

THE VALUE OF SOFT SKILLS

The Value of Soft Skills: Preparing the Next Generation of Workforce for Future Work

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By

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ABSTRACT

RESEARCH PAPER: The Value of Soft Skills: Preparing the Next Generation of Workforce for Future Work

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Graduates are not only expected to attain a degree but a range of soft skills. Soft skills such as communication, creativity, and critical thinking are among the most desired skills employers seek. Soft skills are well respected among employers, as they represent an employee's ability to function successfully in life and at work. Evidence suggests the deficit in soft skills is growing; employers find it challenging to hire new graduates with soft skills. As a result, employers have raised concerns about the widening gap between graduates' skills and capabilities to meet the workforce needs. They fear a disconnect between our education system and the labor market.

This research paper provides an overview of the growing demands of soft skills in higher education and within the workplace. The report shows that higher education plays a critical role in maintaining our current and future workforce. Research shows universities must integrate soft skill curriculum through work and project-based learning, micro-credentials, and cross-sector partnerships to address the soft skills deficit.

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INTRODUCTION

Following dramatic shifts in the labor market, employers are no longer committed to formal education programs. Research has shown that employers desire graduates to possess a range of soft skills, including communication, critical thinking, and decision-making competencies. Soft skills are imperative, offering a wide range of benefits, including productivity, engagement, and employee retention.

Despite their value, most employers struggle to hire graduates with soft skills needed to exceed today's economy. A survey by the Association of American Colleges & Universities notes that sixty percent of executive and hiring managers feel that college graduates are not prepared to succeed in entry-level positions (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2019). Employers suggest the findings might point to a problem within higher education and a lack of ability to apply learning in real-world settings.

Higher education institutions examine learning methods to enhance student and employability to meet employer and labor market needs. To address economic shifts, higher education must implement an infrastructure of soft skills addressing the learning needs of our current and future workforce.

This paper is an in-depth analysis of soft skills in higher education and the workplace. The paper will start with a brief description of soft skills, following a series of recommendations: (a) integrate soft skills into college curriculum (b) provide learning opportunities for working professionals through micro-credentials, certifications, and project-based learning (c) cross sector partnership with universities and industries.

DEFINITION OF SOFT SKILLS

The concept of soft skills is excessively broad as it's intended to pertain to an individual's set of cognitive, emotional, and social competencies. The term soft skills can be described as essential skills consisting of interpersonal, communication, critical thinking, problem, social, and people skills. These five attributes have been proven to predict workplace success and which employers expect employees to have. This section of the literature attempts to define soft skills, explore the attributes associated with skills, and discuss the importance.

The U.S. labor force is ever-evolving, transforming the economy into a modern industrial society sparking innovation and economic growth. According to Herman (1999), we live in a new aged economy, powered by technology, fueled by information, and driven by knowledge. As automation dominates every sector, the demand for soft skills increases over time.

The advent of economic changes has placed higher education at a premium for producing students with knowledge and skills to harmonize with workforce demands. Now, graduates are evaluated not only on their understanding of the subject but also their level of skills, enhancing employability. Soft skills such as personality traits, interpersonal, work ethic, self-direction, and communication skills are among the most sought-after soft skills employers look for in job candidates (LinkedIn, 2020). These attributes are well respected among employers, as they represent an individual's ability to function in life and work.

Bellanca and Brandt (2010) describe soft skills as social and emotional capabilities that shape our attitudes and behaviors. Employers consider this form of soft skills essential in the workplace, as artificial intelligence alters how we process and perform routine tasks in the workplace. Soft skills are a uniquely human skill that machines cannot replicate. To harness

technology's power, employers feel the pressure to ensure graduates meet their needs to face the challenges in the working environment.

Matteson, Anderson, Boyden, (2016) refers to soft skills as an interchangeable skill related to any occupation and sector. Among these soft skills include communication, creativity, and problem-solving. These attributes represent core skills that support an individual's ability to acquire and maintain a job. Communication soft skills serve as a tool to engage in conversations with colleagues and relate expectations. Employers desire individuals with strong, soft skills to foster a positive working environment and enable individuals to interact effectively while maintaining control (Matteson, Anderson, Boyden, 2016).

