

# Soft Skills and Career Development: Prisma Systematic Review of Studies on Students and Employees

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## Abstract

This systematic review evaluates the role of soft skills in career development and synthesizes empirical evidence published between 2019 and 2024. Soft skills are interpersonal attributes such as communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability and problem-solving are increasingly recognized as critical for employability and long-term professional success. Searches of Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and ResearchGate following PRISMA guidelines yielded 10 eligible studies from an initial pool of 1,008 records. The included studies represent diverse countries (Vietnam, China, Malaysia, India, Romania, South Africa,

Nigeria, Slovakia and the United States) and populations (fresh graduates, college students, employees and managers). Findings reveal that key factors influencing soft-skill development include generational differences, cultural expectations, personal obligations, educational exposure, and individual attributes such as self-efficacy and emotional intelligence. Sectoral variations were evident, with industries such as logistics and oil & gas prioritizing structured teamwork and communication, while educational settings emphasized adaptability and self-efficacy. Poor soft skills were consistently associated with reduced job performance, workplace conflict, limited employability, innovation deficits, and long-term career stagnation. This review highlights the need for integrated soft-skill training in curricula and organizational development programmes. Practical implications suggest embedding soft skills into higher education through project-based learning and experiential practices, while organizations must prioritize mentoring, continuous development, and performance systems that value interpersonal competence. Policymakers are urged to support nationwide initiatives to democratize access to soft-skill training. Future research should employ longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches to capture how soft skills evolve over time and across contexts. Overall, this review underscores that soft skills are not optional but fundamental to thriving in the 21st-century workplace.

**Keywords:** soft skills, career development, employability, higher education

## 1. Introduction

The modern labour market demands more than technical competence: employers value interpersonal attributes that enable collaboration, adaptability and ethical behavior. Collectively known as soft skills, these encompass communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, teamwork, critical thinking and problem-solving (Buta, 2022). Research from diverse sectors shows that employees with strong soft skills are more productive, innovate more effectively and experience higher career satisfaction than those who rely solely on technical expertise (Poláková et al., 2023). Conversely, soft-skill deficits are linked to poor teamwork, conflict, stress and stagnated career progression (Ngo, 2024). Despite increasing recognition of their importance, many graduates enter the workforce without adequate soft-skill training, creating a gap between employers' expectations and employees' competencies.

Furthermore, global transformations such as digitalization, Industry 4.0, and post-pandemic work realities have magnified the relevance of soft skills. Hybrid work arrangements, virtual collaboration, and the rise of artificial intelligence require workers to complement technical mastery with human-centered capabilities. Reports by the World Economic Forum (2018) and the Society for Human Resource Management (2021) consistently identify communication, problem-solving and adaptability among the top skills for the future workforce. Thus, understanding how soft skills are developed, and the consequences of their absence, is a pressing concern for educators, policymakers and employers.

Cultural factors also influence how soft skills are valued and taught. For example, collectivist societies emphasize teamwork and interpersonal harmony, while individualist cultures may prioritize leadership and assertiveness. These contextual nuances suggest that soft-skill

training must be tailored to the needs of different populations. In higher education, embedding soft skills into curricula through project-based learning, service-learning, and reflective practices is essential to prepare students for real-world challenges. Similarly, organizations must implement structured training, mentoring, and feedback systems to ensure ongoing professional growth.

This review synthesizes recent evidence on two research questions: (i) What factors influence the development of soft skills among students and workers? and (ii) What are the consequences of poor soft skills for career performance and employability? By integrating findings across countries and disciplines, the paper aims to inform educators, policymakers and organizations seeking to bridge the soft-skills gap and provide actionable strategies for sustainable workforce development.

## **2. Background and Review of Studies**

Soft skills, often described as interpersonal, behavioral, and non-technical competencies, have long been contrasted with hard skills or domain-specific knowledge. While hard skills represent measurable, technical abilities such as coding, engineering, or accounting, soft skills reflect an individual's capacity to collaborate, lead, adapt, and communicate effectively. The distinction between the two categories has shaped educational debates since the late 20th century, when globalization and digitalization began to reshape workforce needs (Nesaratnam, 2014; Bailly & Lene, 2013).

### *2.1 Global Recognition of Soft Skills*

International organizations have repeatedly emphasized the importance of soft skills. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2018) highlighted problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity among the top 10 skills for 2025. Similarly, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UNESCO have underscored that future-ready graduates must balance cognitive, social, and emotional skills to thrive in rapidly changing environments. These reports argue that while technical literacy is essential, it is insufficient without the adaptability and emotional intelligence required in diverse workplaces.

### *2.2 Earlier Empirical Studies*

Before the 2019–2024 focus of this review, several studies had already identified the soft-skill gap. Garcia and Martinez (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of training programmes and concluded that well-structured soft-skill initiatives significantly improve employee performance and retention. Hurrell (2016) argued that blaming employees alone for skill deficits is problematic, as institutions and employers often fail to provide environments conducive to skill development. These perspectives reveal that the responsibility for cultivating soft skills must be shared across multiple stakeholders.

### *2.3 Hard Skills Versus Soft Skills Debate*

The debate surrounding the relative importance of hard and soft skills remains central to career development research. Historically, employers focused recruitment and promotion on

technical expertise. However, more recent evidence shows that technical proficiency alone is insufficient for long-term success. For instance, Smith et al. (2019) found that employees who combined technical mastery with leadership and communication skills were more likely to achieve career advancement. This supports the notion that hard and soft skills are complementary rather than competing domains.

#### *2.4 Regional Perspectives*

Regional differences further enrich the discourse. In Asia, rapid economic growth and industrial transformation have created high demand for adaptability, cross-cultural communication, and leadership (Ngo, 2024; Omar et al., 2023). African studies (Owo & Udoaka, 2020; Ketchiwou et al., 2022) highlight challenges of limited resources and gender disparities in access to training. European research, including Buta (2022) and Poláková et al. (2023), situates soft skills within the broader context of Industry 5.0, emphasizing innovation and sustainability. Meanwhile, North American perspectives (Dean & East, 2019) stress organizational training programmes as strategic tools for competitiveness. These diverse perspectives underline the global relevance of soft skills, while also highlighting cultural and institutional variations.

#### *2.5 Technological Change and Soft Skills*

The rise of artificial intelligence, automation, and remote working has transformed skill demands. While machines increasingly handle routine technical tasks, human workers must excel at tasks requiring empathy, negotiation, adaptability, and creativity. Studies show that employees with strong soft skills adapt better to hybrid and remote work models, fostering collaboration across digital platforms. This trend is expected to intensify as Industry 4.0 technologies continue to evolve, reinforcing the argument that soft skills are not supplementary but central to employability.

#### *2.6 Gaps in the Literature*

Despite increasing attention, several gaps persist. Few longitudinal studies track soft-skill development across different life stages or professional trajectories. Additionally, much of the research remains descriptive, lacking robust experimental or quasi-experimental designs to evaluate training effectiveness. Moreover, cultural and generational nuances are often overlooked, with limited comparative research that explores how soft skills manifest differently in various contexts. Addressing these gaps is crucial for producing actionable insights that can inform evidence-based policies and interventions.

### **3. Objectives**

- 1) Identify factors that influence the development and enhancement of soft skills across educational and workplace contexts.
- 2) Assess the impacts of poor soft skills on job performance, productivity and employability, drawing on quantitative and qualitative evidence.

## 4. Method

### *4.1 Search Strategy*

The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Searches were conducted in May 2024 across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar and ResearchGate using combinations of keywords: “soft skills”, “employability”, “career development”, “professional growth”, “workplace” and “poor soft skills”. Boolean operators (AND, OR) and filters (publication years 2019–2024; English language) were applied. This systematic approach ensured comprehensiveness and transparency, reducing the likelihood of bias in study selection.

### *4.2 Selection Criteria*

This review included empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods) and one narrative review (Kapur, 2020) due to its conceptual relevance to soft-skill development or employability; participants drawn from educational institutions or workplaces; and publication between January 2019 and May 2024. Reviews, editorials and non-English papers were excluded. After deduplication, 253 records were screened by titles and abstracts; 63 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility; 10 studies met the criteria and were included (Figure 1). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion among the authors. This rigorous screening process minimized errors of inclusion and exclusion, ensuring that only high-quality, relevant evidence was synthesized.

