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Cultivating a Cohesive Workplace by Integrating Soft Skills Training in Professional Development Programs and Resources

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Introduction

There are three rationales for this research topic. First, civil service employees are hired and promoted to a supervising role with little to no experience in managing people; second, employees are not equipped to handle critical situations under pressure effectively; and third, there is a lack of efficient communication in the workplace that hinders the momentum toward productive teamwork and organizational success. In today's society, the importance of utilizing soft skills during strenuous circumstances is vital to the success of, not only one's own career, but also the success of his or her employees and the entire company. A career entails more than the required curriculum learned to fulfill job duties, a sensitive demeanor with strong leadership skills, combined with a customer-oriented mentality in a diverse culture is an essential asset to hiring managers looking to add an impressive asset to the organization (Majid et al., 2019).

Leadership abilities, communication skills, time management capabilities, empathy, and organization are just some of the desired soft skills in an employee. Unfortunately, these customer service skills are hard to evaluate during the hiring process and are typically not learned in college curriculum, even though they make up more than three-quarters of a person's success (Majid et al., 2019). Additionally, critical thinking is a necessity in a face-paced environment with urgent deadlines and in immediate crisis situations. Soft skills are imperative in career development, organizational advancement and cohesive collaboration and should be fostered accordingly (Naamati Schneider et al., 2020).

The rules for hiring a university civil service employee differ from that of a public sector job. Hiring managers must interview only those individuals who are at the top of a register for a specific position or classification. For an employee to be placed on a register and subsequently, considered for the position, he or she must score high on an exam tailored for that job. Depending on the classification, these exams may consist of technical questions related to the

tasks of a specific job or it may be a review of the potential employees resume and work experiences (Ramirez & Curry, 2016). Therefore, an employee is evaluated and hired based mainly on vocational skills alone. Unfortunately, these positions are often upgraded to include supervising peers, without any previous experience, which often ends in tragic outcomes for both employees.

Secondly, the ever-growing workload with rigid deadlines coupled with decreasing staffing, frequently leads to increased stress on the employee. A combination of soft skills and hard skills create the ideal employee. An employee may be confident in his or her ability to perform the technical duties or hard skills learned through the school curriculum, professional development programs or other means to perform the task at hand. In fact, he or she may be an expert in their field, however, the lack of soft skills such as time management and effective communication will impede the employee from performing well and contributing to the advancement of the organization, which leads to the last acumen for this research – lack of communication (DeAgostino et al., 2014).

Effective communication skills are extremely important in an organization's success. The lack of this soft skill often leads to interpersonal conflict with peers and supervisors. Productive communication involves both parties, not only articulating expectations clearly, but also listening carefully to produce positive attitudes and increased collaboration. Furthermore, cultural and generational differences make precise communicating even more complicated. Throw in the added technological difficulties and social media lingo and communication has evolved to an entirely new level (Dean & East, 2019). How do employees balance the never-ending stresses and challenges of the workplace to ensure successful outcomes? This research anticipates that by implementing soft skills training into established professional development programs, employee resources, or online learning labs, favorable results are produced. Throughout this paper, I will show how possessing soft skills such as effective communication skills, leadership abilities, and a social-emotional approach will produce remarkable leaders who

sculpt tenacious, reliable employees and contribute to a prosperous, successful workplace (Naamati Schneider et al., 2020).

Review of Literature

Understanding Soft Skills

First, it is important to understand what soft skills are and their meanings. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), the conceptual definition of soft skills is the *"abilities which enable effective communication and social interaction with other people; interpersonal skills"* ("Soft skills," 2016). Unlike technical competence, soft skills are typically not taught in college curriculum or professional development programs; however, Majid et al. (2019) found that soft skills such as effective communication, trust, decision-making abilities, reliable teamwork, critical thinking capabilities, empathy, and adaptability are just a few of the desired soft skills organizations seek in their employees. Their simple operational definition of soft skills was *"people skills"* that are *"difficult to define, measure, and evaluate"* (p. 8). Hurrell et al. (2013) defined soft skills as *"non-technical and not reliant on abstract reasoning, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts"* (p. 162). Both studies are consistent with the conceptual definition and all agree that soft skills are essentially the capacity to interact with others effectively and communicate clearly.

