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Role of Employability and Life Skills in Securing and Retaining Livelihood Opportunities

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Abstract:

In today's workplace, a blend of both hard and soft skills is needed for employees to succeed, even though the latter remains overlooked. Hard skills are the job-specific abilities that workers need to perform their duties, while soft skills are the personal qualities they need to thrive in the world of work. This study postulates that learning institutions have overly inclined towards hard skills at the expense of soft 'employability' skills, thereby making those seeking to secure or progress in their jobs learn the hard way their need for such skills. The objectives were:

- To study the most important factors that organizations consider while hiring or promoting workers,*
- To observe the common employability and life skills that employers consider while making hiring/promotion decisions, and*
- To assess the extent to which employability and life skills are important in securing and maintaining livelihood opportunities.*

With the research seeking to answer the 'what' question rather than the 'how' or 'why,' a descriptive research design was adopted to complement an inductive reasoning approach. A mixed methodology was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data from 284 respondents from 24 counties in Kenya out of 47, who represented more than 10 sectors. The results show that employability skills constitute the main factor of consideration while hiring/promoting workers. The common employability skills include communication, time management, a positive attitude, teamwork, and decision-making. Without these soft skills, workers struggle to secure and maintain jobs at the strategic, business, and operation levels of an organization.

Keywords: Employability skills, life skills, soft skills, livelihood opportunities, graduates, Kenya

1. Introduction

This study postulates that if training approaches were more driven by market skills requirements, graduates would stand a better chance of securing and maintaining livelihood opportunities. In East Africa, for instance, research has shown that there is a market gap between the "skills graduates acquire throughout their studies and those valued by the labour market," with some of the reasons for this disparity being the inclination towards industry-oriented training and the overlooking of occupational skills (Guàrdia et al., 2021, p. 181). The expected outcome was to underscore the importance of employability and life skills in securing, maintaining, and growing a livelihood opportunity and why it is critical for skills providers (training institutions) to work collaboratively with skills consumers (industries) to enhance the transition rate for the trained workforce.

In light of the above, one key question arises: What do employers want or what factors enhance employability? According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), employability is the presence of skills, competencies, and knowledge needed to secure, retain, and progress at work, as well as cope with its dynamics, including securing new jobs after being laid off or after exiting (Brewer, 2013). On the other hand, while looking at both the demand and supply sides of employable skills, a research by the World Economic Forum sought to understand what employers in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asian countries were looking for while hiring, and they found that they want workers with a mix of technical, cognitive, and life skills, and each is considered in equal measures (Jayaram, 2015). However, though the research established the implicit growing importance of both cognitive and life skills, employers largely and explicitly focus on technical skills (Jayaram, 2015). These findings may suggest that employers are compelled to focus on technical and vocational skills because it is what the education system offers their graduates. Yet, they yearn for workers who can have quality cognitive and life skills to complement these industry skills.

The next question that arises is whether training institutions are providing learners with skills that align with labor market demands. In a joint research by Harvard University, Stanford Research Center, and Carnegie Foundation, it was revealed that 85% of job success comes from workers with quality soft and people skills, and only 15% of such success can be attributed to technical skills and knowledge. Yet most training institutions continue to focus on the 15% and either overlook or fail in their attempt to teach employability skills (Miller, 2016). A similar study from more than a century ago arrived at similar findings, indicating that it has been known for more than 100 years that soft skills are key in

securing and retaining livelihood opportunities (Mann, 1918). As a result, companies such as Google are looking for alternatives to the college degree (their focus is now on one's ability to solve problems) because "the signal of the credential is no longer as clear," and training institutions have failed to provide a mix of academic and practical experiences that are needed to succeed in the workplace (Selingo, 2015).

Moreover, graduates are not privy to their deficiency in employability skills. Research shows that only 14% of employees say that fresh graduates are very or extremely prepared in this aspect, compared to 63% of the graduates themselves (Allegheny Conference, 2016). In other words, entry-level workers are oblivious to the basics of navigating work life – they are only equipped to handle the tasks, which, in turn, makes them un-hirable and makes it difficult for them to retain jobs. Seemingly, training institutions also are not aware of the deficient soft skills among their trainees. A recent research has concluded that "colleges and universities think they are adequately preparing students for the workforce, [which is a] stark difference of opinion from industry" (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014). Thus, employers have for many years stated that soft skills are needed, and those seeking to secure or progress in their jobs continue to learn the hard way their need for such skills.

1.1. Study Objectives

To achieve its primary aim and purpose, the study sought to achieve the following specific objectives:

- To study the most important factors that organizations consider while hiring or promoting workers.
- To observe the common employability and life skills that employers consider while making hiring/promotion decisions.
- To assess the extent to which employability and life skills are important in securing and maintaining livelihood opportunities.

