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DEFINITION, DEVELOPMENT, ASSESSMENT OF SOFT SKILLS AND THEIR ROLE FOR THE QUALITY OF ORGANIZATIONS AND ENTERPRISES

Abstract: *Soft Skills is a very popular term nowadays, used to indicate personal transversal competences such as social aptitudes, language and communication capability, friendliness and ability of working in team and other personality traits that characterize relationships between people. Soft Skills are traditionally considered complementary of Hard Skills, which are the abilities to perform a certain type of task or activity.*
Soft Skills are strategic to be successful in personal and professional life then are essential for a candidate when he tries to obtain any kind of job. Enterprises generally hire new employees, in particular recent graduates, taking more in consideration their Soft Skills than their Hard Skills. This happens also for technical professions, such as engineers, because the company, in order to be competitive, needs to create good and effective teams and a collaborative working atmosphere. The quality of products provided by any industry then doesn't only base on the materials chosen and on the technology used, neither only on the expertise of workers who contribute to their fabrication, but also on the quality of the enterprise in its whole. And this quality strongly depends from the human resources involved and their capability of positively interacting to achieve a common aim: the company success.

Keywords: *quality, soft skills, management, organization*

1. Introduction

Any organization is made of people and its success depends mainly on the capabilities of the human resources and on the kind of collaboration they are able to establish. Human capital is then a fundamental component for any enterprise and the quality of it deeply affects the results that the company can achieve. This happens in both services and manufacturing companies, even if in these last ones, the competitiveness of the product also bases of course on the choice of materials and processes used to fabricate it. In the past manufacturing companies of any kind of industrial product were mainly concerned about the technical aspects of their production, in terms of methodologies, systems, facilities, components etc. and tried to select workers technically prepared and able to perform the tasks they were hired for. Nowadays this

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view has changed and workers are considered a key element not only for their ability to perform a certain activity, but in particular for their transversal competences, also called Soft Skills.

The term Soft Skills is used to indicate all the competences that are not directly connected to a specific task; they are necessary in any position as they mainly refer to the relationships with other people involved in the organization. Hard Skills, on the other hand, indicate the specific capabilities to perform a particular job. Then a Hard Skill can be for example the ability of a worker to regulate and control a CNC machine to fabricate a component, while a Soft Skill is his capability of collaborating with the colleagues working at the same factory department.

Soft Skills are then considered a strategic element in any industrial organization and they deserve high attention from the Human Resources management, not only in the recruitment phase but also during the whole professional career of employees. The quality of the industry, in terms of quality of the product, of the organization, of the services and of the workers' life, strongly depends on the Soft Skills possessed by personnel at any level. The quality of the Human Capital working at any company, then the results they can achieve, mainly depends on their Soft Skills.

This paper intends to provide a complete view on Soft Skills and on their importance in order to achieve quality in any job and more widely in individual's life, starting from their definition, learning and assessment. The aim of this work is furthermore to enhance the relevance of Soft Skills within industrial organizations, describing how an enterprise can collaborate with educational institutions to "teach" Soft Skills and can contribute to the development of these competences for its employees, increasing the competitiveness and success of the whole organization.

Definitions, methods, models, tools here

described have been presented during the workshop "Soft Skills and their role in employability – New perspectives in teaching, assessment and certification", proposed by the University of Bologna in collaboration with AlmaLaurea, a consortium of 72 Italian universities collecting data of graduates now containing 2.200.000 cv. The event was held at the University Residential Center in Bertinoro on the 18th and 19th of November 2015 with the participation of 28 speakers (several international), from 18 Universities, Institutions and Companies and a total of 160 participants. Some considerations and conclusions here reported have been elaborated by the author, who proposed this initiative. The workshop was realized within the project Adria Hub – Bridge technical differences and social suspicious contributing to transform the Adriatic area in a stable hub for a sustainable technological development. This European project has been coordinated by the University of Bologna with the aim of a technology transfer of the system used from AlmaLaurea to collect and select the CV of graduates to some universities located in the Balkans, in particular in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina and Montenegro to favour their employability trough the matching with enterprises. As Soft Skills are considered essential for graduates to get a job at any organization or enterprise, the event can be considered a significant action of the project with the following aims:

- To describe the state of the art concerning Soft Skills
- To identify new methods and tools for Soft Skills determination and certification for education and employability purposes
- To identify lines of development for the political and institutional decision-makers and for the researchers, considering the enterprises needs.

Soft Skills are a relevant cross-disciplinary theme. The workshop has collected several

prestigious international and national experts along with scholars of excellence who are studying and analysing transversal competences, who are looking for a bridge between research, teaching and employment and who are fostering and developing these competences within the enterprises. The workshop has provided a complete panorama of Soft Skills from their definition to their expression and application in the labour work.

2. Definition and selection of Soft Skills

Many definitions of Soft Skills exist in literature.

A first distinction can be made between *Self-oriented/Intrapsychic* and *Other oriented/Interpersonal Skills*. The first ones refer to what the person must understand and develop by himself while the second category gathers what the person can develop relating with other people. This distinction can also be made in terms of Personal and Social Skills. Personal Skills mainly correspond to cognitive Skills, such as knowledge and thinking skills while Social Skills refer to relationships with other people. To just mention some, a knowledge skill is the capability of elaborating information and a thinking skill is the ability of exercising critical judgment. Examples of personal skills are the capacity and desire to continue to learn and the ability to plan and achieve goals. Main Social Skills can be identified in communication, listening capability, negotiation, networking, problem solving, decision making and assertiveness (Engelberg, 2015).

Soft Skills give Hard Skills the required plasticity to develop and keep up-to-date in changing circumstances. Soft Skills are closely related to plastic, rational, elaborating, abilities, elaborated in the pre-frontal cortex, developed by Man in the last 50.000 years. Hard Skills allow Man to be what he is: an engineer, a physicist, a philosopher. Soft Skills operate in a direction that is rather separate from the role of the individual and go beyond the strict demands of the profession (Grisi, 2014).

Basic Interactions

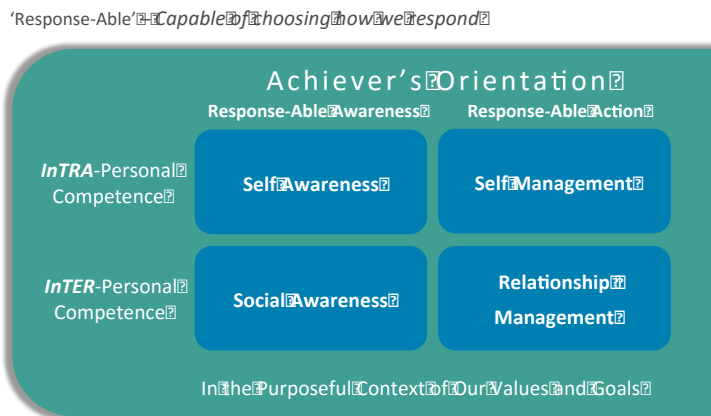'Response-Able' – *Capable of choosing how we respond*

Figure 1. Definition of Soft Skills - Bryce Kingsley

The meaning of *Intra-Personal* and *Inter-Personal Competences* is well described in Figure 1 based on a research of Daniel Goleman. Any individual is responsible of his actions, this bases on different elements, each of them connected to the others.

Awareness and Action interact with Personal and Inter Personal competences, as the figure clearly shows (Kingsley, 2015).

Many personality features have a strong influence on the individual transversal competences. Moral virtues can be considered connected to Soft Skills: Temperance, Justice, Prudence, Courage are all significant traits for the development of transversal competences (Ciappei, 2015).

Soft Skills can be furthermore distinguished in *Entrepreneurship Skills* and *Technological Skills*. Entrepreneurship Skills are connected to leadership, to risk facing, to innovation and change management and correspond to Soft Skills. Technological Skills are the ones that allow performing specific tasks. The parallel with Software

and Hardware in Information Technology is evident: Software controls and manages Hardware. This is particularly true in the Indo-European approach, while in the Oriental one there is more integration between the two parts (Ciappei, 2015).

A proposed integrated taxonomy of Skills is the one in Figure 2 where Soft Skills are organized in two clusters: *Political and Ethical Skills – Strategic and Organizational Skills* while a third one corresponds to Hard Skills: *Managerial and Technological Skills*. Politics and Ethics allow the interpretation, Strategy and Organization bring to planning and Management and Technology imply the coordination of actions. All these skills concur to the realization, then to the production of the effect (Ciappei, 2015).

The main **integrated taxonomy** of **skills**

Fractal approach

Interpretation
Sense making
Politics
Ethics

soft skills

Planning
Sense-action design
Strategy
Organization

Implementation
Action coordinatin
Management
Technology

hard skills

Realization
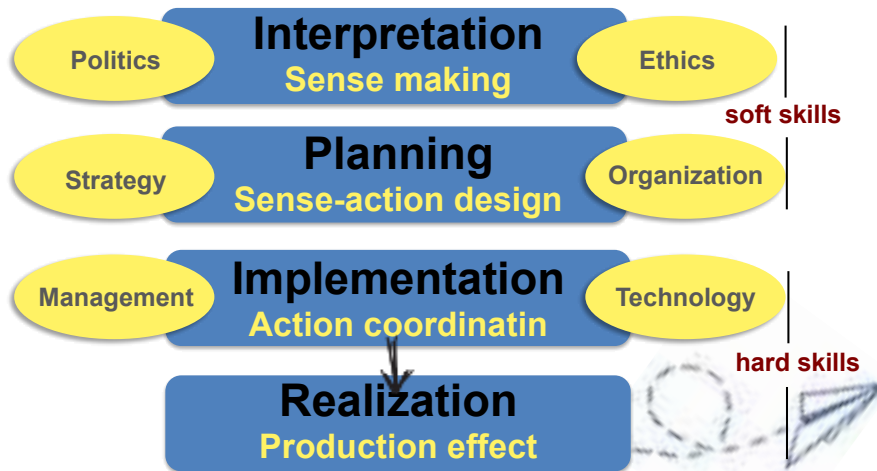**Production effect**

Figure 2. Taxonomy of Skills – Cristiano Ciappei

A famous simple definition of Soft Skills comes from the winner of the Nobel prize 2000 for Economics James Heckman: "Soft Skills predict success in life". He identifies a cause-effect correlation between Soft Skills and personal and professional achievements of people (Cinque, 2015).