Cimatti (2016) refers to soft skills as character traits and personality skills that influence individuals' perceptions. All modern workplaces are made up of people, and success often depends on workplace relationships. Organizations that create a sense of connection and belonging increase engagement by sixty-percent, as employees perceive more psychological value in their daily work (Cimatti, 2016).

Interpersonal and life skills serve as a set of soft skills that allow us to create and manage relationships effectively. Khalid, Hamid, Salin (2014) framework provides strong practical knowledge of the human activity, revealing verbal and nonverbal cues to convey intentions and establish relationships. Soft skills are a component of a person's relationship and communication qualities. Much of interpersonal skills provide a foundation for developing good customer service, and almost every professional organization benefits from customer service.

Furthermore, Shultz (2008) defines soft skills as critical thinking concepts, processing information, and weighing objective data to problems. Individuals with a well-developed

understanding are quick to recognize where issues exist and perceive opportunities when they come into sight. Soft skills, including critical thinking, are highly beneficial, enhancing human capital within the work and community life.

SOFT SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE

Today, soft skills are some of the most in-demand skills in any workplace. Documenting their importance, LinkedIn recently analyzed hiring trends across its platform to determine the most sought-after skills. Data suggest that a range of soft skills, including, interpersonal communication, problem solving, and teamwork, are the most required among employers (LinkedIn, 2019).

A range of soft skills has been shown to impact and improve an organization's performance. According to a 2017 World Economic Forum report, employees with a robust set of soft skills improve their co-worker's efficiency levels and the quality of their work by thirty percent (WEF, 2017). Job performance is critical in determining the overall quality to which an employee exhibits successfully. Employing people with soft skills fosters a culture of engagement and a positive working environment. The modern workplace is interpersonal and collaborative, skills such as written communication and teamwork, account for fifty-five percent of a work environment (SHRM, 2019).

Understanding the association between skills and productivity is essential when measuring the return on investment. A study by Adhvaryu, Nyshadham, Kala (2018) notes soft skills training in areas like communication and problem-solving increases workplace productivity and engagement by twelve percent; delivering a two-hundred and fifty percent return on investment. As organizations measure and monitor employees, they can expect to see

significant benefits of soft skills, including career progression and promotion. iCIMS Hiring Insights (2017) notes ninety-four percent employers promoted candidates with soft skills, compared other individuals with more level of experience and qualifications.

High turnover rates can be detrimental to employers and employees. Due to retiring boomers, turnover rates are increasing, resulting in a constant challenge for human resources. Already, turnover rates for all industries hover around thirteen percent, and those rates are far higher in the service sector, where the average is thirty percent (SHRM, 2019). The retention crisis will continue to intensify, employers understand soft skills are an asset and could reduce employee turnover and increase engagement.

As organizations look to become fast, agile, and responsive, the need for technology increases. IMB's Institute for Business Value (2019) announced that its most recent study found that one hundred and twenty million people worldwide will need to retrain in the next three years to work with automation and advance organic cognition. The increase of digitalization resulted to a decline of hard skills, making soft skills highly valued in the labor market.

Despite these skills being in demand, organizations find it challenging to fill positions that require soft skills. HR Dive reported that they are unable to grow and complete job roles due to a lack of skilled talent: forty-nine percent of candidates fail to exhibit collaboration skills, relationship management, and time management skills (HR Dive, 2019).

The soft skills gap remains a significant problem for both employers and employees. For an employer, the lack of soft skills often results in reduced investment, pressing needs in the present time, and not waiting for a new employee to come comfortably up to speed (Spang,

2014). For new hires, a lack of role clarity, job descriptions are vague and often inaccurate, with little information regarding skillsets and workplace culture (SHRM, 2018).