Communication. The *OED* defines communication as *"The transmission or exchange of information, knowledge, or ideas, by means of speech, writing, mechanical or electronic media, etc."* ("Communication," 2009). Dean and East (2019) noted that the essence of communication is language – *"Language helps people to understand others' emotions and aids in the formation of social skills"* (p. 19). Furthermore, they recognized diverse generational and cultural communication styles as well as modes of communicating such as face-to-face, electronic, and video techniques. Even though communication can be conveyed in many different forms, researchers all agree communication is transmitting clear messages from one person to another.

Trust. Trust was described by Quratulain (2020) as the:

Willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the

expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor,

irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party. (p. 111)

Alward and Phelps (2019) acknowledged the conceptual definition of trust as *"the faith or*

confidence in another person or organization's integrity, fairness, and reliability" (p. 77). Both

recognize trust is believing others will do the right thing.

Decision-Making. The obvious conceptual definition of decision-making is – to make

a decision – which, according to the *OED* means *"to decide; to come to a judgement, conclusion,*

or resolution." ("To make a decision," 2015). Sui et al. (2019) claimed decision-making is the

"result of rational and precise calculation" (p. 1), certain circumstances such as high emotions,

low motivations or other irrationalities hinder the decision-making process. Studies show that

productive decision-making skills involve unbiased, rational thoughts and conclusions.

Teamwork. Ibrahim et al. (2017) specified their operational definition of teamwork

requires the ability to lead, coordinate, and manage conflict. The *OED's* conceptual definition of

teamwork is, *"the action or fact of working together effectively or cohesively; successful*

collaboration or cooperation by a team of people" ("Teamwork," 2016). Studies show that

teamwork is a united team working together toward a common goal.

Critical Thinking. Moore (2013) described critical thinking as difficult to define,

however, easily recognizable – like seeing a familiar face. He cited a committee of academic

scholars who collectively tried to find an encompassing definition. One of those definitions were,

"reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (p. 507).

Another option was *"the educational cognate of rationality"* (p. 507) and yet another was, *"not*

just accepting what somebody tells you; in general terms… the capacity to cut through

accepted ideas to recognize and examine them" (p. 512). Those interpretations were met with

some resistance stating that there is no single approach to critical thinking, therefore, there

should be no single definition. Although academic scholars could not agree on one operational definition, the *OED* lists the conceptual definition as, *"the objective, systematic, and rational analysis and evaluation of factual evidence in order to form a judgement on a subject, issue, etc."* ("Critical thinking," 1989). Researchers did agree, however, on a common theme in lieu of a shared definition, which is: critical thinking involves using sound judgement.

      Empathy. Empathy is defined by the *OED* as, *"The ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience, etc."* ("Empathy," 2014). Charoensap-Kelly et al. (2015) described empathy as one of five aspects of emotional intelligence, which is defined by the *OED* as the *"the capacity to be aware of, manage, and express one's emotions, and to handle a variety of interpersonal situations in an intelligent, judicious, and empathetic manner"* ("emotional intelligence," 2003). Miller (2007) referred to empathy as compassionate communication that involves both verbal and nonverbal emotional processes to connect to others *"hurt, anguish, or worry"* (p. 232) and decipher information adequately. Studies agreed that empathy is showing compassion for others which in the workplace translates to healthier teamwork.

      Adaptability. Naamati Schneider et al. (2020) noted adaptability as one of five categories in handling crisis' and change effectively for positive conclusions. Furthermore, van Dam and Meulders, (2020) referred to adaptability as a *key quality* in complex workforces. They defined it as *"predicting how employees respond in changing and new work situations"* (p. 1). The *OED* conceptual definition is *"the quality or state of being adaptable;"* adaptable means *"capable of being applied or used in different conditions or contexts; capable of being modified, altered, or amended, esp. so as to be put to a new use or serve a new purpose"* ("adaptability," 2011; "adaptable," 2011). Both studies agreed adaptability is the ability to meet ever-changing complex situations effectively.

Appreciating Soft Skills

Communication. There are a multitude of soft skills that are beneficial to employees and important for organizations' success. One skill that several researchers admit is paramount for success is effective communication. In fact, throughout this review communication seemed to be the backbone to many other soft skills, notably decision-making, teamwork, and critical thinking. Dean and East (2019) agreed with Majid et al. (2019) and other researchers that productive communication is a necessary asset for employees and sets a foundation for success.