Different names have been proposed for Soft Skills by several institutions and organizations, including the European Union (UE) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Figure 3. Hard Skills are also called Specific

Competences and Soft Skills are often indicated as Generic Competences (Poblete Ruiz, 2015). The term cross-cultural competencies appeared in Europe 20 years ago. Now expressions such as Key Competences and, after Microsoft-Intel definition, 21st Century Skills are also very common (Hautamäki, 2015).

Some European projects have been developed to define and study the Skills issue. One of them is the "Tuning" project in which Generic Competences are divided in three categories: *Instrumental*, *Interpersonal* and *Systemic*. Instrumental Competences correspond to cognitive, methodological, technological and linguistic competences. Interpersonal can be divided in two groups: individual and social. Systemic competences are considered organizational, entrepreneurial and leadership skills (Poblete Ruiz, 2015).

Life skills (WHO,1993)

Transversal skills (ISFOL,1998)

Generic competences (Tuning project, 2000)

Key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society (OECD, 2003; 2012)

Key competences for lifelong learning (UE, 2006)

21st century skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009)

Transferable skills (RPIC-ViP, 2011)

Future work skills (IFTF, 2010)

Soft Skills for Talent (Manpower Group, 2014)

Skills for Social Progress (OECD, 2015)

Figure 3. Different names proposed to define Soft Skills - Maria Cinque

It is important to try to understand which skills will be necessary in future. The work skills that will be required in 2020 can be defined as the skills that should be acquired by all citizens, in order to ensure their active participation in society and economy, taking into account the major drivers of change. Among them, the skills in using technology, in particular digital skills, will be fundamental in most jobs to perform many tasks (Cinque, 2015). Furthermore digital resources can help students to develop and train their Soft Skills, then they can be considered at the same time aims to be reached and tools to train, to develop and increase competences and capabilities.

In order to define and identify Soft Skills, the Center of Creative Leadership in Bruxelles (Kingsley, 2015) has proposed a tool named "Social Identity Mapping", which considers gender, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, age, education, socioeconomic status etc. of people. This mapping involves three internal processes: categorization, identification and comparison. First it is necessary to define groups based on shared believes, experiences and characteristics. Second each individual should identify himself as belonging to a group. Third the groups have to be compared. It's human nature to want to fit in some group as well as to be unique. To be

aware of his own social identity is the first step in order to understand which is his own idea and connection to leadership, in order to be able to develop this kind of Soft Skill. The identity is not static, it can change and be developed over time. Identity is made of three components: *Given Identity* (for ex. to be a male of a certain age), *Chosen Identity* (for ex. university-educated and married), *Self Identity* (includes traits, behaviours, beliefs, values and skills).

Social Identity is important for Soft Skills because it leads to:

- Self awareness
- Managing Self
- Communication
- Empathy
- Effective dialogue across differences

All the above mentioned transversal skills are really significant to be successful as a manager and more in general in any kind of profession.

A Soft Skill that most experts recognize such as a very important one is *Emotional Intelligence*. A possible definition of this transversal skill is the ability to perceive and express emotions, to understand and positively use them, and to effectively manage emotions in ourselves and others. Thus Emotional Intelligence is central to performance. It can be considered connected to individual personality but it can also be developed trough attention and development (Kingsley, 2015).

The conceptual model of Skills developed by John Dewey in the book "The Human Nature and Conduct" defines the personality as the interpretation of his habits, which are not pure repetitions but dispositions that the person expresses as specific ways of acting in different challenging situations. Dispositions motivate, activate, and direct abilities. Then the model of soft skills, revisited like dispositions, looks like a complex construction in which many components interact and are developed over time, showing performances based on a coherent set of knowledge, abilities, attitudes and values.

In the concept of disposition three interacting components can be distinguished:

- attitudes and values
- knowledge and abilities involved
- a set of coherent behaviours

The disposition can only be inferred evinced, from repeated congruent behaviours and performances (Pellerey, 2015).

Following another approach, competences can be distinguished in three categories:

- Knowing-why competences implying Reflectiveness
- Understanding and Self-awareness
- Knowing-What, When, Where competences implying Proactivity

Further Soft Skills important to be considered regard the capacity to develop and take advantage of an extensive network of relationships, the Knowing-How, Whom competences implying Reactivity and the Transferable competences in terms of knowledge and employability improving skills (Guglielmi, 2015).

3. How to teach and develop Soft Skills

"The universities' mission of spreading knowledge among the younger generations implies that, in today's world, they must also serve society as a whole; and that the cultural, social and economic future of society requires, in particular, a considerable investment in continuing education." *Magna Charta Universitatum, signed in Bologna in 1988.*

This famous statement includes the idea that Education Institutions don't have only the duty of forming young generations providing them with Hard Skills to become capable professionals, but must first of all create citizens able to actively and positively participate in society, then they also have to support them for the development of their Soft Skills (Morandin, 2015).

Teaching Soft Skills is a fundamental educational activity that must start very early at primary school, then it is not an issue only regarding Universities and Enterprises. Furthermore the development of Soft Skills starts within the family, then even earlier than the time when the child goes to School. It is very difficult to predict what the labour world will be in future, only short-term prediction can have sense. Educational programmes should try to consider possible future scenarios in order to educate young people to find a job, but this is not easy to do, as the future is often unpredictable. (Hautamäki, 2015). But Soft Skills are not only necessary to work, they are essential for everyday life, then educational institutions must focus on methodologies and techniques to help students develop transversal competences that will be useful for them in any circumstance.

A recent report "Skills for social progress" produced by OECD, stressed the need to develop a "whole child" with a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills in order to better face the challenges of the 21st century.

As "skills beget skills", early interventions in social and emotional skills can play an important role in efficiently raising skills and reducing educational, labour market and social disparities (Cinque, 2015).

It is evident that school must provide students with Soft Skills not only to find a job, but to flourish as human beings and citizens. In the book "Not for profit", written by Martha C. Nussbaum in 2010, the following passage is notable: … we increasingly treat education as though its primary goal were to teach students to be economically productive rather than to think

critically and become knowledgeable and empathetic citizens. This focus on profitable skills has eroded our ability to criticize authority, reduced our sympathy with the marginalized and different, and damaged our competence to deal with complex global problems. Then Soft Skills are so important not only for the labour market but for a complete human being, in order to achieve happiness in life (Cinque, 2015).

Emotional Intelligence has been identified as one of the most significant Soft Skills in paragraph n.2.

How is it possible to develop it? To effectively answer this question, we can use the metaphor of an ascending ladder (Figure 4), whose steps correspond to different Soft Skills to be sequentially acquired during the process of development. The base correspond to Self-Awareness, which is fundamental to start the process, then Self-Control, Directed Motivation, Social Awareness and finally Social Influence can be achieved (Engelberg, 2015).

In order to acquire Soft Skills the support of more experienced people who have already achieved professional results is fundamental. Then experts' seminars, coaching and tutoring are effective tools to teach Soft Skills. In particular mentors, who can personally support and taking care of the individual growth and learning, are considered particularly powerful in the process of development of transversal competences of their pupils. The University tutor doesn't only provide support to the student to pass an exam, but he can help him to better understand his attitudes, to develop his skills then to find his way in his professional life (Ciappei, 2015).

Emotional Intelligence

Figure 4. The Ladder of Emotional intelligence – Sydney Engelberg

Teaching of Soft Skills has a different relevance in several countries. Few countries considered it mandatory, in some other nations it is offered as an extra activity on demand only for students interested in it. In both cases schools organize courses and activities to teach Soft Skills. In some cases students themselves organize these courses, such as in some polish cases where students' unions propose themselves activities to teach Soft Skills (Cinque, 2015).

The didactical methods to teach Soft Skills are many. Soft Skills teaching can be embedded in a regular course corresponding to a specific discipline, or they can be taught in separated dedicated activities (not only courses, but also project works, visits, journeys etc.).

A significant European project developed by Fondazione RUI concerning transversal competences is "Mediating Soft Skills at Higher Education Institutions" (ModEs), whose aim was to find a unified methodology for teaching Soft Skills at the undergraduate level. Some deliverables of this project now available are a handbook in several languages and the prototype of a learning game. The focus is to help students identifying their own gaps in Soft Skills and autonomously learning how to fill them. The main outputs of the project are a self-evaluation and orientation tool for students and a lesson learned kit (Cinque, 2015).