1.2. Purpose of Study/Statement of the Problem

The primary purpose of this article is to understand the role of employability and life skills in securing and retaining livelihood opportunities, particularly in the context of Kenya's corporate space. The study problem stems from findings from numerous pieces of research about the gap between the skills obtained in school and what the labour market is demanding, especially the over-inclination towards industry-oriented training (hard skills) and overlooking of occupational skills (soft skills), even though both are considered and valued in equal measures by employers. The postulation is that if training approaches were more driven by market skills requirements, graduates would stand a better chance of securing and maintaining livelihood opportunities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Talent Acquisition – Hiring and Promoting Workers

For the longest time, education qualification has been arguably the most important factor in recruiting staff, at least in the majority of organizations. A study analyzing the aspects of human capital, organization screening, and discrimination theories found that education screening had a significant effect on promotion rates (Sheridan, Slocum, Jr., & Buda, 1997). In particular, having a bachelor's degree with a professional major greatly increased the chances of managers being promoted further. Thus, college graduates were likely to receive promotions compared to others with comparable performances on other factors. More recent research has established that human resource managers concur "that educational credentials are the most effective way to 'separate the wheat from the chaff' in the pool of applicants" (Saar et al., 2013). It is an indication that tertiary education qualifications are the employers' screening device and a strategy to attribute negative ratings and remove 'inappropriate' applicants, making it a penalty for not having educational qualifications regardless of how well you perform on other considerations, especially because this approach is normally used at the initial pre-selection stage to trim the applicants' pool.

However, in recent years, few organizations have shifted away from over-reliance on education qualifications in favor of other metrics such as soft/employability skills. In an analysis of Glassdoor job-search site, it was revealed that technology giants such as Google, Apple and IBM, as well as other renowned and reputable brands like Hilton, Starbucks, and Bank of America, do not require a four-year degree as a qualification for most of their positions (Connley, 2018). Even though some of these companies replace college certificates with similar vocational and hard skills qualifications such as having to pass hands-on coding boot camps or industry-related vocational classes, others like Google are placing immense focus on 21st-century skills like problem-solving, team working and communication (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2015). Nonetheless, soft skills are yet to become a mainstream recruitment consideration, with educational qualification and work experience being the key focus.

2.2. Employability and Life Skills

As the job market becomes more competitive, especially in technical aspects, soft skills allow an individual to stand out. Various industry studies have shown that soft human skills are the most sought-after currently and in the short-term future; they include communication, critical thinking, learning, problem-solving, social intelligence, collaboration, and creativity (Ravindran, 2023). The nature of industries is constantly changing, thereby mandating learners to acquire adaptable skills that will allow them to survive politically, socially, and economically. The idea is to have skills that can be applied in different contexts, be it for employment or other capacities (Bakar, Mohamed, & Hanafi, 2007). Nonetheless, the required skills vary from one employer to the other, particularly depending on the job role to be undertaken.

However, across the board, the building consensus is that modern workers should have 'transferable' or 'employability' skills, especially while aspiring to hold leadership/managerial positions. Essentially, employability skills allude to specific personal attributes of an individual, which they can apply from one job role to the other and use in any profession and stage of their careers (Bakar et al., 2007). Notably, in modern-day industries, there are deliberate efforts to enhance adaptability, reduce costs, increase productivity, enter new markets, and offer new products and services. As a result, employees need to possess not only technical and industry-specific skills but also additional ones such as good decision-making, the ability to collaborate and work in teams, problem-solving skills, the capacity to deal with no-routine processes, taking responsibility, and effective communication (Bakar et al., 2007). In other words, proficiency in non-technical generic skills is becoming a necessity for a modern worker to have.

Evidently, academic qualifications and experience have undeniably remained the essential eligibility criteria to secure and maintain a job for the longest time. However, recent developments have seen employability and life skills playing a critical role, with multinationals such as Google, Apple and IBM, Hilton, Starbucks, and Bank of America shunning the four-year degree in favor of customized boot camps and industry-related training and assessments that have a keen eye for not only technical/industry prowess but also soft skills such as effective communication and problem-solving talents (Connley, 2018). Employers perceive the plethora of employability skills as elements that enhance and improve workers' performance and value at the workplace. This is why they increase the chances of being accepted for a position, remaining in it, and being promoted (Swarnabharati, 2018). However, even with the realization that most of these life skills are not innate, the majority of tertiary and higher learning education systems have not been reformed to incorporate them in training, which means that most graduates remain unemployable in the modern corporate space.