Charoensap-Kelly et al. (2015) specified two communication attributes, *assertiveness and responsiveness*, that are effective in conflict resolution. Assertive employees can start, sustain, and end conversations, whereas, responsive employees listen and comprehend, all while maintaining interpersonal goals. Charoensap-Kelly et al. (2015) determined that most people express themselves using both aspects to some extent, depending on their preferred communication style. Furthermore, they found no single communication style to be superior to the others; however, they noted that knowing one's own communication style, is beneficial when collaborating with differentiating styles. This helps connect different personalities, creating effortless communication in the workplace.

Dean and East (2019) expanded on Charonensap-Kelly et al.'s (2015) research and described advantageous communication as not only verbal and written skills, but also listening as well. In fact, they found that listening skills need to be developed first, before speaking. Listening allows employees to clearly synthesize what was said, draw inferences and ask questions to avoid misunderstandings. Moreover, they noted when managers listen thoughtfully to their employees, it instills job gratification in the employee and leads to goal completion and organizational success. Studies have proven that communication skills are extremely important in the workplace and contribute to utilizing other soft skills successfully.

Communication and Trust. Ibrahim et al. (2017) noted that communication skills have been proven in many experiments to enhance employee achievements and attain rewarding project outcomes. In today's Covid-19 world, virtual meetings are vital to continue

working toward organizational goals. Alward and Phelps (2019) identified open communication and trust among colleagues as essential elements, especially in the virtual environment. They concurred with Ibrahim et al., (2017) that a strong collective trust among teams' augment communication and is vital to favorable project completion. In fact, both elements go hand-in-hand, *"without proper and clearly defined communication channels and expectations, trust cannot be cultivated, and without trust, there cannot be open communication"* (p. 76). Additionally, Quratulain (2020) found that scholars from diverse disciplines stress the importance of building social relationships within workplaces. She claimed, *"There is no single variable which so thoroughly influences interpersonal and group behavior as does trust"* (p. 111). Trust has been demonstrated to be a valuable asset, and when combined with effective communication, produces positive outcomes.

Communication and Decision-Making. Dean and East (2019) found that employees spend the bulk of the day communicating with others and those who are deficient in interpersonal skills, such as sufficient communication, have a higher risk of conflict in the workplace. Le Bris et al. (2019) stated that favorable communication skills should be integrated into the culture of an organization with a focus on reliability. Moreover, they found that communication sets the foundation for remarkable decision-making skills which, *"involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action"* (p. 4) and is essential in preventing irreversible, costly mistakes. Additionally, they provided new vigorous, dependable strategies to assist in making suitable decisions promptly. Dean and East (2019) also found that erroneous or careless mishaps can be disastrous and expensive for organizations. Studies have shown that reliable decision-making skills limit workplace conflict as well as organizational expenses and errors.

Communication and Teamwork. Teamwork requires the ability to lead, coordinate, and manage conflict according to Ibrahim et al. (2017). They stated that communication is among the most important soft skills needed for successful, integrative teamwork and that

administrators demand exceptional employee teamwork in conjunction with their core degree knowledge to ensure compatibility between colleagues. Furthermore, an employee's job performance is an indicator of their communication and teamwork abilities. DeAgostino et al. (2014) agreed that employees' soft skills must contain adequate communication skills to achieve collaborative teamwork. Additionally, Majid et al. (2019) also concurred with the importance of cooperative communication and teamwork in the workplace. Researchers found that not only are these skills ones that organizations expect new employees to have upon hiring, but they are also two soft skills highly sought after by managers in recruiting potential employees.

Communication and Critical Thinking. Critical thinking has been referred to as the fundamental element to making sound judgements according to Moore (2013). He found that critical thinking is more than just breaking down perceived information by thinking critically, it is also putting those pieces together to produce an informed thought. Roessger (2014) explained that enforcing productive critical thinking skills into communicative learning helped evaluate the context and meaning of what others conveyed during intricate circumstances. Furthermore, Morris' (2017) research merged the two concepts of communication and critical thinking into critical dialogue. Critical dialogue moves beyond an individual asset to one of whole group engagement during challenging conversations while maintaining mutual respect. He found that critical dialogue is vital when facing sensitive issues in today's workforce; in fact, he referred to it as *"the ultimate survival tool."* Studies have shown that unbiased critical thinking is essential to achieve successful outcomes in a collaborative manner.