Is it possible at university to well teach and develop Soft Skills? There are projects to define methods and best practices for it. An example is the already mentioned "Tuning" project that focuses the presence of Soft Skills teaching in Higher Education programmes. This project has been carried on in Europe in collaboration with 135 universities and in Latin America with 62 universities. One of the most significant outcome of the project is the need of a paradigm shift from a Teaching Based Knowledge (TBK) system to a Learning Based Competences (CBL) (Poblete Ruiz, 2015).

The "Tuning" project proposes some alternative methods to teach Soft Skills:

1) Integrating Soft Skills in the different subjects of a Degree.

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2) Conducting Seminars and Workshops during the weekend aimed at teaching different Soft Skills.
3) Devoting two weeks at the beginning of each semester to train Soft Skills.
4) Setting up different subjects for each Soft Skill and integrating them in programs with different teachers, who are only dedicated to the teaching of Soft Skills.
5) Dedicating a full semester in the Degree to train some specific Soft Skills.

The first one has been preferred, because it is considered more effective, concrete and easy to apply than the other four.

The model to teach Soft Skills implies first to define the competence to be taught, then to consider their implications. Depending on the level of Mastery different indicators and descriptors are used. For instance, referring to the competence *Teamwork*, which is the actively participation and collaboration in team tasks and the promotion of confidence, cordiality and involvement in shared work, possible indicators are:

- Completing assigned tasks within deadlines as a group member
- Participating actively in team meetings, sharing information, knowledge and experiences.
- Collaborating in defining, organizing and distributing group tasks
- Focusing on and being committed to agreement on shared objectives.

Descriptors define the grading of the indicators. Going on with the previous example, the first indicator can be defined through the following descriptors referring to each group member:

- Does not complete the assigned tasks
- Partially complete the assigned tasks or does it with some delay

- Reports before the deadline on the outcome of the assigned task
- The quality of the work on the assigned task is a clear contribution to the team
- In addition to completing the assigned task well, his/her work guides the other team members.

In order to implement the teaching of Soft Skills into a specific subject, a map can be designed in which each didactical module is connected to one or more transversal competences that can be taught within that context.

It is very important to underline that the responsibility of implementing the model, then of effectively teaching Soft Skills, is totally of the Institution. The top management must decide which Soft Skills are the key ones, not only a limited group of professors. It is advisable to identify 4 or 5 Soft Skills, not more. Then it is necessary to check these Soft Skills consistency with the goals and values of the University and finally the identified Soft Skills must become a part of the strategy of the University described in some official document.

From the practical point of view, in order to implement this action, a deep analysis of each academic and professional profile and didactic programme must be carried on in order to define Soft Skills that have a connection, then can be included in each subject. It is necessary to evaluate how important these Soft Skills are in each profile and how to evaluate them. A permanent team to monitor the program and to support during the development and evaluation of Soft Skills should be created. The workload of teachers must be carefully calculated and they have to be trained and motivated. Each professor should be the referent for some indicators and should use the descriptors to assess the level of acquisition of the Soft Skills from the student (Poblete Ruiz, 2015).

The University of Genova and AlmaLaurea have realized a significant survey to

understand how Soft Skills are considered and taught at Italian Universities (Mangano, 2014). The "CT3" (Transversal Competences research) has been carried on in collaboration with Unioncamere, an Italian association of enterprises.

Eight Soft Skills have been investigated:
1) Problem Solving
2) Analysis and synthesis of information
3) Autonomously criticism
4) Effective communication
5) Long-life learning
6) Team working
7) Initiative
8) Organization and planning

A questionnaire was sent to the Directors of Didactical Programs at 78 Italian Universities, 74 answered.

The survey had in particular the aim to enhance the connection between different skills and different disciplines.

A first result regards the easiness to teach competences related to their typology. The most difficult to transfer are the capabilities of initiative and of organization and planning, while the analysis and synthesis of information is considered the easiest one for Universities to teach.

Another outcome regards the connection between discipline and perception of the relevance of the skill. Different disciplinary groups perceive differently the importance of each Soft Skill: for example for architects is much more significant to be able to work in team than for lawyers.

Some tools to teach the above-indicated Soft Skills are furthermore suggested and investigated:
- Laboratories
- Work teams
- Case study
- Simulations
- Project works
- Presentations from the students

The Center of Creative Leadership in Bruxelles has developed some specific tools to teach and develop Soft Skills basing on the idea that leadership should be democratized, therefore leadership development should be more affordable and accessible to people to give more chance to anyone to express his attitudes, then to improve our world.

An example is "Visual Explorer" that opens creative conversations and deep dialogues, using a wide variety of images, about almost any topic chosen by the user. Questions such as: How do you think you are perceived? What is your greatest strength/weakness? help the user to become aware of himself. Another tool is "Leadership Metaphor Explorer" that uses drawings and captions to increase understanding of how leadership operates in organizations, communities and across boundaries. Some framing questions used in this tool are: Which is your ideal leadership style? What leadership metaphor best describes our team/group/organization? This tools lead to develop significant Soft Skills, in particular: Self-Awareness, Communication Skills, Empathy, Networking (Kingsley, 2015).

An interesting recent research carried on at the University of Bologna shows the last trends in the educational debate about teaching Soft Skills at the University level. Magazines, Journals and Trade publications have been analysed using the EBSCO database, looking for the term Soft Skills. A first significant result is that Soft Skills appear more often in Business literature than Education one (Figure 5).
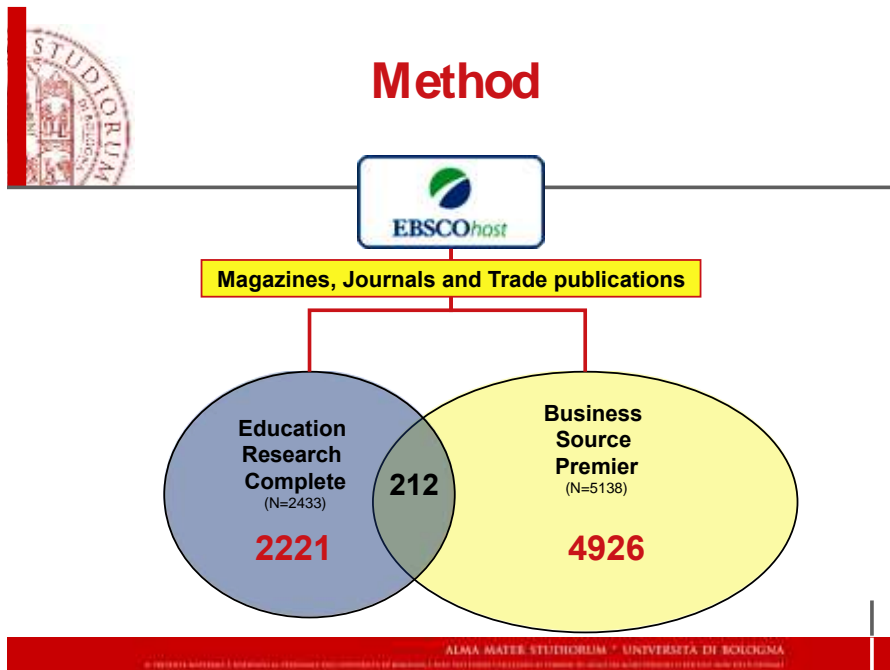
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Method

Figure 5. Investigation on Soft Skills literature - Massimo Marcuccio

The term Soft Skills is still not often used compared with Generic Skills, but it is becoming more popular. Most research about this topic takes place in Europe and USA and the amount of it has increased in these last years.

Researches focus on teaching methods and on tools already developed and used in order to evaluate and consolidate them or they propose some innovation in didactics addressed to teach Soft Skills.

Some existing activities to foster Soft Skills development are:

- Clinical pairing / Internship/ Industrial training programme / stage at enterprises and organizations
- Collegiate capstone projects (thesis)
- Courses integrated in university programmes (Leadership certificate / degree)
- Competitions out of University, such as the "Elevator pitch competition" in which students are

required to quickly present an idea for a new project.

Some more innovative methods presented in literature are:

- Academic writing interventions / production of communicational items
- Interpersonal Professional Development Programs / academic disciplines focusing on social skills and leadership
- Programs on the development of Soft Skills / incorporation of Soft Skills seminars in courses
- Multiple-solution problem / integration of content-based learning with problem-based learning (system level) / international competition
- Collaborative learning / cooperative classroom / work with peers in a constructive and cooperative manner / virtual groups using online technologies

- project assignments using Web 2.0 tools
- "simulated environment" / industries simulated by creative learners (networking).

In particular the last two methods, related to digital tools and simulation, should be considered to innovate current didactical methodologies, as they can be very effective in particular for students' Soft Skills development. Writing courses, ODL self-learning, training in presentations, integration of activity developing Soft Skills in each course, thesis projects, Web-courses for Soft Skills development are the most popular methods according to literature. (Marcuccio, 2015).

In order to effectively acquire Soft Skills an individual's positive psychological state of development is necessary.
It can be built basing on:
1) having confidence (self-efficacy)
2) making a positive attribution (optimism)
3) persevering toward goals (hope)
4) sustaining and bouncing back (resilience) (Guglielmi, 2015)

Recent trends consider the teaching of Soft Skills alones an obsolete approach. The border between Soft Skills and Hard Skills is difficult to be defined because Soft Skills and Hard Skills are integrated and the same task always requires using both together. For instance a project manager must know economics, planning, informatics but at the same time he needs to be able to manage a team, to communicate with providers, to motivate employees etc. Then the most effective way to teach Soft Skills can be proposed in term of learning them integrated with the Hard Skills (Bonomo, 2015).

