



Nexus between soft skills training and business graduates' performance: an empirical study based on Bangladesh

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Soft skills are the expected qualities of the business graduates to take part in purposeful intercommunications with others to establish a synergic, productive, and flourishing work environment, which are crucial for the growingly competitive corporate world. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between soft skills training and business graduates' performance. There were limited studies found on soft skills training and business graduates' performance in the Bangladeshi context and this study bridges the existing research gap. The study is based on primary data. A structured questionnaire was prepared to collect the primary data. The questionnaire was delivered randomly to all the business schools in Bangladesh through an online platform because of the Covid-19 pandemic. A total of 352 valid responses were accumulated from this online survey. To analyze the data, descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, and chi-square tests were applied. It was found that 84.1% of respondents agreed that soft skills training increased professional performance. The study also revealed that 38.6% of students felt bored during soft skills training sessions. However, almost 43.2% of students were opposed to this statement. From the study, it is recommended that soft skills training should be made compulsory in the Bangladeshi business school curriculum to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in future professional performance.

Keywords: Soft skills, Soft skills training, Graduate performance, Business school's Curriculum, Industrial Revolution 4.0

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Introduction

In recent years soft skills have received attention in academics as well as industry because of their potential and beneficial aspects. It is generally assumed that soft skills help people to manage themselves with other people and describe their behaviors and attitudes. Someone's capability to connect with others at work or at a personal level is expressed through soft skills. Every organization looks for employees who can engage with others inside or outside of the organization and this qualification cannot be overlooked.

Organizational leadership has evolved into a critical instrument for controlling and empowering a company's growth. Various leadership attributes have been discovered to improve organizational performance with the use of innovation (Ahmed & Rehman, 2020). To execute diverse activities in society, people require competencies such as knowledge, attitude, values, and skills. Higher levels of knowledge and abilities are required to complete activities to a higher degree and quality. Without the continuous growth of people's competencies, a company, as well as a country, is unlikely to fulfill its objectives (Deshkar, 2020). The impact of soft skills training on employee performance has been studied extensively. Soft talents and their impact on long-term work have been researched by researchers. However, the relationship between soft skills and their impact on business graduates' performance has received little attention. Aside from that, there are very few studies on soft skills training and graduate performance in the Bangladeshi context. As a result, an empirical investigation of the relationship between soft skills training and graduates' occupational performance in Bangladesh is highly demandable.

According to Nusrat and Sultana (Nusrat & Sultana, 2018), as the current marketplace for job seekers is becoming very competitive, soft skills are "must-have" skills. These days, a faster change in the education sector is noticeable. Graduates may not succeed in the corporate world if they cannot communicate effectively with their colleagues or clients. In this arena of the industrial revolution, the corporate sector has become very competitive because of automation and much corporate personnel are losing their jobs because of the competition as well as the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic (Malik & Javed, 2021).

Therefore, the students must train themselves at effective communication skills, which is the core part of soft skills to sustain in this competitive world. Communication skill is an important soft skills element, and it plays a significant role in the business world (John, 2009). Soft skills are different from other skills in terms of these being the only set of skills that can never truly be crammed by anybody but can only be polished at best. No one can teach how to be polite, but a basic knowledge of social etiquette and professional protocol can go a long way in the corporate world. Moreover, soft skills are essential for professional and business success. Corporate training and educational institutions concentrate on equipping individuals with technology and industry knowledge. These are core entities for business operations and a business can become ineffective if employees are not well trained in soft skills.

Training is defined as a planned process to change attitude, knowledge, or skill behaviour by learning experience to achieve effective performance in a range of activities. According to Edwin B Flippo (Flippo, 1984), "Training is the act of increasing knowledge and skills of an employee for doing a particular job". Therefore, it was inferred that the principal objective of the training is to make sure the availability of a skilled and willing workforce to the organization. Thus, soft skills training can be interpreted as a systematic process by which soft skills are developed in an individual (Choudary et al., 2016).

Soft skills, or interpersonal skills, relate to employees' ability to get along well with others, social graces, and communication abilities. Soft skills training for managers and employees is vital for successful collaboration in the workplace. Soft skills refer to the cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark people in varying degrees. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job.

According to the Stanford Research Institute and Carnegie Mellon Foundation, 75 per cent of long-term job success is directly related to soft skills, while only 25 per cent of success is attributed to technical knowledge. In 2007, a survey by the International Association of Administrative Professionals showed that 67 per cent of hiring managers said they would hire an applicant with strong soft skills but weak technical skills.

