THE EFFICACY OF "SOFT" SKILLS TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT: QUALITATIVE SURVEY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF CZECH BUSINESSES

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Abstract: "Soft" skills training and development courses often have a limited impact, even if employees are satisfied with the results. The reason is the nature of such skills, which may require employees to shed deeply rooted habits before developing new skills. The lack of efficacy of such training courses is often related to their poorly defined focus and content, as well as to the unprofessional methods applied, which in some cases is associated with the low quality of the lecturers. These factors, acting in combination, can sometimes lead to the illusion, on the side of companies or their managers, that those employees who have completed such training courses have mastered certain soft skills, while in truth the situation is very different. The article deals with the specific features of soft skills compared to their "hard" counterparts, how this affects the efficacy of such training courses, the most common reasons why soft skills training courses do not deliver the expected results, as well as ways how to tackle the problem. A qualitative survey was conducted to determine to what extent medium-sized and larger Czech companies are aware of the potential flaws and the lack of efficacy of soft skills training courses and what methods can be applied to resolve this and with what results.

Keywords: Soft skills, employee training and development, training efficacy, methods for improving efficacy of training and development

1 Introduction

It goes without saying that soft skills are crucial in a lot of occupations and work environments (Akla & Indradewa, 2022; Dean & East, 2019; Sharma, 2018). The requirement for employees to master these abilities is therefore growing (Burbekova, 2021; Hirsch, 2017; Schislyaeva & Saychenko, 2022). They are needed for effective communication and cooperation with others, and thus important wherever work results depend on smooth work coordination. They are important for negotiation, team work, creating mutual trust, good interpersonal relationships, common problem solving, overcoming conflicts, reducing work stress (Molek-Winiarska & Kawka, 2022; Baron & Morin, 2010; Vasanthakumari, 2019), etc.

These skills are also increasingly becoming important for successful employee "self-management" (Jones, et al., 2017, Khilji, & Roberts, 2021), i.e. in situations where employees have to work without direct supervision or guidance from a superior. Within this context, such skills must cover, for example, the ability to plan and effectively use one´s time, motivate oneself, check ones´ own work progress and resist stress (Börner, et al., 2018), etc.

Honing these skills is also important for the successful management and leadership of others (Lok, et al., 2021). The ability to set an example, inspire confidence, influence, motivate, encourage and evaluate colleagues, develop and inspire others, delegate based on the development of employee abilities and build and lead teams (Hendarman & Cantner, 2018; Semenova, et al., 2021; Riyanti & Sandroto, 2016), are key.

Overall, there is a proven link between the level of the soft skills of managers and employees and their individual performance and that of the company as a whole (Howes, et al., 2017; Ibrahim, et al., 2017; Johnson, 2021).

Unfortunately, referring to these skills as "soft" is not very appropriate because it inadvertently suggests that they are easy to comprehend and learn (Adhvaryu, et al., 2018), whereas the contrary is true. Unlike "hard" skills, be they technical, computer, legal, or other (e.g. the ability to operate certain machinery or comply with new legislative rules), the training of

which usually does not present a major problem, soft skills training is often much less effective and requires more time. In addition, group training of such skills may not always be the most effective way of developing them, with more individual forms of education potentially being required (Gibert, et al., 2017).

There are four main reasons for the lack of efficacy of soft skills development. The first reason is that the contents/goals of hard skills training courses can usually be clearly defined, whereas for soft skills they often suffer from being vague. In other words, there is a lack of clarity and understanding of what particular skills employees should learn (Botke, et al., 2018; Botke, et al., 2017).

The second reason is that, unlike for hard skills, good lecturers of soft skills are not abundant (Asbari, et al., 2020). The lecturers/soft skills training companies used by businesses are often not fully up to their job, lacking training expertise.

The third reason is that soft skills training, to be effective, relies on some very "hard" rules (Iorio, et al., 2022) that, unlike hard skills that are usually relatively easily transferable (most often using the method of instruction), require the application of a combination of training methods or more complex ones.

