



19
June 2019

Gaetano Domenici

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Soft Skills and European Labour Market: Interviews with Finnish and Italian Managers

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7358/ecps-2019-019-schl>

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SOFT SKILLS E MERCATO DEL LAVORO EUROPEO: INTERVISTE CONDOTTE CON MANAGER FINLANDESI E ITALIANI

ABSTRACT

Recent reports have suggested that many employees in the labour market today lack essential soft skills. Yet, the specific relevance of these skills for particular job occupations is still to explore. We investigated perceptions of skill requirements and their development potential reflected against cultural impacts, using close interviews of 64 managers at firms in different fields of industries in Italy and Finland. Managers reported that, due to heightened competitive pressure, specific soft skills, particularly Work in team and flexibility to develop, are becoming increasingly important. The study indicates that the perceived significance of soft skills seems to vary according to the working environment and occupation. Furthermore, some soft skills seem to have a higher potential for development and thus suggested to be implemented in the university curricula. The paper concludes that a coun-

try characterized by working environments conducive to the development of soft skills, must however promote research for the identification and relevance of the skills themselves.

Keywords: Competencies; Curriculum design; Job occupation; Labour market; Soft skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. *Working and workers in a common European space*

The role of competencies and skills is central in the performance of organizations. According to recent studies (McKinsey, 2014; WEF – World Economic Forum, 2016), competencies related to creativity, problem-solving, personal development and communication as well as team skills, are gaining importance as assessed by employers. Competencies and skills are not only important in the private sector, but they are also central in the political debate. Currently, the European Union has launched a comprehensive project on the classification and assessment of competencies across sectors within the European Union (ESCO – European Skills/Competences, Qualifications and Occupations, 2016). This project follows a previous effort, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF, 2008), which introduced the Knowledge, Skills and Competences (KSC) model, and the key performance indicators for vocational schools and universities of applied sciences.

The European project on skills, competencies, qualifications and occupations (ESCO), covering the time frame between 2013 and 2020, aims on creating distinct classifications of skills, competences, qualifications and occupations in all fields and working occupations, relevant for the EU labour market. In the ESCO system, skills are divided in two categories, job specific skills and soft, i.e. transversal skills. One of the biggest challenges in this project is to identify the skills needed in each occupation.

Attempts to define skills and competencies have also led to more focused discussions on the aims and goals of education and the role of universities. In recent years, it has been advanced that soft skills are subjects that can be learnt (Andrews & Highson, 2008; Tynjälä *et al.*, 2016). However, due to the diversity of professional performances referred earlier, there is a need to define more clearly the types of learning outcomes in educational programmes, as well as match them to specific job occupations (Klaus, 2007).

Recent reports have indicated that while soft skills are expected by employers, yet many graduates and employees still lack these essential

attributes (Klaus, 2007; Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010; Robles, 2012; Yarbrough, 2015).

EU countries have different methodologies and approaches to the teaching and assessment of soft skills (Cinque, 2016) there is a collection of best practices and methods for teaching and learning them at university level. Despite their obvious importance, institution/programme changes are seldom given attention when analyzing HE-to-work transitions and graduate employability: thus, there is a lack of comparative studies and statistics.

The World Economic Forum (WEF, 2016) surveyed the outlines for changing environments and competences needed in them by interviewing nearly 400 general and HR managers in multinational companies worldwide. Managers estimated that approximately 65% of children at school entry end up in occupations which do not yet exist; moreover, by 2020 approximately one third of the skills needed were deemed to be unknown at the time of writing. Knowing these skills is the first step to be able to adapt them to university curricula (Conejero *et al.*, 2015). Among the 35 competences which managers were asked to rate according to their importance, grouped in subgroups such as abilities, basic skills, transversal/cross-functional skills, it turned out that transversal skills such as affecting skills, emotional intelligence and teaching others as most important and valuable skills were rated as the most important (WEF, 2016).

1.2. *The bridge between higher education and labor market: analyses of the theoretical framework*

Traditionally, skills and competences have been reconsidered to be formal, technical and «hard» skills: subjects like accounting, law, electricity basics, or human body anatomy represented the bulk of skills. The need to adapt to changing environments has led to the emergence of new set of skills, focusing on the ability to understand and direct oneself and interact successfully and effectively with peers: this focus on human skills has been referred to with various names, such as «people skills», «intrapersonal/interpersonal skills», «soft skills», «generic skills» or «transversal skills».

