

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE SOFT SKILLS THAT EMPLOYERS IN ZIMBABWE EXPECT GRADUATE JOBSEEKERS TO POSSESS: A STUDY OF FIVE COMPANIES UNDER THE INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION OF ZIMBABWE (LIMITED) GROUP

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ABSTRACT: *This study sought to investigate the soft skills which employers in Zimbabwe value most, which they expect graduate jobseekers and graduate employees to possess. The study was based on five companies under the Industrial Development Corporation of Zimbabwe Limited Group (IDCZ) namely Chemplex Corporation, Almin Metal Industries; Olivine Industries; Allied Insurance and Sunway City. The study was primarily quantitative with wide use of self-completing questionnaires. The research found out that employers as represented by managerial staff at the five companies under study felt that tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe exclude the training in soft skills and emphasised on the development of technical skills (hard skills). The study found out that the ten soft skills that employers in Zimbabwe felt were critical for graduate employees to possess are: critical thinking, morality (hunhu/ubuntu), teamwork, ethics, anger management/ self-control, communication skills, integrity, reliability/ trustworthiness, self-confidence, and understanding the work culture. As entailed in the Personality Trait-Based Model of Job Performance, the study recommended that compulsory training in soft skills which prioritizes the identified most preferred soft skills should be introduced in tertiary institutions. The study also recommended that institutions with the mandate to develop manpower in Zimbabwe, such as the National Manpower Advisory Council (NAMACO) should develop a National Soft Skills Framework which clearly outlines the set of soft skills to be possessed by graduate youths in order for them to meet industry skills expectations when they join the world of work.*

KEYWORDS: Soft Skills, Core-Skills, Jobseekers, Non-Technical Skills, Graduate Youths

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, the world witnessed a gradual move in higher and tertiary education from traditional, discipline-specific content in the curriculum to the inclusion of non-technical skills commonly referred to as soft skills, core-skills, generic skills, people skills or transferable skills (Kramar, 2010), but this has not been happening in Africa, let alone in Zimbabwe. This has caused an outcry among employers who have been shunning employing graduate youths justifying that today's graduates lack critical soft skills. On the other hand, graduate youths have been equally surprised and disheartened to discover that the distinctions on their transcripts and certificates do not count much during job selection interviews as most employers shun graduate youths in preference of older, experienced and less qualified staff. Oral interviews have turned out to be a competent search for the candidate who possesses and exhibits the most desired soft skills and it is that candidate who lands the job ahead of others. This only serves to underpin the importance of soft skills and their role in solving the unemployment debacle among educated youths.

Work places like families are social settings. Investors, company owners, executives, managers, supervisors, workmates, subordinates, clients and suppliers interact, share ideas, experiences and implement instructions and execute tasks individually and in teams and thus a lack of soft skills in one employee can cause the company to lose business opportunities worth thousands or millions of dollars. Wilson, Ariffian and Abu (2012) postulated that the lack of hard skills is easier to manage as it can be addressed by on-the-job retraining, but lack of soft skills ends up becoming entrenched in one's personality and habits. It is difficult to remove bad habits and instil desired soft skills in a work environment. That is why most employers expect desired soft skills to be present in an employee at recruitment stage (Kramar, 2010). Important as soft skills may be, there is a yawning gap of knowledge as to what are the soft skills valued most by employers in Zimbabwe and that is what motivated this study.

According to Jackson and Hancock (2010) acknowledgement of the need to develop these non-technical skills (soft skills) in graduate youths basically arose from industry's calls for job-ready graduates who have both the technical expertise and soft skills necessary to add immediate value in the workplace and in so doing save the company on scarce resources that are usually spent on staff development and training. Studies conducted on soft skills needed in order for graduate youths to increase job performance have excluded the African continent, yet Africa is part of the global village and is equally affected by the effects of globalisation, growing world-wide competition, technological advancement and the changing demands of customer needs. The unprecedented demand for better graduates has been created for the twenty-first century company worldwide including in Zimbabwe, but colleges and universities may continue doing nothing about lack of soft skills in graduates until they are informed by research which would single out those soft skills which employers desire graduate employees to have and this is the gap this study sought to fill.

The meaning of soft-skills and their importance

Literature review conducted for this study indicated that there was no common definition for the term 'soft skills'. This was because the perception of what constituted a soft skill differed from context to context (Shulz, 2008) and was subject specific and country-job-market-specific (McKinnon, 2011). Thus according to Ibid (2011), the soft skills sets expected in marketers, lecturers, students, doctors in Country X and Country Y to name but just a few vary although similarities may exist here and there. Durowoju and Onuka (2014) defined soft skills as a sociological term relating to a person's Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EIQ). Emotional Intelligence (EI) is the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness and optimism that characterize relationships with other people at a workplace (Durowoju and Onuka, 2014). Soft skills are known by different names across the globe as illustrated in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Terminologies used to refer to soft skills (Absullah, Ramlan, Sabran, 2013)

| Country | Terms used for Soft Skills |
|----------------|---|
| Australia | Key competencies |
| Canada | Strategy for prosperity |
| Denmark | Process independent qualifications |
| Finland | Framework for evaluating educational outcomes |
| France | Transferable competencies |
| Germany | Key qualifications |
| Italy | Transversal competencies |

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Malaysia | Soft skills |
| Netherlands | Core competencies |
| New Zealand | Essential skills |
| Singapore | Critical enabling skills |
| South Africa | Critical cross field outcomes |
| Switzerland | Trans-disciplinary goals |
| United Kingdom | Interpersonal skills and employability skills |
| United States | Necessary skills and workplace know-how skills |

This study agrees with the Malaysian context and will use the term 'soft skills' throughout this paper. While in practice soft skills can be found anywhere, this study confines itself to soft skills as they apply at a workplace.

