  
Doctoral Student  
Walden University

## Appendix C: Email to Interested Participants Who Were Not Selected for the Study

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for expressing your interest in participating in my study of *Critical Soft Skills in the Work Environment to Achieve Success*. There has been great interest in this study, and the limit has been reached on the number of participants. Therefore, I will not interview you at this time. However, if one of the participants withdraws, I hope that you will be willing to join the study at that time. Should space open up, I will contact you. Thank you once again for your interest and support.

Sincerely,

Gloria A. Meeks, Doctoral Student  
Walden University

## Appendix D: Email to Respondents Who Agree to Participate in the Study

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the study of *Critical Soft Skills in the Work Environment to Achieve Success*. You will receive a consent form in the mail within 3 days at the address that you provided in your email. Please return the signed consent form using the provided self-addressed postage-paid envelope. You must return the form by \_\_\_\_\_ to confirm your participation in the study. Once I receive your returned form, I will call you to schedule an interview. I will provide you with a copy of your signed consent form at the interview. If you have any questions, please call me at [REDACTED] or email 123. Again, thank you for your interest in my study.

Sincerely,

Gloria A. Meeks  
Doctoral Student  
Walden University

## Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

***Introduction Script:***

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me. Our interview should take 45 to 60 minutes and will include a series of questions to find out your perception about the soft skills and their importance in the job readiness of college graduates. The information from this interviews will provide key information that potentially will serve as a platform to create new strategies to better prepare students while they are still in college.

With your permission, I would like to audio record our interview so that I may be able to accurately document your perceptions and experiences. Please answer your questions honestly and when possible, provide some examples to better illustrate your responses. I will not use your name or any organization's name. Your responses will be used only for the study, and they will not be used for any other purpose. You have the freedom to answer all the questions, part of the questions, or refuse to answer questions. You may also ask me to stop the recording at any time. Do you have any questions at this point?

After we conclude our interview, I will transcribe our conversation, which means that I will put the recorded information in writing. Then I will email you a copy of the summary and ask you to review that summary. Once you have completed reviewing the summary, I will contact you for a 10-minute interview on the phone. During the phone interview, you will have an opportunity to add any additional information or clarify something that I may have misunderstood.

Prior to this interview, you signed a consent form indicating that your participation in this interview is completely voluntary; therefore, you may withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. During the interview, if you would like to take a break or revisit a previous question please let me know.

**General background questions:**

1. How long have you been working in the human resources field as manager or director?

I have been in HR for 9 years and 3 years for this organization.

2. How long have you been working for this company?

**Questions regarding definition of soft skills?**

3. How do you define soft skills?
4. Could you give some examples of soft skills?

**Questions regarding importance of soft skills**

5. What do you think are the most important soft skills for professionals in the industry in which you are working? Please provide a brief description of the top four soft skills.
6. How significant are soft skills for a professional to advance in his/her career?
7. In general, what do you think are the most important soft skills that make a graduate a successful employee?

**Questions assessing soft skills:**

8. What strategies does your company have in place to evaluate soft skills in a job applicant?
9. How does your company evaluate employees' soft skills?
10. If there is no system in place to evaluate soft skills, how do you identify if an employee is missing some soft skills?

**Questions regarding lack of soft skills:**

11. What are the soft skills that graduates are missing in today's business world?
12. How much does the lack of soft skills affect an individual's job performance? Please provide an example.

13. How much does the lack of soft skills affect an organization's productivity?  
Please provide an example

**Questions regarding training in soft skills**

14. What are the programs or strategies that your company has in place to improve employees' soft skills?
15. What percentage of the time and financial resources does your company invest in helping employees improve their soft skills?
16. What strategies do you recommend to improve the teaching of soft skills at the college level?

**Final question:**

17. Before concluding our interview, is there anything else you would like to share?

***Conclusion Script:***

I anticipate having our interview transcribed within the next five calendar days. I will email you a summary of your interview for your review so that you may offer any additional comments or changes. I will use my Walden University's email to send you the transcription. Again, thank you so much for participating in this interview about soft skills.

## Appendix F: Confidentiality Agreement

Name of Signer:

During the course of my involvement as external auditor in this research project titled: Critical Soft Skills in the Work Environment to Achieve Success, I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement, I acknowledge and agree that:

- I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
- I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
- I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant's name is not used.
- I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
- I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
- I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
- I will only access or use systems or devices I'm officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature:

Date: