

Determining the Needed Soft Skills for Al Fakhora Students

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Abstract

This study, analyze and identify types and levels of soft skills do Al Fakhora students' posse; what are the required soft skills that can enlarge the opportunity for Al Fakhora university post graduates to competently join the local labor market. Finally conduct a case study for all Al Fakhora's students to determine the needed soft.

The study found that every attested employer showed all soft skills are important, but they ranked highly code for ethics skills. While, students showed great interest in English language and report writing.

It was noticed that 12 soft skills are repeated in the first 25 soft skills at all categories. Each student's category has significant characteristics; research team uses the most needed 25 skills for each category, these 25 skills used in conducting the case study for each student.

These results help in designing a training program according to the financial and time capacity. As well as, this training program can be extended to be applied on any student from the 6 academic specialization.

Keyword: Soft Skills, Training, Graduates.

تحديد المهارات الناعمة المُحتاجة لطلبة الفاخورة

ملخص

هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل وتحديد أنواع ومستويات المهارات الناعمة التي يمتلكها طلاب الفاخورة؛ وما هي المهارات المطلوبة التي يمكن أن تزيد وتوسع فرصة خريجي الجامعات من طلاب الفاخورة للانضمام بكفاءة لسوق العمل المحلية من وجهة نظر الطلبة والمُشغلين. وأخيراً يتم إجراء دراسة حالة لجميع طلاب الفاخورة لتحديد المهارات الناعمة المطلوبة، حيث قامت الدراسة بتصنيف طلبة الفاخورة إلى 6 تخصصات، حيث أن كل تخصص للطالب يتمتع بخصائص تميزه عن التخصصات الأخرى، كذلك هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل وتحديد أنواع ومستويات المهارات الناعمة التي يمتلكها طلاب الفاخورة، وتلك التي يرغبون في اكتسابها. كشفت الدراسة أن كل صاحب عمل أظهر بأن جميع المهارات الناعمة هي مهمة، ولكن المهارات التي تتعلق بالأخلاق تحتل مرتبة عالية بالنسبة للمهارات الأخرى. في حين أظهر الطلاب اهتماماً كبيراً باللغة الإنجليزية وكتابة التقارير. وقد لوحظ أن عدد 12 مهارة من هذه المهارات تتكرر في الـ 25 المهارات الأولى في جميع الفئات. استخدم فريق البحث الـ 25 مهارة الأكثر حاجة لكل تخصص، وهذه المهارات استخدمت في إجراء دراسة حالة لكل طالب. تساعد نتائج الدراسة في تصميم برنامج تدريبي وفقاً للقدرة المالية والزمنية. وقد كشفت الدراسة عن اهتمام المُشغلين بجميع المهارات الناعمة إلا أن المهارات المتعلقة بالأخلاق كانت الأعلى أهمية أو (في الأهمية) من وجهة نظرهم مقارنة مع باقي المهارات الأخرى. في حين أظهر الطلاب اهتماماً كبيراً باللغة الإنجليزية وكتابة التقارير.

كلمات مفتاحية: المهارات الناعمة، سوق العمل.

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1. Introduction:

Soft skills are a sociological term relating to a person's "EQ" (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that characterize relationships with other people. Soft skills complement hard skills (part of a person's IQ) (Symmonds, 2009.), which are the occupational requirements of a job and many other activities (Contreras, 2013). Soft skills are sometimes referred to as people skills. On the other hand, Hard skills are those that are easily observed and quantified (perhaps via a scientific test), while, soft skills are not easy to quantify, and are sometimes described as intangible. That said, it's often easy to identify a coworker that appears to possess strong soft skills mostly due to what seems to be their natural ability to work effectively with others (MTD training, 2013; Jaber, 2001; Hamdan, 2010).

However, soft skills at this paper were determined by holding a workshop with key employers, and Al Fakhoora Students.. Soft skills in this study are categorized to 9 main categories which are: communication skills, Entrepreneur and leadership skills, Risk management and decision making, self-managing, development, and learning, code of business ethics, team work skills, information management skills, customer relationship management and other support soft skills.

Youth has vital role in the development of society was formally recognized in the General Assembly Resolution 2037 in the United Nations, this recognition perhaps best expressed by paraphrasing UNICEF: 'Unless the investment in youth is made, all of humanity's fundamental long-term problems will remain fundamental long-term problems'. Palestinian are living in building stage, because of that and others, the donor would like to strengthen the youth soft skills, so that, they can emerge in the market, and be effective for their homeland (The Status of Youth in Palestine 2013, A report by Sharek Youth Forum in partnership with the Youth Economic Empowerment Center 2013).

The proportion of youth (15-29 years old) in Palestine has reached 29.8% of the total population (PCBS, 2013). Such a youthful society brings with it great potential. Youth could be a force to advance society when the social, economic, political, legislative, and educational sectors embrace the different capacities of youth and include them in leading the nation towards achieving national and community objectives. On the other hand, without such investment and involvement of youth, this potential could go to waste and threaten the attainment of these objectives.

Natural resources in Gaza are rare, so Youth as human resources in Gaza strip is the main asset for Palestinian in Gaza-strip. The recent demographic trends indicate that, in the future, youth will constitute an increasing proportion of Palestinian society. As noted by the UN General Assembly, youth "are both a major human resource for development and key agents for social change, economic development and technological innovation." The importance of youth is thus evident, as an ill-prepared youth may affect negatively on societal cohesion, national security and the developmental process. In this regard, the involvement of young people in society, and their engagement not only as beneficiaries, but also as participants and key labors in the market is a key element in the process of development.

Gaza Strip is considered to be one of the most vulnerable areas in the world. Gaza graduates are facing a severe problem of unemployment which is classified to be very high;

this problem is due to a mismatch between the aspirations of graduates and employment opportunities in the labor market. (The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, PCBS, 2013).

Empowering youth is essential to improve their quality of life and increase their opportunities. This requires, however, the provision of institutional, legal, socio-economic and political incentives to encourage their involvement in various sectors in order to influence and benefit from them. This enables youth to find suitable jobs to ensure a decent life for themselves and their families. Youth economic participation is also vital for responsible and active citizenship. It makes youth a powerful force for development and change. Economic empowerment boosts their confidence, increases their involvement in their communities, and their ability to act and influence development so as to achieve the goals of young people on a personal and community level.

The unemployment problem is due to several factors, one of them is the level of graduates' required skills by labor market. This problem is found in Palestine according to the workshop, which was help with key employers, (see annex 4). There is a considerable controversy over the extent to which graduates are mismatched with the labor market. Most analysts call for better guidance services and for a better match between what the education system delivers and what the labor market needs. Hence, training lessens the gap between the existed skills and the required skills at the labor market. In the light of this, the local academic institutions should improve their educational programs in proportion with the labor market's requirements to skillful graduates beside as well as, academic institution should contract with the labor market in order to be cooperated in matching the academic courses with the practical life and refining the practical experiences of the academicians.

2. Objectives:

- To determine the most important soft skills for the labor market.
- To assess the availability of these soft skills at the Al Fakhoora students.
- To assess the most needed soft skills for al Fakhoora students.
- To help designing a comprehensive training program that increase students' personality and performance.
- Execute a case study for each student to determine the needed soft skills for each student.

The result of these objectives are the basis for designing training programs about soft skills, these training programs help improving Al Fakhoora's competency to join the labor market. The size of these training programs depends on the available capacity "finance, time".

3. Main Question:

- a) What are the most required soft skills for the (LM) Labor market?
 - i. What is the arrangement of the importance of soft skills from the Students and employers point of view?
 - ii. What are the most important frequent soft skills in all categories?

4. Importance Of The Research:

Palestinian labor market suffers from rare vacancy opportunities, this leads to high competency between graduates in the LM. Moreover, there is a gap between the graduates'

skills and the needed skills for the LM. As a result, this study helps the graduates to bridge the gap between them. However, Al Fakhoora donors suggested a training program helps Al Fakhoora students to join the LM. Doubtless, creating distinguish training program needs executing needs assessment study. However, this study may give recommendations for the graduates for the most needed soft skills that are required by the LM.