Weber, Finley and Crawford (2009) viewed soft skills as interpersonal, human or behavioural skills needed to apply knowledge at the workplace. According to Conover (1979) these personal values and interpersonal skills determined a person's ability to fit into a particular structure at work and in society. Thus soft skills are the bedrock through which application of hard job-specific skills is made possible (Muir, 2004). For instance, no matter how qualified a lecturer or doctor may be, as long as he/she has no appropriate soft skills, his/her students or patients as the case might be will tell you that he/she is useless. The same applies to graduate job-seekers; their hard job-specific skills come to nought if they do not have desired soft skills. In support of this assertion, Shakir (2009) defined soft skills as skills that complement academic achievements. More than ever before, soft skills are viewed as a key element in organisational competitiveness as they enable employees to fully apply their technical knowledge as learnt at tertiary education level.

Jain (2009) proffered that soft skills make up who the employee really is and generally they encompass the employee's attitudes, habits and how they interact and live with other people in a working environment. Conrad and Leigh (1999) add that soft skills address how best to interact and work with others so that one can build meaningful work relationships, influence other employees' perceptions at work and motivate their actions.

In this study, the term soft skills will be used to refer to the characteristics that relate to a person's capability to interact effectively with others at work from workmates, to superiors/supervisors, clients, suppliers and other various stakeholders. This study views soft skills as a set of attributes that relate to the way one lives and interacts with other people in his/her workplace. Soft skills are people skills or communication skills or qualities that enable a worker to exhibit polished, superior human skills so as to be successful in co-existing with all forms of stakeholders in a workplace. Soft skills are the difference between an employee and mere hardware. It is common cause that the basics of motivation are to make work as interesting as play and soft skills are the employee, supervisor or manager's tool-kit to achieve the same.

Graduate jobseekers

In this study, a graduate is a person who successfully completed a post-secondary school diploma or degree including those who would have completed any postgraduate study in a higher education institution such as a college or university. This study thus views a graduate jobseeker as an individual armed with a diploma, degree or any postgraduate qualification, who is searching for a formal job and has not worked since graduating from college or university. In this study, a graduate jobseeker has no working experience and is by description an educated youth aged between fifteen and thirty-five years.

Employers or Managerial Staff

Employers in this study were represented by managerial staff such as executives, directors, managers and supervisors in the five selected companies under the IDCZ flagship. In this study, the words 'employer' and 'managerial staff' have the same meaning. Such understanding is consistent with Zimbabwe's Labour Act (Chapter 28:01) of 2006 which agrees that managerial staff represent the employer and therefore they are employers. The Labour Act (Chapter 28:01) of 2006 defines an "employer" as any person whatsoever who employs or provides work for another person and remunerates or expressly or tacitly undertakes to remunerate him; and in general, managerial employees do this. The same Labour Act (Chapter 28:01) defines a "managerial employee" as an employee who by virtue of his contract of employment or of his seniority in an organisation, may be required or permitted to hire (employ), transfer, promote, suspend, lay off, dismiss, reward, discipline or adjudge the grievances of other employees. A close analysis of the definition of the word 'employer' and that of 'managerial employee' above shows that there is a thin line which separates the two words and at law they are applied as one. The employer and managerial employee basically have the same powers at law. It is for that reason that for purposes of this study, the two terms were taken to mean the same and thus were used interchangeably throughout this paper.

The IDCZ Group

This research was a study of soft skills deemed critical by employers and the study used 5 companies in the IDCZ Group, it therefore became imperative to briefly unpack who IDCZ is. The Industrial Development Corporation of Zimbabwe Group Limited (IDCZ) was incorporated through the enabling Act (Chapter 14.10) in 1963 to invest in industry as a state agency. The organisation identifies and develops industrial project opportunities into commercially viable ventures in partnership with local, regional and international players. Having been in business for more than 50 years, the organisation has built an investment portfolio of sixteen companies in the following core sectors: automobile sector, fertilizer industry, chemicals, packaging, glass products, non-ferrous metal fabrication, light engineering, cotton value addition and textiles, food processing, timber and wood products and real estate development (IDCZ Annual Report, 2012).

Background to the Study

Zimbabwe is faced with high unemployment as supported by various authorities among them ILO (2013) and IMF (2012). Zimbabwe Statistical Agency (2012) carried out a national census and concluded that there were more educated unemployed youths than the uneducated youths. This is an unusual happenstance which is a cause of concern. Why would more educated people be unemployed yet uneducated ones are employed? Why would employers shun employing graduates in preference to the experienced or less educated employees? What is it that employers expect in graduates which they are not getting?

On a national level, Zimbabwe has witnessed in the last decade an increase in the number of universities from 2 in the 1990s to 16 universities by the end of 2015. Although this development is a blessing as many students can now enrol for a first degree, Zimbabwe has since the late 1990s witnessed a dynamic and unstable socio-economic environment and this has had a negative impact on industry causing graduates to have intense competition in getting the few formal jobs that exist. The IDCZ portfolio of companies is shrinking and companies outside the IDCZ are either shutting down or producing at break-even point or below capacity.

It is for this reason that Zimbabwean graduates have moved from interview to interview and company to company in search for jobs but all they get are regrets making them wonder what exactly employers want from them during interviews or during probation periods. Some companies have even come up with graduate trainee schemes which are basically yearlong periods during which they employ graduates at low salaries in the pretext that they will be training them yet all they will be doing during the period will be assessing the trainees to see if they possess the desired soft and hard skills. The graduate trainee viewed as having the most desired soft-skills then lands the job while the rest are off-loaded and left to wonder what they would have failed to do.

It is a truism that an employer faced with twenty graduate job-seekers with Accounting degrees clearly knows that they all possess skills in compiling Statements of Accounts, Bank Reconciliation Statements, Trial Balances to name but just a few. Given that all the twenty employees if they are true graduates have the Accounting skills which the employers themselves may not have, the difference as to who they will employ comes through interviews which search the possession of soft skills.

The Gap

This study sought to fill the gap in knowledge by making bare the facts of what soft skills employers in Zimbabwe expect from graduate employees and graduate job-seekers whom they already know possess the hard job-specific skills or technical skills. Existing literature on desired soft skills is a result of studies outside the African continent. The area of desired soft skills has not been researched in Zimbabwe yet most interviews, promotions, disciplinary actions, workplace relations/ esprit de corps, dismissals and performance are strongly based on the possession of desired soft skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study noted that different scholars who carried out studies in different countries outside Africa at different times identified the soft skills which employers deemed critical and came up with different and in some cases similar findings as illustrated on Table 2 below:

Table 2: Desired soft skills identified by earlier researchers

| Young and Chapman(2010) | Kelly (2001) | NCIHE (1997) | McLaughlin (1992) | Doyle (2014) |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| Communication Skills | Communication Skills | Communication Skills | Communication Skills | Communication Skills |
| Critical Thinking Skills | Numerical Reasoning Skills | Teamwork Skills | Problem Solving Skills | Networking |
| Teamwork Skills | Information Management Skills | Problem Solving Skills | Managing Information Skills | Business Etiquette |
| Life –Long-Learning Skills | Problem Solving Skills | Life-Long-Learning | Responsibility | Anger Management |

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Ethics and Morals | Self Management Skills | Good manners | Adaptability Skills | Teamwork |
| Planning and Organising | Social Skills | Listening Skills | Life-Long Learning Skills | Interviewing Skills |
| Interpersonal Skills | Teamwork Skills | Sense of Humour | Teamwork Skills | Emotional Intelligence |
| Negotiation Skills | Study Skills | Resilience | Integrity | Negotiation Skills |
| Decision Making Skills | Positivity | | Self control | Problem Solving |
| Leadership Skills | Self awareness | | Trustworthiness | Creative Thinking |
| Self Confidence | Forgiveness | | | Telephone Etiquette |
| Professionalism | | | | Time Management |
| Self Management | | | | Patience |
| Understanding Work Culture | | | | Sense of humour |

An analysis of Table 2 above shows that there are other soft skills which can be deemed 'universal or world-wide soft skills' as proven by the above findings from different researchers who carried out studies in different parts of the world. For instance, Communication Skills and Teamwork are such basic global or international soft skills as the two were singled out by all the earlier researchers as shown in Table 2. What that means is that a job-seeker attending oral interviews anywhere in the world or at any company in Zimbabwe is sure to be assessed on his/her ability to communicate and work in teams during interviews. Getting a job is increasingly premised on excelling in exhibiting desired soft skills as employers treat diplomas and degree certificates as adequate proof of the existence of technical/ hard skills in applicants.

The Role of Tertiary and Higher Education Institutions

According to Whatley et al (2011) there are many benefits for employers when education institutions equip students with soft skills that make them functional on the job. Some of the benefits are reduced training costs, business becoming competitive, increased profitability and economic growth of the organization. The Chetsanga Commission Report (1995) and Nziramasanga Commission Report (1999) also confirmed that institutions of higher learning are producing graduates who although academically sound, fail to meet current industry skills needs. On the other hand, unemployed graduates complain that employers shun them in preference of less educated but experienced workers.

Hissy (2002) supported the notion that employers increasingly feel that training in soft skills at tertiary education level is critical as it enhances job performance of graduates when they join the world of work. What is not clear is which soft skills are most valued by employers in

Zimbabwe which they feel are lacking in Zimbabwean university or college graduates. The findings of this study will assist universities and colleges in ensuring that tertiary institutions' curriculum development meets the current skills needs of industry and commerce.

Redmann and Kotrlik (2004) noted that the previous way of working is no longer effective. The National Business Education Association (NBEA) indicated that the shortage of skills confronting today's dynamic workforce goes beyond academic and technical skills, and that points to the need for graduate youths coming out of institutions of higher learning to possess soft skills to complement their academic and technical skills. The best way to prepare graduate youths for tomorrow's workforce is to develop not only technical skills but also soft skills during the time they are still in school (Policies Commission for Business and Economic Education, 1979). Ibid (1979) averred that there is a noticeable gap between the skills employers seek and the skills graduate employees possess.

According to Dewey (1916) education is not only a preparation for life but it is life itself. It is therefore generally agreed that an educated person should be able to co-exist and prove that they have superior interpersonal skills than the less educated, but this is not the case with graduates being produced by Zimbabwean institutions of higher learning.

Research carried out by Smith and Comy (2004) suggested that graduate youths have difficulties in adjusting to the work environment; an unwillingness to take job seriously and a lack of understanding of the impressions they create. According to Ayofe (2009) graduate youths fail to perform because they lack soft skills and are ill-prepared to apply soft skills in the workplace.

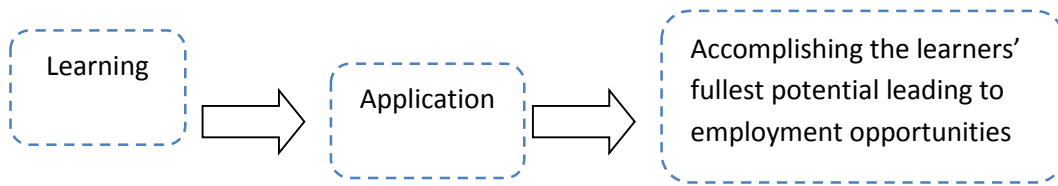
Theoretical Framework

There are several theories which depict the concept of soft skills namely the Theory of Progressive Education by Dewey (1916), The Human Capital Theory by Mincer (1958), the Generalists and Specificists Theory to Soft Skills Development by Moore (2004) and the Personality Traits-Based Job Performance Theory by Ahmed, Capretz, Bouktif and Campbell (2013). The Theory of Progressive Education by Dewey (1916) and the Personality Traits-Based Job Performance Theory formed the foundation of this study as the two theories illustrated fully how soft skills complement hard skills and are essential in creating a high performing graduate employee.

Theory of Progressive Education

The Theory of Progressive Education or the Pragmatic Learning Approach coined by Dewey (1916), viewed education as a lifelong commitment that lays the basis for success in business and in society. The theory argues that soft skills help the students develop their careers upon joining the world of work, since soft skills complement the technical skills that are specific to a particular career or field (Durowoju and Onuka, 2014). The theory states that soft skills are complimentary in their nature, and are not specific to a particular field and can be transferred on the job from one task to the other, hence they lay the basis of a successful careers for graduates once acquired (Amanda, 2014).

Figure 1: Theoretical framework: Pragmatic Learning (Dewey, 1916)



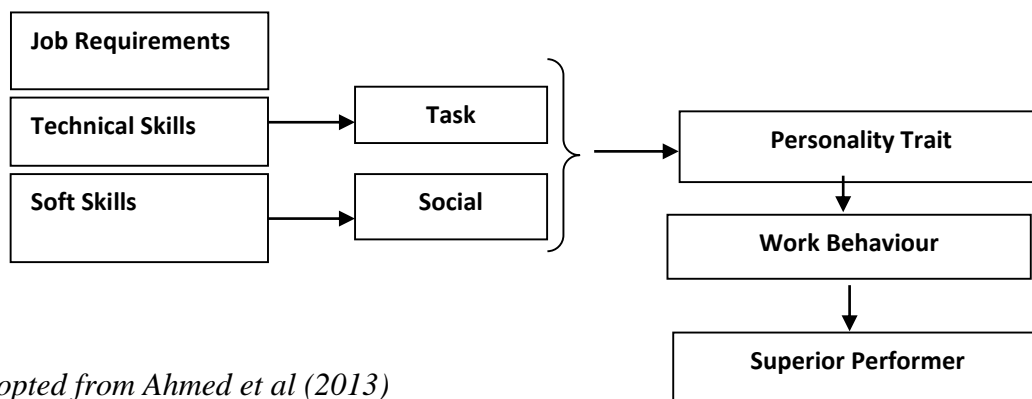
Adopted from Dewey (1916)

In summary, Fig 1 shows that the Theory of Progressive Learning states that students have to first learn (about soft skills) and then be trained to apply what they learn so that they become superior performers who enjoy many employment opportunities.

The Personality Trait-Based Job Performance Model

The Personality Trait-Based Job Performance Model as developed by Ahmed, Capretz, Bouktif and Campbell (2013) depicted that the success of a graduate employee on the job requires the graduate to possess two broad categories of skills; which are technical skills and soft skills, whereby given the current dynamic environment the possession of soft skills in graduate employees and graduate jobseekers helps complement technical skills which are subject specific and this was supported by Ketter (2010).

Figure 2: The Personality Trait-based Model of Job Performance



Adopted from Ahmed et al (2013)

METHODOLOGY

This study was basically a quantitative research as it employed wide use of questionnaires as the main data collection tool.

The Population

The population of interest in this study consisted of sixty (60) managerial employees (executives, directors, managers, section managers, Heads of Departments and supervisors) from five companies and their branches under the IDCZ Group namely: Chemplex Corporation, Sunway City, Almin Metal Industries, Allied Insurance and Olivine. These companies were particularly selected because they were in five sectors namely: the fertiliser and chemicals, real estate, light engineering, insurance and food processing sectors, which were

of interest because they covered a fairly wide array of sectors which all enjoy the supply of graduate employees from higher education institutions. Such a cross-section of companies helped to come up with a representative population of employers in Zimbabwe and that assisted in generalising the findings.

Sampling

According to Giddens (1993) a sample frame is the source from which the informants will be drawn. This study used the Raosoft Sample-size Calculator found on <http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html>, where a population of 60 (N) at 90% confidence level (c), at $\pm 5\%$ margin of error (E) with a presumed high percentage response rate of 95% (r) as calculated to get the sample size n was given by the formula:

$$x = Z(c/100)^2 r(100-r)$$

$$n = N x / ((N-1)E^2 + x)$$

$$E = \text{Sqrt}[(N-n)x/n(N-1)]$$

Where N is the population size, r is the fraction of responses that the researchers were interested in, and $Z(c/100)$ being the critical value for the confidence level c . The resultant sample size (n) was **28** managerial employees/ employers from the five IDCZ companies under study.

Response Rate

26 out of the 28 respondents returned the completed questionnaires and this was 92.9% response rate. Such a response rate is very high by any standard as supported by Burns (2000) and this was attributed to the strategy of distributing questionnaires which involved hand delivering and collection of the completed questionnaire after a couple of hours. The high response rate was also attributed to the high interest level demonstrated by managerial staff/employers at the five companies in the IDCZ Group who agreed that lack of soft skills in graduate employees and graduate jobseekers was indeed a pertinent problem notwithstanding that the respondents (managerial employees) were themselves once graduate jobseekers.

PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

28 questionnaires were hand delivered to managerial staff at Allied Insurance, Sunway City, Chemplex, Olivine and Almin Metal and as stated earlier, 26 were returned as illustrated in the Table below:

Table 3: Distribution of questionnaire by cluster/group

| Cluster Sample | Number of Questionnaires Distributed and Returned | | | |
|------------------|---|-------------------------------------|-------------|-------|
| | Senior Executives/ Directors | Managers and Section Managers | Supervisors | Total |
| Allied Insurance | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Sunway City | 2 | 4 | 4 | 10 |

| | | | | |
|--------------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Chemplex | 1 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Olivine | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Almin Metal | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Total | 6 | 10 | 10 | 26 |

Table 3 above shows that six of the respondents were senior executives, ten were managers while another ten were supervisors drawn from five IDCZ Companies where Allied insurance had 5, Sunway City 10, Chemplex 5, Olivine 3 and Almin Metals 3. The varying numbers of respondents from each of the five companies was a result of computations based on the population of managerial employees in each of the companies under study. Collectively all the 26 respondents were managerial employees or employers according to this study and as supported by Zimbabwe's Labour Act (Chapter 28:01)

Table 4: Response rate per managerial employment level

| Employment Level | Questionnaires Distributed | Returned Questionnaires | Response Rate |
|-------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| Senior Executives | 6 | 6 | 100% |
| Management | 10 | 10 | 100% |
| Supervisors | 12 | 10 | 83.3% |
| TOTAL | 28 | 26 | 92.9% |

The response rate was 100% among executives and managers and it was 83.3% among supervisors. Supervisors are usually on the ground in the factory supervising work. This makes them have little time to sit and complete a questionnaire and that explains why the response rate among supervisors was not 100% as in managers and executives.

Demographic Analysis

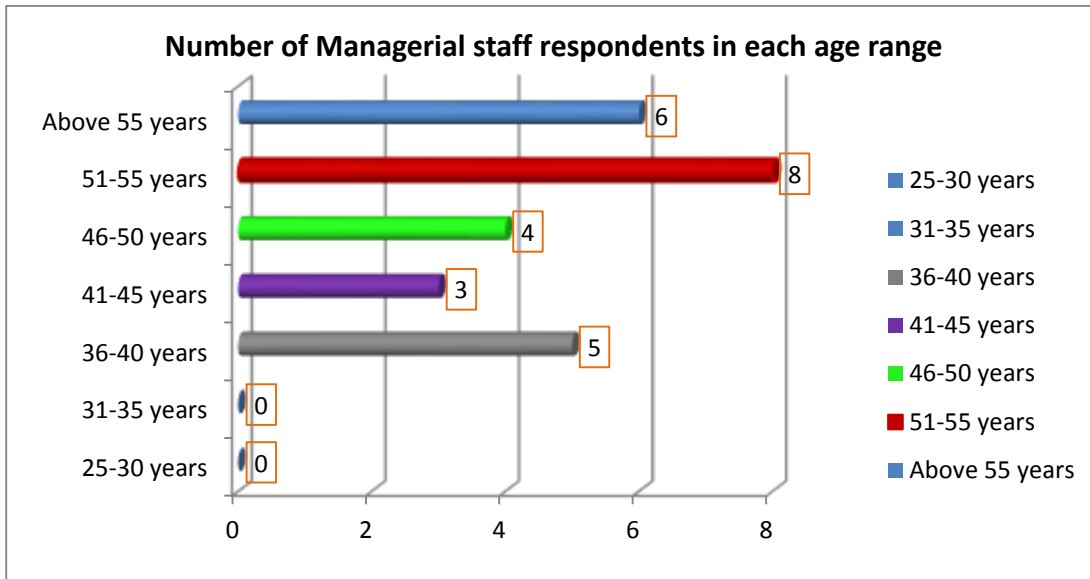
Table 5: Respondents by gender

| Post/ Managerial Level | Males | Females |
|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Senior Executives | 5 (80%) | 1 (20%) |
| Managers | 8 (80%) | 2 (20%) |
| Supervisors | 5 (50%) | 5 (50%) |
| Total | 18 (69.2%) | 8 (30.8) |

Table 5 above shows that there were 18 males who made up 69.2% of the respondents and 8 females who made up 30.8% of the respondents. Gender disparity is more apparent at the senior executive level and the level of managers which are key decision-making levels. At the lower managerial level of supervisors there was a gender balance of 50% which is quite ideal. This information confirmed a common phenomenon at IDCZ Group where the majority of employees are male, especially at senior level. This characteristic was not peculiar to the IDCZ Group only, but was common in most companies in Zimbabwe (Malaba, 2006).

Table 6: Distribution of Respondents by Age Group

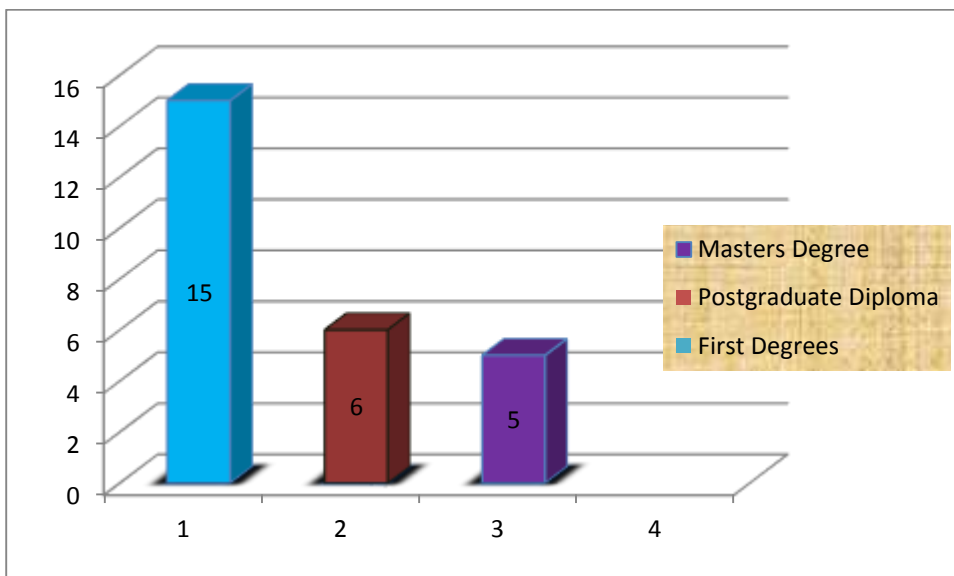
N=26



Analysis of the findings on Table 6 above proved that there were zero respondents among managerial employees who were aged between 25 - 30 years, zero aged between 31-35 years, five aged between 36-40 years, three aged 41-45 years, four aged 46-50 years, eight aged 51-55 years and six aged above 55 years. By and large this was a wide age sample of managerial staff respondents who by virtue of their ages were expected to be mature such that they had experienced the problem of lack of soft skills among graduate youths for considerable years. Such a wide age-range sample was bound to give informative responses to questions.