Goleman (1995) was among the first to introduce the concept in the scholarly debate. He referred to «intrapersonal skills in emotional intelligence». According to Wikle and Fagin (2015), the first effort on defining soft skills was made by McLelland (1973), who sought personal factors that predict work performance. Later several researchers, Todd *et al.* (1995), Owen (2001), Fang *et al.* (2005), Bereiter and Scardamalia (2006)

and McMurtrey *et al.* (2008) have highlighted the character of soft skills and differences between hard and soft skills.

According to Bereiter and Scardamalia (2006), hard skills would be «job specific», «objectively testable» and «directly teachable», whereas soft skills are «not job specific», «assessed subjectively» and «not directly teachable». Soft skills can be considered as a brighter scope, addressing «personality traits, goals, motivations, and preferences that are valued in the labour market» (Heckman & Kautz, 2012).

Soft skills have often been considered difficult to define and evaluate, often considered close to personal, inborn abilities (Robins & Webster, 1999; Gilbert, 2002; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Bastos *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, on one hand, skills like communication skills, problem-solving skills, creativity, attitude or analytical thinking skills can easily be seen as personal attributes. On the other hand, it is suggested that soft skills are employer-defined and only locally relevant, rather than generic and universal (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009). One important point of convergence in the discussion on soft skills is that transversal skills can be considered as a resource which social actors apply to solve organizational problems (Blackler, 1995).

In this regard, scholars have been concerned with the ability of the education system to provide students with skills and competences relevant to employers (Elias & Purcell, 2004; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Andrews & Highson, 2008). Typically, working life representatives consider soft skills as most important skills for business graduates (Schleutker, 2017; Caggiano, 2018a, 2018b). Advancing that companies need graduates with rigor and relevance, instead of fact-presenting specialists, Bennis and O'Toole (2005) advocated business schools to change their focus from pure substance-based fact-gathering to multidisciplinary business skills. This issue has become even more crucial along with the increasing number of educated young professionals and the growing rate of unemployment (Mourshed, 2014; WEF, 2016). To know how these aspects influence, it is important to have a transnational vision (Caggiano, 2018a, 2018b). In a survey mapping out the skills of newly graduates expected by business employers in the UK, Austria, Slovenia and Romania, Andrews and Highson (2009) report that employers in these four countries stressed the importance of graduates possessing practical skills: they expected business graduates to possess intrapersonal soft skills, in addition to «hard» business-related skills.

In a recent comprehensive study covering eight European countries, Mourshed (2014) indicates some interesting gaps in the skill composition of newly graduates. Only 33% of employers and 34% of graduates' experience that graduates possess relevant working life skills. This suggests a

rather severe challenge for vocational education and universities. The study researches the gap by dividing skills into «hard» and «soft» skills.

As Berdrow and Evers (2010) stated, competences are complexities of contextualized know-how, and are combinatorial, ongoing, contextual and evolutionary as well. A competency is formed by a set of capacities and these, in turn, are formed by a number of skills, all of which are required for a more and more complex professional performance.

According to Blazquez (2014), skills-based profiling tools serve to better diagnose individuals' strengths and weaknesses within the context of action planning, and help target services more effectively for job entry.

1.3. Education and labour market in Italy and Finland

The university curriculum and in general the HE system are very different in these two countries, this difference it is reflected in the labor market regulation, which is often gauged with the OECD's Employment Protection Legislation (EPL) Index, and occupational specificity of the education/training system and the labour markets are referred to when explaining cross-national variation in the typical transition patterns and their outcomes (e.g., Ryan, 2001; Gangl, 2003; Scherer, 2005).

In the Finnish higher education system there is a «dualism» which comprises the traditional university sector and since the mid 1990s a network of universities of applied sciences. The mission of the UAS-network is to produce graduates with practice-oriented expertise, and graduates typically get employed in the private sector, whereas the majority of the university graduates works in the public sector. UAS-sector comprises the kind of traditionally upper-secondary level training (such as training of nurses) that is not included in the FH sector and thus not regarded as «HE». Accordingly, the UAS degrees are generally considered to be of lower level than that of master's and FH degrees. In addition, studies are largely financed with non-repayable grants and there are no tuition fees, making the direct cost of studying very low.

The Italian HE system does not include vocation-oriented institutions comparable to those of Finland. The Italian HE system comprises mainly traditional universities, and students are selected directly to master's programmes. Tuition fees in the Italian institutions are, on average, relatively small. The cost of studies is reduced by non-repayable student grants. However, Italy does not have as universal a grant/loan system as those of Finland. Because of this, the level of state financial assistance to students is the lowest in Italy (see the Eurostudent Report, 2005, fig. 24).

Of the the national systems considered in the study, the Italian system is clearly the most traditional and also the least differentiated both in vertical and horizontal dimensions.

In particular, as education systems, the Italian and the Finnish one differ substantially in the level of tracking students by ability or career aspirations, and the prevalence of vocational education. These two aspects of school system designs are likely to affect skills accumulation in important ways e.g. through peer effect or curriculum content (PIAC, 2012).

Based on the data from the Survey of Adult skills (PIAC, 2014) the Scandinavian countries follow the pattern of a high level of vocational education orientation and a low level of tracking, Italy follow a low medium combinations of tracking and vocational education orientation. The vocational education orientation measures made by Bol and Werfhorst (2013) intended to capture both the extent to which education provides students with vocational skills and the specificity of these skills in education.

There is a general understanding that the demand for soft skills has increased in the labour markets, as described in § 1.2 (also see Teichler, 1999; García-Aracil & Van der Velden, 2008). This demand should affect incentives to study specific courses dedicated to soft skills, as the labor market seems to values the type of skills and knowledge that may not effectively be acquired by participating in any single university courses (Russell *et al.*, 2008).

Across the OECD countries, some interesting treats regarding the labour market conditions, indicating cultural differences, can be noted. For example, regarding the Job quality and labour market inclusiveness for the *Gender labour income gap* Finland is the top performer, whereas Italy stands below the average of the OECD countries (OECD, 2017). The occupational ranking of italian workers indicates that the managers with a university degree are fewer than European managers (OECD, 2017). This gap is particularly observed in technical and vocational schools. Due to evident cultural differences reflected in the numeracy and literacy skills between these two countries (OECD, 2013) it can be presumed that attitudes and considerations vary upon competences and skills needed in job occupations.

2. THE OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

Regardless country, one of the main missions of the higher education and vocational schools is to provide the graduates with adequate competencies and skills. Regarding soft skills, their need has been described in the earlier

section, as well as the fact that there is a skills gap in most European countries, despite the different education systems. Still, it remains unresearched, which specific soft skills can be connected to particular job positions and how their significance is perceived by the employees. Additionally, in the European labor market the cultural impacts should be considered when working increasingly in multinational compositions and teams.

The objective of this study is enable bridging this gap by addressing the most significant soft skills needed in job positions through a structure interview addressed to Italian and Finnish business managers. All of them work in demanding positions within business and management and have at least 5 years of work experience. The hypothesis is that these two groups show differences as they represent two different cultures and tradition of education.

The study will also serve as a pre-phase in the development of a research procedure which will be conducted as a measure in the European CoSki21 (core skills for 21 century professionals 2017-19) project funded by Erasmus+. The aim of this project is to detect the most significant soft skills needed in Business and ICT fields, and consequently create a framework enabling the matching of job positions with the essential soft skills needed in them. To fulfil this, data will be collected in multiple European countries through an online survey.

The focus on specific target group, sample that we considered, represents the main objective to explore how soft skills are needed in job occupations in the perspective to contribute in the labor market. The intention was to relate managerial work and behaviour to its cultural and organizational settings. Besides the institutional analysis of the labour market qualifications, of background education, the aim is to explore the needs in terms of indications to implement the European university curriculum with a soft skills course dedicated.

When researching personal competencies and skills in working life conditions for purposes of academic development, it is crucial to find persons with personal experience of recruitment, management and development of skills. This was the reason to choose experienced managers and HR-experts to the sample group.

The main hypothesis of the study is «there are differences in the significances of soft skills needed in different working environments and positions». The second hypothesis is «it is realistic to presume that some soft skills can be developed». The third hypothesis is «manager' considerations upon soft skills are culture-bound». Through answering these hypothesis, the study aims to provide universities with better understanding of skills needed in working life.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. *Sample*

The sample is non-probabilistic and consists of 64 subjects: in particular 32 subjects belong to the Finnish group, coming mainly from Turku city and other cities of southern Finland; 32 Italian subjects, concentrated in the Region of Lazio. The sample's geographic distribution is based on the relationship between UniTre Roma and Turku University of applied sciences and the managers involved are stakeholders of these universities. Due to the character of the study, specific criteria was set regarding the sample. As first criteria was set experience, since the perceptions of skills needed in any position will probably mature along with years. Thus five years of working experience was set as lowest limit, and a wide range of experienced persons was courted. The second criteria was to reach a multiplicity of company fields, in order to produce representativeness in terms of working environments. Thus a range of companies representing different sizes and working positions was set as criteria. This was also necessary in order to strengthen the reliability of the questionnaire for being used in the international CoSki21 project.