3. Methodology

3.1. Methods

The researcher intended to study, observe, and assess the context of Kenya in relation to the relevance of employability and life skills in securing and retaining livelihood opportunities. These action verbs suggest that the study took a descriptive research design. This design focuses on the 'what' question rather than the 'how' or 'why' (Nassaji, 2015). In particular, the research sought to answer three questions:

- What are the most important factors that organizations consider while hiring or promoting workers?
- What are the common employability and life skills that employers consider while making hiring/promotion decisions? and
- What is the extent to which employability and life skills are important in securing and maintaining livelihood opportunities?

In addition, an inductive reasoning approach was adopted. It means that there are no hypotheses or theories to be proved or refuted by the collected data. Rather, it is about analyzing data from an observed sample to infer conclusions and insights about the larger study population through generalization. What is more, to reach the said population sample, a purposive sampling method was used to reach specific respondents such as trainers, human resource officials, managers, supervisors, coordinators, executives/CEOs, administrators, business owners, and other categories that were deemed to provide the intended insights. Though the purposive sampling method does not bring the unique benefits of probabilistic/random sampling, it is the most suitable when the intention is to reach respondents who can provide 'rich information' as far as the topic being researched is concerned (Palinkas et al., 2015). In other words, it was important for the respondents to be knowledgeable about the issues of employability and soft skills as they apply to their organizations or their individual situations. Additionally, a mixed-methodology was used in the data collection; the developed survey sought to collect both quantitative and qualitative data through closed and open-ended questions.

3.2. Respondents

The research targeted about 528 respondents from at least 50% of all Kenyan counties. With at least 284 returning completed surveys, the response rate was 53.8%. In addition, as shown in Table 1, 192 of the 284 respondents are located in one of the 24 counties out of 47, which translates to 51.1% representation of the counties, with the remaining 92 (32.4%) respondents not providing their county of residence/work. About 60% of the respondents were from 15 (62.5%) of these 24 counties.

No.	County	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
1	Kwale	43	15.14%	15.14%
2	Taita Taveta	37	13.00%	28.14%
3	Mombasa	27	7.70%	35.84%
4	Kilifi	23	8.10%	43.94%
5	Tana River	11	3.90%	47.84%
6	Nairobi	10	2.10%	49.94%
7	Lamu	7	2.50%	52.44%
8	Murang'a	4	1.40%	53.84%
9	Nakuru	4	1.40%	55.24%
10	Kiambu	3	0.70%	55.94%

No.	County	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
11	Kisumu	3	0.70%	56.64%
12	Malindi	3	1.10%	57.74%
13	Busia	2	0.70%	58.44%
14	Homa Bay	2	0.70%	59.14%
15	Kajiado	2	0.70%	59.84%
16	Kitui	2	0.70%	60.54%
17	Makueni	2	0.40%	60.94%
18	Bungoma	1	0.40%	61.34%
19	Eldoret	1	0.40%	61.74%
20	Kakamega	1	0.40%	62.14%
21	Kirinyaga	1	0.40%	62.54%
22	Kisii	1	0.40%	62.94%
23	Machakos	1	0.40%	63.34%
24	Siaya	1	0.40%	63.74%
25	Not indicated	92	32.40%	96.14%
	Total	284	100.00%	100.00%

Table 1: County Representation

In terms of gender, 109 (38.4%) of the respondents were male while 175 (61.6%) were female, which means that none of the two genders had a representation of more than two-thirds, which is the Kenyan measure of gender equality (one-third rule). (See figure 1 below).

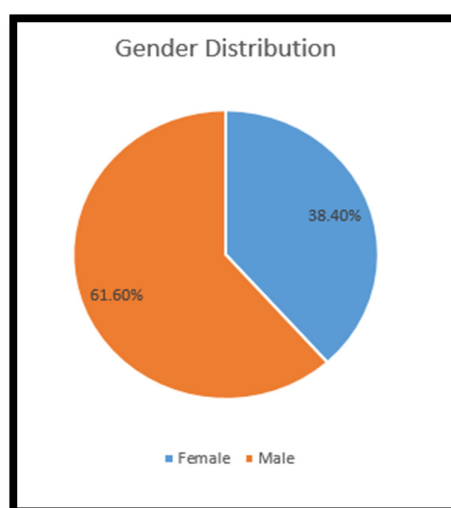


Figure 1: Gender Distribution

Regarding age, there was an intentional effort to target the youthful population (in Kenya, a youth is aged between 18 and 35 years), especially because they are the ones who are currently entering the labour market and seeking to advance their careers through promotions, job hopping, and advancing education, thereby making the issue of employability skills relevant to them based on their experiences as decision makers or victims/beneficiaries. In this regard, at least 70.4% (n=200) were in the youth bracket of 18 to 35 years, with only 11.3% (n=32) being above the age of 45 (see Table 2).