Table 7: Distribution of Respondents by highest Educational Qualification attained

(N=26)



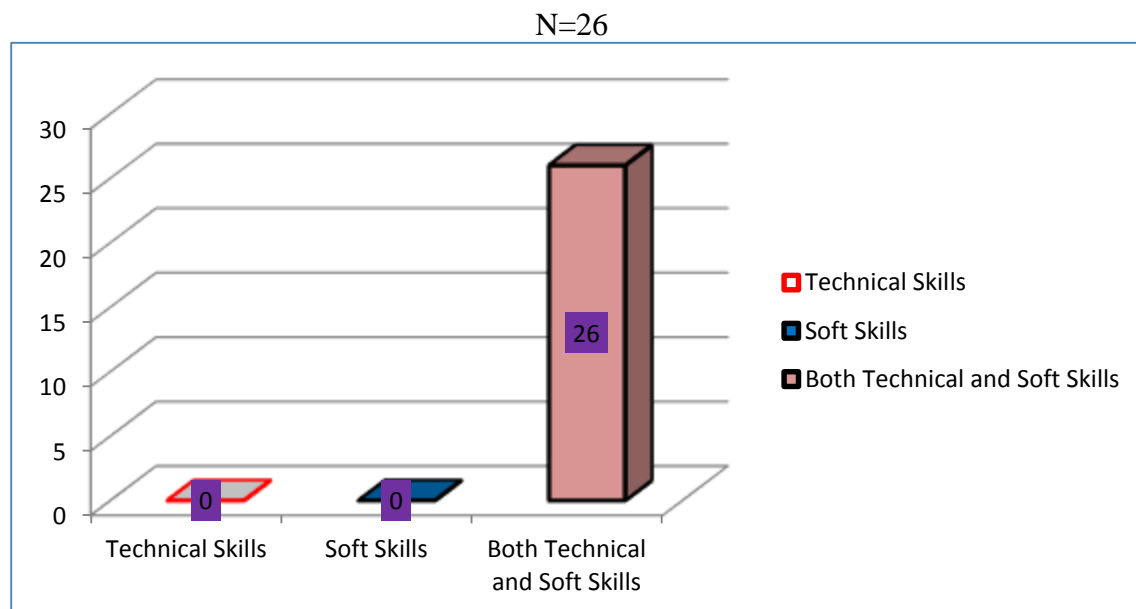
The findings show that 15 managerial staff respondents at IDCZ's five companies under study have first degrees as their highest qualifications while six have postgraduate diplomas and five have Masters degrees. Such respondents would offer well informed responses which could be safely generalised.

Table 8: Distribution of Participants by Length of Service in a managerial post

| Length of Service in a managerial post in years | <2 years of service in a managerial post | 3-5 years of service in a managerial post | 6-10 years of service in a managerial post | 11 years of service and above in a managerial post | Total |
|--|--|--|---|---|--------------|
| Senior Executives | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Managers | 1 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 10 |
| Supervisors | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 10 |
| TOTAL | 4 | 9 | 6 | 7 | 26 |

Table 8 shows that all the six senior executives who were respondents had been in post for over six years. Only one manager had been in post for a period of less than two years while nine had been in post for periods of three years and above. According to the Table, three supervisors had been in post for periods of less than two years. Such supervisors were inexperienced but could have more zeal to analyse the graduate employees since they are still fresh in their jobs. On average, the respondents were a very experienced sample which could give reliable and valid responses.

Table 9: Employers responses on which is the most important skill for graduate employees and graduate jobseekers.



The above Table shows that all respondents representing employers responded that they were aware of the importance of graduate employees' and jobseekers need to demonstrate both technical (hard) and soft skills on the job in order for them to enhance their job performance in the workplace. The finding was in support of the facts deduced from the Personality Trait-

Based Model of Job Performance, which forms the theoretical foundation of this study. The model depicted that the success of graduate employees in this current dynamic environment was only possible when they applied both hard and soft skills in the workplace. Such responses help to underline the fact that soft skills cannot be absent in an employee who seeks to excel in a job.

The most preferred soft skills

Managerial employees in the five companies under the IDCZ Group were given a separate sheet with a list of soft skills as on Table 2 above. They were then asked to rate the importance of each of the soft skills into four categories (Very Significant, Significant, Somewhat Significant, and Not Significant) to determine which of the soft skills were most preferred to be present in graduate jobseekers and graduate employees at recruitment stage. Table 10 below is a summary of the Top 20 soft skills which were identified as the most preferred by employers in Zimbabwe and the resultant rank order.

Table 10: Summary of findings on employers' perceptions on the most preferred soft skills in graduate job-seekers and graduate employees.

| Most preferred Soft Skills which Employers Expect Graduate job-seekers and graduate employees to have | NUMBER OF MENTIONS | | | | Points (Score) | Rank Order |
|---|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|------------|
| | Very Significant (3 points) | Significant (2 points) | Somewhat Significant (1 point) | Not significant (0 point) | | |
| Critical thinking Skills | 26 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 78 | 1 |
| Morality (Hunhu/ ubuntu) | 26 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 78 | 1 |
| Teamwork Skills | 25 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 77 | 3 |
| Anger management/ self-control | 24 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 76 | 4 |
| Ethics | 25 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 76 | 4 |
| Communication Skills | 24 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 75 | 6 |
| Integrity and Professionalism | 21 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 73 | 7 |
| Reliability / Trustworthiness | 21 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 72 | 8 |
| Self-confidence | 21 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 72 | 8 |
| Understanding Work Culture | 18 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 70 | 10 |
| Decision-Making Skills | 20 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 69 | 11 |
| Department/ Business Etiquette | 20 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 69 | 11 |
| Information Technology skills | 20 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 69 | 11 |
| Sense of humour | 19 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 68 | 14 |
| Adaptability Skills | 17 | 7 | 2 | 0 | 67 | 15 |
| Lifelong Learning Skills | 18 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 67 | 15 |
| Planning & Organising Skills | 18 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 61 | 17 |
| Negotiation Skills | 17 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 59 | 18 |

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|----|---|---|---|----|-----------|
| Leadership Skills | 16 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 56 | 19 |
| Entrepreneurship Skills | 15 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 56 | 19 |

Table 10 above reflects employers' opinions on twenty soft skills which they deemed most critical in order for graduate employees to become superior performers. The soft skills were given a rank order after computing the points earned for each score as depicted in the last column. Of the top twenty soft skills rated by respondents who represented employers in this study, the top ten which they expect graduate employees to possess are: critical thinking, morality (hunhu/ ubuntu), teamwork, ethics, anger management/ self-control, communication skills, integrity and professionalism, reliability/ trustworthiness, self- confidence, and understanding the work culture. The preceding paragraphs will discuss the findings to justify each of the top ten soft skills which respondents singled out as the most expected in graduate youths.

Every job in a company, more so those reserved for graduate employees requires people who can think and solve problems. Passive and reactive employees are not desirable. That could be why the finding of critical thinking was ranked highest by the respondents who had graduate employees in mind. Employers do not want employees who rush to them with problems but rather they desire employees who rush to them with solutions. The same may not be said if the unit of analysis were lower level labourers such as grounds staff or cleaners.

The soft skill of morality differentiates civilised people from animals. A workplace being a social setting requires people with good morals. Hunhu/ Ubuntu means humanism; being good mannered, well behaved, respectful of others especially elders, leaders and workmates and doing things which are expected of humble morally upright people. A graduate employee or jobseeker with hunhu/ ubuntu can listen and take advice. He/she can apologise if he/she makes a mistake, is humble, devoid of arrogance and abstains from wayward behaviour or unnecessary misconduct such as quarrelling, fighting, refusal to take up delegation to mention but just a few examples.

The findings also singled out teamwork as a highly critical soft skill. Without working as part of a team, no worker can achieve much in an organisation. Every working environment has requisite work ethics. Ethics as a soft skill includes punctuality, being first to the customer, treating a customer as king, honesty, zero tolerance to theft, pilferage, corruption and nepotism, loyalty to service and producing high quality service are but some of the good work ethics expected of graduate employees according to the above findings.

In order to fit in a team, graduate employees need the soft skill of anger management/ self-control. One has to be accommodative to embrace diversity. One has to be selfless and understand individual differences. Workplaces are a meeting point of different characters. Workmates, clients, managers, supervisors come in all shapes and sizes in terms of conduct and behaviour and one must exude maturity by accommodating diverse characters.

Employers promote reliable and dependable employees. It is also prudent to note that at every workplace, communication is key and employees with polished soft skills in communication have an upper hand over those without. Employees who cannot communicate well are a liability and can destroy an organisation. Good communication can avoid a lot of disasters including strikes. Good communication can increase production and performance beyond imagination. Employees who cannot communicate scare away clients. Employees with the soft skill of communication offer clear competitive advantage and can turnaround the fortunes of a company.

Every post requires that the holders exhibit integrity and professionalism and this helps to uplift the organisation's brand. Self-confidence is yet another soft skill that can boost company profile if its workers exude it. Customers trust employees with self-confidence. On the list of ten most preferred soft skills is the issue of understanding the work culture. A culture of hard work must be embraced by all graduate employees. Workplaces are different from church congregations where others may be passive recipients or listeners. Workers who understand work culture will understand their role and play it to the fullest. They respect their seniors; they know why they must achieve or surpass targets and why they must not steal. Such graduate employees are not only team members but team-players and team-builders as well. If the work culture of a company is good, it may also mean there is good teamwork in an organisation.

The other important soft-skills identified by managerial staff as critical are business etiquette or deportment, Information Technology Skills, decision-making skills, sense of humour, adaptability, lifelong learning skills, planning and organising skills, negotiation skills, leadership and entrepreneurial skills. All these were viewed as important too.

However, following the rank order, respondents drawn from managerial staff representing employers from the five IDCZ Group of companies felt that at the time of recruitment, entrepreneurial skills and leadership skills are least crucial in graduate employees as the two were ranked last in a list of twenty preferred soft skills. Nunn (2013) supports such findings when he states that at the time of joining a company, graduate employees desire to be led and have to be led. This helps them to be taught and guided on how to do the job and for that reason, their leadership skills are not necessary, instead, at recruitment stage all they need are good subordinate or followership skills.

Another interesting core skill ranked number 14 by respondents is sense of humour. This confirms what Burns (1978) proffered, that you cannot have successful employees unless they are happy employees. Thus institutions value employees who make others happy. Gadot (2007) noted that a joke is very serious business at a workplace. Workers need to be happy for them to be productive. Workplaces must be happy places. Workers should long going to work and not dread the experience of going to work every morning. Given that employees spend the greater part of their day at work, working should be a pleasurable experience and workers who make work as productive and as interesting as play are more desirable than those who create too much formality, rigidity and seriousness. Humans are social creatures, workplaces should be treatment centres for stress and not causers of stress among staff.