In the Finnish sample 59% of respondents are females and 41% are males. Their age varies as follows: 21% represent age 35-44 years, 52% 45-54 years and 27% 55-64 years. The job position of the interviewees has been categorized according to the ESCO 10-step job position classification. Of the interviewees, 63% belong to the category 1 (managers and superiors), 30% pertain to the category 2 (professionals) and 7% are classified in the category 3 (technicians and associate professionals). The average work years of the respondents was classified in four intervals, less than five years of work experience (0%), between 5 and 14 work years (4%), between 15 and 25 work years (41%) and the remaining 55% have work experience more than 25 years. In order to find out the significance of personal professional history upon the persons' opinions, the respondents were also asked their experience in years in current position. 66% had been working less than three years in their current job, whereas 34% had had their current position more than three years.

In the Italian sample we have 81% of men and 19% of women. Their age varies as follows: 10% are less than 35 years old, 34% represent age 35-45 years old, 28% 46-55 years old and 28% are more than 55 years old. The job position of the interviewees has been categorized according to the ESCO 10-step job position classification. Of the interviewees, 94%

belong to the category 1 (managers and superiors), 0% pertain to the category 2 (professionals) and 6% are classified in the category 3 (technicians and associate professionals). The average work years of the respondents was classified in four intervals, less than five years of work experience (0%), between 5 and 14 work years (25%), between 15 and 25 work years (28%) and the remaining 47% have work experience more than 25 years. About their experience in years in current position, 16% had been working less than three years in their current job, whereas 84% had had their current position more than three years.

3.2. Instruments and procedure

Soft skills and their character has been widely researched, whereas their significance in specific tasks and job positions remains less studied. For higher and vocational education research data upon field-related soft skills enables the development of curriculum in order to reduce the existing skills gap. The questionnaire was designed to give data on the need of specific soft skills as well as their development potential.

The questionnaire was structured in three blocks. The first block focuses on demographic data, such as interviewee's position, tasks and work experience and the related companies as well as company field. Here the NACE (2010) classification has been used, and for the job position, the ESCO (2016) classification was used. The second block focuses on the perceived significance of each soft skill for the interviewees by responding the question «How significant do you consider this skill in the position you work in?» applying a five-point Likert scale (1 = very little; 5 = extremely important).

The map of soft skill selected for this study is composed by 21 soft skills utilized more frequently in the job offers and compiled in the «key competences dictionary» (Barcelona Activa, 2011; ESCO, 2016).

The interview guidelines were mainly based on Stewart's (1976, 1982) demands-constraints-choices-approach, and were adapted to the functional and national context of the interviewees. The interview guideline was supplemented by questions based on Scheurich (2014) intercultural approach. This question aims to contrast the veracity of the opinion expressed in the soft skills' assessment and the affinity of the interviewee with the importance of soft skills.

In the third block the respondents were expected to assess the development potential of each 21 soft skill by responding the question «To what extent do you consider that this skill can be developed?». Here the Likert

scale 1-5 was used (1 = can hardly be developed; 5 = very likely to develop). This question was considered important by the researchers especially from the point of view of universities and educators, as it is necessary in order to create mutual understanding between university teachers and business and organizational experts and managers on development potential of soft skills, and also produce indication whether they should be learned at HEIs and other educational institutes. This aspect is more complicated to assess than the occupation-related significance, since it is a very subjective appreciation.

The data for this analysis derives from a total of 32 interviews from the Finnish sample which were conducted during August-September 2016, and 32 Italian interviews which were conducted during January-February 2017. The interviewees participated voluntarily in the study, which implies that their responses should be considered as oriented to their interests. Their experience was at least 5 years occupations are in company management, HR management or other senior roles. In all cases they have, or have had people in their charge. The interviews with managers were made in person-to-person discussions which lasted from 40 minutes to 105 minutes.