The fourth reason is that the need for employees and managers to acquire new hard skills is usually clearly visible within an organisation, or easy to explain to them direct (Santos, et al., 2017). As far as soft skills are concerned, the visibility of their practical importance tends to be lower, with some employees potentially having a problem admitting to a lack of knowledge in this area and therefore the need to develop such skills (Nusrat & Naz, 2018).

2 Theoretical backgrounds: literary research

The most common shortcoming of soft skills training courses are that they are not properly focused (Espina-Romero, et al., 2023; Saranya & Guduru, 2022). This usually concerns situations where the focus/aim of the training course is not based on a thorough analysis of the skills development needs of the organisation and its employees, but rather based on the proposals and recommendations of external trainers or training organisations that offer their services (Kic-Drgas, 2018; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017).

A similar problem arises when the goals of soft skills training courses are not specific enough. As a result, checking the achievement of the goals at the end of the course proves difficult. There is namely a difference between a training course focused on "communication skills" without any further concrete training goal and a training course whose stated goal is "to learn to overcome objections of the counterparty regarding the excessively high price of a certain product or service in a business/customer negotiation" (Urban, 2018).

A similar example is the difference between a "social skills" course on the one hand and a training course in "the ability to listen actively to the other side in a conversation and inspire trust" (Meeks, 2017).

Misconceptions about soft skills

The aforementioned problem is often aggravated by misconceptions of the substance of social skills, even of the most important ones. Within this context, it is not uncommon for lecturers, as well as the companies that hire them, to misunderstand the methods for training, acquiring and developing the soft skills they want to transfer. A common reason for this is that training courses are often conducted by lecturers without the appropriate education, psychological or

pedagogical, or even by persons who have no previous experience in the training field.

This can potentially lead to situations where the lecturer's idea of what a particular social skill is about is not only inaccurate, but even misleading (Iorio, et al., 2022). The trust a company places in the trainers in cases like this may therefore result in the "skills" the trainees learn, as far as the content thereof is concerned, not corresponding to the skills they should acquire (Jardim, et al., 2022).

A training course on "stress management", the main focus of which is relaxation techniques an employee should use after being exposed to severe or long-term work stress, is used here by way of an example. These techniques, though sometimes helpful, do not deal with the primary issue of "stress management", which equates to stress prevention, and do not take into consideration that the impact of various stress factors depends to a large extent on how they are handled or even interpreted by the person in question.

One of the main sources of stress lies in how people deal with stressful social situations, which are intrinsic by their very nature. A training that overlooks this phenomenon can therefore never be very effective.

The same may apply to the fact that stress at work can quite often be substantially minimised when people learn how to change their counterproductive habits that determine their behaviour in certain situations. If they succeed, they will not have to use the relaxation techniques because their stress will be greatly diminished (Majid, et al., 2019).

A similar example is the generic training course on "time management", which does not take into consideration that the main prerequisite for effective time management is managing oneself. In other words, the development of one's ability to successfully face or even welcome disruptions, both internal and external, that prevent us from performing activities that are necessary or unpleasant.

Unfortunately, no technical "time management" rules can help in this regard. It goes without saying that time needs to be planned. However, if we really want to stick to a plan, it is often necessary to adopt or use certain psychological methods that create or strengthen one's own motivation to carry them out, which can, for example, fall into the category of autosuggestion (Chakraborty, et al., 2017).

Within this context, a "time tamers" training course offered by an educational company therefore has a ring of the unreal about it. The company or lecturer who offers it probably believes that time can be tamed in order to use it more effectively, perhaps to even make it run more slowly. As with the term "soft", the term "time management" is not very appropriate because time cannot be managed, it can only be used more or less efficiently.

Another example concerns a soft skills training course focused on leadership, the instructor of which claims that a good leader should be "invisible". They therefore train participants to "become an invisible leader". Regardless of this non-sensical approach to leadership, some of the participants of the training may be convinced of the importance of this ability. This despite the fact that in reality it is acknowledged that a leader must be very visible to be successful (and even more so in crisis situations) in order to be able to, among other things, set an example, instil confidence in employees, provide security in difficult situations, as well as to not only formulate, but also personally convey their vision.