Empathy. Miller (2007) noted that empathy allows a considerate and cognitive awareness of others. Furthermore, Charoensap-Kelly, et al. (2015) stated the importance of empathy in promoting individual advancement, group inclusion, and engagement and organizational success. They viewed empathy and social aptitudes as effective ways for employees and supervisors to work together, allowing employees to exceed expectations, advance individual portfolios and work toward a common goal. Naamati et al. (2020) referred to

empathy as an emotional-social skill, essential to interpersonal communication. Additionally, Dean and East (2019) noted that supervisors expect employees to be empathetic toward coworkers and customers. Studies showed that mutual respect fosters cooperation and leads to employee satisfaction and organizational success.

      Adaptability. Van Dam and Meulders (2020) stressed the significance of adaptability which Naamati et al. (2020) referred to as a coping mechanism. In today's global society, van Dam and Meulders (2020) found that organizations are forced to continually update and innovate, which means employees must adapt to the ever-changing needs of the organization for both self-gratification, as well as organizational success. Furthermore, DeAgostino et al. (2014) stated employers need, *"creative, adaptable and autonomous employees… an ability to assimilate new subjects and technologies quickly, without the expectation of being trained"* (p. 24). Dean & East (2019) went a step further and said that employees' adaptability and communication skills could potentially impact the entire organization. Roessger (2014) noted that through his experimental learning theory, employees showed improved adaptation by pondering recent activities. Change is constant and studies have shown that adaptability is vital to accommodate organizational needs, not only for today, but also for the future.

Lacking Soft Skills

      Majid et al. (2019) stated employers feel that newly graduated employees lack sufficient soft skills. They described this deficiency as a gap between employer expectations of adequate soft skills and those employees possess [or] job demand -versus- soft skills training. Effective communication, objective decision-making, collaborative teamwork, and unbiased critical thinking were noted as skills organizations <u>expect</u> new employees to have upon hiring. Employees that fail to meet these expectations of acquired soft skills are set up for failure. Dean and East (2019) found that not only do employees lack certain soft skills like communication and interpersonal skills, but managers are also lacking skills, such as emotional intelligence.

DeAgostino et al. (2014) found that employees soft skills contain holes in their teamwork abilities such as communication and leadership. Majid et al. (2019) also concurred that employers are displeased with newly graduated employees' soft skills, notably communication, decision-making, and leadership. They found barriers such as a lack of self-confidence, bashfulness, and nervousness prevent adequate communication in employees. Dean and East's (2019) study coincided with DeAgostine et al. (2014) and Majid et al. (2019) in that employees lack proficient soft skill abilities. Furthermore, they noted that employers lack adequate soft skills training programs or strategies that support employees in gaining these desirable skills. Majid et al. (2019) also found training programs lacking or non-existent.

With the virtual world so prevalent during the Covid-19 pandemic, Alward et al. (2019) stated that many managers are deficient in leadership skills needed for productive virtual meetings. In fact, every single leader they surveyed admitted to having no leadership training for a virtual environment and some acknowledge no leadership preparation for even the real-world. In addition to productive leaders in the virtual world, Alward et al. (2019) found that employees must trust their leaders. If employees find leaders not to be trustworthy, the employee may not feel obligated to perform effectively, causing the team to fail and creating problems within the organization. Furthermore, they noted that problems arise from incompetent or uncommitted leaders' organizations hire and train.

Pyc et al. (2017) studied the impact of ineffective supervisor-subordinate relationships. They noted two unproductive leadership styles, *abusive* and *authoritarian*, which impacts not only the supervisor and subordinate, but is also extremely costly to the organization. Quratulain (2020) described *low-quality relationships* between the supervisor and subordinate as *out-groups*. The employees in this type of relationship are unwilling to share information, exclude the other from participation and decision-making opportunities and the supervisor tends to regard the employee as unworthy of trust, therefore assigning only mediocre tasks and providing

little to no support. Mikkelson et al. (2017) noted that future studies should be performed to demonstrate a link between employee outcomes and supervisor communication relationships.