Age Category	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
19 to 35	200	70.4%	70.4%
36 to 45	52	18.3%	88.7%
46 to 65	31	10.9%	99.6%
Above 65	1	0.4%	100.0%
Total	284	100.0%	

Table 2: Age Distribution

Various sectors/industries were represented. However, the ten most popular were tourism & hospitality (34.9%), education (11.6%), security (8.1%), engineering (5.6%), maritime security/freight/logistics (4.2%), service (4.2%), food & beverage (3.9%), banking/insurance/finance (3.5%), agriculture (2.8%), and FMCG (2.5%), as shown in figure 2.

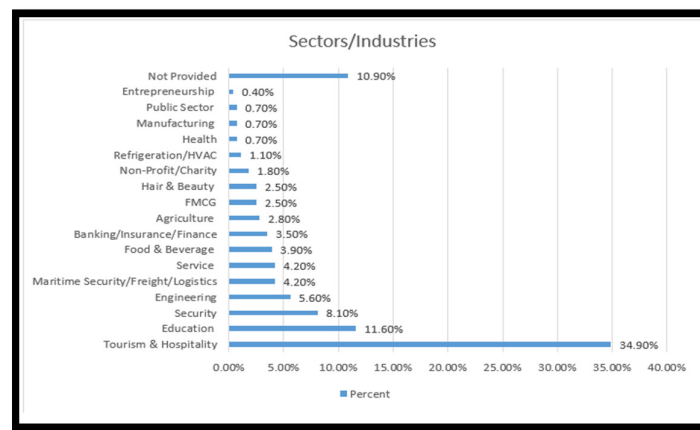


Figure 2: Sector/Industry Representation

In terms of size of organization sizes, the different groupings were fairly represented, as shown in table 3 below. However, at least 78.9% of the respondents came from micro, small, and medium enterprises of up to 250 employees, with the remaining 21.1% coming from either large or multinational companies.

Size	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
Micro (1-10 Employees)	78	27.5%	27.5%
Small (11-50 Employees)	81	28.5%	56.0%
Medium (51-250 Employees)	65	22.9%	78.9%
Large (Over 250 Employees)	40	14.1%	93.0%
Multinational/Group	20	7.0%	100.0%
Total	284	100.0%	

Table 3: Responses by Organization Size

At least 56% of the respondents held positions of interest to this study: managers (21.5%), executives/business owners (13%), supervisors (10.2%), human resource officials (6.3%), and trainers (4.9%) – because of their hiring/firing decision-making roles or being facilitators of skills acquisition (see Table 4). The remaining 44% held other equally important positions as they helped the researcher capture the experiences of workers at different levels, occupations, and industries across Kenya, especially in their search for work or career growth.

Position	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
Manager	61	21.5%	21.5%
Executive/Owner/Administrator	37	13.0%	34.5%
Supervisor/Coordinator	29	10.2%	44.7%
Human Resource	18	6.3%	51.1%
Trainer/Instructor/Facilitator	14	4.9%	56.0%
Houser Keeper	19	6.7%	62.7%
Waiter/Waitress	19	6.7%	69.4%
Security Guard	15	5.3%	74.6%
Chef/Cook/Baker	13	4.6%	79.2%
Receptionist/Secretary	12	4.2%	83.5%
Engineer/Technician	8	2.8%	86.3%
Trainee	6	2.1%	88.4%
Clerk	4	1.4%	89.8%
Accountant/Finance	3	1.1%	90.8%
Hair Dresser	3	1.1%	91.9%
Others	11	3.9%	95.8%
Not Provided	12	4.2%	100.0%
Total	284	100.0%	

Table 4: Positions Held by Respondents

4. Findings

4.1. Factors of Consideration in Talent Hiring/Promotion Decisions

The respondents were asked to gauge how important employability & life skills, hard skills, work experience, and education qualifications were important in recruiting high-skilled employees in a scale of 1 to 5. Based on the mean, employability/life skills were considered slightly more important than the rest ($\bar{x} = 3.36$), followed by hard skills or industry-specific expertise ($\bar{x} = 3.14$), education qualification ($\bar{x} = 3.13$) and work experience ($\bar{x} = 3.06$), in that order, as shown in table 5. The coefficient of variation (CV) was below 0.5 for all the factors, thereby indicating less variability around the mean. However, with the responses being ordinal/categorical in nature, it was important to consider the mode in measuring the central tendency – and on this front, employability/life skills and education qualification were considered the main considerations ($Mo = 5$). Nonetheless, it is clear that the four factors are somewhat equally important in hiring/promotion decisions, at least going by the mean.