5. Literature Review:

In their published article on Al-Manar web site www.almanar.jo Randal and Catherin Hansen determined the required skills and personal values at jobs. They said that the employers are looking for specific skills they like to be exists in workers, as well as job seekers want to know what attract the interest of the employers, the authors also emphasize on that there are many researches that talked about such subjects and they summarize the most Importance skills as following:

First: the most demanded skills by employers: Communication skills, analytical and research skills, computer skills, adoption ability, management skills, leadership skills, awareness of other cultures, administrative skills (planning, organizing), problem solving ability, innovation, team working.

Second: employees' personal values: Honesty, Integrity, manners, adoption, loyalty, hard work, ethic, Dependability, trust worthy, responsibility, positive attitude, professionalism, self-esteem, motivation, Ability to learn, confidentiality, commitment to work, flexibility.

The authors concentrate that these skills can be adopted and improved through training and other ways , also they refer that job skills and ethics are one of the importance elements of success , so it's necessary that everyone make sure to Acquire and maintain these skills along his life and present it whenever he introduces himself.

One of the other related studies done by Young Enterprisea charitable educational association founded in 1963 that makes connection between the job and education- published on newspaper on Tuesday 11 October 2011 showed that graduates at UK lack mathematical and soft skills in general.

According to this study three of four employers that have been interviewed lacks the mathematical skills, speaking skills, writing skills, discipline skills and positive attitude toward work and achieving which employers see as an important element for work progress and success, however the study blame both individuals and educational organizations for not putting into consideration the link between the required skills and the already existence one. It also clarify that the focus on academic cases and tests is no more worthy. . On the other side, the study came to a conclusion by making a comparison between the case at UK and other European countries, Results shows that, not employed or educated at UK are more than those who are at Rome. However, the study explains the size of gap between what is taught for students and what is required for working field as well as what is required from educational organizations to do in order to continue or achieve its mission in community.

6. Materials And Methodology:

This research followed a systematic method to determine the needed soft skills for the labor market. However, this research employs descriptive, analytical and comparative methods involving both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The fieldwork is based on two main tools; which are Focus Groups, questionnaire in addition to previous academic works.

First, a preparing brain storming workshop to a pilot group from Al Fakhoora Students to understand the nature of targeted population and to discuss and determine the categories and subcategories of each main soft skill.

Second, the research team conducts a focus group with the key employer and businesspersons to discuss and determine the needed soft skills for the graduates. Third, the research team conducts a second workshop with Al Fakhoora Students to discuss the suggested soft skills from the employers' workshop; some skills were suggested from Al Fakhoora students.

Second, the results of the students workshops and employers focus group are used in developing the employer's questionnaire, this questionnaire consist of (59) skills. (See appendix 1).

Third, Academic works on the subject such as books, articles, special studies and reports, and other library-housed materials were collected through library research. Overall, this study relied on a variety of sources and used a selective method in gathering the relevant information from each source in order to benefit fully from all available sources.

Target population:

The total number of the target group is 286 students from Al Fakhoora program, their age average is around 20 year. They are distributed on 15 academic institutes in Gaza, the majority of them at Al-Azahar University and the Islamic University of Gaza. The study fields vary between scientific, educational, human sciences and vocational.

Study Sample:

Study sample consists of two parts:

- **Employers and businesspersons sample.**

The total number of employers and businesspersons sample are 39 participants; those participants represent different sectors as follows;

Table 1 <i>The number of participants according to the sectors</i>		
Sector	No. of participants	%percent
Governmental sector	15	38.5
Non-governmental sector, local, and international	20	51.3
Private sector	4	10.3
Total	39	100.0

The activity of each sector varied. The following table shows the details.

Table 1 <i>The activity of each sector</i>		
Activity	No. of participants	%percent
Health	5	12.8
Education	12	30.8
Services	10	25.6
Other activities	12	30.8
Total	39	100.0

- **Al Fakhoora students' sample**

Two study student sample samples were used.

1) First student sample:

First student sample has been chosen from the students who answered the research team invitation from the first time, however, these students showed more interest in answering the questionnaire than the other samples. This data have been used in analyzing and determining the importance degree for each skill.

The total number of these students is 177 student (42.4% male, 57.6% female), their age average is 20.37 year, 87.6% single, 12.4% married.

The Academic disciplines are varied up to more than 30 specializations, they were categorized to 6 main categories, and each one consists of convergent and homogenous specializations. The following table shows the distribution of sample according to Academic disciplines.

Table 3 <i>First student sample participants according to categories</i>		
Activity	No.	%percent
Humanitarian studies majors.	21	11.9
Educational studies majors.	45	25.4
Business and finance management majors.	48	27.1
Medical and health professions majors.	25	14.1
Sharea'a and law majors.	15	8.5
Others "little social contact majors"	23	13.0
Total	177	100.0

2) Second student sample:

The total number of respondents of the students is 258 student including the first sample, 43.4% male, 56.6% female, their age average is around 20 years, 86% single, 13.6% married and 0.4% others. The following table shows the number and percent of respondents distributed on the Students' major category.

Table 4 <i>Second student sample participants</i>		
Activity	No.	%percent
Humanitarian studies majors.	32	12.40
Educational studies majors.	64	24.81
Business and finance management majors.	65	25.19
Medical and health professions majors.	47	18.22
Sharea'a and law majors.	16	6.20
Others "little social contact majors"	34	13.18
Total	258	100

Data Collection:

First, Students' demographic data were collected from an Excel sheet was given to the research team. Second, businesspersons' demographic data were collected by a questionnaire. The research team builds the questionnaire tool through conducting a very concentrated, deepened and brainstorming focus group conducted with the key employer and business persons. However, the soft skills' subcategories of each main category have

been discussed. At the end of the workshop, the attendees were asked to answer a questionnaire; this questionnaire is pre-prepared and modified during the workshop.

Finally, the final questionnaire was distributed to the businesspersons to evaluate the soft skills by using a scale from 10 degrees, the highest degree shows the most important skill and the least one shows the least important. 39 questionnaires were collected from the field.

Workshops were used to collect data from Al Fakhoora Students. Each workshop consists of 20-25 students. The research team discussed and explained each soft skill, during the discussion the students were asked to evaluate their competence at each soft skill by answering the prepared questionnaire. This questionnaire used a 10 degree scale, the highest degree shows highest competence of a skill and the least one shows the least competence.

Moreover, the questionnaire asked separately whether the targeted respondent would like to take a training course in each soft skill by answering yes, or no.

These phases used in the process of preparing the measurement tool, (See fig. 1) as follow:

The questionnaire consists of 9 main categories of soft skills; this questionnaire used a 10 degree scale, the highest degree shows highest competence of a skill and the least one shows the least competence. Moreover, the questionnaire asked separately whether the targeted respondent would like to take a training course in each soft skill by answering yes, or no, as follows:

Table 2 <i>Employer's main nine skills categories questionnaire</i>	
Employers' questionnaire	No. of sub skills
Communication skills.	12
Entrepreneur and leader ship skills.	11
Risk management and decision making.	4
Self-managing, development, and learning.	7
Code of business Ethics.	9
Team work skills.	2
Information management skills.	3
Customer relationship management.	5
Other supported skills	6
Total of sub skills	59

7. Scaling Tool:

Scaling tool is created by research team in two phases.

Phase I: Determining the importance of soft skills.

Determining the importance of soft skills depends on the following fourth variables:

- 1- The employers' opinion toward the importance of a skill to join the LM.
- 2- The degree of students' knowledge of the skill.
- 3- The students' willingness to take a training course or not.
- 4- The students' specializations.

The research team notices that the businesspersons and employers show great interest in soft skills, there were no significant differences between groups.

The research team categorizes the Students according to the academic major to 6 main specializations, as mentioned earlier.

- 1- Humanitarian studies specializations.
- 2- Educational studies specializations.
- 3- Business and finance management specializations.
- 4- Medical and health professions specializations.
- 5- Sharea'a and law specializations.
- 6- Others "little social contact specializations".