The method of teaching Soft Skills is strictly connected to their definition. When Soft Skills are considered personal resources, they can be activated by the context and by the situation, then simulations and case studies can be particularly helpful. Soft Skills as capabilities and performances can be better developed by a functional approach, methods such as project work can in this case may more effectively support their development. Once Soft Skills are acquired they can be transferred from one to another context, then the same learning process can produce results in different surroundings. Vice versa Soft Skills definition is also connected to the best didactic method that can be used to help their development. The distinction between *Subject Bones* and *Cross Curricula Soft Skills* is helpful in this sense. The first ones are connected to the theme and the second ones are transversal to subjects, then Subject bones can be taught within specific subjects while Cross Curricula can be fostered within each discipline and also through initiatives dedicated to the development of transversal skills (Sarchielli, 2014).

A final important point to be considered regarding the teaching of Soft Skills is that the learning process of these competences is a dynamic one, during which these skills can evolve and develop over time thanks to commitment, involvement and habituation. An effective approach is the Learning-to-Learn. There is a significant Finnish definition for it: the ability and willingness to adapt to novel tasks, activating one's mastery of thinking and the perspective of hope by means of maintaining one's cognitive and affective self-regulation in and of learning action (Hautamäki, 2015).

4. The assessment and certification of Soft Skills

Traditionally schools and universities assign school marks to evaluate knowledge and performance of students in different disciplines (Hautamäki, 2015).

Some tools to assess Soft Skills have been proposed, a significant one has been developed by Fondazione RUI with Università Cattolica Milano consisting in a questionnaire based on the theories of Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive

Psychology. Seligman wrote with Christopher Peterson, a book: "Character Strenghts and Virtues", which represents the first attempt to identify and classify the positive psychological traits of human beings. The questionnaire can be used by students for self-assessment or to assess their peers, when they require it (Cinque, 2015).

Assessment and soft skills learning

- Assessment <u>of</u> learning (internal/external)

- Assessment <u>for</u> learning

- Assessment as learning

Balancing the tensions between different functions

Figure 6. Assessment versus Learning of Soft Skills – Maria Lucia Giovannini (2015)

The Bologna process has enhanced the importance of moving from more concentration in Learning than in Teaching. This shift is fundamental in order to effectively prepare students for life and work. Students don't only study to get a title but to acquire competences and abilities that will increase during their whole life (Long-life Learning). Soft Skills learning of course doesn't only take place at the University, competences are acquired also out of School, in everyday personal and social life, even if Institutions play a fundamental role.

One of the main current issues concerns the assessment of skills. A fundamental question is: Is the assessment in Higher Education a process or a product? Process corresponds to teaching and product to learning, then evaluation can and must be considered a learning tool that helps the student to self-regulate his learning process (Figure 6).

Several projects ("Ahelo", "Tuning", "Teco") have been developed in order to study and improve the assessment of students' competences during their university career. Indicators and descriptors have been defined for each Soft Skill.

A fundamental target that each university should pursue is to provide a reference framework to identify the key Generic Competences of each degree program in order to tune the teachings also to allow and favour students' learning of these Soft Skills. This operation should be done from the Direction of any Higher Education Institution (Giovannini, 2015).

An innovative tool to foster the development of Soft Skills is the ePortfolio.

Three ePortfolio can be distinguished, depending on the main mission they have (Figure 7):

1) ePortfolio to support learning
2) ePortfolio concerning the learning results
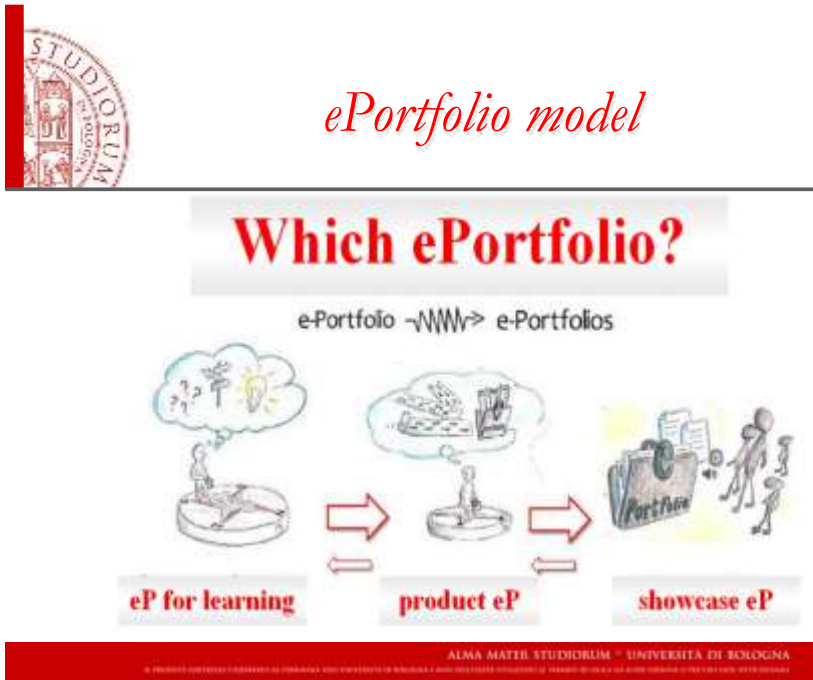3) ePortfolio to present themselves into the labour world

Figure 7. The different uses of the ePortfolio Model - Maria Lucia Giovannini (2015)

The ePortfolio is then a powerful tool to support the individual in his self-assessment then understanding of which competences he already possesses and which are the ones he needs to work on (Giovannini, 2015).

Referring to the interpretation of Soft Skills as dispositions reported in paragraph 2, the assessment must be considered in terms of an evaluation of probability about future performances. To assess a disposition the question is: What is the likelihood that something will happen? To this aim the Bayesian approach can be helpful. Bayesian methods are often recommended as the proper way to make formal use of subjective information such as expert opinion and personal judgments or beliefs of an analyst. They directly address the question of how new evidence should change what we currently believe and they extend naturally into making predictions, syntheses of evidences deriving from multiple sources

(Pellerey, 2015).

In assessing Soft Skills as dispositions the Bayesian method suggests:

The explicit use of evidences derived from subjective, objective, and inter-subjective sources in the design, monitoring, analysis, interpretation and reporting, starting from a set of beliefs about their presence and level of development.

The model of assessment proposed is built on two basic principles (Pellerey, 2015):

1) the assessment is a continuous process: the subject and others actors monitor the development of the skill, collecting data from internal and external sources in a recursive process.
2) to make the process possible we have to make the intended skills visible both to the subject as well as to the others.

In order to make the dispositions visible the following may be suggested:

- A set of selected choices to questions that tap into a subject's awareness and feelings about the meaning and value of particular dispositions.
- Open-ended questionnaires in which the subjects express their awareness of the meaning and value of one or more dispositions.
- Internal observations of performances: How does one perceive behaviour when he/she applies a disposition?
- External observations of performances: what does it look like when he/she applies a disposition?
- Narratives about personal experiences and life situations
- Simulations and role-playing
- Other possible sources: Journals, Diaries, Blogs
- Consensus about the estimation of the level of a skill developed by a subject.

Collecting data about a particular disposition become easier and more accessible using a digital portfolio.

When dispositions (Soft Skills) can be better assessed:

- during vocational and/or professional education
- at the end of a process of education, or a university cycle
- in an interview for recruitment and selection
- in a period of initial employment.

At the University level the student and staff must be aware of the Skills of the student and a systematic plan of self-evaluation and external evaluation must be elaborated.

The periodical assessment takes the character of a formative evaluation, in which feed-back has a pivotal role:

a) Feed-Up: were am I going (You are going)?

b) Feed-Back: how am I going (You are going)?
c) Feed-Forward: what is the next move?

The periodical self-evaluation includes:

- awareness of the most important dispositions and of their nature;
- perception of personal coherent and incoherent behaviours.

At the end of a University cycle the summative evaluation must be referred to the final profile.

In that activity the staff and the student have to make an analysis of the collected evidences in order to express a plausible final evaluation.

A final profile must be developed that includes the most important Soft Skills or personal dispositions coherent with the curriculum. The plausibility of the final judgement derives from weighing the amount, variety and consistency of the positive evidences against the amount, variety and consistency of the negative evidences (Pellerey, 2015).

Who are the Boards who can certify Skills?

The certification of Skills is at the moment mainly voluntary.

To certify his skills a professional in Italy can address to a accredited certifying body (Accredia) that can state that he meets the certification criteria in compliance with a specific national standard: this means having specific knowledge and skills that are needed for the job and corresponding to the reference standard. UNI is the "Ente di normazione Italiano" (National Standard Board) in charge of publishing these regulations.

Some professions in Italy require a mandatory certificate, such as for Security Managers (UNI 10459) or Energy Managers (UNI 11339). There are now 33 published standards for Hard and Soft Skills in specific technical professions. Anyway Skills certification can be important and useful for any professional for several reasons

(Ferragina, 2015):

- work experience and careers can be optimized basing on a diversification of knowledge and skills by providing uniformity, impartiality, defining clear roles
- capitalization of knowledge and skills in order to guarantee a method that ensures effectiveness and efficiency
- from an employee's perspective, it facilitates flexibility, employability and continuous empowerment.
- from a company's perspective, this translates into a strategic competitive advantage, introducing know how and re-usable training tools. It helps better defining existing retention policies, as well as attracting new resources. It guarantees clients a high quality certified service.