The last example is that of a motivational skills course, the "lecturer" of which is of the opinion that it is not appropriate to praise employees too often and/or too much because this could "spoil" them.

Practice, however, does not record such cases (which are contrary to the psychological theory of reinforcement). The lecturer may have meant that excessive praise that is not specific can sound unconvincing or even manipulative. However, employees or managers should definitely not take away from the training the idea that if we praise someone, their motivation will decrease because they will "rest on their laurels".

Difference in the nature of soft and hard skills and its impact on their training

The lower efficacy of soft skills training courses is often related to the nature of the skills themselves, i.e. the essence of the difference to "hard" skills (Almeida & Morais, 2023; Iorio, et al., 2022). The difference lies not only in the fact that it is more difficult to (correctly) define, explain and assess them, but also in the often firmly rooted social and communication skills with which people come to organisations.

These are not skills, but often habits, picked up in previous jobs, or even before starting work. Some may be effective, but others problematic. Developing new social skills is more difficult in these situations. It requires not only the acquisition of new skills, but also the destruction or replacement of old ones (Myers, 2021; Ooi & Ting, 2015).

The brain, much like a computer processor, processes information. Unlike a computer, however, it does not allow unwanted programmes controlling human reactions to be simply removed, figuratively speaking, by pressing the "delete" button. Behaviours are "physically set" by built-in neural connections, whereby any new behaviours, even those that are reasonable and desirable, are borne with difficulty (Putra, et al., 2020).

The only permanent way to create a new way of behaving, replacing the old way, is to create a "new or corrective experience" for that person. The essence of this procedure is that the new behaviour "delivers better results". In other words, it is appreciated and supported by the environment: if the new way of behaving is supported by the environment for a long enough time and therefore proves to be more successful, the hope is that a new brain will also be created with neural connections that lead to it (Santos, et al., 2017).

It follows from the results of studies dealing with the functioning of the brain that the only way to achieve a permanent change in human behaviour is to "reinforce" these changes over the long term, i.e. to support and thereby fix them. The basis of this support is usually immediate and positive feedback. Simply put, immediate praise ().

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Hard rules of soft skills trainings

Even the idea that soft skills are essentially a free "art" that can easily be learned through practice or that can be acquired together with other course participants is often harmful or inappropriate.

Soft skills training courses should, of course, benefit from discussions with participants. However, most soft skills, like hard skills, have their own rules. These are principles that are mostly based on long-term research or experience, the results of which cannot simply be derived in group discussions (Börner, et al., 2018). This applies, among other things, because some of these principles are counter-intuitive in nature. In other words, they do not fully correspond to what seems obvious at first glance, or to how people behave in practice in certain situations (because they believe that they will be successful).

An example is the psychologically proven assumptions on which the ability to convince or act trustworthy is based. One of them is that if we want to convince someone, we should not "press" them too much. It is better to leave at least some space for them to derive the opinion or decision to which we are trying to lead them on their own.

Similarly counter-intuitive is the principle that effective conflict resolution usually requires preventing a dispute turning into a confrontation. Confrontational resolution of a dispute reduces the willingness of the other party to come to our aid, or even gives them arguments as to why they should not even try. In practice, however, and contrary to this proven principle, people often believe that in the event of a conflict, the other side should be "hit" and therefore forced to make concessions. The idea that if we get upset the stress will go away, is usually wrong. Inevitably, the stress returns very quickly as soon as we find out that we have not achieved anything by being upset (Vinichenko, et al., 2020).

The hard rules or principles on which soft skills are based apply to even the most demanding of them. This applies, for example, to the ability to lead: although certain innate prerequisites (personal "charisma") undoubtedly contribute to it, it can also be learned, based on proven ways of behaving and communicating by successful leaders. However, even these rules, which are appropriate to follow, need to be learned, sometimes in a way that can resemble the acquisition of "hard" or factually based skills (Sousa & Rocha, 2017).

