

Soft Skills Needed for the 21st-Century Workforce

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Abstract: *Technical skills are no longer enough for workers to compete in this highly competitive global work environment. Soft skills are of paramount importance. A multiple-case-study design through the lens of emotional intelligence formed the basis of the research study. The focus of the research was identification of the successful soft skills training strategies in the logistics industry. Three logistics organization leaders in the counties of Burlington, Middlesex, and Somerset, New Jersey, were participants in the study. Data were collected through semi structured interviews and the review of company documents. Four themes emerged through data analysis of converging multiple data sources:*

(a) the use of a combination of group and individual training, (b) the identification of training needs by individual,

(c) the use of a systematic method to resolve emotional behaviour at work,

(d) the importance of effective communication.

Keywords: *21st-century workforce, distribution, emotional intelligence, logistics, soft skills, training*

I. Introduction

Possession of technical skills alone is no longer sufficient for employees in the highly competitive marketplace (Lazarus, 2013) of the 21st century. The need for individual soft skills has taken on heightened importance (Seetha, 2014). The most valuable employees in the organization have a mix of both hard and soft skill competencies (Griffith & Hoppner, 2013). Background of the Problem Employers seek individuals to fill their existing job openings based on the skill level for the position. The historical focus has been on hard skills. Hard skills are typically technical in nature and easier to assess within a short time frame. As businesses face a changing competitive battleground, the employee skill set needs are evolving as well. The new world is a place where technology is constantly improving and influencing change in the workplace (Connell, Gough, McDonnell, & Burgess, 2014). The new world includes diverse work groups who can have the ability to interact globally with different cultures. The ability to use interpersonal communication skills is critical for employees to work with and understand team members. The workforce mixture is changing. There is a combination of individuals from multiple age groups including individuals nearing retirement (Bailey, 2014). Included in the mix are people of different ethnicities and genders. Generational changes have resulted in the increased demand for employees with soft skills (Bailly & Lene, 2013). Problem Statement There is a shift in business to focus on worker knowledge to gain a competitive advantage (Wu, Lee, & Shu, 2013). This shift has enhanced the importance of workers' hard and soft skills (Borghans, Weel, & Weinberg, 2014). Fifty percent of employers surveyed globally identified workers with a skills gap to be deficient in soft skills (Hurrell, 2016). The general business problem is that some workers lack soft skills; the specific business problem is that some leaders in the logistics industry lack soft skills training strategies for employees.

II. Purpose Statement

The purpose of the qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the successful soft skills training strategies used by logistic industry leaders. The target population was leaders in three organizations in the logistics industry located in one of the central New Jersey counties of Burlington, Middlesex, and Somerset who had successful soft skills training strategies in leading logistics workers. The study may contribute to social change by identifying the efficacious soft skills training program strategies for the 21st-century workforce in the logistics industry. Identification of the successful soft skills training strategies in the logistics industry may inform leaders about ways to train workers lacking in soft skills to gain a competitive edge in the marketplace. Use of the knowledge may positively benefit workers who are unemployed or who are not performing well in their current positions.

Soft Skills

The soft skills identified as important in the workplace include communications, teamwork, motivation, problem-solving, enthusiasm, and trust (Chute, 2012; Ellis, Kisling, & Hackworth, 2014; Rasul, Rauf, & Mansor, 2013; Robles, 2012; Wahl et al., 2012). Soft skills are critical to success in business (Dana, Hancock, & Phillips, 2011). The wrong decision about a candidate's knowledge and skills can be costly to an organization

(Velasco, 2012) due to resulting effects on business outcomes such as worker behaviour, safety, productivity, engagement, and withdrawal. The ability to communicate is an integral skill for workers. Individuals who lack interpersonal skills are more likely to be involved in interpersonal conflict (Moeller, Robinson, Wilkowsky, & Hanson, 2012). Pattillo (2013) stated that management spends the majority of their time communicating. Language is the root of communication (Kahlon, 2013). Language helps people to understand others emotions and aids in the formation of social skills (Benjamin et al., 2012). Forms of communication include interpersonal communication, verbal, and written (Keyton et al., 2013). Listening skills play an important role in the communication process (Pop & Sim, 2012). To be an effective communicator, an individual must first be a good listener. An individual should focus on hearing what an individual says, taking what they heard and drawing inferences and asking questions to clarify any parts of the conversation either not heard or misunderstood (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2011). Organizational success correlates to effective communication (Waldeck, Durante, Helmuth, & Marcia, 2012). Supervisor listening is a key for catalyzing employee job satisfaction, and positive organizational behaviour outcomes (Lloyd, Boer, Keller, & Voelpel, 2015). Individuals born into different generations have differing communication styles. The Millennial group, which includes individuals born in 1980 through 2000, has grown up in the age of connection to each other through technology (Hartman & Mc Cambridge, 2011). Arguably, the availability of technology may have contributed to their lack of soft skills. Generation Z, which spans individuals born during the years of 1993 through 2005, has only known technology (Turner, 2015). Generation Z is inclusive, with the majority of the members owning a cell phone. Electronic communication has replaced some face-to-face conversations as the preferred mode of communication (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2014), which can result in individuals lacking soft skills. As businesses leverage human capital, an individual's aptitude to learn becomes more important than his or her existing experience (Galabova & McKie, 2013). Companies are searching for workers who are self-motivated and who can work independently (Wahl et al., 2012). Lean workforces have resulted in individuals taking on more work with less time for worker training. Individuals need to possess the skills to enable them to do the work themselves without asking others. The focus is on the creation of a workforce with increasingly strengthened soft skills during their career, regardless of the employer (Windsor, Douglas, & Harvey, 2012).