Some research works have developed and are currently carried on to define the methods for the professional roles certification. In next future KIWA-CERMET, which is a international certification board present in many countries, Italy included, mainly dedicated to technical requirements of materials, product, systems, will also play an important role in the certification of professions, a service that is already included in their offer (Ferragina, 2015).

A last consideration regarding the delicate point of the assessment of Soft Skills is the necessity to use multi-sourcing information, the evaluation of only one teacher is not enough to correctly assess Soft Skills, different sources are needed, included the self-assessment (Sarchielli, 2015).

5. Soft Skills: the employment bridge

Several researches and surveys demonstrate that the *Skill Gap* in employability mainly concerns Soft Skills than Hard Skills. This gap expresses the inconsistency between the human resources looking for a job and the requirements of enterprises to hire employees for available positions. Fig. 8 shows some significant results of four surveys conducted in the USA regarding skills gap. A lot of positions go unfilled due to a skills shortage in particularly concerning Soft Skills such as punctuality, precision, professionalism, ethics etc. (Cinque, 2015).

The Bloomberg research carried on in 2015, investigating the MBA's market (Master in Business Administration) in USA, highlights that the most desired and hardest to find skills are communication, leadership, problem-solving and strategic thinking skills. A NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers) research of the same year shows that employers mainly look for leaders who can work as part of a team and communicate effectively. Then these surveys confirm the importance for employers of Soft Skills.

The McKinsey Report Education to Employment: Getting Europe's Youth into Work of 2014 demonstrates that skills gap is a problem in several countries, but it is more serious in those with the highest youth unemployment, such as Italy (Figure 9).

Surveys in the USA

Deloitte Survey (2011)	• more than 600,000 positions in manufacturing went unfilled due to a skill shortage
Manpower Group' Survey (2012)	• nearly 20% of employers cited a lack of soft skills as a key reason they couldn't hire needed employees
Human Resource Management (2012)	• "professionalism" or "work ethic" is the top "applied" skill that younger workers lack
Career Builder Survey (2014)	• 2,138 human resource managers: "a strong work ethic", "a positive attitude" etc.

Figure 8. Surveys in USA on Skill Gap - Maria Cinque

McKinsey Report
Education to Employment: Getting Europe's Youth into Work (2014)
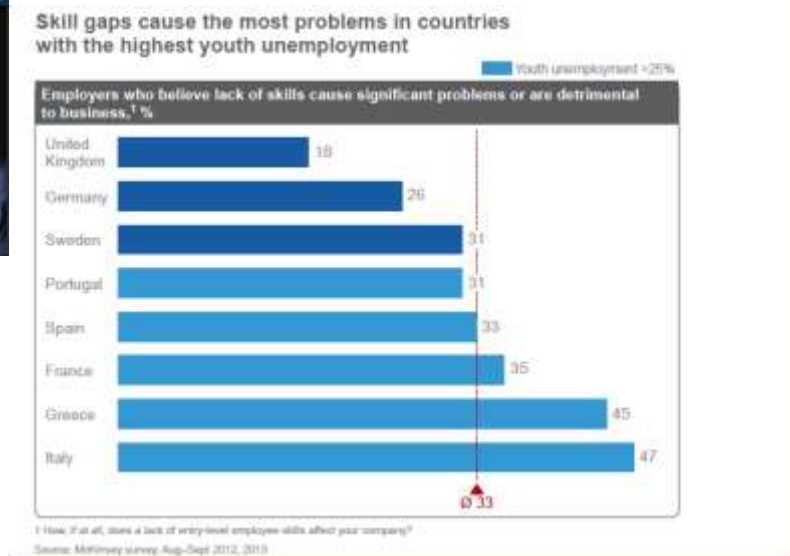
Figure 9. Skill Gaps in different countries - Maria Cinque

A relevant research work concerning skill mismatch was carried on at the University of Bologna, focusing in particular the specific Italian labour market of fashion production. This sector in Italy has perhaps been the earliest that off-shored its manufacturing processes in the 90's' (Prota and Viesti, 2007), moving the production to low labour cost countries. Now, several entrepreneurs are back-shoring or declare the intention to back-shore in the near future. One of the main problems they face, coming back to Italy, is the skills shortage. Previous research (Ferrari and Emiliani, 2009) has clearly

shown that the most common complaint among fashion entrepreneurs is the skill mismatch which 'affects' Fashion operators when they leave school.

The most significant conclusion of this survey are:

- In the opinion of employers, educational outlines are characterized by unnecessary and/or useless skills rather than skill shortage, hence, it's fundamental to update these outlines.
- The students perceive themselves as under-skilled, both in technical skills and soft skills, and they don't feel ready for the labour market.
- Soft skills (communication, teamwork, problem-solving) are almost always critical: this skills category has more relevance in employers' opinion than in the one of teachers and students perceive themselves as under-skilled.

In conclusion, the local labour market studied in this research shows frictions in school-to-work transition. To reduce this mismatch, it is necessary to insert soft skills in learning activities (communication; problem-solving; teamwork and customer care) and to utilize more effective teaching methods (i.e. cooperative learning). Furthermore, it is advisable to provide final-year students with early orientation and assessment paths, in order to improve their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Some research recently conducted in the USA identify as essential competencies on the job Problem Solving, Teamworking and Critical Thinking, in order of importance, considering this last essential but relatively easy to hire in comparison to the first two, which are essential but hard to hire. Creativity is considered a less essential competence however significant, but very hard to hire. Figure 10 and Figure 11 graphically represent the results of this research listing the competences most important to be hired and showing that Technical Skills are at the second to last position in the ranking. Soft Skills therefore result also in this survey more important to be hired for most employers interviewed (Poblete Ruiz, 2015).
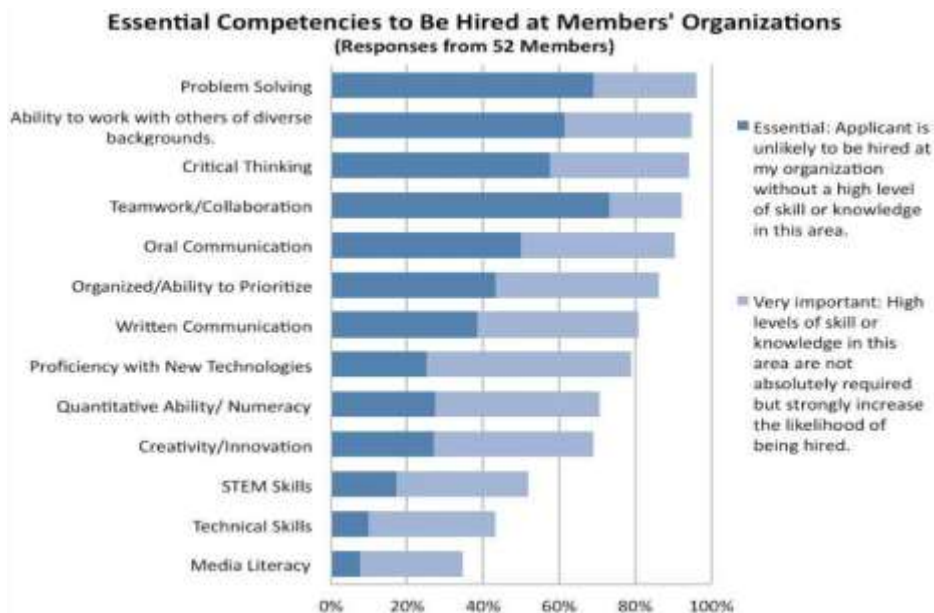

Figure 10. Essential competences to be hired – Manuel Poblete Ruiz (2015)
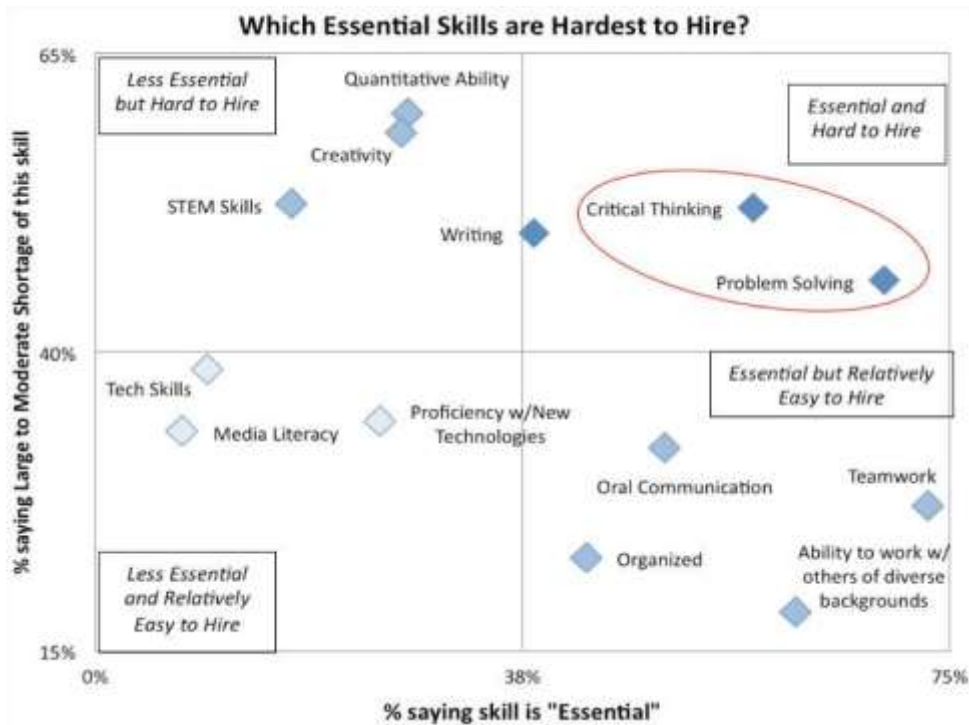
Figure 11. Difficulty in hiring Skills – Manuel Poblete Ruiz

An important issue is the difference in perception of the skills gap between providers and employers. Teachers believe that students are well prepared to work while youth and employers don't. A McKinsey report of 2012 showed that 74% of education providers were confident that their graduates were prepared for work, but only 38% of youth and 35% of employers agreed. In Italy employers often claim that university graduates are well prepared in their disciplines, but they lack general competences and practical skills (Cinque, 2015).