Factor of Consideration	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	CV
Employability & Life Skills	3.355634	3	5	1.403027	0.418111
Hard Skills	3.144366	3	3	1.367313	0.434845
Work Experience	3.06338	3	3	1.387551	0.452948
Education Qualification	3.133803	3	5	1.435191	0.457971

Table 5: Factors of Consideration in Hiring/Promotion

When the same data were analyzed for those holding decision-making roles in regards to hiring/promotion (managers, human resources, owners/executives, and trainers), employability/life skills were still the most important consideration ($\bar{x} = 3.68$), followed by education qualification ($\bar{x} = 3.41$), hard skills ($\bar{x} = 3.33$), and work experience ($\bar{x} = 3.28$). In the mode measure, employability/life skills and education qualification remained the joint most important factors ($Mo = 5$); however, hard skills ($Mo = 4$) and work experience ($Mo = 3$) were separated, with the former being most important among the two (See Table 6).

Factor	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation	CV
Employability & Life Skills	3.679245	4	5	1.244333	0.338203
Hard Skills	3.333333	3	4	1.266245	0.379873
Work Experience	3.283019	3	3	1.346031	0.409998
Education Qualification	3.408805	4	5	1.317909	0.386619

Table 6: Factors of Consideration in Hiring/Promotion
Key Respondents

With education qualification often coming with hard/technical/industry skills, it can be concluded that employability/life skills and educational qualification are the two most important considerations when decision makers are hiring or promoting workers – while work experience is the least of the considerations.

With hard/technical/industry skills and employability/life skills being the two main factors, the researcher assessed the perception of who (school, organization, or self-taught) bears the responsibility of equipping employees with these sets of skills. As shown below, the majority (48.9%) said that hard/technical/industry skills should be acquired at the station of work (organization), with only 34.2% saying an educational qualification (school certificate) should achieve the same. On employability/life skills, a slight majority (36.3%) say that they should be taught at school, with 35.6% saying that one can acquire them while working (organization) – the two close figures suggest an element of indecisiveness. More people felt that employability/life skills (28.2%) could be self-taught compared to hard/technical/industry skills (16.9%) (See Figure 3).

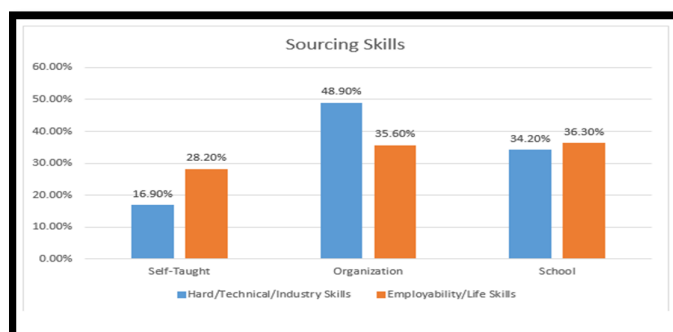


Figure 2: Source of Skills

In addition, the respondents were asked to state their level of agreement with the statement: *"During my education, the main focus was on equipping me with hard skills (abilities to tackle job-specific duties and responsibilities) and not on soft skills (e.g., teamwork, time management, creativity, public speaking, etc.)."* At least 68.3% either strongly agree or agree with the statement – only 26.1% either strongly disagree or disagree.

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
Strongly Agree	71	25.0%	25.0%
Agree	123	43.3%	68.3%
Neither Agree nor Disagree	16	5.6%	73.9%
Disagree	49	17.3%	91.2%
Strongly Disagree	25	8.8%	100.0%
Total	284	100.0%	

Table 7: Focus of Formal Education

Considering the preceding analysis (Figure 3), it can be said that 48.9% (majority) of people agree that hard skills should be taught in the organization while working and not in school (formal education), whereas 36.3% (majority) says that soft skills should be taught at school. Yet 68.3% confirm that their former schools focused on hard skills instead of soft skills (see Table 7).

In a follow-up open-ended question, respondents were asked to list what they think *"most fresh graduates lack that is making it difficult for them to secure livelihood opportunities (employment or self-employment)."* Qualitative analysis of the common themes showed that for those holding hiring decision-making positions, 56% (n=70) felt that the graduates were lacking key soft skills, while 25.6% (n=32) cited a lack of hard/technical/industry skills, with the remaining 18.4% (n=23) saying lack of relevant work experience was the key factor.

4.2. Common Employability and Life Skills

In the above-discussed question on what respondents found lacking in most fresh graduates seeking to secure livelihood opportunities, the common soft skills mentioned include communication skills, positive attitude, creativity, time management, patience, self-awareness, decision-making, adaptability, determination, honesty, courage, confidence, and a sense of responsibility.

After an extensive literature review, the researcher found that among the most common employability/soft/21st century skills include communication, problem-solving, teamwork, time management, leadership, positive attitude, conflict resolution, critical thinking, decision-making, organization, creativity, self-awareness, adaptability, negotiation, and public speaking (Bakar et al., 2007; Brewer, 2013; Chidinma & Onyehuikebue, 2023; Leonhardt, 2023; Ravindran, 2023; Suwintana et al., 2017; The National Network of Business and Industry Associations, 2014; Toh, 2023). In this study, the respondents were asked to rate the importance of each of these skills in securing an employment opportunity in their affiliated organizations – the responses were based on a 4-point Likert Scale of Not Important [1], Slightly Important [2], Important [3], and Extremely Important [4].