### *4.3 Data Extraction and Synthesis*

Data from the eligible studies were extracted into a structured table capturing author, year, country, population/sample, methodology and key findings. This systematic extraction enabled comparison across diverse contexts and study designs. A narrative synthesis was conducted because heterogeneity in study designs precluded meta-analysis. Where possible, findings were grouped under themes related to factors influencing soft-skill development and the impacts of poor soft skills. The use of thematic grouping allowed for meaningful integration of findings and highlighted commonalities across cultural and disciplinary contexts.

### *4.4 Reliability and Validity Considerations*

To enhance reliability, two independent reviewers cross-checked extracted data and reconciled differences through consensus. Validity was supported by following PRISMA standards and ensuring that inclusion criteria were consistently applied. This methodological rigour strengthens the credibility of the conclusions drawn from the synthesis.

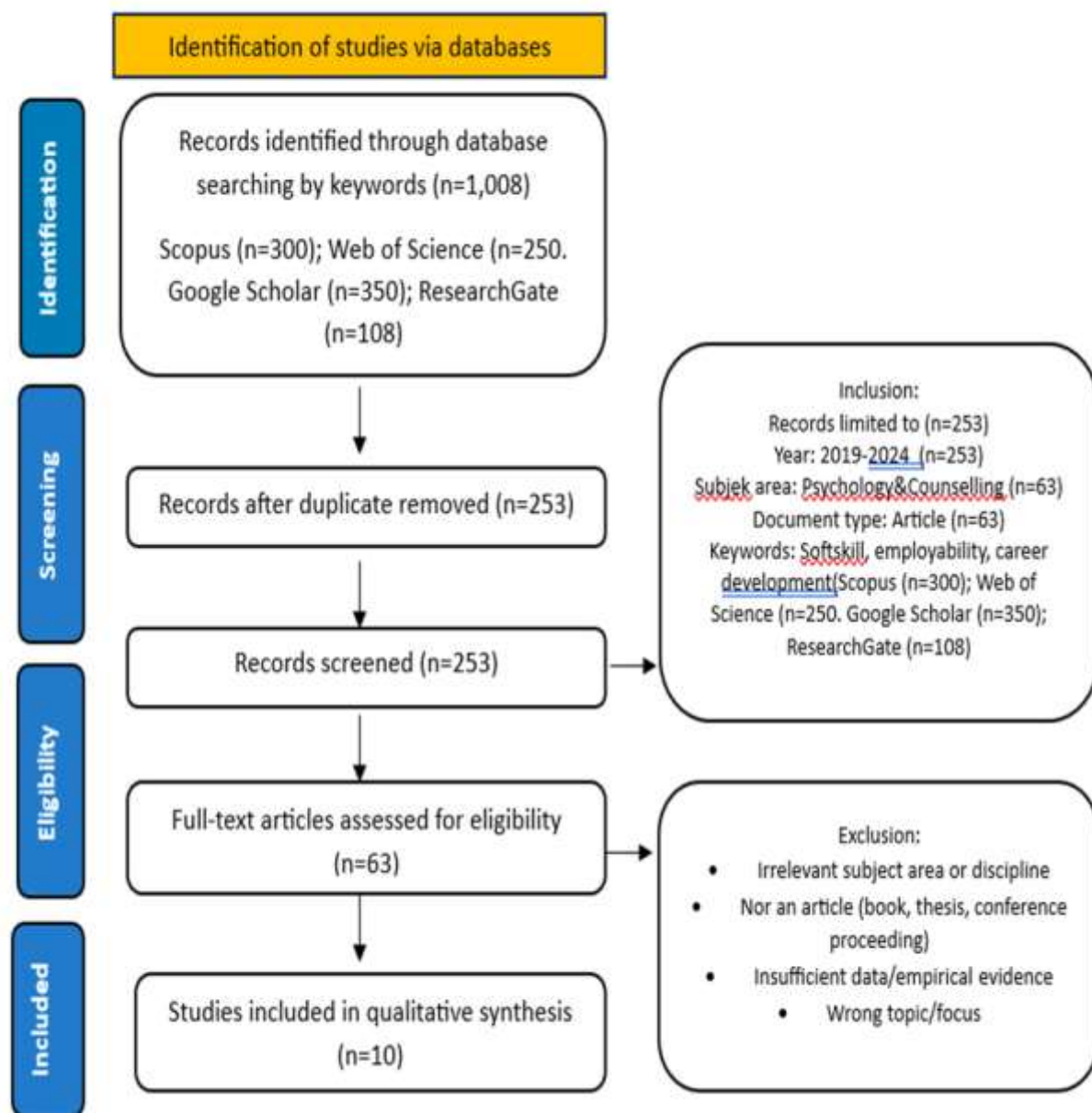


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram for a systematic review of soft skills and career development on students and employees

## 5. Results

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the included studies. They encompass cross-sectional surveys, descriptive studies and qualitative analyses conducted across nine countries. Sample sizes ranged from 27 to 968 participants. Collectively, the studies examined soft skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, time management, adaptability and problem-solving in diverse contexts, vocational colleges, universities, service industries, logistics sectors, and oil and gas companies.