The need for longer-term support

Without this long-term support or reinforcement, new ways of behaving will not be formed, with most people, sooner or later, reverting to their old ways, i.e. those behaviours learned and fixed in the past or that they grew up with. As a result, their behaviour remains more or less unchanged (Naamati Schneider, et al., 2020).

Even a longer and/or more demanding soft skills training course may not achieve a substantial result if it is not followed through with significant support for the use of the skills within the work and/or social environments, especially from direct superiors. In such cases, the results of the training will remain below expectations and the return on investment will be low.

This applies even to intensive multi-day training courses, including those that use individual or group exercises that apply the role-play method (Espina-Romero, et al., 2023), the participants of which really try to change their behaviour. Trainings alone, cannot create new skills. They do not provide sufficient long-term support, which is necessary for new behaviours to take root. Their main contribution lies primarily in the fact that they constitute a necessary first step or "introduction" to new behaviours and the correct procedures or methods for solving certain social situations. However, they must be followed up by a long-term strengthening of the newly learned behaviour.

In other words, if an employee returns to their workplace after completing training, they need a supervisor, co-worker, or another person next to them to provide them with feedback, guidance and support on an ongoing basis. If they don't, their behaviour quickly reverts to that of the past.

Top-down progression

The aforementioned principle also leads to the fact that an effective development of soft skills usually only works in an organisation based on a top-down approach (Majid, Shaheen, et al). It starts with changing behaviour at the highest levels of corporate management and continues with the training or coaching of people at lower levels.
As part of this procedure, managers who have adopted the new behaviour become coaches or trainers of the people they manage. These persons, if they are also leaders, for example

team leaders, in turn strengthen the development of the soft skills of the members of their groups.

An important prerequisite for the efficacy of this procedure is to set clear expectations for change, provide regular and frequent feedback, as well as motivation for the development of new skills.

Objective assessment of soft skills

The objective assessment of employee soft skills, pointing out to the main strength as well as weaknesses of individual persons, also serves to develop soft skills (Cotet, et al., 2017; da Silva, et al., 2021). Its easiest and most effective way is feedback, which occurs not only from superiors, but also from subordinates, colleagues or customers. If it is designed correctly, it gives a relatively accurate assessment of abilities that can otherwise often be assessed only with difficulty or whose assessment sounds subjective.

If we identify the main weak points in the soft skills of each person before starting their development, this brings us two advantages. On the one hand, the training and coaching program can be focused on the areas in which the need for improvement is greatest, and on the other hand, the participants of the training and subsequent development program will gain a stronger motivation to change. In addition, weaknesses identified by feedback can be re-examined over time, so development program participants get immediate information on what improvements they have already made.

External coaching

The development of soft skills, supported by coaching, is important/particularly suitable for employees who have already acquired the basic skills necessary to perform their job, but who are starting to encounter problems when applying them, and, as a result, are losing confidence in themselves (Baron & Morin, 201).

In such situations, an external coach can help not just with new skills development, but also with providing motivational support for the learning thereof (Majid, et al., 2019). This involves instilling the employee with the necessary self-confidence and motivation to use their newly acquired skills and showing them that they can handle more demanding situations or apply those skills independently.

When giving guidance to employees, helping them to find the right solution, the coach usually asks so-called guiding and/or indirect questions. These questions are designed to lead the trainee towards new approaches. Examples of such questions are: "What are your options for moving forward?", "What do you think you could do differently?", "What would happen if...", "Do you see any way we could speed things up?", "What do you think about the possibility of...?", "Is there anything about your job that makes you nervous or uncomfortable?"

One of the most important personal prerequisites for a coach's success is patience. They should respect the fact that it takes a certain amount of time to develop soft skills and gain experience of their use, which may vary from employee to employee. However, differences in learning speed do not necessarily mean that employees who are "better" at learning soft skills will also be better at actually performing them within their job. Consistency, the ability to monitor and evaluate performance and clearly formulate set goals are also important.