In the analysis, three key tendency measures were considered: mean, median, and mode. Since a high figure in these three metrics means that the skill in question is of high importance (and vice versa), an additional measure was added: Combined Factor (CF), which was the total of mean, median, and mode. According to the CF values, the top ten most important employability and life skills are communication, time management, positive attitude, teamwork, decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, critical thinking, self-awareness, and organization, respectively.

Skill	Mean	Median	Mode	STD. DEV	CV	CF
Communication	3.3627	4	4	0.8272	0.2460	11.3627
Time Management	3.3451	4	4	0.8577	0.2564	11.3451
Positive Attitude	3.3345	4	4	0.8557	0.2566	11.3345
Teamwork	3.3310	4	4	0.8341	0.2504	11.3310
Decision-making	3.2500	3	4	0.8306	0.2556	10.2500
Problem-solving	3.2359	3	4	0.8390	0.2593	10.2359
Creativity	3.2007	3	4	0.8397	0.2624	10.2007
Critical Thinking	3.1901	3	4	0.8401	0.2633	10.1901
Self-Awareness	3.1901	3	4	0.8526	0.2673	10.1901
Organization	3.1831	3	4	0.8204	0.2577	10.1831
Conflict Resolution	3.1479	3	4	0.8444	0.2682	10.1479
Adaptability	3.1408	3	4	0.8663	0.2758	10.1408
Leadership	3.0810	3	4	0.8555	0.2777	10.0810
Negotiation	3.0458	3	3	0.8663	0.2844	9.0458
Public Speaking	2.9824	3	4	0.9378	0.3145	9.9824

Table 8. Common Employability and Life Skills

Figure 4 below is a column graph of the mean, mode, median, and CF figures tabulated above.

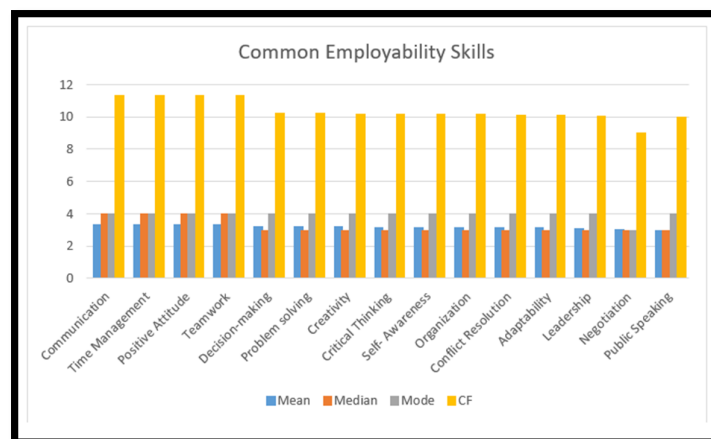


Figure 3: Common Employability Skills

4.3. Importance of Employability and Life Skills

Notably, the researchers acknowledged that most organizations have a set of core values. These are the ethics, ideals, guiding principles, or fundamental beliefs that organizations seek to embed in their corporate culture, especially to guide decision-making, including those related to hiring and promotions. In this light, respondents were asked to analyze their organizations' core values and indicate whether they are influenced by soft/life skills or hard/industry/technical skills. At least 68% chose 'soft/life skills,' while 28.5% and 1.1% chose 'hard skills' and 'both,' respectively (See Figure 5).

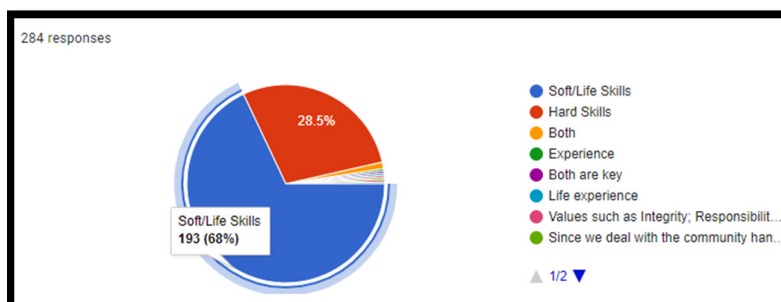


Figure 4: Importance of Employability and Life Skills

With core values being critical in decision-making, relationship building, and development & pursuance of strategic goals, these findings accentuate the importance of employability and life skills, especially at the strategic management level.