Table 1. Summary of selected studies (2019–2024)

Author & Year	Country/Population	Methodology	Key Findings
<b>Owo &amp; Udoaka (2020)</b>	Nigeria, 27 electrical supervisors & 62 recent graduates	Survey	Graduating students must cultivate broad soft skills (teamwork, communication, leadership, problem-solving) to secure employment and perform effectively in the oil and gas sector.
<b>Ketchiwou et al. (2022)</b>	South Africa, 412 women in the service sector	Quantitative survey	Career advancement is strongly associated with continuous soft-skill development; personal accountability influences women's commitment to upskilling.
<b>Buta (2022)</b>	Romania, high-school students	Mixed methods	Individuals with technical skills often recognize the need for additional training later in life; inadequate career guidance delays soft-skill development.
<b>Boakye &amp; Jingzhao (2019)</b>	China, 165 international university students	Descriptive study	Universities must foster employability and career-management skills; personal development activities enhance students' adaptability and networking abilities.
<b>Kapur (2020)</b>	Generic review	Narrative review	Personal skill development—task organization, self-assessment and planning—is a lifelong endeavour critical for improving living conditions.
<b>Poláková et al. (2023)</b>	Slovakia, analysis of 19 000 organizations	Content analysis of job advertisements	Employers emphasize soft skills such as communication and problem-solving; Industry 5.0 will increase demand for creativity, leadership and adaptability.
<b>Dean &amp; East (2019)</b>	United States, three logistics companies	Case study	Organizations must implement structured soft-skill training programmes to remain competitive; failure to do so undermines business performance.
<b>Ngo (2024)</b>	Vietnam, 968 undergraduate students	Survey	Problem-solving, leadership and teamwork are the most important soft skills for career advancement; these differ from skills

Author & Year	Country/Population	Methodology	Key Findings
			prioritized for academic success.
<b>Omar et al. (2023)</b>	Malaysia, 70 vocational college students	Survey	Students proficient in employability skills exhibit higher career self-efficacy and confidence in preparing for the workforce.
<b>Chandrabose et al. (2024)</b>	India, 104 logistics industry workers	Cross-sectional study	Managers highly value administrative and interpersonal skills; operational staff emphasize technical competence but recognize the importance of communication and knowledge acquisition.

### *5.1 Commentary on Individual Studies*

#### *5.1.1 Owo & Udoaka (2020, Nigeria)*

This study focused on the oil and gas sector, where safety and precision are paramount. The authors concluded that technical expertise alone is insufficient, as graduates also need teamwork, communication, and problem-solving abilities. The findings underscore the importance of industry-aligned curricula that combine technical and interpersonal training.

#### *5.1.2 Ketchiwou et al. (2022, South Africa)*

By studying women in the service sector, this research revealed how personal obligations influence commitment to skill development. Gendered responsibilities such as caregiving constrained opportunities for leadership development, emphasizing the need for organizational policies that support flexible arrangements and inclusive growth.

#### *5.1.3 Buta (2022, Romania)*

Investigating high-school students, this study highlighted how inadequate career guidance delays the acquisition of soft skills. Students often discover the importance of these skills only when transitioning to higher education or the workplace, stressing the need for earlier interventions in school curricula.

#### *5.1.4 Boakye & Jingzhao (2019, China)*

Examining international students, the study showed that exposure to diverse environments enhances adaptability and networking skills. Universities that integrate career-management programmes help students cultivate resilience and employability in global job markets.

#### *5.1.5 Kapur (2020)*

Although a narrative review rather than an empirical study, Kapur highlighted lifelong personal skill development as essential for improving living conditions. The article's conceptual perspective adds depth to understanding how soft skills extend beyond

employability to broader aspects of well-being.