One cohort that is particularly involved in these types of supervisor-subordinate relationships is Civil Service employees due to the lack of soft skills and soft skills training. Most lack a formal education beyond high school, as no degree is required for many of these positions; yet, they are tested and scored based solely on technically experiences tailored toward a specific job. Furthermore, restricting rules limit the number of applicants for vacant positions and hinder the hiring manager's ability to select the most suitable candidate for the office. Additionally, civil service employees are hired and promoted to a supervising role with little to no experience in managing people which unfortunately, often ends in tragic outcomes for both the employee and the supervisor. Sadly, because of the restraints surrounding the civil service discipline and dismissal statutes, supervisors are not reprimanded or required to perform any conflict management training or soft skills course in supervising employees when problem arise. This causes a revolving door when subsequent employees are hired, since the new employee will most likely have the same *low-quality* relationship with the supervisor without some type of intervention (Frant, 1993).

In today's global, fast-paced environment with urgent deadlines and immediate crisis', handling critical situations under pressure effectively is vital. Unfortunately, this is another soft skill ability most employees lack (Naamati Schneider et al., 2020). Le Bris et al. (2019) found that when employees are forced to interpret new information quickly under pressure, they often react with slower decision-making abilities. DeAgostino et al. (2014) also noted a gap in soft skills when it comes to employees' abilities in working with urgent deadlines under intense pressures. Many studies have shown that employees lack the soft skills employers expect, just as they also agree that the employers lack a robust support system to assist employees in obtaining the soft skills coveted. However, Ibrahim et al. (2017) noted that as more practical data is reported on the soft skills training connections to organizational success, more employers are

willing to invest in soft skills training programs. Researchers also concur that obtaining these soft skill abilities will improve employee performance and satisfaction, develop supervisor managements skills and employee relations, and contribute to the success of the overall workplace.

Acquiring Soft Skills

Considering the lack of soft skills in employees and the detrimental consequences caused from this inability, some type of soft skills training program should be a mandatory part of professional development. Dean and East (2019) suggested that soft skills training strategies should be implemented as soon as possible in the employees' career as more senior employees may be reluctant with any change. They developed four themes: 1.) Develop a plan specified for each employee, holding them accountable for completion. A few ways they found improved soft skills was by using interactive, simulation or role-playing methods; 2.) A blend of one-on-one and group training. The individual focus is to confirm the employee understood information that was conveyed during the group session, reiterating clear communication; 3.) A methodical strategy to manage emotional behavior. They noted employees' emotions should not interfere with their capacity for effective communication and should be addressed promptly, as it could interrupt the workforce. Their study suggested the organization should *"defuse the situation, validate their emotion ... don't attempt to judge or manage emotion"* (p. 25); 4.) Effective communication was noted as the most important soft skill for employees to acquire, reiterating Dean and East (2019), Majid et al. (2019) and numerous other researchers. Even though there is a need for virtual leadership training, Alward and Phelps (2019) noted the sparse literature on the topic. Furthermore, they suggested that virtual leaders as well as remote employees could benefit from formalized training focused on resources for and concerns of the remote employee.

Charoensap-Kelly et al.'s (2015) study coincided with Dean and East's (2019), in that some employees are unwilling to learn new soft skills. They noted that employees can easily recognize when they need to learn a new technical skill, however, they may assume they know

how to react in certain situations (depending on previous experiences) so the need for soft skills

training is less clear to them. Their study was based on the *People Styles Model Training,* which

focused on two behavioral types, *assertiveness* and *responsiveness*, two communication

qualities that produce positive conflict management outcomes. The organization that

participated in their study mandated this training for all its employees, whose intentions were

geared toward employees learning how to accommodate others' communication styles

ultimately, generating stronger employee relationships. The employees participated in both in-

person and online trainings during the study. The face-to-face learning showed slightly higher

comprehension and significantly higher behavioral rates than from the online learning

environment. They believed the increase in positive behavior rates from the in-person settings

may be due to the interactive activities, which is consistent with Dean and East's (2019) and

Majid et al.'s (2019) studies. However, they also suggested that online programs should

supplement the face-to-face training for practice purposes. Importantly, employers should

engage employees by implementing soft skills training programs that show positive connections

between employee performance and organizational goals.

Majid et al. (2019) found that a joint responsibility approach is most effective in

identifying needs, developing soft skills programs and assigning tasks. They also exhibited

encouraging outcomes by incorporating soft skills into training programs, allowing for

simulated practice. Robinson and Persky's (2020) study researched a method they call *"Self-*

Directed Learners (SDL)." This method was a six-step process: 1.) Develop goals; 2.) Establish

metrics to know when goal has been achieved; 3.) Establish framework and progression of the

activity; 4.) Determine timeline; 5.) Identify resources; 6.) Enlist others for feedback. Using this

method, employees choose what, when, and where to learn, fostering self-motivation. On the

other hand, Alward and Phelps (2019) found that some employees learn skills better simply by

watching others.