SOFT SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

One primary function of higher education is to equip students with the skills and knowledge required for the workforce (Orefice, Melacarne, Giampaolo, 2012). In an increasingly competitive job market, graduate employability has become a hot topic among universities. Graduate employability is a critical indicator of a strong work ethic to potential employers. Education must be built upon an understanding of producing qualified graduates that can fill current and future job roles. Learning should be responsive to employment needs, and include the development of general skills, wide values in employment.

Evidence suggesting the deficit in soft skills is nothing new, a 2019 study by SHRM noted thirty percent of employers find it challenging to hire new graduates with a set of soft skills (Tarallo, 2019). Both hard and soft skills play a significant role in the workplace. Hard skills are required to do a job-related task; however, soft skills are required for customer driven careers. Numerous employers have raised serious concerns about the widening gap between graduates' skills and capabilities and the need to meet the work challenges. One out of four employers believe that traditional universities lack the ability to provide students with the essential skills and knowledge to succeed today's labor market (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019).

Chan (2010) found that university graduates are lacking in social skills, critical thinking, time-management and creativity. The lack of soft skills is a significant threat for companies, as soft skills represent core values of self-motivation and personal development towards work and

the organization. Studies show that employees who are exposed to soft skills through learning, embrace work, and life transitions more positive than the individual who has had no exposure (Chan, 2010). Soft skills are both the "language and currency" of the job market, and so students must become adept at using them (Pretti & Fannon, 2018). After all, the workplace is made up of interpersonal relationships, thoughts and opinions must be reflected, and conflicts must be resolved.

Bauer-Wolf (2018), notes eighty percent of modern organizations believe a broad gap between the soft and technical skills of university graduates. The advancements in technology has presented significant challenges for faculty, students can go beyond the classroom environment, and tailor information to learning style that work for them. Witziers, Bosker, Krüger (2003), notes, there seems to be a huge disconnect between our education system and the demands of the real world; academia believes that the 'hard' skills of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) are critical to the future. However, employers feel soft skills will withstand the wave of technology and prepare employees for future workforce needs.

Higher education overlooks the importance of soft skills, feeling that they interfere with the dissemination of disciplinary knowledge; they perceive that the purpose of education should be fixated on "learning "and not "earning" (Lombardi, 2007). To some extent, universities think that higher education institutions should not be held accountable for producing work-ready candidates. Academic knowledge acquired from a formal institution fails to measure work-life success, hard skills account for twenty percent of work performance, rather than the forty-five percent linked to soft skills (International Association of Administrative Professionals, 2018).

The World Economic Forum (WEF) recently ranked the U.S. as third on the Global Competitiveness Index, behind Switzerland and Singapore, pointing to the quality of education

as one of the reforms needed if we're going to improve (WEF, 2018a). Researchers note one challenge holding academia back is the traditional teaching style and their relatively passive transmission of knowledge. The structured lesson plans and standardized testing are stifling students' creativity and innovation within the classroom. At the core, higher education is based on structured grading scales. Students are forced to follow narrowly-structured pathways that prioritize class rank, GPA, and exam scores to be the basic measures of academic performance. A well-paid career should be the byproduct of an education focused on inspiring intrinsic motivation, relationship curiosity, and collaboration. As jobs are quickly redefined, our systems of learning need to adapt to address the rising demand for soft skills in today's market (Witziers, Bosker, Krüger, 2003).

To meet economic needs, higher education must go beyond traditional teaching methods, focusing on lifelong skills that enhance student's employability. Employers look for candidates with communication, critical thinking, and social skills to employ new graduates. The successful and appropriate implementation of these skills benefits all parties—students, corporations, and universities. Failure to prepare graduates with these skills results in adverse effects such as unemployment and low wages (Lombardi, 2007).

BRIDGING THE GAP

A vast majority of Americans say that institutions—schools, employers, and governments—all share responsibility for the skills gap in the U.S. (American Staffing Association, 2017). Bridging the gap requires collaboration among universities and employers, blending every knowledge and skills from every practice domain.