The data obtained from the interview was entered into an online form of Google docs to be exported to the analysis tool. The questionnaires were saved and subsequently analyzed by quantitative analysis. Data has been analyzed with the software Statgraphics Centurion XVI.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Finnish results: significance and development of soft skills

The results are presented in *Table 1*. Each skill is presented with the average it has got in terms of significance («How significant do you consider the skill in the position you work in?»; 1 = very little; 5 = extremely important).

The most important and significant soft skills in this survey proved to be the following: «Work in team and cooperation» (4.6), «Customer orientation» (4.5), «Communication» (4.4), «Flexibility to change» (4.4) and «Goal orientation» (4.2). Taking into account the variety of the branches and positions that the respondents present, the results indicate that these highest rated skills might be important on a variety of branches and positions. It might also be of importance to note that most of the skills groups seem to have high significance. Among the highest rated skills there were skills from four of the five skills groups, with exception of «Thought/Thinking skills».

Table 1. – Finnish sample and soft skills' significance and development potential.

SOFT SKILL	SIGNIFICANCE			DEVELOPMENT		
	AVERAGE	STANDARD DEVIATION	COEF. VAR.	AVERAGE	STANDARD DEVIATION	COEF. VAR.
<i>Category: Goal-oriented skills</i>						
Initiative	4.07	0.88	22%	3.31	1.00	30%
Goal orientation	4.21	0.77	18%	4.03	0.63	15%
Planning and organization	4.17	0.71	17%	4.17	0.66	16%
Order and quality	4.38	0.82	19%	3.93	0.80	20%
<i>Category: Team management skills</i>						
People management	3.69	1.26	34%	4.25	0.70	16%
Leadership	3.41	1.18	35%	4.04	0.88	22%
Work in team and cooperation	4.62	0.49	19%	4.48	0.63	14%
<i>Category: Personal management skills</i>						
Self confidence	3.76	0.95	25%	3.79	0.79	21%
Self-control	4.17	0.89	21%	3.93	0.88	22%
Commitment w. organization	3.79	1.08	29%	3.83	0.80	21%
Flexibility to change	4.38	0.82	20%	3.64	0.91	25%
<i>Category: Influence skills</i>						
Communication	4.41	0.95	21%	4.11	0.96	23%
Empathy	3.41	1.05	31%	3.04	1.14	37%
Negotiation	4.00	1.07	27%	4.39	0.57	13%
Networking	3.31	1.11	33%	4.00	0.67	17%
Customer orientation	4.49	0.69	15%	4.21	0.69	16%
<i>Category: Thought/Thinking skills</i>						
Learning and use knowledge	3.97	0.83	21%	4.11	0.88	21%
Creativity	3.59	1.05	29%	2.89	1.03	36%
Strategic orientation	3.10	1.21	39%	3.71	0.94	25%
Analytic thinking	3.83	1.17	30%	3.29	1.01	31%
Conceptual thinking	3.48	1.27	37%	3.11	1.17	38%

Lowest rated skills were «Strategic orientation» (3.1), «Networking» (3.3) and «Empathy» (3.4). This is to say that all the 21 skills were rated higher than 3 (3.1 - 4.6), which can be seen as remarkable.

As for the qualitative descriptions of the skills, it produced some interesting information on the character and the context of each skill in different occupations. Even if the respondents were not expected to give descriptions on all 21 skills and they rarely had time for this, they usually described the context and character for a 5 to 10 skills perceived as most significant for them. The descriptions typically consist of 2 to 4 sentences.

The second purpose of the study was to survey perceptions of the development potential of each skill. In order to find out this one, the managers and experts were asked to rate each skills in terms of «To what extent do you consider that this skill can be developed?» on a scale of 1-5 (1 = can hardly be developed; 5 = very likely to develop). Thus, each average noted in the table is an average on subjective perceptions on the development potential of each skill. According to the results, the highest development potential seems to be perceived in «Work in team and cooperation» (4.5), «Negotiation» (4.4), «People management» (4.3), «Planning and organization» (4.2) and «Learning and use knowledge» (4.1). These results present the skills which the respondents perceive as most potential to develop.

The results indicate that the development potential of soft skills is considered in varying ways. Some skills are clearly considered as more potential than others. «Work in team and cooperation» is a generally known soft skill and most respondents might know many ways how to developed it. In the same way, «Negotiation» and «People management» are generally known. The ratings above 4 mean that their development potential can be considered high.