Le Bris et al. (2019) studied soft skills acquisition using the "*meta rule… conditions required to respect the integrity of the organization in an unexpected situation*" (p. 1). Meta rules help negotiate between rules and reliability to quickly evaluate and provide an overall sense of the situation. Employees should prioritize rules; more complex situations may require more rules that may not be known to the decision-maker, thus requiring the need for updated and precise operating manuals. Nonetheless, in urgent situations Le Bris et al. (2019) suggested using less rules and more meta rules. In other words, when there is no time to consult the operating manual, the most logical, ethical decision should be incorporated. Predominantly, researchers found some type of soft skills strategy, training program or other support system, such as a mentor is a highly recommended addition to the workplace environment.

Enhancing Employee Skillsets & Advancing Organizational Goals

Communication. Dean and East (2019) stated when managers listen thoughtfully to their employees, it instills job gratification for the employee and leads to goal completion and organizational success. Ibrahim et al. (2017) agreed that communication skills have been proven in many experiments to enhance employee achievements and attain positive, rewarding project outcomes.

Communication and Trust. Open communication is imperative to build trusting relationships and trust in the workplace is essential for open communication (Alward & Phelps, 2019). Quratulain (2020) found that this combination of soft skills significantly influences positive interpersonal and group behaviors.

Communication and Decision-Making. Dean and East (2019) noted that effective communication limits workplace conflicts. These skills, when integrated into the organization's culture and focuses on reliability, prevent costly mistakes to the organization and provide vigorous, dependable strategies to assist with immediate accurate decision-making skills for employees (Le Bris et al., 2019). Additionally, Ibrahim et al. (2017) found that giving employees more decision-making authority enhances employee performance.

Communication and Teamwork. Ibrahim et al. (2017) found that effective communication, leadership abilities, and effective conflict management produces successful, integrative teamwork and compatibility between colleagues.

Communication and Critical Thinking. Moore (2013) found that unbiased critical thinking skills leads to making sound judgements. Merging effective communication and critical think skills creates critical dialogues between colleagues which produces mutual respect, especially during conversations on sensitive issues.

Empathy. Charoensap-Kelly, et al. (2015) found empathy leads to promoting individual advancement, group inclusion and engagement as well as organizational success. Furthermore, empathy and social aptitudes allow employees and supervisors to work together effectively, permitting employees to exceed expectations, advance individual portfolios and work toward a common goal.

Adaptability. Employees who adapt to the unstable needs of the organization can react in crisis' situations and organizational changes effectively (Naamati Schneider et al., 2020), find self-gratification and contribute to the overall success of the organization (van Dam & Meulders, 2020).

Summary

In summary, the literature showed adequate soft skills enhance an employee's technical abilities, foster communication and interpersonal relationships, and provide positive outcomes for the employee as well as the organization. Additionally, there are a magnitude of valuable soft skill abilities that employers expect employees to perform in an effective manner; employees that do not possess these skills are hindered in hiring and promotion opportunities and could be a liability for the organization. However, it is obvious that support systems and training programs

That may assist employees in cultivating soft skills in the workplace are inadequate or completely lacking. It is also apparent there may be difficulty obtaining compliance from all

employees to participate in a soft skills training program. Therefore, it is paramount to integrate practicable, thoughtful soft skills training into professional development programs and resources to cultivate a cohesive, productive, and successful workplace.

RQ1: What is the most effective and least costly method of incorporating soft skills training into professional development programs and resources?

RQ2: What is the most effective way to achieve employee buy-in and inclusion in mandatory soft skills training program development?

Methods

Participants

This research will focus primarily on civil service employees at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; considering this population seems most impacted by the lack of soft skills; largely due to the absence of a formal education, restricting hiring rules, lack of supervisor support and the nonexistence of soft skills training programs currently provided. There is a total of 1,534 full-time and part-time civil service employees on campus, which contain a mix of male and female participants within various age ranges, races, religions, and ethnicities. These employees are divided into five civil service classifications as follows: Executive, Administrative and Managerial; Technical and Paraprofessional; Clerical and Secretarial; Skilled Crafts and Trades; and Service and Maintenance. The data collected should provide a good mix of civil service employees and their feelings toward implementing a soft skills program, each classification's preference on a delivery method and what incentive would entice them to learn soft skills.