Americans go to college to prepare for a job. Corporations recruit top graduates, employees look to education to advance their careers, and the government invests in public value offerings. Each relationship plays a critical role in maintaining a healthy workforce ecosystem.

Preparing for labor market demands goes beyond the extension of training and reskilling employees. Higher education is at the frontline of producing skilled talent; the focus must shift towards programs supporting employers and economic needs. Given the urgency in responding to the soft skills deficit, I recommend the following recommendations: (a) integrate soft skills into college curriculum (b) provide learning opportunities for the working professionals through micro-credentials, certifications, and project-based learning (c) cross partnership with universities and industries.

Soft Skills Curriculum

For universities, the foundation of student success is providing graduates with intellectual and professional skills to succeed in today's workforce. Achieving this objective requires universities to produce graduates with a robust set of cognitive skills and a broad range of soft skills. The most significant value doesn't rely on the academic degree; instead values relies on skills used to enhance employability.

The reality is, learners of today will be leaders of tomorrow. Our system of education must shift with the needs of our workforce. Educators must correspond by designing a curriculum that serves the professional world as well as the theoretical world. According to Alismail and McGuire (2019), soft skills, a blend of problem-solving, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking should be at the core of the academic curriculum. A recommendation that provides students with an opportunity to cultivate soft skills is through

learning activities and real-world case studies. Case studies connect and apply career content to the classroom environment and build upon the fundamental problem and critical thinking skills.

Our workforce's future doesn't depend on teaching to the test but on graduates' skills that demonstrate knowledge (Lombardi, 2007). Traditional teaching styles, such as lesson plans, provide students with deep cognitive understanding but are far less effective than soft skills because they don't teach people how to communicate and collaborate in a teamworking environment. Problem-based learning offers a solution to soft skills learning; by focusing on hands-on training instead of lecturing on the material.

A study conducted by Idrus and Ridhuan (2018) employs the PBL approach to a series of engineering programs to help students engage in learning and address the soft skills gap. Utilizing real workplace scenarios and the PBL approach, students were more involved in feedback and developed a range of soft skill attributes, including problem-solving, communication, and teamwork skills.

According to Musa, Maryan, Latiff (2012) project-based learning enables students to make a definitive connection to soft skills, improving their problem solving, communication, and decision skills, further noting that the approach facilitates learners' growth in acquiring the attributes. One institution utilizing this approach is the University of Delaware. Faculty are encouraged to collaborate with industry leaders to incorporate problem-based learning activities for students. The objective is to motivate students to work together to solve real issues.

The cooperative learning approach combines both academic and social skills. The method increases students' participation by splitting them into small teams, presenting with a series of problems, and applying various learning activities to enhance critical thinking. The group work

approach allows students to collectively work towards a task and feel a sense of belonging. A study by Nizah, Rahim, & Sulaiman (2011) analyzes the impact of cooperative learning, its effort in bridging the soft skills gap among college students and producing work-ready graduates. Results showed an eighty-percent increase in students' level of soft skills; respondents also agreed by engaging in group work; they were more involved in learning outcomes. The study further noted that the approach was far reaching in terms of relationship management and cultivating trust with peers. As humans, we rely on relationships in the workplace. Failure to acquire interpersonal and communication skills can significantly impact business outcomes and worker behavior.

Recently, a new focus has been on liberal arts degrees, as its core curriculum emphasizes the soft skills employers seek. A liberal arts degree is not intended for a specific career; instead, it is a wide range of academic disciplines such as humanities, social science, and arts. Employers consider the degree critical in developing uniquely human skills such as—critical thinking, flexibility, and collaboration. Kruger and Peck (2017) notes, there seems to be a massive disconnect between our education system and the demands of the real world; academia believes that the technical skills such as science, technology, engineering are critical for long-term success. However, emphasis needs to be placed on the skills that technology can't create. While artificial intelligence is beneficial, many jobs require human capabilities such as communication, empathy, creativity, and strategic thinking.