Students showed very little differences among the same category group. The scale weight was divided into two main factors; the first refers to the employers and businesspersons, this factor took 60% of the total weight. Second, refers to the importance of each soft skill for students, this scale took 40%. The results of this scale produce a comparison between the soft skills, showing which one is the most important and shows the least important. The student opinion relative importance was calculated by using the arithmetic complement to the scale. As follows, if the student knowledge of this skill is K, the need of this skill would be (11-K), as shown.

Knowledge	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Need	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

The importance students' final opinion was calculated by merging his need to the skill (11-k) and his willingness to have a training course in this skill, the total percent is 40%. The student's need percent to take training course for this soft skill is 20% and 20% for the willingness to take a course about this soft skill (See fig. 1). The total value of employers' and students' opinion for each soft skill is calculated. The soft skills are arranged descending according to importance.

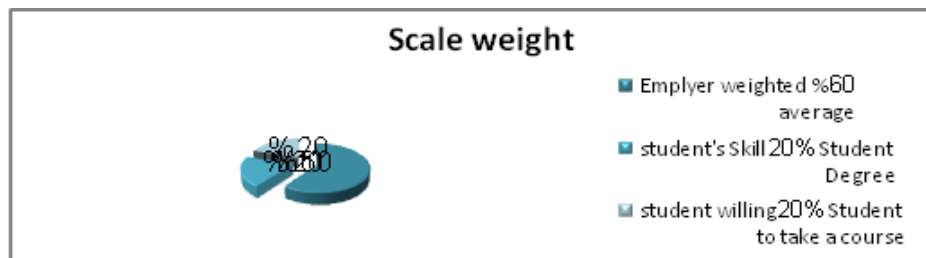


Figure 1 student and employer scale weight

Phase II: Determining the needed skills for each student (case study)

The highest 25 skills were asked to employers and students, were chosen of the 6 categories. Each soft skill of the 25 has been researched as separate case study on each student according to the student study category as follows:

Willingness to take a course in the researched skill has been given a weight. (10 is granted if respondent willing to take a course, 0 in he not willing to take a course).

The average for both need and willingness was calculated and then transformed to the percentage rate, the research team suggested 70% as the cut point (this point vary according to financial and capacity variables). This means that if the percentage rate is 70% or higher means that the respondent needs and wills to take this training course, and it was given the value of (1); on the other hand, if the respondent obtains an average lower than 70%, this

means that the student does not need to take this training course, it was given the value of (0). (See fig.4)

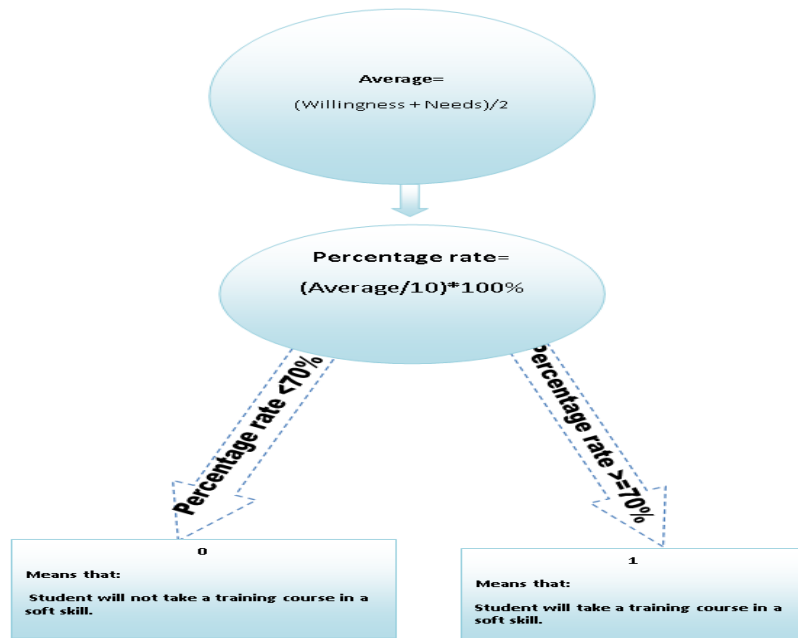


Figure 2 Willingness and needs scaling tool

Statistical tools

- The data were processed and analyzed by using SPSS software application. The following statistical methods were used.
- T-Test and one way ANOVA to check differences among Means.
- LCD Test for multi comparisons.
- Ratios and weighted means were used.
- Level of significant 0.05.