Measures

Data should be collected for a short period of time. According to Fletcher and Bostock's (2020) study, most people completed the survey within the first week, after that the response rate started to decline. Stein (2006) also performed a short, two-week survey, which yielded a 28% response rate. The surveys used in both studies provided promising results for their

respected researchers. For this study, a two-week period seems sufficient, with a reminder email at one-week. June would be the most likely month on campus to receive the most responses; it is somewhat quiet and employees may have extra time to complete the survey. Original email requests and flyers for participation should be carefully worded to express the importance of soft skills training to employees and not seem critical or scrutinizing to his or her abilities. Stein (2006) also utilized a secondary method – *"News Headlines"* – to advertise and encourage participating in the survey as well as provide a reminder a little over halfway through the research period.

Procedures

This research will involve a mixed mode survey, including email messages and online surveys as well as focus groups. This method provides an equal opportunity for all civil service employees to participate. Some classifications, such as Administrative and Managerial, Technical and Paraprofessional, and Clerical and Secretarial are more likely to have easy access to email and not necessarily a common area where messages are displayed. The survey link can be sent via email to this population, providing a brief explanation of the importance of soft skills in the workplace and directing them to the online form survey. On the other hand, Skilled Crafts and Trades and Service and Maintenance classifications are not tied to a computer all day, making email access more difficult. However, these classifications do have access to common areas, such as timeclocks and breakrooms, where posters can be displayed. These employees are more likely to learn about the online survey this way, through supervisors or team meetings.

As president of the Staff Advisory Council, I have access to email addresses of employees in all civil service classifications on campus. Additionally, this also furnishes me with elected representatives for each classification that could participate in focus groups, providing a smaller sample size as well as post flyers or target their constituents directly, encouraging them to participate in the survey. I believe the rationale for this method is well justified since I should be able to collect the necessary data easily. Marques (2013) used a mixed methods survey approach

in her research to show the importance of soft skills training in leaders, which showed that more consideration should be given to finding ways to strengthen soft skills in leaders.

This survey will be delivered through the online platform *Webtools* that allows for collecting and sorting data easily. This method also allows a unique sign-in method, ensuring only civil service employees participate and only once, permitting more accurate data. Marques (2013) used *Survey Monkey* in her research using a qualitative approach with open-ended questions. Likewise, Stein (2006) used the company's intranet, *Crossroads,* to disseminate the survey. Charoensap-Kelly et al. (2015) surveyed participants using both online and face-to-face methods. Astonishingly, more than three-quarters of participants used the online method, versus only a quarter of face-to-face participants.

Similarly, Fletcher and Bostock's (2020) results showed that online surveys provided more accurate results than face-to-face methods, which likely resulted in answers the participant thought the researcher wanted to hear, instead of his or her true feelings. Online surveys also provide the participant flexibility to complete at his or her convenience, are inexpensive, use little time to create and participate in and provide accurate data. Even though, their mixed mode method was more expensive than online only, it is still necessary to provide flyers to ensure inclusion of all classifications as indicated earlier. Stein's (2006) study used a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from l (*low*) to 7 (*high*) to survey employees on their perceptions on community connections to the organization that showed encouraging results. This method seems to parallel the information that would try to answer my first research question:

>   ***RQ1:***   What is the most effective and least costly method of incorporating soft skills training into professional development programs and resources?

Using a Likert scale similar to Stein's ranging from l (*extremely unimportant/ extremely unlikely)* to 7 (*extremely important or extremely likely*) and posing questions like the following:

Instructions: Please answer the following questions regarding your feelings toward implementing a soft skills program that could potentially increase workplace collaboration, strengthen employee/ supervisor relationships, promote employee satisfaction and improve collaboration and overall departmental success. Use the following scale: 1 = *Extremely Unimportant/ Unlikely*, 2 = *Very Unimportant/ Unlikely*, 3 = *Somewhat Unimportant/ Unlikely*, 4 = *Neutral*, 5 = *Somewhat Important/ Likely*, 6 = *Very Important/ Likely*, 7 = *Extremely Important/ Likely*

1. How likely are you to participate in an online program once? ___ Monthly? ___ Annually?
2. How likely are you to participate in a face-to-face training program?
3. How important is it for your supervisor to have soft skills training?
4. How important is adequate communication between you and your supervisor?
5. How important is being promoted to you?
6. How important is it to have trust among co-workers?