The Evolution of the Role of Soft Skills in the Workplace

The basis of the definition of success in the early workforce was on an individual's hard skills that include their physical ability to get the job done. The concept of work was associated with an individual's ability to attain the American Dream, regardless of the personal costs due to loss of freedoms or dangerous working conditions (Crain, 2012). Intense global competition has resulted in an emergent workforce where soft skills are among the most valuable assets an employee can possess (Cobo, 2013). There has been a progression in the workforce from the early 1900s considered as the epoch of the first industrial revolution (Magnusson, 2014), where men worked while women stayed at home and raised the children. The focus in the workplace was on mass production (Piercy, 2012). The history of the workforce in the United States includes challenging economic times during the Great Depression (Eichengreen, 2012), high unemployment during World War II and the Vietnam war (Wisman & Pacitti, 2014), the emergence of computers to increase work efficiency, and the feminist struggle (Gordon, 2013). The presence of women in the workforce has changed some business outcomes. Women typically have greater empathy and stronger relationship building skills than men (Matsa & Miller, 2014). The identification translates into the view of women as weaker than men in physical labour with a stronger balance of soft skills. Although opportunities exist in the workplace for women, some women cannot seize the opportunities due to challenges of balancing home life with work (Sudha & Karthikeyan, 2014). For example, although women work full time, they still bear the responsibility for housework and rearing the children.

III. Discussion

Application to Professional Practice Logistics leaders should pay attention to the results of this study. Individuals with soft skills deficits and emotional behaviour could affect business outcomes. As the workforce mix (Bailly & Lene, 2013) and global competition increases, it is of paramount importance for businesses to employ individuals who have soft skills, and managers who are emotionally intelligent. The managers should be able to navigate through the issues that occur in the workplace, as well as set up the environment for training to gain efficiencies. Soft skills training programs should include a focus on individual needs, group and individual training, a component to address emotional behaviour at work, and training on effective communication. Employers should determine the level of training offered to employees. Recommendations for Further Study A recommendation for further research is to perform the study using nonmanagement workers as study participants. The workers may have a different perspective on successful soft skills training strategies. We recommend that a larger study be performed to examine the relationship between the types of strategies for developing and improving emotional skills and the size or type of the organization. Responses from managers

who work at a smaller size company may unintentionally exhibit bias from dealing with the behaviour of specific employees in their workforce. A further recommendation for future research is to conduct the study in the same industry in another geographic location and compare the results. The subject of training soft skills versus training emotional intelligence is also a subject for exploration. The focus for this study was successful soft skills training strategies. Altindag and Kosedagi (2015) indicated the desired soft skill outcomes may be achieved by training emotional intelligence. Further research is suggested to determine whether it is beneficial to train soft skills directly or whether emotional intelligence training should occur to achieve the desired soft skills results. Conclusion Some workers lack soft skills in the logistics industry (Anthony & Garner, 2016). The soft skills deficit includes oral communication, problem solving, low self-confidence, and interpersonal skills (Robles, 2012; Rosenberg, Heimler, & Morote, 2012; Selvadurai, Choi, & Maros, 2012). The soft skills deficit affects business outcomes including worker behavior, safety, engagement, and productivity. Companies are competing based on worker knowledge, which has enhanced the importance of worker hard and soft skills (Borghans et al., 2014). It is imperative that businesses develop and implement strategies for developing successful soft skills training programs to address the soft skills deficit. Failure to do so has far-reaching implications in terms of negative business outcomes in this highly competitive global work environment.

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Prof. Manisha Devi "Soft Skills Needed for the 21st-Century Workforce" *International Journal of Engineering Science Invention (IJESI)*, Vol. 05, No. 12, 2016, PP 77-79.