#### 5.1.6 Poláková et al. (2023, Slovakia)

Through analysis of job advertisements, the study demonstrated how employers consistently emphasize communication, creativity, and adaptability. In the context of Industry 5.0, soft skills are increasingly tied to innovation, sustainability, and leadership, reinforcing the idea that future economies demand human-centered competencies.

#### 5.1.7 Dean & East (2019, United States)

This case study of logistics companies showed that structured training in soft skills is not optional but a competitive necessity. Companies that neglected these programmes experienced weaker performance and lower adaptability to change.

#### 5.1.8 Ngo (2024, Vietnam)

Surveying nearly 1,000 undergraduates, Ngo found that leadership and teamwork were most critical for career progression, contrasting with the academic focus on technical knowledge. The findings highlight a persistent misalignment between university curricula and employer expectations.

#### 5.1.9 Omar et al. (2023, Malaysia)

This survey of vocational students revealed a positive correlation between employability skills and career self-efficacy. Students with stronger soft skills expressed higher confidence in entering the workforce, suggesting that targeted training interventions can directly influence self-belief and readiness.

#### 5.1.10 Chandrabose et al. (2024, India)

By examining logistics industry workers, the study revealed differences between managers, who valued interpersonal and administrative skills, and operational staff, who placed greater emphasis on technical competence. This highlights the layered skill expectations within organizations.

### 5.2 *Cross-study Synthesis*

Findings were organized into clearer thematic categories: (i) education/training gaps, (ii) generational differences, (iii) cultural and gender influences, and (iv) personality/self-efficacy factors. Together, these results affirm the critical need for integrated, context-sensitive approaches to soft-skill training. Some studies reported strong institutional roles in soft-skill development, whereas others suggested individuals bear primary responsibility, indicating inconsistency in how soft-skill development is conceptualized across contexts. Limited longitudinal and cross-cultural studies were identified, and few examined causal effects of softskill training.

## 6. Discussion

### *6.1 Factors influencing Soft-Skill Development*

#### 6.1.1 Personal Obligations and Social Roles

Family responsibilities can constrain individuals' ability to participate in training or networking activities. Studies on women's career advancement highlight that caregiving duties limit opportunities to cultivate leadership and negotiation skills, contributing to slower career progression (Ketchiwou et al., 2022). Organizational cultures that do not support work-life balance exacerbate this barrier. Additionally, research suggests that access to childcare facilities, flexible schedules and supportive supervisors can mitigate these challenges, underscoring the role of institutional support in enabling soft-skill development.

#### 6.1.2 Education and Training

Many higher-education curricula prioritize technical knowledge over soft-skill instruction. When universities intentionally embed communication, leadership and critical-thinking modules—through internships, group projects or professional development workshops—graduates demonstrate stronger employability and career resilience (Boakye & Jingzhao, 2019; Omar et al., 2023). Lifelong learning programmes and mentoring also help employees refresh and enhance their soft skills. Beyond formal training, informal learning through peer collaboration, volunteering and cross-functional teamwork has been shown to foster adaptability and problem-solving skills.

#### 6.1.3 Generational Differences

Generational shifts are linked to varying communication styles and work expectations. Millennials (born between 1980 and 2000) grew up during rapid technological advancement, often prioritizing digital interactions over face-to-face communication. Generation Z (born after 1995) is even more immersed in technology, which can undermine the development of interpersonal and conflict-resolution skills (Pol ákov áet al., 2023). Employers report that new entrants often lack the soft-skill proficiency needed for collaborative work environments. At the same time, younger generations bring digital fluency, creativity and openness to change, suggesting that training should leverage these strengths while addressing weaknesses in communication and collaboration.

#### 6.1.4 Personal Attributes and Personality

Traits such as openness, conscientiousness and self-efficacy influence individuals' motivation to learn and practice soft skills. People with high self-efficacy are more likely to seek feedback, engage in professional development and adapt to workplace challenges. Conversely, introversion or low confidence may hinder participation in collaborative tasks or leadership roles. Recent psychological studies also highlight the role of emotional intelligence in moderating these relationships, suggesting that individuals who can regulate emotions and empathize with others excel in teamwork and conflict resolution.

### *6.2 Consequences of Poor Soft Skills*

Poor soft skills have tangible impacts on individual careers and organizational outcomes.