Even if we in this study did not ask for arguments «why», it is probable that respondents' spontaneous insights have importance and relevance concerning how certain soft skills are developed. However, the argumentation «why I see this skill as potential» is important and includes certainly several interesting points of view. As an example, it is quite evident that a person's own experiences of own development affects her opinion. In addition, it is presumed that skills which have already been considered for development, and thus are better known, might be more likely to perceived to have potential to develop. Thirdly, it seems that some persons, e.g. many experts in HR and education branch, might have more belief in human capacity development than other groups of persons. Since the respondents were persons with significant experience as managers and Human Relations tasks, they probably have a considerable insight on the development of skills in working environments. Thus, this kind of result is interesting to universities and other educational actors who are expected to develop these skills by students.

4.2. Italian results: significance and development of soft skills

The questionnaires for the Italian sample were administered via Google Form and through Skype call. Data was collected and analyzed by quantitative analysis, according to the method previously used by the Finnish group of researchers. Each skill has been interpreted through a meaning analysis and a development analysis (as explained for the Finnish sample).

The averages performed on the Likert scale scores (1-5) tell us that all 21 skills have fairly high values ranging from 3.34 to 4.81. The skills that are most important, almost essential for managers in the exercise of their profession are: «People management» (4.81), «Flexibility to change» and «Work in team and cooperation» (4.63), «Planning and organization» and «Commitment with organization» (4.53). For the Italian sample, these skills belong mainly to two categories: «Team management skills» and «Personal management skills». The category with the lowest averages is «Thought/Thinking skills» with «Creativity» (3.63) and «Analytic thinking» (3.72). Other skills with low scores are: «Order and quality» (3.34) and «Networking» (3.78).

In regards to the average scores, the comments issued by managers are based on the skills evaluated and contextualized by the data. Although not everyone wanted to give the skills' description, the collected opinions are exhaustive and provide important thoughts. Those who have released opinions are HR managers, working in groups and thus appreciating Team management skills. People management is defined as essential in the optimal management of persons because «the results are achieved together with others, enhancing people and working on intelligences. A good leader can be followed by the group and tackles the difficulties through the example». For the «Planning and organization» skill, the structured work is a key element to achieve the objectives in a short time. Shaped organizations, according to an HR manager working in the luxury transport sector, are able to respond effectively to change, therefore «Flexibility to change» is defined as an «element of intelligence and vision and the manager must be a man of vision and push». The «Commitment» also represents a life style because the manager «is always on duty!». As for the scores, even in the comments, the «Analytical» thought to understand the phenomenon is emphasized, but it is the «Conceptual thinking» that is decisive in working «The best choice in the shortest possible time». All managers have defined the list of 21 skills as exhaustive, only a woman HR manager said that the entrepreneurial spirit competence should be included.

Table 2. – Italian sample and soft skills significance and development potential.

SOFT SKILL	SIGNIFICANCE			DEVELOPMENT		
	AVERAGE	STANDARD DEVIATION	COEF. VAR.	AVERAGE	STANDARD DEVIATION	COEF. VAR.
<i>Category: Goal-oriented skills</i>						
Initiative	4.31	0.86	20%	3.63	1.10	30%
Goal orientation	4.47	0.67	15%	3.91	1.03	26%
Planning and organization	4.53	0.51	11%	4.00	0.76	19%
Order and quality	3.34	0.79	24%	3.25	0.88	27%
<i>Category: Team management skills</i>						
People management	4.81	0.40	8%	3.88	1.01	26%
Leadership	4.56	0.50	11%	3.44	1.48	43%
Work in team and cooperation	4.63	0.49	11%	3.72	0.77	21%
<i>Category: Personal management skills</i>						
Self confidence	4.34	0.65	15%	3.53	1.11	31%
Self-control	4.28	0.77	18%	3.63	1.10	30%
Commitment w. organization	4.53	0.67	15%	3.59	1.16	32%
Flexibility to change	4.63	0.49	11%	3.53	1.02	29%
<i>Category: Influence skills</i>						
Communication	4.44	0.67	15%	4.25	0.76	18%
Empathy	4.38	0.66	15%	3.16	1.30	41%
Negotiation	4.03	0.59	15%	3.72	0.77	21%
Networking	3.78	0.83	22%	4.06	0.91	22%
Customer orientation	4.19	0.74	18%	3.72	0.99	27%
<i>Category: Thought/Thinking skills</i>						
Learning and use knowledge	3.91	0.93	24%	3.63	1.01	28%
Creativity	3.63	0.66	18%	3.44	0.67	19%
Strategic orientation	4.38	0.49	11%	3.91	0.82	21%
Analytic thinking	3.72	0.63	17%	3.63	0.91	25%
Conceptual thinking	4.19	0.74	18%	3.38	1.01	30%

In the assessment of skills development potential, the skills with the highest results are: «Communication» (4.25), «Networking» (4.09), «Planning and organization» (4.00), «Strategic orientation» (3.91) and «People management» (3.88).