The most sought after and hardest to find HR managers may interview candidates for a specific job, however, emotional intelligence and other types of skills related to getting along with people should always be considered. The main problem of this study is that most of the business graduates do not take soft skills training during their graduation. The main purpose of this research is to find out the association between soft skills training and fresh business graduates' performance. There are some specific objectives which are; to find out the relation between soft skills training and business graduates' performance in their professional life; to explore the benefits from soft skills training if it is compulsory in the curriculum; to explore the students' eagerness in soft skills training.

From the previous research, it was inferred that soft skills are important learning process tools for business graduates to get a quick response from the job market. But very few studies were conducted in this aspect in Bangladesh. Therefore, this research is designed and conducted to investigate the impact of soft skills training on business graduates. Furthermore, this study is a modest approach to find out soft skills training benefits for graduates.

The format of this study is that initially, a literature review is presented on soft skills training and graduate performance followed by illustrated methodology and results. At the end of this study, the discussion and conclusion are highlighted.

Literature Review

Soft skills are the ability of a person which help them to perform effectively at the workplace, the increased growth in the service sector has outstretched the importance of these types of skills, which have consequently occurred as a crucial feature for the success of enterprises and organizations (Young, 2012). Many researchers along with different professional institutions emphasized that employers find the soft skills more significant rather than focusing heavily on intellectual skills (Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Nabi, 2003). (Raman et al., 2015) surveyed in 2015 to understand the importance and requirements of soft skills in the IT industry and the reasons behind the lack of soft skills in students. The study has revealed that problem-solving skills (98%), communication skills (92%), interpersonal skills (88%), time management skills (65%),

And team-building skills (43%) were among the top five skills that are sought after and these are followed by the other skills like emotional intelligence, motivation, positive attitude, presentation, and decision-making skills.

It also can be added that soft skills are the traits and abilities of attitude and behaviour rather than the knowledge or technical aptitude (Tobin, 2007), they build and withstand effective relationships that will result in a mutual benefit (Asbari et al., 2020; Fikri et al., 2020). An insightful training program acts as a medium to enhance employee skills and thus enable them to perform better in their job. These skill-based training programs are conducted to improve and increase the performance level of a student to develop 'people skills to meet the current as well as the future needs of industry businesses to ensure effective utilization of available resources and integrate personal goals, which results in improved productivity, greater workforce flexibility, savings on resources and principal costs, more motivated workforce and improved quality of the final product or service in the professional colleges (Gruzdev et al., 2018; Succi & Canovi, 2020).

Concerning the importance of including soft skills in management colleges, (Thacker & Yost, 2002) stated that students require training to be effective team members. Employers also found that business graduates lack good leadership skills. During this pandemic, employers demand good leadership skills from business graduates.

Soft skills not only accelerate creativity but also promotes the innovation capability of graduate students which ultimately improves environmental performance, societal development, and organizational performance (Javed, 2018; Javed & Husain, 2021; Javed & Khan, 2017; Johl & Toha, 2021; Toha et al., 2020). In a survey of 400 employers on their perception of workplace basic skills and competencies required for current and potential employees, the employers said that they want entry-level workers to possess employability skills rather than technology competencies. The most important skills to these employers (over 92.6%) were basic skills, thinking skills, personal quality skills, and interpersonal competencies (Richens & McClain, 2000).

After this secondary research, it was inferred that empirical result is necessary to investigate the benefits and prospects of soft skills training that

Actually, students get, thus that hypotheses were developed to prove empirically whether the soft skill training has some impact on business graduates or not. It was also understood that existing results are inconclusive regarding soft skills training and graduate performance.

A number of studies have investigated the effects of soft skills training on employee performance (Tang, 2020). Furthermore, previous researchers have studied how soft skills affect sustainable employment. However, there are very little attention has paid to the relationship between soft skills and their attachment to business graduates' performance. Based on this research gap the following hypothesis has been developed. In addition to that, there are very few studies found in the Bangladeshi context regarding soft skills training and graduate performance. Therefore, it is further demanded an empirical investigation into the relationship between soft skills training and graduates' performance in the workplace in the Bangladeshi context. Based on this research gap the following hypothesis has been developed.

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between soft skills training and graduate performance.

From the literature review, it was assumed that soft skills training is a prominent tool to catch the corporate world. Different studies like (Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Nabi, 2003) recommended that professional performance largely depends on soft skills training; therefore, business schools need to include more transparent and reliable curricula based on soft skills. Generally, graduates give more preference to hard skills compared to soft skills. Whereas employers' look for a proper blend of hard and soft skills. They seek to employ and promote candidates with quick-wit, ethics and self-coordinated with good communication skills (Binsaeed et al., 2017). According to (Seetha, 2013) employers prefer to hire and promote those people who are resourceful, ethical, and self-directed with good soft skills. Hard skills and experience are not enough for the ingress and escalation in the corporate world. Despite such great significance of soft skills, many institutions are reluctant to include soft skills training in the curriculum (Sopa et al., 2020).