#### 6.2.1 Reduced Performance and Productivity

Employees lacking communication or time-management skills may deliver suboptimal work and miss deadlines. These inefficiencies create bottlenecks that affect entire teams. Research in logistics and service industries shows that poor interpersonal coordination significantly reduces customer satisfaction and profitability.

#### 6.2.2 Workplace Conflict

Inadequate conflict-resolution abilities lead to strained relationships, absenteeism and turnover. Conflict not only reduces morale but also imposes hidden costs through recruitment, training of replacements and lost institutional knowledge. Case studies suggest that conflict mediation and training can reduce turnover and improve organizational climate.

#### 6.2.3 Limited Employability

Surveys of employers show that graduates who cannot communicate effectively or work in teams struggle to secure jobs, contributing to high unemployment rates even among technically competent individuals (Poláková et al., 2023). Employers increasingly use behavioral interviews and assessment centers to evaluate candidates' soft skills, highlighting their weight in recruitment decisions.

#### 6.2.4 Innovation Deficits

Creativity and problem-solving are essential in the knowledge economy; deficiencies hinder innovation and organizational adaptability. In industries facing rapid technological shifts, employees with poor soft skills may resist change, fail to collaborate across disciplines, and contribute to stagnation. Conversely, strong soft skills promote resilience, encourage cross-pollination of ideas, and support organizational competitiveness.

#### 6.2.5 Long-Term Career Stagnation

Individuals lacking leadership, networking and adaptability skills often face slower promotion rates and reduced career mobility. Longitudinal studies show that employees who invest in soft-skill development enjoy higher salaries, better career satisfaction and stronger professional networks.

### 7. Implications for Practice

The synthesis underscores that soft skills are not innate traits but competencies that can be taught and reinforced. For educational institutions, integrating soft-skill development into curricula through project-based learning, service-learning and reflective practice is imperative. Collaborations with industry partners can offer students real-world contexts to hone these skills. Moreover, assessment methods in universities should move beyond examinations to include peer evaluations, role-play, presentations and collaborative projects that provide opportunities to practice soft skills.

For organizations, continuous professional development programmes, mentoring and

feedback systems help employees at all levels strengthen interpersonal abilities. Companies that invest in coaching and leadership programmes create a culture of learning that fosters both technical and relational growth. Importantly, embedding soft-skill expectations into performance appraisals ensures accountability and consistent progress across the workforce. Organizations that actively cultivate these skills often report higher employee engagement, retention and customer satisfaction.

Policy makers should emphasize soft-skill training in workforce development initiatives and support flexible arrangements that enable workers, particularly women, to balance family responsibilities with upskilling. National policies could also encourage collaboration between universities and industries, ensuring graduates are work-ready. In addition, government-funded skill enhancement initiatives and online platforms could democratize access to training, particularly in rural or underprivileged areas.

Finally, individuals should proactively engage in lifelong learning and self-reflection to remain adaptable in an evolving labour market. Attending workshops, seeking feedback, joining professional networks and embracing experiential learning opportunities can build a strong portfolio of soft skills. By recognizing that career success is increasingly defined not only by knowledge but also by interpersonal and adaptive competencies, individuals and organizations alike can thrive in a rapidly changing global economy.

## **8. Conclusion**

Soft skills are indispensable for career development, employability and organizational sustainability. This systematic review revealed that generational dynamics, personal obligations, education and personality all influence soft-skill acquisition. Evidence across nine countries confirms that deficits in communication, teamwork and leadership contribute to reduced performance, workplace conflicts and unemployment.

Expanding beyond previous literature, this review highlights that soft skills not only enhance immediate job performance but also play a decisive role in long-term career mobility and organizational adaptability. Employers that invest in cultivating these skills gain a competitive edge through innovation and employee resilience. Likewise, educational institutions that embed structured soft-skill training in curricula contribute to producing graduates who are not only technically competent but also adaptable, collaborative and capable of leading in diverse contexts.

Future research should focus on longitudinal studies that track the impact of soft-skill interventions across different career stages, as well as cross-cultural analyses that deepen understanding of how sociocultural contexts shape skill acquisition. Policymakers, educators and organizations must collectively acknowledge that in a world characterized by uncertainty and technological disruption, soft skills are the bedrock of sustainable professional growth and social cohesion. By embedding these competencies into policies, curricula and organizational practices, stakeholders can close the skills gap and empower individuals to thrive in the 21st-century workplace.

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