In order to fill the gap, after the gathering of data, several initiatives can be carried on and different tools used: publications to spread the results and the awareness of this problem, research projects, best practices and policies by governments and institutions, use of social media etc.

The CT3 research, already mentioned in paragraph 3, confirms the different perception in Italy between the Directors of Didactical Programs at 74 Universities, graduates employed for one year and employers. The Soft Skills for which the gap is higher are Initiative and Effective Communication, while the Analysis and Synthesis of Information is a capability that all the three actors agree to be a skill that students can generally learn at university (Mangano, 2015).

Several surveys confirm that graduates generally don't meet employers expectations. In the USA only 16% of hiring managers think that student hires are well prepared with the knowledge and skills they need for new jobs. In United Kingdom over 70% of employers think that students need to do more to prepare themselves for the workplace. In Middle East many students hires lack Soft Skills, including workplace etiquette, communication skills and time management. In Canada more than 25% of student positions were unfilled in 2010,

usually because students accepted offers at the last minute from another organization. In South Africa students with technical degrees are in short supply and demand high salaries or emigrate. In India multinational employers consider only 10 to 25 % of graduating students to be employable. Then the perception of a skills gap is spread all over around the world, independently from specific school and university programs. The consequences are serious, as some statistics report that 1 out of 4 graduates are likely to leave their employer within 12 months (Chinotti, 2015).

Some surveys demonstrate that graduates have, in order of importance, the following five goals in their first job:

1) a desire to achieve career goals
2) opportunities to learn, develop and grow
3) the opportunity to demonstrate their talent
4) recognition for doing a good job and giving a significant contribution
5) material reward, salary and benefits

Then the least important point is the wage and money, which is an unexpected result.

One problem that arises during the recruitment of new hires is that the recruiters from the company tend to describe only the positive aspects of the job in order to attract candidates. This tendency of commutating only the best of the company leads to wrong expectations and disappointments once the candidate is hired. It is important that the description is reliable and correspondent to the reality. Recruiters must be clear to prevent failures in terms of newcomers leaving the job after a short time. The current approach is to try to influence more than attracting, to create a genuine interest in the candidate for the job, but also awareness of the real conditions of the offered position.

According to employers, the most required skills from employers in new hires are:

- verbal communication
- team working
- making decisions and problem solving
- planning and organization
- information processing
- analysis of data
- technical knowledge
- computer software use
- report writing
- ability of influencing (Chinotti, 2015).

The competences needed to advance in the career change along its development are mainly Soft Skills.

The Self Career management process as showed in (Figure 12) is composed by three steps, at each one the worker must be aware of Which competences he needs, How he can develop them and Who has to support him to do it (Guglielmi, 2015).

Within a psycho-social approach a profile of employability is composed by:

- Career identity (Career goals)
- Human and Social Capital (knowledge, skills and contextual resources)
- Adaptability (Ability to cope with change)

At Ce.Trans. (Center for Transitions to work and in work at the University of Bologna, Italy) a tool for the employability self-evaluation has been elaborated focusing in the three above mentioned dimensions. It is a questionnaire based on a Likert scale, in which each dimension of employability is investigated through the following points (Guglielmi, 2015):

- Career identity: importance of work, vocational planning, external obstacles
- Human and Social capital: networking, Social skills, Social support, Perceived Employability
- Adaptability: Job search self-efficacy, Entrepreneurship, Career management skills, locus of control, Resilience.

It is important to identify which actors are involved in the Self-Career management

B. Cimatti

process to make people who need to develop their skills aware of whom can support them in doing it (Figure 13).

Self Career management process

Figure 12. The process of management of Self Career - Dina Guglielmi

Figure 13. Stakeholders involved in career development - Dina Guglielmi

Together with the Placement and Internship Area of the University of Bologna, Ce.Trans has realized a survey distributing the questionnaire to 2618 graduands and graduates, of which 62.1% females, demonstrating that for almost all the investigated characteristics, the work experience contribute to develop a stronger skill (the only one for which the situation has been evaluated equal is the Internal locus of control).

The results of the employability self-evaluation are fundamental in order to orient the graduate to address to the right service depending on his/her personal needs.

If the critical point is in the Career goals the correct service to address to is the Orientation. It the graduand/graduates are lacking competences, Educational services are suggested such as laboratory for entrepreneurship, internships, training. Adaptability, which is the capability to effectively and quickly reacting to the labour market changes, is the most innovative dimension, then it is still difficult to identify an existing service taking care of it. To develop this dimension, specific tools should be studied and created for graduands and graduates who need to increase this specific skill (Guglielmi, 2015).

Several actors are taking attention to the "Bridge" and the problems of students who must enter the world labour at the end of their educational path. Also political institutions must intervene to establish policies and guidelines in collaboration with educational institutions. The government of the Emilia Romagna region in Italy, has established an consortium of Universities, centres of Research and association of enterprises called ASTER, with the aim of promoting the innovation of industrial production through the collaboration between the world of research and enterprises.
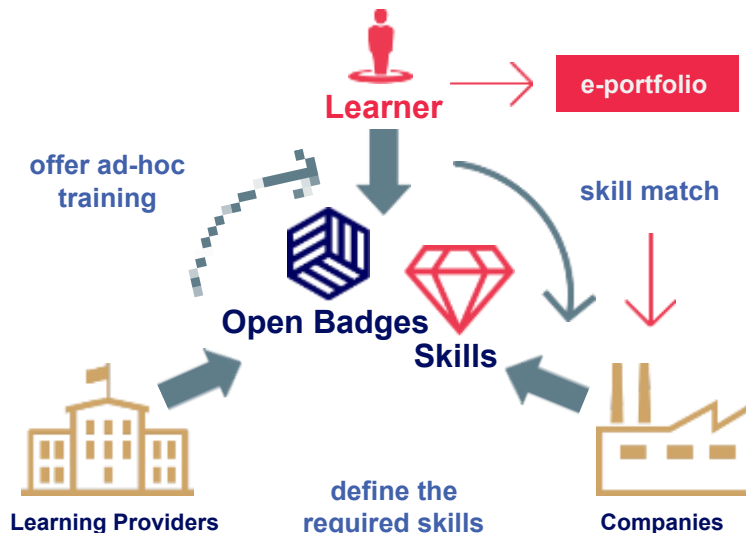
Figure 14. The Best project for the diffusion of digital badge - Chiara Carlino (2015)

Aster has been realizing in the last years several initiatives to favour the communication between researchers and entrepreneurs, in particular focusing on the target of Ph.D. students, in order to provide them also with transversal competences, fundamental to collaborate with industries.

Besides traditional competences, already well known "new" competences, very important for young researchers are nowadays:

- A sense of community, in terms of sustainability, respect of the environment, capacity of facing social challenges;
- The capacity of promoting changes within the organizations
- Teamworking in international and multidisciplinary contexts
- Creativity and interests.

Aster proposes Doctor Skill, a questionnaire available on line, in collaboration with ABG - L'intelli'agence®, France, studied for Ph.D. students and doctors who can self-evaluate their skills through it, in particular referring to the most important ones for their role and professions (D'Angelo, 2015).

An innovative IT tool applied to the certification of skills, that is rapidly spreading around the world, in particular already popular in the USA, is the *digital Badge*. It is the visual digital representation of the acquired skills of the owner. By means of digital open badges, issuers can describe and publish the skills that they are willing to certify, and declare in a clear, interoperable manner that a learner has a given set of skills. It is a personal and secure tool that can be very useful to bridge the gap and connect learners, providers and companies [20]. In Italy the consortium CINECA is promoting the use of the digital badge, through the project Bestr, offering the possibility to Learners, Learning Providers and Companies to meet, matching their needs and sharing opinions and actions in order to focus the most required skills by the labour market as shown in Figure 14

(Carlino, 2015).

6. The importance and development of Soft Skills within enterprises

Soft Skills are a very hot topic nowadays for companies because an outstanding CV not always corresponds to the real performance of the person once hired. In Figure 15 a significant graph shows that only 11% of failures of new hired managers correspond to lack of technical competences, while 89% are due to scarce Soft Skills, in order of importance: Coachability, Emotional Intelligence, Motivation and Temperament (Engelberg, 2015).

Another survey carried on by McKinsey in April 2015 on 1,946 executives at different industries shows that just 26% of the organizational change programs to improve company performance are successful. These failures mainly depend on the executives' Soft Skills.