Liberal arts revolutionize education by combining both technical and soft skills. The University of Texas is using liberal arts as an opportunity to address the soft skills shortage. The "Human" Dimension Program is incorporating communication, behavior science, and relationship management. To date, the program has enhanced grads' work ethic and their ability

to thrive in many career areas, including business, healthcare, and technology (University of Texas, 2020).

Higher education serves as a pathway to career success. Learning institutions set their students apart by equipping them with skills that can be used to solve real-world problems. Reinhardt University, a small liberal arts college in Georgia, is revamping education by launching a new soft skills program. Mallard, President of Reinhardt University, notes that the soft skills program draws on communication, relationship management, and critical thinking courses, giving students a competing edge over their peers in the job market (Tate, 2019). The purpose of the program is to connect classroom learning to real world settings, utilizing scenarios in which they have utilize soft skills (Tate, 2019).

San Jose State University (SJSU) partnered with IBM to infuse a soft skills program to gain industry experience before graduation. The partnership allows students to deepen their communication and networking skills while learning to adapt to real-world business challenges. Being directly involved in the education system had been a significant advantage for IBM; the system ensures they have a steady talent pipeline and that graduates possess the required employment skills (McElhatton, 2019).

Learning Opportunities' for Working Professionals

Today's labor market is changing drastically; automation and technology are growing at an accelerated pace. A report by the McKinsey Global Institute, notes thirty percent of all occupations will be associated with artificial intelligence by 2030 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2017). The tight labor market makes it necessary for employers to find candidates with the right skills, capabilities, and mindset to succeed in their job role.

Companies grow eager to develop a talent strategy that upskills employees' cognitive, social, and emotional functioning. The current talent development model assumes employees possess all the skills they need for their existing careers and futures. Employers feel that the job skills we acquire from college, our shelf life, and employers only need to make a limited investment in talent development (SHRM, 2019). As the workforce changes, so must the systems that students and employees rely on to learn and stay relevant.

Now, more than ever, universities are transforming learning systems to create an environment that better facilitates working professionals. Access to life learning opportunities for working professionals means adopting a more practical and applied approach to our current educational system. A learning system that allows career professionals to enroll in courses with minimal barriers to entry and complete coursework on timelines that work for their schedules.

Capella University is an example of universities expanding learning opportunities for career professional. Consulting with industry leaders, the university developed a series of microcredits and graduate certificates that provide professional with a short-term pathway to advance their career. Employers find these programs highly beneficial, as they are cost effective, provide a customized experience to skill needs, and counts towards a graduate degree (McKenzie, 2020).

Strayer University launched a new workforce development program--Strayer at Work. The unique program partners with employers to identify new skills, developing customized degree programs to boost productivity. The feedback process enabled faculty to remember skill gaps and ROI-driven solutions that improve performance roles where differences are the greatest (Strayer University, 2020).

Cross Sector Partnerships

Cross sector partnerships aim to improve knowledge production by facilitating exchange relationships and processes between actors associated with different sectors (Mehling, Kollec, 2019). University partnerships can foster engagement opportunities through work-based learning and curriculum planning, equipping students, and employees with work-ready skills. The collaboration efforts are highly beneficial to universities and students. Faculty can gain exposure to real-world experiences, and students can enhance workplace skills.

In terms of work readiness, cross-sector partnerships demonstrate the best learning experience for students. The learning model utilizes a college to career concept, engaging multiple stakeholders in career readiness programs that teach sustainable skills in an ever-evolving workforce. Tumuti, Wanderi, & Thoruwa (2013) examines the benefits of cross-sector partnerships for universities and businesses and finds a positive link between learning and career outcomes of graduates. Results show sixty percent of employers offered jobs to graduates that were involved in collaborative projects. The study also showed students had an easier transition to the world of work (Tumuti, Wanderi, & Thoruwa, 2013).