These questions will not only answer if employees are likely to participate in soft skills training programs and how often, but it will also show the correlation between the importance of learning and being promoted; in addition to how important employees think communication skills are in the workplace and if employees think it is important for their supervisor to gain soft skills to be an effective manager.

Open-ended questions would be the best method to collect accurate data for my second research question:

RQ2: What is the most effective way to achieve employee buy-in and inclusion in

mandatory soft skills training program development?

Open-ended questions are important so that they are not leading, allowing for honest employee input on what would encourage him or her to participate in the program. Questions that could be asked include:

1. Do you feel people skills are important in the workplace? If so, what skills do you feel are most lacking in your department?
2. Would you be willing to learn or improve skills if that means more satisfaction and success in your position? If so, how often would you be open to attending a class, whether in-person classes or online independently?
3. What kind of incentive would entice you to participate in a soft skills training program?
4. What type of soft skills training do you feel would benefit your supervisor?
5. Would you like your supervisor to learn or improve his or her skills? If so, how often do you think attending a class is appropriate to maintain adequate skills?
6. Would you be willing to attend soft skills training if your supervisor does also?

The open-ended questions should be followed by a semantic differential scale to get a sense of what is important to the employee related to his or her own, or the supervisor's, current soft skills abilities, the atmosphere, and teamwork within the department and employee and supervisor relationships. These questions will provide data that is spontaneous and capture the employees' true feelings in their own words. This will also help identify any situations that may not have been thought about when implementing a soft skills program.

Data Analysis

Data collected from all the participants will be synthesized and analyzed. The Likert Scale will be quantified to find the median response. The outcome will help determine employee feelings toward implementing a soft skills program that could potentially increase workplace collaboration, strengthen employee and supervisor relationships, promote employee satisfaction, and improve collaboration and overall departmental success.

Open-ended questions will be categorized into similar groups and then ranked. This will be calculated for all responses and then analyzed for each classification separately to find if there is a common theme in each group. Furthermore, the semantic differential scale will be calculated to find a nuanced opinion of employees' workplace relationships. These two methods combined will provide a snapshot of employees' feelings toward participating in a soft skills training program and employee buy-in. This data will provide a beneficial foundation for next steps in incorporating soft skills training in professional development programs and resources.

Conclusion

This research has shown that soft skills are lacking in employees, as well as supervisors. Moreover, there is inadequate soft skills training programs or strategies that support employees in gaining these desirable skills. Research has also shown that by implementing soft skills training into established professional development programs, employee resources, or online learning labs, favorable results will be produced. Furthermore, possessing soft skills such as effective communication, trust, practical decision-making, and critical thinking skills,

collaborative teamwork, empathy, adaptability, positive leadership abilities, and a social-emotional approach will produce remarkable leaders who sculpt tenacious, reliable employees that contribute to a prosperous, successful workplace.

Unfortunately, even though research has shown there is a need for soft skills training by employees, there has not been any single method that has been proven successful in the workplace. This is probably because each employee group approaches learning differently and depending on past experiences, has a biased opinion on what soft skills are and how to use them already. However, by utilizing a mixed mode survey, including email messages. online surveys, and focus groups a best approach for incorporating a soft skills training program into professional development programs and resources will emerge. Synthesizing and analyzing data from this mixed mode method will help identify employees' attitudes toward soft skills training for themselves, as well as their feelings toward their supervisor's abilities and needs.

One theme that was reiterated in all the research is that effective communication skills are extremely important in an organization's success. Supervisors who articulate expectations clearly reduce interpersonal conflict with employees, produce positive attitudes, and foster increased collaboration and teamwork. Furthermore, today's global organizations with urgent deadlines require effective critical thinking and decision-making skills. Organizations that demand a holistic approach to solving problems seek employees that offer comprehensive skillsets; therefore, employees that desire high-quality jobs and to be considered for promotions must possess a sensitive demeanor with strong leadership skills, combined with a customer-oriented mentality. As a result, soft skills must be integrated into professional development programs and resources to cultivate the cohesive collaboration needed to achieve personal career growth, foster workplace relationships, and promote organizational success.

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