A cause of failure in enterprise management strictly connected to executives' Soft Skills is oversimplification and overconfidence. There is a general trend to oversimplify the issue of Soft Skills and to be optimistic in the prediction of the results that will be achieved in a company implementing new actions. This happens in particular to experts who totally trust their forecasts in their field of expertise. A healthy self-criticism can be very helpful in these cases to prevent errors and failures. Self-criticism can be considered a Soft Skill, meaning the capability of the subject of self-awareness of his knowledge and expertise but also of his limits in applying them, in particular when the results also depend from other variables (Engelberg, 2015).

Any enterprise uses graphical charts to define and represent the processes and roles within it. This is called Organizational Design. We can distinguish between *Organization Design* and *Organizational Behaviour*, which refers to what happens

when people take their role into the organization, then how they behave within the organization (Morandin, 2015).

Why "Soft Skills"?
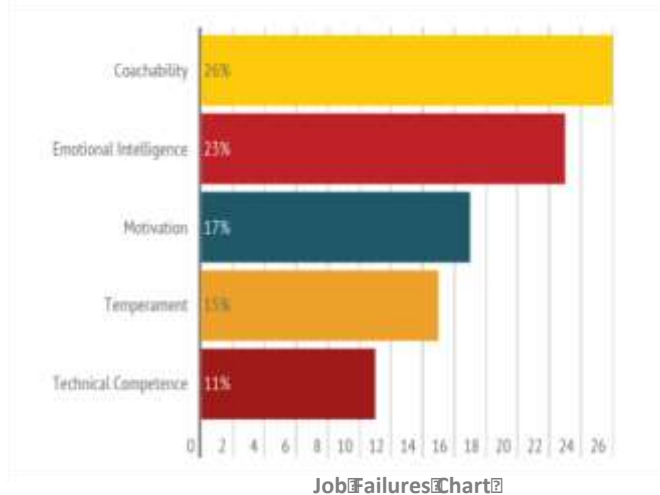
Job Failures Chart

*Leadership IQ, June 2015 5,247 hiring managers from 312 public, private, business and healthcare organizations, 20,000 New Hires

Building A Developmental Perspective on" Soft Skills" and Employability   Dr. Sydney Engelberg

Figure 15. Job failures versus lack of Soft Skills in managers - Sydney Engelberg

A recent research conducted at Harvard in USA by Keith Ferrazzi shows that:

- nearly 33% of new hires look for a new job within their first six months on the job
- 23% of new hires turn over before their first anniversary
- the organizational costs of employee turnover are estimated to range between 100% and 300% of the replaced employee's salary
- it typically takes eight months for a newly hired employee to reach full productivity.

To solve this problem and to reduce enterprises costs it is necessary to insert between Recruitment & Selection and Job Performance, the fundamental phase of *Onboarding*.

Onboarding is a very important period during which it is necessary to motivate new hires and to prevent them from leaving and looking for another job in a short time. The first question to be made by Human Resources mangers is "Why are my employees working?" (Ulrich *et al.*, 2010). Participation and Sensemaking have to be fostered in particular during the first period of work at a new company and don't have to be taken as granted. The connection between quality of work and personal life have to be considered also as one key element to increase the satisfaction of the worker, not only in terms of money and wage, but to allow him to express himself within the organization and to feel satisfied of his job, then of his life.

The difference between employees who have gone through an onboarding phase and employees who have not been offered this possibility is evident in Figure 15. The job performance of workers who don't pass an

onboarding phase is mainly depending on the possibility of earning money, while who has participated in an onboarding phase is mainly focused in his career prospective.

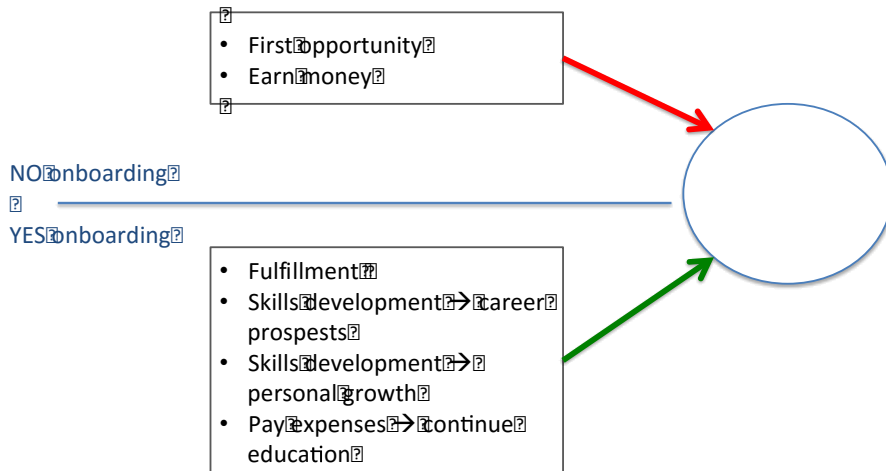# How does sensemaking influ nce Job performance?

Figure 15. Factors influencing job performance with and without onboarding - Gabriele Morandin

When people join a company, they cope with a period of organizational entry, during which they determine what their company is like and they decide whether they fit-in.

How newcomers can integrate into the organization largely shapes the *Psychological Contract* that is defined with the employer and has long-lasting effects on job attitudes and performance (Morandin, 2015). This contract should match the new comer's expectations, whose adjustment is the core of the organizational entry. This phase is conceived as a sense-making process, occurring in the first months after the entry and involving the interpretation of the leader/supervisor, colleagues, the job and the whole organization. New hires, besides accomplish daily tasks, activate search processes (information, knowledge, etc.) and build relationships (peers, supervisors, etc.)

to complete this process and answer to questions such as: "Do I fit with this organization? Where's my place in there?"

Then it is strongly recommended to enterprise managers to plan and design an onboarding phase for their new hires. International Labour Organization suggests firms to organize appropriate initiatives to decrease the phenomenon of the "shopping around", which means changing very often job (Morandin, 2015).

Onboarding is a fundamental part of the recruitment and selecting process. It creates a sold bridge fixing the base for a good future performance of the people at any company (Chinotti, 2015).

A good start in a new job is then fundamental for the hiring company and for the employee and its whole career and life. It is demonstrated that the initial experience in

the labour market has a strong influence not only on the first job, but on the whole professional life and an initial failure can negatively affect the whole working life of the employee. Turnover risk is higher among new employees causing the already mentioned economic damage for the companies hiring them as shown in Fig. 16 (Jokisaari, 2015).

Turnover risk is highest among new employees

Quit rate
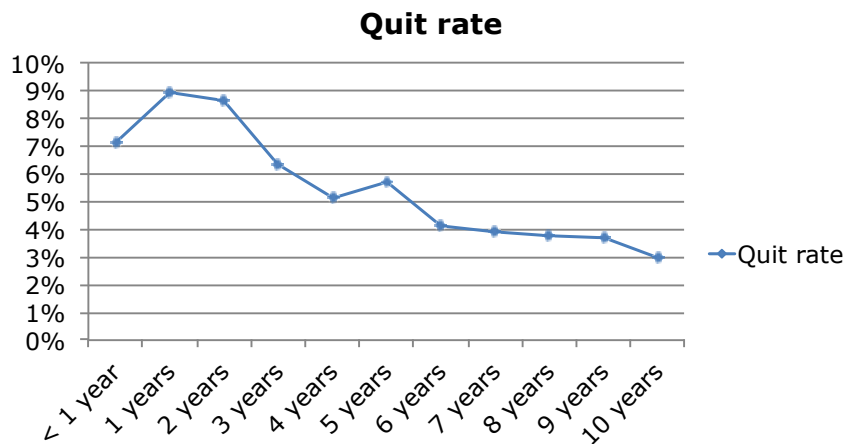
Hom, Roberson & Ellis 2008

Figure 16. Turnover risk versus employment time - Markku Jokisaari

This is particularly true for younger workers and recent graduates. Younger employees face increased number of job changes and related transitions to a new job during their occupational careers. During these transitions new employees need to learn organization and job-specific skills and practices and to assimilate to the new organizational environment. Graduates' adjustment to work takes longer time than adjustment among more experienced employees.

Organizational socialization is another word to indicate onboarding and can be defined as a process during which "employees are transformed from organizational outsiders to participating and effective members" (Feldman and March, 1981). Another definition for Organizational socialization is making sense of the new situation and learning the expected capabilities" (Ashforth *et al*., 2007).

Both parts benefit of a successful organizational socialization: the individual in terms of learning to do the job, development of organization-and job-related skills, work adjustment, career benefits; the organization for the return on investment costs of recruitment, selection and training; new employees' organizational commitment, enhanced job performance, organizational citizenship behaviour.

The organizational socialization not only corresponds to learning the job goals and responsibilities and to clarify the role within the enterprise (Feldman and March, 1981), but also implies to learn skills and enter

procedures required to perform the tasks and develop relationships with co-workers and to achieve a social integration within the enterprise.

There are different ways for organizations to make newcomers socialize: Human Resources practices; orientation programs, training, are some of them.

Examples of socialization tactics are:

- Collective -- Individual tactics: common learning experiences as a group vs. individual learning
- Formal -- Informal tactics: clearly defined socialization activities vs. learning as a by-product on the job
- Serial – Disjunctive tactics: an experienced member of the organization serves as a role model vs. a role model not available
- Investiture – Divestiture tactics: social support and positive feedback from experienced members of the organization vs. support is not available or negative feedback

Social tactics (serial and investiture) showed the strongest relations with adjustment outcomes (Saks *et al.*, 2007).