It is important to note that the skills with the highest and lowest development potential belong to the same categories: Influence skills. If Communication is seen as decisive and therefore requires constant development, «Empathy» (3.16) results as a skill not tied to implementation and improvement, as defined as «a primordial mechanism that allows overcoming the relational problems» (*Tab. 2*).

5. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Although for both samples (Finnish and Italian) the results are all high average, reading the data carefully you can see how the samples have attributed different values to the skills in terms of significance and development. Among the five skills with the common score, only two are repeated for both samples: «Work in team and cooperation» and «Flexibility to change». «Goal orientation», «Communication» and «Customer orientation» are the skills that are important for the Finnish experts compared to the Italian one, which instead focuses on «Planning and organization», «Commitment» and «People management». For the Finnish the «Influence skills» category has a significant weight (we find two of the skills with the highest score), whereas for the Italian managers it does not have the same value because it shows fairly high average but not as high as the other categories of skills. With reference to the development potential, on the other hand, in the Italian group «Communication» and «Networking» have a high average score, whereas in the Finnish group «Work in team and cooperation» and «Negotiation» are rated highest. For both the «Thought/Thinking skills» category does not seem to have an important relevance in terms of significance, but traces in «Strategic orientation» (for Italians) and in the «Learning and the use of knowledge», two skills that can be improved and with high potential for development.

The Italian and Finnish experts agreed in attributing high scores to the remaining categories, emphasizing the management of human resources, both through skills that describe the planning of organizational activities («People management skills» and «Goal oriented skills»), and skills that instead they refer to personal attitudes that must be put in place by the manager himself («Personal management skills»).

The studies presented have shown that the soft skills profile and the expectations of managers are subject both to task-related and to cultural and institutional factors, which we interpreted in conjunction with each other.

Given the continuous changes in business environment to which organizations are exposed, the need for new professional profiles has emerged. In contrast, in Finland and Italy, some improvements could be achieved by placing more emphasis on the inter-functional aspect of required competences and focusing more on team work, as suggested by some authors (Bens, 2017).

As Alasoini (2004) points out, however, «In Finnish studies, data on team working is based simply on subjective evaluation by the respondents themselves. These studies also make no distinction between different forms of team working». As such, it is impossible to know what kind of team working is being used, or the extent to which it is associated with the enhanced skills and autonomy of employee.

This poses new challenges to universities to develop curricula which match the new business needs and, in this regard, to reconsider their relationship with companies. The implementation of transversal competences in university curricula is still at an early stage, and the multidisciplinary approaches that these competences imply have not yet been sufficiently evaluated from the point of view of employability and contribution in one's occupation (Ricchiardi & Emanuel, 2018).

Regarding the methodology used for this study, it can be stated that the first steps of this research, the data collected from the interviews, offered new perspectives that made the authors rethink for the next phases of the study. Especially, the basis of work on the group of potential soft skills must be analysed and how to interrelate them with each other. It requires some kind of application design more focused on a matrix module that allows users to analyse the competencies in a matrix form according to professional profiles required. This application should be able to describe what these competences are according to which professional profile within the same degree. Another limitation was that rating assignments in the structured interview, while helpful, may have given the impression that the other assignments were not perceived as effective for soft skills. It is important to compare both the ranking question and the mean scores data to gain a complete picture of the relative effectiveness of each assignment. One of the challenges that future research could address is how to maintain accountability for ensuring managers complete all of the assignments in an ethical way. This paper contrasts survey methodology with qualitative methodology, demonstrates the utility of the latter with an example from research on management soft skills of European managers and sug-

gests ways in which the two methodologies qualitative and quantitative can complement each other in future research.

This research had several limitations. The sample size (N = 64) was limited, and a larger sample with different instructors could provide more robust results. Despite the small sample, the results obtained have produced some interesting outcomes. They indicate on the usability of the chosen skills-set for soft skills, independent on branch. In addition, it seems possible to define soft skills related to particular occupations.