Correlation Analyses

Table 11: Correlation between perceived importance of soft skills and level of education of managerial staff respondents:

| Correlation Analysis | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Soft Skills | Correlation between managerial staff's education level and the importance they placed in a particular soft skill |
| Communication Skills | .745(**) |
| Critical thinking Skills | .745(**) |
| Teamwork Skills | .745(**) |
| Life-Long-Learning Skills | -.86 |
| Information Technology Skills | .000 |

| | |
|---------------------------------|----------|
| Entrepreneurship Skills | -.139 |
| Ethics | .000 |
| Leadership Skills | .000 |
| Deportment / Business etiquette | -.086 |
| Planning and Organising Skills | .745(**) |
| Reliability/ Trustworthiness | .111 |
| Negotiation Skills | .225 |
| Understanding Work Culture | .609(**) |
| Decision Making | b |
| Adaptability | .104 |
| Sense of humour | .000 |
| Self Confidence | .000 |
| Integrity and Professionalism | .000 |
| Anger management/ self-control | .112 |
| Morality (Hunhu/ Ubuntu) | .745(**) |
| | |

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

(b) no difference because one of the variables is constant

Table 11 above reveals that there was a strong positive correlation between respondents' educational attainment and the importance they placed on the following soft skills: Communication, Critical Thinking, Team Work, Planning and Organisational Skills, Understanding Work Culture and Morality (Hunhu/ Ubuntu). This meant that as the level of education of the respondents increased so did the number of respondents who felt the above soft skills were important. This could be because the respondents were aware through knowledge gained from their academic exposure of the importance of the abovementioned skills in creating superior performers in the workplace.

On the other hand, there was low correlation between the managerial respondents' educational attainment and the importance they placed in the soft skills of ethics, integrity and professionalism, leadership, dependability, honesty, professionalism, humour, adaptability and negotiation skills.

Table 12: Correlation between perceived importance of soft skills and work experience

| Correlation Analysis | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Soft Skills | Correlation between managerial staff's work experience and the importance they placed in a particular soft skill |
| Communication Skills | .199 |
| Critical thinking Skills | .199 |
| Teamwork Skills | -.163 |
| Life-Long-Learning Skills | -.031 |
| Information Technology Skills | .027 |
| Entrepreneurship Skills | -.064 |
| Ethics | .299 |

| | |
|---------------------------------|----------|
| Leadership Skills | .027 |
| Department / Business etiquette | .620(**) |
| Planning and Organising Skills | .199 |
| Reliability/ Trustworthiness | .283 |
| Negotiation Skills | .197 |
| Understanding Work Culture | .266 |
| Decision Making | a |
| Adaptability | -.205 |
| Sense of humour | .570(**) |
| Self Confidence | .299 |
| Integrity and Professionalism | -.112 |
| Anger management/ self-control | .607(**) |
| Morality (Hunhu/ Ubuntu) | .765(**) |
| | |

**correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

(a) no difference because one of the variables is constant

Table 12 above shows that there was a strong positive correlation between managerial respondents' years of experience and the importance they placed on humour, morality, department and anger management and self-control. This meant that as the number of years of work experience increased so did the number of respondents who felt the soft skills of humour, morality, department, anger management and self-control were crucial among graduate employees.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

It was established that most respondents representing employers from the five IDCZ Companies under study felt that most graduate employees were lacking on the soft skills that they deemed important and this affected the graduates' chances of being employed and of staying on the job.

From the research findings, conclusions were drawn that employers at IDCZ Group of companies expect graduate youths or job-seekers joining their work force to demonstrate possession of the following top ten soft skills at recruitment stage and during their working life: critical thinking, morality (hunhu/ ubuntu), teamwork, ethics, anger management/ self-control, communication skills, integrity and professionalism, reliability/ trustworthiness, self-confidence and understanding the work culture. Managerial employees representing employers in this study recognised the importance of soft skills in creating superior performers that are of value to the organisation.

It was also concluded in this study that the curriculum in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe in its current form is not effective in infusing soft skills in graduates as it was biased towards the development of job specific hard skills. This conclusion was collaborated by Cox and King (2006).

Recommendations

Considering the conclusions highlighted above as drawn from the findings, the following recommendations were proffered:

- That tertiary institutions should blend the teaching of hard skills (technical skills) with soft skills
 - training by introducing compulsory stand-alone courses as recommended by Moore (2004) to
 - include the teaching of the twenty identified core soft skills particularly the following top ten soft
 - skills which employers in Zimbabwe as represented by managerial respondents in the five IDCZ
 - Group of Companies deem critical in all graduate employees: critical thinking, morality
 - (hunhu/ ubuntu), teamwork, ethics, anger management/ self-control, Communication skills,
 - integrity and professionalism, reliability/ trustworthiness, self-confidence and understanding the
 - work culture.
- Partnerships between universities and employers should be developed so that curriculum reform
 - done in tertiary institutions is relevant to the skills needs and expectations of industry and
 - commerce. This would address the mismatch that currently exists between what tertiary institutions
 - produce and what employers require.
- Tertiary institutions in liaison with industry and commerce should offer industrial attachment to
 - lecturers so that they are familiar with the world of work in order to be in a position to competently
 - update their teaching and training methods and pass on to students correct skills including soft skills
 - which fit well with industry needs.
- Industrial attachments should be structured to include the exposure of students to the ten core soft
 - skills identified in this study as the most preferred soft skills that employers in Zimbabwe expect
 - graduate youths and graduate jobseekers to possess when they join the workforce and as part of
 - assessment, employers who offer attachments should rate students on soft skills.
- In accordance with the Personality Trait-based Model of Job Performance (Ahmed, Capretz,
 - Bouktif and Campbell, 2013) institutions with the mandate to develop manpower to meet industry
 - expectations such as the National Manpower Advisory Council (NAMACO) should develop a

- National Soft Skills Framework which includes the identified soft skills which should be possessed
- by graduate youths before they leave tertiary institutions.

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