Many studies have investigated the effects of soft skills training and others factors of performance (Binsaeed et al., 2017). However, there is very little attention has given to the relationship between soft skills and their attachment to the business school curriculum. It is interesting to note that there are very few studies, which are focused on the length of the soft skills training. Therefore, it is further demanded an empirical investigation into this relationship in the Bangladeshi context. Based on these research gaps the following hypotheses have been developed.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between soft skills training and the business school curriculum.

Ho3: Getting bored in the lengthy session does not affect the soft skills training.

Methodology

This study is quantitative in nature in which primary data was used to investigate the hypotheses. A representative sample size was drawn from the population of business graduates from two renowned public universities in Bangladesh for this study; firstly, data were collected from Jagannath University, Dhaka) and secondly, National University, Gazipur. Data were collected on the second week of November 2020. The Table published by (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) was employed to choose the appropriate sample. A structured questionnaire was adapted from (Ibrahim et al., 2017); followed by a distributed online platform to collect the primary data. In this study, respondents are from the four departments namely Accounting and Information Systems, Management Studies, Marketing, and Finance. Although questionnaires were distributed to the selected business schools in Bangladesh however, only 352 valid and usable respondents were obtained.

To analyze the data, descriptive statistics, frequency distribution, and chi-square tests were employed. Hypotheses were developed in this regard and then Chi-square Test was used to test the hypotheses (Hair et al., 2019). Data were mainly collected by 5 points Likert Scale which is supported by many researchers (Hair et al., 2019). Bar graphs, frequency tables, and descriptive statistics are also highlighted in this study (Husain & Javed, 2019b; Javed et al., 2020). SPSS 20 software was used

For statistics using calculation (Hair et al., 2019; Husain & Javed, 2019a; Javed, 2017; Javed et al., 2019; Javed & Khan, 2017)

Results

Table 1 illustrated the respondents' composition regarding male and female where it is presented that 52% are male respondents and 36% are female respondents. From Table 2, it is inferred that students have learned the interview skills primarily from soft skills training. Moreover, they have obtained huge improvement in communication skills from soft skills training. Furthermore, English speaking ability, presentation skills, and body language have improved significantly through soft skills training. However, the lowest number of students have put their preference on resume writing and time management skills. The data is shown in Chart 1, which is derived from Table 2.

Table 3 has illustrated the descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics suggest that the students have strongly agreed on the first statement that is 'Soft Skills Training Increase Graduates' Professional Performance' as its mode is 5. 'Soft Skills Should Be Made Compulsory In curriculum' for this statement the mode is 4. Furthermore, most students said that soft skills training is not boring for its long-time session because its mode is 2 which means they have disagreed with this statement.

From table 4, it is concluded that 68.2% of students have strongly agreed on soft skills training increases graduate's professional performance. On the contrary, only 6.8% of students opposed this. From table 5, it is observed that 40.9% of students have strongly agreed that soft skills should be made compulsory in the curriculum, and 6.8% of students stated otherwise. A total of 38.7% of students have agreed that soft skills training is boring for long time sessions which are highlighted in table 6. However, almost 50% of students opposed this matter.

Discussion

The Chi-square test was used to analyze the hypothesis which was illustrated in the literature review. Table 7 indicates the alternative hypothesis H₀₁, and it is found that soft skills training increases graduates' professional performance since the chi-square test result is obtained as 66.227 and a p-value is 0.00 which falls on the rejection region of

The null hypothesis. Hence, the alternative hypothesis is accepted since the p-value= 0.00 2, table 7 showed that soft skills should be made compulsory in the curriculum since the chi-square results as 39.864 and a corresponding p-value are 0.00 which falls on the rejection region of the null hypothesis. Hence, the alternative hypothesis is accepted since the p-value= 0.00

Additionally, alternative hypothesis H₀₃ is derived from table 7, and it is seen that soft skills training is boring for long time sessions since the chi-square test result is 7.59 and a corresponding p-value is 0.108 which falls on the accepted region of the null hypothesis. Hence, the alternative hypothesis is rejected since the p-value= 0.00 < α = 0.05, assuming a 95% confidence interval. This result suggests that soft skills training is not boring for long sessions. Table 11 justifies the summary result of the hypothesis test where two hypotheses are accepted and another one is rejected.