8. Results:

Workshops results:

The results of the workshops were as follows; first employers showed that all the skills are important, and added some new skills such as Etiquette, and they said that soft skills importance differ from major to another. Second, the students' main outcome of this workshop is that the students required distinguished practical training techniques.

Questionnaire's Results:

The results of the questionnaire's statistical analyses show that the opinions of business persons and employers agrees that all soft skills are important, as a result, their answers are very similar and close to each other, and the differences were not significant at 0.05.

However the results of the employers' workshop support this result, also, it was a difficult to determine which soft skill is more important than the other is. On the contrary, the student's results' showed significant difference from employers' results.

Results show that the businesspersons and employers put on their priority the following skills: *secrecy, loyalty, commitment, respect working hours, and privacy.*

Results show that the students first needed skill is *writing report in English in all specializations. Students also, states that they need English skills.*

The statistical analysis for students' questionnaires showed the arrangement of the relative importance of skills arranged descending, (see annex 1 table 1).

Results of Each Students' Category:

However, the results of each student's category have been illustrated in two tables as follows:

First annex shows the descending arrangement of the relative importance of skills, were estimated separately for each category.

Second annex, the highest 25 skills for each category as shown in scaling tool were chosen for the case study. This table shows the total No. of needed skills for each student, as well as, the No. of students need each skill.

The above-mentioned three tables are applied to all categories

Notes On Results:

Results show that the students from all categories want training courses in English writing report, and English skills, Job search skills.

- Humanitarian category students added the skill of self-marketing skills and innovative thinking skills, Presentation skills, Letters and Email writing skills and Using technology in time management skills.
- Educational specialization students added the presentation and self-marketing skills, using technology in time management skills, Presentation skills, letters and Email writing skills, crisis management.
- Health specialization students added customer trust building skill, and Impact and persuasion skills, meeting leadership skills, marketing skills, Impact and persuasion skills.
- Share'a and law specialization and little contact specialization students' added letter and e-mail writing skills and time management skills, meeting leadership skills, team builder and leadership, marketing skills.
- Little contacts specializations students' category added time management skills and technology in time management, scientific method in decision making, innovative thinking skills, and verbal communication skills.
- Business specialization students added meeting, leadership skills and innovative thinking skills, meeting leadership skills, scientific method in decision-making, using technology in time management skills, Innovative-thinking skills.

It is noticed that 12 skills of the first 25 skills are repeated at all categories,. English skills, and English report writing skills were at the top of the results. Time management skills, working under stress, oral communication, and job search skills also occurred within the first 12 soft skills. Most Common soft skills for all categories are English Speaking, English Reports writing, English Writing, English Reading, English Listening, Time management skills, Using technology in time management skills, Job Search, Verbal communication skills, Working under stress skills, Adaptability and flexibility skills, Initiative skills.

The research team thinks that these results asset the willing of student to break the ice when talking in front of or with the public.

Results showed that each student has a different No. of training course. This is due to his training need and his willingness to take a training course.

It's obvious that the studies agree about the importance of soft skills at work field and concentrate on how employers keen on the employees' acquisition of such skills as we notice at this study or the study done by Young Enterprise that many graduates don't have these skills. If we compare these skills which are determined by Randel and Kathren at their article with the first 12 skills in our study we will find that there is matching among these skills, for example on both studies the computers skills, communication skills and administrative, research skills are all required skills for jobs which prove the credibility of both studies.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this study is designing a training program; this training program is affected by different factors; results and annex1 give a comprehensive overview for the importance of skills in descending arrangement. These results and annex1 help the training program designer to determine the most needed training courses for Al Fakhoora students, so the training program designer should start choosing from the first skill to the next. This is to improve their competency to get a job and carry a business in labor market. Skills in table 7 are needed for all categories, and this may help training program designer to take all these skill for all Al Fakhoora Students.

Each student has been researched separately as a case study. The top rated 25 skills have been researched as separate case study on each student according to the students' category.

However, the results of this study help in designing a training program according to the financial and time capacity, for the 6 academic specializations' students.

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