What is more, a key question arose in the preliminary stages of this research: If employability and life skills are so important, why do the majority of opportunities (jobs and consultancy work) emphasize more on the level of education, work experience, and proven expertise? This study revealed that even though recruiters are stuck with the conventional criteria (education, experience, & expertise) of sourcing talents, they implicitly make the final decision largely based on employability and life skills. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement: "In my experience, advertised career opportunities (jobs and consultancy works) mostly focus on the level of education, work experience, and proven expertise, but people are mainly hired, promoted, and fired based on employability and life skills." Figure 6 shows that 80.3% either agreed (47.9%) or strongly agreed (32.45%), while 11.6% disagreed (7%) or strongly disagreed (4.6%) with the statement.

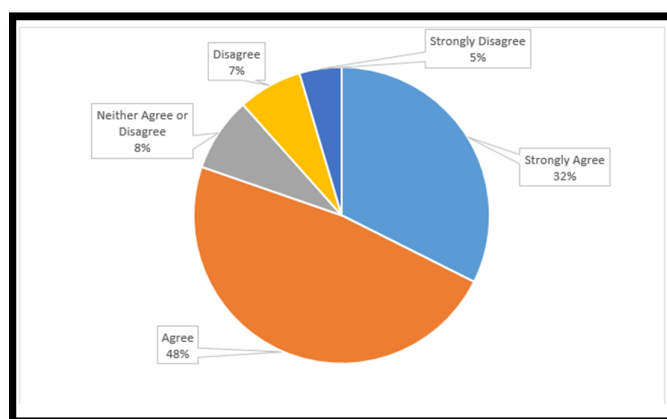


Figure 5: Focus on Advertised Career Opportunities

Similarly, after securing the opportunity, it was acknowledged that one of the reasons people cannot maintain their jobs is because of breaching or deviating from established work ethics or standards of work, and such cases are often handled by staff disciplinary committees (or their derivatives). It was of interest to this study to establish whether most cases handled by these committees are about lack of employability or hard skills. Respondents were asked to register their level of agreement with the statement: "...incidences are mostly about lack of or poor employability and life skills rather than job-specific hard skills". A resounding majority (67.2%) agreed/strongly agreed with the statement, with only 20.4% dissenting (See Figure 7).

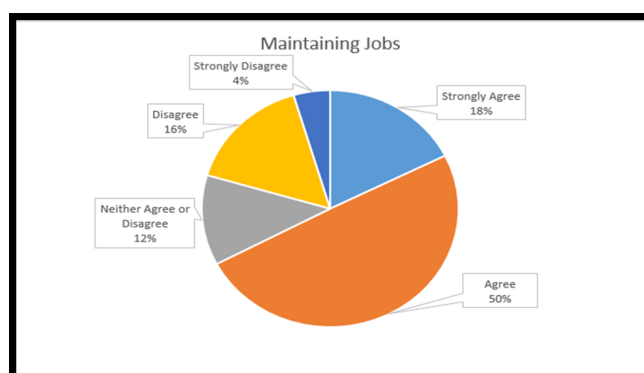


Figure 6: Role of Soft Skills in Maintaining Jobs

To incorporate the aspect of performance in assessing the importance of employability/life skills vis-à-vis hard skills. The respondents were asked to choose between two fictional employees with different levels of employability and hard skills:

- Employee 1: AVERAGE hard skills (job expertise) and ABOVE AVERAGE soft skills (personal attributes that support how you work and interact), and
- Employee 2: AVERAGE soft skills (personal attributes that support how you work and interact) and ABOVE AVERAGE hard skills (job expertise).

As shown below, the majority (58.5%) choose Employee 1, which indicates that soft skills are more appreciated than hard skills, at least when it comes to employee performance (see Figure 8). However, the assumption made in this inquiry is that an employee should have both types of skills to be successful, and the findings show that those with "above-average employability skills" (and average hard skills) have the upper hand when compared with those with "above average hard skills" (and average soft skills).

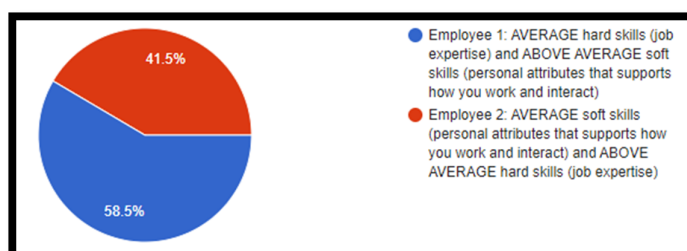


Figure 7: Soft Skills vs. Hard Skills

Overall, at least 76.06% feel that "there is a gap between the skills being taught at school and the skills that most employers (labor markets) want," whether soft or hard skills. In addition, a staggering 89.44% say that "training institutions (schools) should incorporate soft/employability/life skills in all the courses." In fact, a similar percentage (84.86%) disagree with the narrative that "training institutions (schools) should only focus on hard/job skills and let students source soft/employability/life skills elsewhere" (see Figure 9).