Conclusion

The demand for skilled and practical work experienced personnel in today's job market has not reduced. Therefore, for entry into the real job market, fresh business graduates should have some specific real-world work experience in a major field of study along with soft skills training. It will broaden the horizons of different jobs and bring new opportunities for them.

This study's findings suggest that soft skills training improves graduates' professional performance and it should be made mandatory in the academic curriculum, which may be useful for educators or decision-makers. This study will assist educators and decision-makers in developing curriculum that will improve their employability.

It is recommended from the study that the soft skills program should include more practical sessions so that all the students can learn practically. Soft skills training may be included in the academic curriculum like- Business Communication, and Organizational Behavior course to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in future graduates' professional performance. This study was only undertaken in one geographic location and at two public universities due to a lack of time and resources. Studies about the curriculum of the training program and their effectiveness have

Also been skipped because of time limitations as that need extensive qualitative judgement. A further study, on the employable soft skills training and their effect on the graduates' professional performance, including several universities from around the world will be done soon.

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Table 1: Total Respondents

Total Number of Male Respondents	208
Total Number of Female Respondents	144
Total Respondents	352

Table 2: Forms of Soft Skills Training that Student Learn Most

	Group Discussion	Presentation Skills	Resume Writing Tips	English Spoken	Time Management	Communication Skills	Interview Skills	Body Language
Male	24	24	16	36	12	28	48	20
Female	8	16	8	12	12	28	40	20
Total	32	40	24	48	24	56	88	40
Percentage	9%	11%	7%	14%	7%	16%	25%	11%

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics

		Soft Skills Training Increases Graduates' Professional Performance	Soft Skills Should Be Made Compulsory In curriculum	Soft Skills Training Is Boring For long Time Session
N	Valid	352	352	352
	Missing	0	0	0
Mode		5.00	4.00	2.00
Minimum		1.00	1.00	1.00
Maximum		5.00	5.00	5.00

Table 4: Soft Skills Training Increases Graduates' Professional Performance

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Agree	240	68.2	68.2	68.2
Agree	56	15.9	15.9	84.1
Neither agree nor disagree	32	9.1	9.1	93.2
Disagree	16	4.5	4.5	97.7
Strongly Disagree	8	2.3	2.3	100.0
Total	352	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: Soft Skills should be made compulsory in curriculum

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Agree	144	40.9	40.9	40.9
Agree	160	45.5	45.5	86.4
Neither agree nor disagree	24	6.8	6.8	93.2
Disagree	16	4.5	4.5	97.7
Strongly Disagree	8	2.3	2.3	100.0
Total	352	100.0	100.0	

Table 6: Soft Skills Training is Boring for long Time Session

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Agree	40	11.4	11.4	11.4
Agree	96	27.3	27.3	38.6
Neither agree nor disagree	64	18.2	18.2	56.8
Disagree	112	31.8	31.8	88.6
Strongly Disagree	40	11.4	11.4	100.0
Total	352	100.0	100.0	

Table 7: Test Statistics

	Soft Skills Training Increases Graduates' Professional Performance	Soft Skills Should Be Made Compulsory In curriculum	Soft Skills Training Is Boring For long Time Session
Chi-Square	66.227 ^a	39.864 ^a	7.591 ^a
df	4	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.000	.108

Table 8: Soft Skills Training Increases Graduates' Professional Performance

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Strongly Agree	240	8.8	21.2
Agree	56	8.8	-1.8
Neither agree nor disagree	32	8.8	-4.8
Disagree	16	8.8	-6.8
Strongly Disagree	8	8.8	-7.8
Total	352		

Table 9: Soft Skills Should Be Made Compulsory in curriculum

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Strongly Agree	144	8.8	9.2
Agree	160	8.8	11.2
Neither agree nor disagree	24	8.8	-5.8
Disagree	16	8.8	-6.8
Strongly Disagree	8	8.8	-7.8
Total	352		

Table 10: Soft Skills Training is Boring for long Time Session

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Strongly Agree	40	8.8	-3.8
Agree	96	8.8	3.2
Neither agree nor disagree	64	8.8	-.8
Disagree	112	8.8	5.2
Strongly Disagree	40	8.8	-3.8
Total	352		

Table 11: Summary of the hypothesis test result

Null Hypothesis	Chi-Square	p-value	Evaluation
There is no significant relationship between soft skills training and graduate performance.	66.227	0.00	Rejected
There is no significant relationship between soft skills training and the business school curriculum.	39.864	.000	Rejected
Getting bored in the lengthy session does not affect the soft skills training.	7.59	.108	Accepted