Porter had already stated it in 1975: "To the new hire, the supervisor is the organization". Then it is suggested to the enterprise mangers to identify the correct people within the organization to act as supervisors of the newcomers during their organizational socialization.

It is difficult to connect the newcomer behaviour during the socialization phase to his performance. In general the more proactive the new employees are, the more they are effective and productive, but some researches also demonstrate that sometimes proactivity is related to poor performances for different reasons connected to possible work-family conflict, job stress, role overload etc.

A pro-active behaviour can even give a negative impression to supervisors and co-workers if it doesn't express a real willing of

the new employee to learn. High Positive Affect (PA) that is the tendency to feel high energy, concentration and engagement defined by Watson *et al.* (1988) generally decreases in time. The social environment is then a fundamental element during the organizational socialization (Jokisaari, 2015).

One main issue that the company must face once a new hire enter the organization is after the onboarding phase to train and help the employee development of skills to be able to well perform his tasks.

In order to make a graduate effective in the enterprise or to move an employee effectively from a leader position to another one, 9 months can be considered a normal and correct time. Not all the graduates can be top talent and employers must accept it and plan onboarding and trainings to help them integrate in the company and develop their skills.

Company always want to hire the best talented people, but must become aware that this is not possible, the labour market is rich of offers but most human resources available are just normal people who can well perform but rarely can possess all together the desired qualities.

From a employers perspective, skills can be effectively divided in two main categories: *Execute* and *Engage*. The first term refers to the capabilities of acting of the employee, making things and producing. The second means collaboration, sharing of responsibilities, and capabilities referring to ability of people of engaging other people in the job. The enterprise must be able to help the individual to develop the aspects in which he is weaker, then the Execute or the Engage, as it is very difficult to find people excellent at both (Chinotti, 2015).

During the onboarding phase and also along the whole career of the employee, company managers must be able to help their employees to clarify which their professional aims are and to express them. Furthermore one of the most important point is that

workers must be aware of which their skills are and if they are aligned with the enterprise needs (Bonomo, 2015). An important issue, in particular in the post-boarding phase, regards the continuous motivation and improvement that most companies await from their employees. Is it realistic to expect that individuals will never reach a ceiling to their achievement? It is arguable that not everyone can continuously improve. In fact, most people reach what is, for them, an optimal level of functioning and are content to remain that way (Engelberg, 2016). The awareness for enterprises management of this natural human condition, is fundamental in order to design employees careers' plan without making the common mistake of fostering a continuous competition and causing high frustration.

In previous paragraphs several definition of Soft Skills have been provided. An important question is: From the point of view of enterprise which are the most important Soft Skills?

Beyond the all above already mentioned a fundamental one is considered *Flexibility*. This skill will become more important in future when changes will be more frequent and the worker will have to adapt quickly to them. An important skill that is required in particular in international companies is the capability of *Understanding Cultures.* Employees often deal with clients located in different countries and colleagues at foreign branches, then the communication skills and the ability to adapt them to the specific context are keys for the success of companies that are always more global (Bonomo, 2015). A further skill recognized as very significant is *Empathy*. In this case the skill can be considered a personal trait, then it is not easy to foster it through specific programs, but it is an important added value for people who possess it in order to be hired. People who go for a new job to an interview often neglect to take information and to try to understand the company mission and vision. This is a big mistake, as the empathy in this circumstance means that

the selector feels that the candidate is really interested in the company and has chosen it among others because he is willing to work in that particular context (Alberani, 2015).

Some enterprise identifies few areas of importance and foster the competences connected to these areas. *Future, Life Values and Networking* are in several cases considered priorities. Some competences required to be able to positively face the future are the capability to explore new options, to wide horizons and to choose the change. Some connected to living values can be considered the expression of potential, the spread of responsibility and the overcome of expectations. Linking Networks mean to develop communication, to cultivate relationships and to foster collaboration (Sirolli, 2014).

How to teach Soft Skills within a company? It is almost impossible by a training program to modify the personal traits of the individual, who arrives already with his personal features, values and attitudes, then companies generally focus the skills required to perform the assigned tasks. It is topical to understand that the same skill must be taught in a different way depending on the role and assignment of the receiver. Another important point is to tune the training depending on the phase of the career of the trainee, a new hire must be approached in a different way compared to a mature employee who needs to be motivated. Several methods can be applied to employees training, one of the most effective is the use of Case Studies connected to the process and tasks of the receiver, under the guidance of some senior employee who can supervise the work.

The enterprise approach related to the human resources management has changed from the traditional one in which fidelity to the company, sense of belonging and seniority were considered the key points to keep employees committed and prevent them from changing job. Nowadays these principles have been substituted by a

relationship between the employer and the employee simply based on a contract where the enterprise defines the targets that they want to reach and the employee commits to achieve them, but Soft Skills necessary to perform the job are not specified.

Companies are customer-oriented, must pay attention to sustainability in any sector and for any product, then this vision must be shared between management and employees. This means that sensitiveness to the environment and social commitment are becoming new relevant Soft Skills for enterprises. This along with a good general culture of the candidate, because the identity of the company doesn't only correspond to business anymore but also culture plays an important role (Bonomo, 2015).

To reduce Skills Gap and to favour a fast and effective integration of new hires, in particular graduates and

Ph.D. doctors in the enterprise, many companies are now carrying on joined training programs for high school and university students. The most popular solutions are:

- Joined programs for High Apprentice
- Master for graduates organized in collaboration between University and Enterprise
- Internships for Ph.D. students
- Joint open laboratories
- Partnerships and joined research projects.

The last three initiatives are mainly directed to Higher Education third level students and to young researchers. The possibility for them to work in collaboration with professionals and senior company employees and senior researchers allows them to effectively develop their Soft Skills (Sirolli, 2015). At the same time the company can get to know new resources and start a professional relation with them, which can even bring to the hire of the student after the end of his study.

More flexibility in School and University programs, enhancing the alternation School –Work within the different curricula by offering different kind of experiences to students, depending on their own interests and attitudes, in collaboration with enterprises is one of the expected change in order to improve the preparation of youth to enter the labour world. Anyway the need of collaboration between Academy and Enterprise and the graduates' necessity of achieving a job after their study must not cause the false belief that University can or must totally substitute the real labour world, skills and Soft Skills in particular have to be developed for the quality of life in its whole, not only for professional reasons, such as already mentioned more than once in the present text (Luzzatto, 2015).

A final important consideration must be done regarding the importance of Soft Skills within the enterprise, relates to who need in a company to acquire transversal competences: Soft Skills are not only important for "white collars", even if most literature focuses on them. Blue collars also need transversal competences that are fundamental to rule successfully a workshop and a manufacturing plant (Alberani, 2015).

7. Conclusions

Several considerations emerge from this work, here a list of significant points that must be considered to focus, understand and foster Soft Skills, whose importance for the achievement of quality in any organization and enterprise results evident through what reported in this paper.

- Soft Skills are difficult to define in a univocal simple way. Making a "shopping list" of skills isn't a real solution, neither over-simplify. Many elements must be considered to effectively define them.
- Soft Skills must be taught since the primary School and even before within the family.

- Soft Skills can be considered integrated with Hard Skills and can be taught together with them. A synergy exists between Soft Skills and Hard Skills, last trends indicate that it is hard to teach the first ones separated from the second ones.
- The context plays an important role for Soft Skills, which cannot be separated from it. Each individual expresses his Soft Skills relating to the surrounding when he works and lives.
- Soft Skills involve several actors: providers such as teachers, employers and schoolmates and colleagues can all help to develop them. A genuine dialogue between all the stakeholders for true understanding is necessary to well define needs and methods.
- The individual himself plays a fundamental role in Soft Skills development, because he must be first of all aware of his skills and able to active strategies and actions to improve his competences.
- A precise measurement of Soft Skills is impossible, it is more correct to talk about a disposition or a probability to act in a certain way.
- Soft Skills imply a long-life learning approach. It means that they can be learned and developed during the whole life of the individual, through Educational Institutions but also in personal and professional experience.
- In order to effectively teach Soft Skills an updating of the didactic programs at School and Universities is wished. But not all the Soft Skills can be developed at Educational Institutions, some need a work context to grow.
- Soft Skills teaching can effectively be integrated in each discipline using didactic tools to help students to develop them, such as project

work, simulation, case study, learning game etc. Other specific initiatives such as seminars and workshops focusing this topic can be activated.
- New technologies are a very powerful tool to teach Soft Skills. The use itself of technology, in particular if we refer to digital technologies, requires good transversal competences and capabilities in using them.
- Collaboration between Educational Institutions and Enterprises play an important role in the development of Soft Skills. Visits, internships, joined programs, laboratories and projects are very effective to increase the transversal competences of students. Learning by doing is one of the best ways to increase skills.
- Soft Skills are not only necessary in professional activity, they play a fundamental role in life. Good Soft Skills help people to be happy.

All these considerations can be very helpful to Providers such as School and University and to Employers such as Enterprises, which are always looking for human resources technically well prepared but in particular able to bring a significant contribution in terms of competitive advantage of the organization in its whole.

It is evident the importance for any company to select human resources with the best Soft Skills available in the labour market and to go on fostering their development for employees once hired. Transversal competences are fundamental in order to allow any organization to work effectively and efficiently, then to reach a high quality of the products and the services offered. Even in industry, where the level of technology plays a particularly significant role, technical competences are not sufficient to correctly run the production: a coordination and harmony between employer and employees are fundamental to

achieve the necessary level of quality to be competitive.

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