3 Methodology and Data

The purpose of the analytical part of this article, which is based on the qualitative analysis of the results of a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews, mainly with human resource managers of medium-sized and large companies, was to determine what importance the surveyed companies attach to efforts to maximise the efficacy of the training and development

of new soft skills, thereby taking into consideration that the efficacy of such training courses is often relatively low (especially when compared with the results of "hard" skills training courses).

The research questions specifically covered the following issues:

(i) Do the surveyed companies purposefully attempt to increase the efficacy of their soft skills training courses to avoid falling into the trap of believing their employees have mastered certain skills, even though they have not?
(ii) What specific methods for increasing the efficacy of their soft skills training courses do the surveyed companies use (or, have they developed) and which of these methods would they recommend?
(iii) Which methods, if any, do the surveyed companies use for evaluating the results of their soft skills training courses.

Data collection was carried out in the first half of 2023 on the basis of simple random sampling. The sample set consisted of companies operating mainly in Prague and central Bohemia. In total, 36 companies were included in the research. The number of employees in these companies ranged from 345 to 854 people. The majority of the companies operate in manufacturing, logistics, trade, finance and personal services.

4 Results

The results of the analyses of the research questions, based on the responses to the questionnaire survey and interview statements, were the following:

(i) Most of the surveyed companies did not purposefully attempt to increase the efficacy of their soft skills training courses and do not make a principal difference between soft and hard skills training activities. Only 18% claimed that soft skills training, due to the nature of these skills and the specific requirements regarding the training thereof, deserve a special approach. The majority (63%) did, however, recognise the importance of soft skills, mainly communication and management skills, and try to come up with more individualised methods for the development thereof, mainly through coaching. At the same time, the majority of the companies are convinced that the training of employees in the field of soft skills should be entrusted to persons who have both the professional and personal prerequisites to do so. When it comes to external lecturers, it is therefore important to diligently check their credentials and not just trust the claims of educational companies. In the case of internal lecturers, the trainers themselves need to be trained first.

(ii) Unlike training courses for hard skills, more than half (69%) the surveyed companies feel that one of the most important ways to increase the efficacy of soft skills training courses is to involve employees (participants) in the planning thereof, both in terms of focus and methods used. Within this context, the role-play method is often used. However, rather than increasing the efficacy of the training course, it is more likely to be used as an instrument to raise employee interest and satisfaction with the execution thereof.

(iii) Only a minority (15%) of the surveyed companies clearly define the goal of the training course in terms of specific social skills required in a concrete situation. Likewise, only 38% use a method of evaluation to determine whether the trained skills have improved. Practically all of them (95) do, however, get feedback from participants of training courses, though this feedback typically does not concern an objective evaluation of the acquired skills.

(iv) Although more than a half (78%) of the surveyed companies have a relatively clear idea of the area the training course should be focused on, they leave plenty of space for the lecturer to determine the specific contents of the training course. The majority (71%) do not feel the need to monitor the training, either through a HR specialist or a line manager.

(v) About one-third of the surveyed companies stated that the higher efficacy of soft skills training courses requires the establishment of standardised content, uniform procedures and proven principles upon which the training of such skills is based. According to their experience, it is advisable to create written manuals for employees, the aim of which is to specify the main points of the newly acquired skills and to even highlight the use thereof in situations they might commonly encounter at work, including their resolution. These requirements are, however, as they admit themselves, not always fulfilled.

(vi) The prevailing view (70%) among the surveyed companies is that it is usually not enough to explain or demonstrate new skills to employees. If they are to learn new skills, they need to acquire them based on their own practice and/or experience. For positions where employee failures can cause serious problems (including senior positions), training should be based on practicing simulated situations. One of the goals of this training is to alert employees to potential mistakes before they make them while actually performing their tasks.

(vii) When developing soft skills, it must be assumed that a few days of training alone is not enough to acquire them. Long-term attention, support and feedback from a superior or external coach, and sometimes even repeated training courses, are also important.