University and industry partnerships provide great value for employers, such as a secure talent pool of candidates who meet the job qualifications. It also stimulates a wide range of educational opportunities, including training programs, professional development workshops, and boot camps. Through such ventures, employers and universities can monitor workforce trends and create work-ready programs aiming to strengthen the economy and close the skills gap.

Many universities throughout the region are adopting the cross-sector partnerships model to support college to career efforts. The University of California Berkley engineering program has a long-standing history of collaborating with industry experts to create robust online courses. Faculty note the primary goal is to enhance learning outcomes by connecting classroom content to real-world practices (Berkley Engineering, 2020). Berkley's engineering program is rigorous, students often lack soft skills to succeed in the competitive environment. Organizations and faculty use several tactics, including real world projects that integrate workgroups, client relations, and organizational skills. These projects provide unique opportunities to build soft skills (Harris, Jones, Coutts, 2010). For instance, interpersonal relationship skills are needed to manage client relations, communication skills to maximize team work, and organizational skills meet project work deadlines.

Another example, George Mason University partnered with Education Design Lab, to create curriculum emphasizing the practice and understanding of soft skills. The university experienced a significant skills gap, IT students lacking in communication, creativity, empathy, and decision-making skills (Hopler, 2017). Today's employers not only expect graduates to have technical knowledge, but a range of soft skills with regard to their ability to communicate with clients and work well in teams (SHRM, 2019). The labor market shift made it increasingly important to ensure graduates were workplace ready and demonstrated skills employers desired. To achieve the desired standard, faculty and design lab experts created a learning module, requiring students to make use of critical thinking, communication, work ethic, and listening skills (Education Dive, 2018).

Clemson University Center for Workforce Development serves as a talent and research hub for South Carolina's workforce. Due to economic expansion, the state's workforce is

experiencing a soft skill gap within the manufacturing industry. More specifically, the advancement in AI and manufacturing has created a need to fill gaps in social and emotional capabilities where machines fall short. To meet this demand, Clemson University and The National Science Foundation created a Technology-Human Integrated Knowledge Education Researcher program, also, known as the THINKER program (Alongi, 2018a). Clemson's THINKER program consists of soft skills curriculum, reflective exercises, and human behavior activities. Since the creation of the THINKER program, the state has seen a seventeen percent reduction in the skills gap, noting it as rewarding experience for employees (Alongi, 2018b).

For business, cross sector partnerships can present challenges. For instance, academic scholars undermine real world skills where areas industry experts consider to be an important contribution in the workplace. A study conducted by Dan (2013) investigates the risk factors associated with university and employer partnerships: coordination and information problems, each party has its own set of formal rules, which impart a lack of flexibility, can hinder research output. Also, corporate partners are more likely to incur costs to clinical research studies, including supplemental equipment and field assistance. Ownership and commercialization, universities maintain rights to research results, which inhibit organizations capitalizing on the results for profit investment. Last challenge is piracy, any project or task belongs to the university, company's find it difficult to own copy of any documentation to signify collaborative efforts (Dan, 2013).

DISCUSSION

According to a report by the World Economic Forum Future of Jobs, nearly forty percent of occupations will be replaced by technology and robots (WEF, 2019). As technology alters the outlook of our economy, the need for soft skills has never been more urgent. Survey results from

West Monroe, shows the biggest economic challenge is access to skills that machines can't replicate, citing communication, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking as the most sought-after skills (West Monroe, 2019). Further noting that a lack soft skill could be detrimental to an organizations' productivity, growth, and innovation.

The Society for Human Resource Management shows that organizations find it difficult to recruit candidates in several areas of soft skills, consisting of decision making, problem solving, written communication, and relationship management (SHRM, 2016). Also noting an eighty-four percent gap in available soft skills, such as social skills, teamwork, conflict resolution, and work ethic, according to the survey.

Other economic pressures caused by technology is industrial growth. The pace of unemployment and low skilled workers, places a greater focus on the need to develop educational pathways for our current and future workers. Education is a fundamental source to closing the skills gap, allowing individuals gain the skills needed for labor market demands.