Thus, future research should address the practical limitations of soft skills profile of managers. We can tentatively state that recent trends towards an increase in the percentage of knowledge workers with high profile in soft skills in the enterprises 4.0 could push the European education policies towards a stronger blending of managerial and technical competences.

Another limitation is that we used the pedagogical approaches in this study that we were most familiar with, yet future research could experiment with other strategies such as peer or manager feedback or T-group. Future research could also examine ways to provide graduates who do not work access to managerial-type feedback. It could also be helpful to assess soft skills across different business and professional context and private and public organizations.

The authors can already specify from the analysis carried out that the differentiation between the transversal competences that the university poses and those that the employers require, are not totally consensual or at least they are not described in the same way from the academic scope of the professional. Also the degree of importance that is given to some competences from the university is not the same that is given in the company. Due to this, universities are likely to produce skills which are not of high relevance in working life. Additionally, in many cases the employer might not believe that this competence is something acquired by the student since it is not reflected in the student's curriculum clearly.

Efforts to embed soft skills in curricula have been carried out recently in some fields, such as ICT (Noll & Wilkins, 2002), engineering (Oladiran *et al.*, 2011); nursing (Waite & McKinney, 2016) and teachers' education (Nganga *et al.*, 2014; Tynjälä *et al.*, 2016) and business (Schleutker, 2017; Bastos *et al.*, 2018). In most of these cases 3-5 soft skills have been selected and accordingly been trained in one or several study units. Some of the researches have even aimed to measure results. These experiments show, that there are several challenges for universities in facilitating the learning of soft skills. Firstly, the knowledge of the crucial soft skills in each of the respective fields. Second question is, which facilitating methods are appro-

priate in order to produce these skills. The third question for universities lies in how to assess the development of soft skills in a way which is objective and repeatable.

As a conclusion, this work presents some fields of future action in our research. On one hand, there is a need to have access to taxonomies of the necessary soft skills validated by both the university and the employer organization. On the other hand we must design an array of potential soft skills in relation to the jobs required by the companies and their degree of need according to the profile.

Secondly, there is a need to develop these soft skills in the academic field. As a result, the student of today can be the employee of tomorrow more completely integrated in the company according to the needs of this and with the knowledge necessary, to fulfil both the expectations of the company as the expectations themselves and concerns of the worker himself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Part of this work was supported by the Erasmus+ program of the European Commission under Grant 2017-1-ES01-KA203-038589 in the frame of the project CoSki21 – Core Skills for 21th-century professionals. The authors would like to thank the people who have collaborated with the research answering the interviews.

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RIASSUNTO

Recenti rapporti sull'occupabilità suggeriscono che molti soggetti impiegati nel mondo del lavoro non sono in possesso di soft skills essenziali. Tuttavia resta ancora un campo inesplorato la misura in cui queste competenze siano rilevanti rispetto alla propria occupazione. Attraverso interviste semi strutturate condotte su 64 manager di aziende che operano in diversi settori in Finlandia e in Italia, abbiamo preso in esame la percezione di 21 soft skills studiando i cambiamenti nelle competenze richieste e gli effetti dell'impatto culturale. Dalle interviste è emerso che (a causa della pressione generata dalla competizione) per i manager, specifiche soft skills – in particolare team working e flessibilità nella gestione del cambiamento – stanno diventando sempre più importanti. Lo studio infatti indica che il valore percepito di ogni skills, in termini di significato, sembra variare in base all'ambiente di lavoro e all'occupazione. Inoltre alcune tra le competenze analizzate, sembrano avere un maggiore potenziale di sviluppo, suggerendo la possibilità di essere implementate attraverso i curricula universitari. L'auspicio del lavoro è che un paese caratterizzato da ambienti di lavoro favorevoli allo sviluppo delle soft skills, debba comunque promuovere la ricerca per l'identificazione e la rilevanza delle skills stesse.

Parole chiave: Competenze; Competenze trasversali; Curriculum universitario; Mercato del lavoro; Soft skills.

How to cite this Paper: Schleutker, K., Caggiano, V., Coluzzi, F., & Poza Luján, J. L. (2019). Soft skills and European labour market: Interviews with Finnish and Italian managers [Soft skills e mercato del lavoro europeo: interviste condotte con manager finlandesi e italiani]. *Journal of Educational, Cultural and Psychological Studies*, 19, 123-144. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7358/ecps-2019-019-schl>