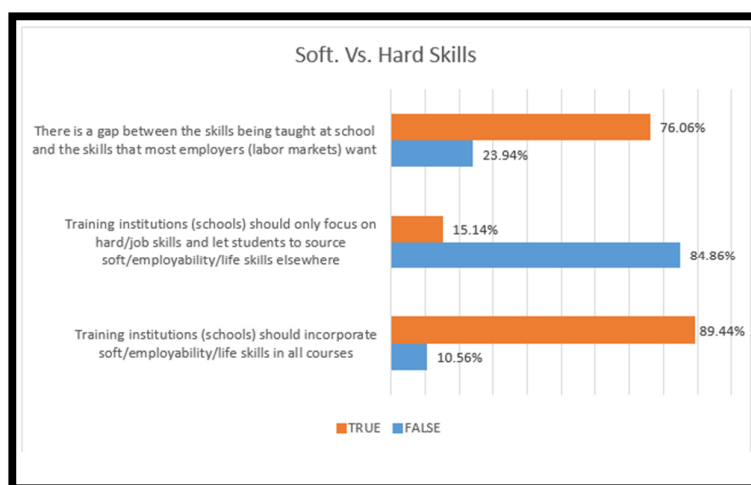


Figure 9: Soft vs. Hard Skills

5. Conclusion

This study sought to understand the role of employability and life skills in securing and retaining livelihood opportunities, especially considering the overreliance on hard/technical skills. The assumption is that the education system has overly inclined towards training hard and technical skills that one needs to undertake specific tasks in the various industries – all at the detriment of employability or soft skills, which research has shown that they are more important for those seeking employment or to scale up their careers. Existing literature has shown that neither the graduates nor the training institutions are privy to the deficiency in employability skills, at least the majority of them. However, it has been known for more than 100 years that soft skills are key to securing and retaining livelihood opportunities. For the few who have acknowledged the importance of employability skills, such as the technology giant Google, they are gradually shifting away from requiring job candidates to have education certificates; instead, the recruitment is largely focusing on the presence of transferable personal attributes such as problem-solving, communication, teamwork, and creativity skills.

Overall, at least 76.06% feel that "there is a gap between the skills being taught at school and the skills that most employers (labor markets) want," whether soft or hard skills. In addition, a staggering 89.44% say that "training institutions (schools) should incorporate soft/employability/life skills in all the courses." In fact, a similar percentage (84.86%) disagree with the narrative that "training institutions (schools) should only focus on hard/job skills and let students source soft/employability/life skills elsewhere."

On the question of what are the most important factors that organizations consider when hiring or promoting workers, this research compared the likings of employability/life skills, hard skills, work experience, and education qualification. It concluded that employability/life skills are the most important, followed by hard skills, which can be derived from formal training (education) – work experience is the least of the considerations. What is more, it was revealed that though the majority of the respondents agree that hard skills should be taught in the organization while working and not in school (formal education) and that soft skills should be taught at school, at least 68.3% confirm that their former schools focused on hard skills instead of the soft skills. In addition, 56% said that soft skills are what most fresh graduates lack, thereby making it difficult for them to secure livelihood opportunities (employment or self-employment) – the remaining 25.6% and 18.4% cited a lack of hard/technical/industry skills and lack of relevant work experience as the reasons, respectively.

The other study objective was to identify the common employability and life skills employers consider while making hiring/promotion decisions. A perusal of the existing literature showed a host of such skills that most employers seek to be preferring currently. Out of the 15 skills identified from the literature, this research observed that the top ten most important employability and life skills are communication, time management, positive attitude, teamwork, decision-making, problem-solving, creativity, critical thinking, self-awareness, and organization – in that order.

Lastly, the research sought to understand the extent to which employability and life skills are important in securing and maintaining livelihood opportunities. It found out that at the strategic management level, where key organization goals, objectives, code of work, and regulations are developed, soft skills are significantly important. For instance, 68% of respondents said that their organization's core values (that guide decision-making, including those related to hiring and promotions) call for workers to possess certain soft/life skills. At the operation management level, 80.3% said that even though advertised career opportunities (jobs and consultancy works) mostly mention the level of

education, work experience, and proven expertise as qualifying factors, the decisions to hire, promote, or fire the talents are largely based on employability and life skills. Moreover, 67.2% reported that incidences of non-compliance with work ethics or standards of work are dealt with mostly on the grounds of lack of or poor employability and life skills rather than job-specific hard skills. In addition, 58% an employee with average hard skills (job expertise) and above average soft skills (personal attributes that supports how you work and interact) instead of one with average soft skills and above average hard skills – with 41.5% preferring the opposite.

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