Employers have expressed concern that graduates are not equipped with the right set of soft skills to contribute effectively within the workplace. An ideal start to address this need is the development of educational programs which integrates soft skills into course curriculum. Faculty can promote highly sought-after skills through work and project-based learning. These learning formats are designed by subject matter experts, which include both academic and industry-related goals for students to meet. In return, employers act as program accreditors, acknowledging students have attained the skills they need to succeed in the labor market.

A constant dilemma for faculty is the traditional bureaucratic system of learning, overlooking the quality of relevant knowledge required for jobs of the future. Cross sector

partnership between universities and employers allows faculty to stay up to date on new skills, problems, and perspectives of employers.

Rybnicek and Königsgruber (2019) examine the effectiveness of university and industry partnerships. Scholars identify six benefits for all parties involved—universities, graduates, and employers: (i) talent pipeline and joint offering, secure job placement of students guaranteed skills align with talent needs (ii) funding, employers sponsor projects for research development opportunities (iii) reputation, increasing the visibility and attention of partnership between universities and industry leaders (iv) employee training, faculty develop programs aimed at reskilling employees who are vulnerable to economic shifts (v) innovative developments, exposure to new products aiming to enhance organizational profit (vi) educational opportunities for faculty, collaborate with employers to stay up to date on industry skills and knowledge (Rybnicek, Königsgruber, 2019).

Various institutions, including the University of Texas, Capella University, and Strayer University, have responded by designing targeted training programs and customized degrees for career professionals. Although these efforts provide learning opportunities for working professionals, employers are reluctant to invest, as they perceive academia as all theory and no practice. Business problems are complex and multifaceted, there is no one size fits all approach to learning. Academic courses fail to provide a broad viewpoint, as well, exclude external sources to addressing business issues.

Educational offerings such as micro-credentials and graduate certificates are highly favored by employers today. A report by Learning House (2018), notes sixty percent of employers would hire a candidate with a certificate of completion in place of an executive degree (Learning House, 2018). Graduate certificates are an accessible option for both employers and

employees. Students have the ability to tailor their learning experience to align with workplace needs, as well, complete course work on timelines that work with their schedules. Employers benefit by training employees' certificates which count toward executive degrees, therefore saving money in talent development.

CONCLUSION

One of the most impactful ways to address the soft skills gap is to implement an infrastructure of lifelong learning for graduate students and career professionals. Soft skills represent the basic components of lifelong learning and human development. By nature, soft skills influence our attitudes, behaviors, and interactions to life and work.

Evidence suggest that employers no longer desire only hard skills sets, instead, also look for soft skills such as communication, problem solving, and creativity. Soft skills benefit employers, they generic in nature, have the ability to withstand economic changes, and can be transferred across multiple industries and disciplines. Despite the demand, employers struggle to hire candidates with soft skills.

Numerous employers have raised serious concerns about the widening gap between graduates' skills and capabilities to meet the work challenges. There seems to be a huge disconnect between our education system and the demands of the real world. Employer are placing higher education at premium to equip students with soft skills required for today. To meet these challenges and seize the opportunity to serve lifelong learners, universities must integrate soft skill curriculum through work and project-based learning. These learning pedagogies enable students to develop soft skills, improving their problem solving, communication, and decision skills.

Advancement in technology is altering the way organizations operate. To keep up with demands, organizations must upskill and reskill employees as quickly and effectively as possible. For universities to address the needs of employers, it is recommended to offer graduate certificates and microcredits that provide career professionals with learning and development opportunities. Graduate certificates are a short-term online educational program, allowing learners to tailor to the needs of industry and market demands.

A final recommendation to improving higher education's effort in meeting the workforce demands is adopting a holistic partnership between employers and universities. Cross-sector partnerships have proven to be beneficial, creating a steady talent pipeline of trained workers. Universities can increase learning experiences through public and private partnerships with corporations, allowing educational and industry leaders to collaborate and provide information on the skills needed to meet market demands.

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