(viii) Most of the surveyed companies (68%) agreed it is important for their employees to gain trust in the need for and use of their newly acquired soft skills. An important part of soft skills training courses is therefore convincing the employees that the skill they are learning is appropriate, important and effective. The reason for this being that they may have personal doubts as to whether the new skills are really more effective than the skills they already possess and have used in the past. Overcoming the employee's distrust in the new skill should be based on practical illustrations. An example, as given by one of the companies, was a situation in which a lecturer/superior advised an employee, handling complaints, not to argue with the person who is complaining. The reason for this being that it is very likely to calm the situation down sooner. However, the employee did not agree with this procedure. They argued that if they did not argue with the complainant about the content of their complaint, their position becomes weaker and that of the complainant becomes stronger.

(ix) Objections to a certain course of action are often found to be stronger on the part of leaders. Their views on, for example, how to manage their subordinates sometimes differs significantly from what their trainers, organisations or coaches deem appropriate. These situations, even more so than the previous one, have to be handled in soft skills training courses. Companies are, however, increasingly coming to the conclusion that training is not an effective way to solve this issue. Almost half (45%) of the surveyed companies agree that this is an issue which can be best handled through coaching.

(x) Resistance to changing habitual procedures (and sometimes even prejudices) should be regarded as natural, which is something superiors should anticipate in advance. The majority (79%) of surveyed companies stated that the superior should give the employee time to familiarise themselves with the new soft skill and gradually accept it as their own, and that they should not promote the adoption thereof too quickly. Too much pressure placed on employees can increase their resistance. This rejection can then be difficult for them to take back.

(xi) At least in theory, most of the surveyed companies agreed that for all major soft skills training courses, appropriate model situations must be created to verify that employees have actually learned the new skills. These situations should assess their ability to solve certain model social situations. If employees are unable to solve these, they need to either have follow-up training or have a coach to help them to do so.

6 Conclusion

The answers to the research questions revealed that most of the surveyed companies believe the nature of soft skills training courses requires them to be entrusted to persons who have both the professional and personal prerequisites to do so. When it comes to external lecturers, it is therefore important to diligently check their credentials and not just trust the claims of educational companies. In the case of internal lecturers, the trainers themselves need to be trained first.

Unlike training courses in hard skills, more than a half of the surveyed companies feel that one of the most important ways to increase the efficacy of soft skills training courses is to involve employees (participants) in the planning thereof, both in terms of focus and methods used.

Even though more than half of the surveyed companies have a relatively clear idea of the area the training should be focused on, only a minority clearly define the goal of the training course in terms of specific social skills required in a concrete situation. They therefore leave plenty of space for the lecturer to determine the specific contents of the training course. In addition, only a minority of the companies use a method of evaluation to determine whether the trained skills have improved.

About one-third of the surveyed companies stated that the higher efficacy of soft skills training courses requires the establishment of standardised content, uniform procedures and proven principles upon which the training of such skills is based. In addition, according to their experience, it is advisable to create written manuals for employees, the aim of which is to specify the main points of the newly acquired skills.

Most of the surveyed companies agreed it is important for their employees to gain trust in the need for and use of their newly acquired soft skills. An important part of soft skills training courses is therefore convincing the employees that the skill they are learning is appropriate, important and effective.

The prevailing view is that resistance to changing habitual procedures (and sometimes even prejudices) should be regarded as natural, which is something superiors should anticipate in advance.

Most of the surveyed companies agreed that for all major soft skills training courses, appropriate model situations must be created to verify that employees have actually learned the new skills. These situations should assess their ability to solve certain model social situations. If employees are unable to solve these, they need to either have follow-up training or have a coach to help them to do so. This practice, however, is used by just a minority of the companies.

The conducted survey did not find any significant differences between companies from different industries. Larger companies were, however, usually stricter in their adherence to the principles of effective soft skills training and claimed to use a broader array of guidelines covering their execution. Regardless of company size and industry, the most space for improving soft skills training lies in the clear and unambiguous definition of the content of the soft skills to be learned, clear training goals and the evaluation of the results thereof.

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Primary Paper Section: A

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