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**Soft skills relevance and categorization:
the alleged 'skill mismatch' of Chinese workforce.**

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Alla mia famiglia, senza la quale non sarei la persona che sono oggi

All'amore donatomi in tutte le sue forme

Ai miei cari, carissimi amici

A me.

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前言

知识经济时代的到来让在当前国际市场中经营的企业日益注重开发, 以确保能够得到提供竞争优势的资源。赢得竞争, 占有优势是所有企业的主要目标。因此, 有健全的人力资及其内部知识, 具有更大的重要性了; 雇用具有有竞争力的技能, 有发展才能的工作人员成为竞争的中心。可以说工作人员是如今企业为了在市场竞争最愿意加强的资产之一。全球研究所比如经合组织(OECD)和英国理事会(BritishCoucil), 招聘机构和专门知识共同呼吁注重中国劳动力市场出现严重的软技能短缺的问题。有人认为是中国教育系统是让中国劳动力市场进行人才发展进程的主要障碍。主要原因是中国教育系统在培养人才的人际能力方面不能满足市场的需要。本系统似乎是促进消极态度, 而不是提高关于市场需求的认识程度。根据别人的看法, 触发这种短缺的是中国公司人力资源管理实践的不足之处。中国管理实践和别的国家相比似乎在许多地方需要改进。虽然关于软技能短缺的问题有很多不同的立场, 但是普遍接受的观点即是它有可能导致中国面对全球竞争时面临巨大挑战。

综上所述, 本论文的研究课题是种所谓的“软技能不足”是否仍然相关, 同时考虑到中国与七个最需要的软技能有关的立场。也就是说我们将尝试调查中国劳动力市场对这些软技能有什么知识水平和能力。我们研究的技能就是:

- 主动性
- 沟通
- 团队合作
- 批判性思维
- 时间管理
- 解决问题

➤ 领导能力

为此，本研究以三个基本论点作为研究的基础：软技能的重要性，有关国外雇主和当地雇员的不同角度以及在支持软技能发展中的不匹配现象，以及培训的作用。

第一章旨在让我们更好地理解“技能”的含义。为了达到这一目标，跟技能有关的语言、理论和管理三个角度将被研究。通过考察当今市场上与就业能力特征和企业竞争优势相关的关键问题，本论文对现在软技能比硬技能更重要的趋势进行考察。软技能在当今千变万化的市场中的重要性是本章主要的焦点。根据国内外的文献资料，上述七项软技能似乎是竞争优势的最重要的来源。此外，本章最后章节对每一个技能提供大致的定义和分类。

在第二章中，在介绍了软技能项目以后，我们将分析关于软技能总体对中国劳动力市场有什么影响。就象我们说过的，国际机构和私营企业都强调了行业需要的技术与中国大多数员工的技能并不匹配。这种失配在某种程度上导致中国努力培养一支发达的劳动力，却无法获得足够的优势克服来自国外的经济竞争者。通中国的人力资源实践变化的过程、在正规教育、职业教育和职业培训背景下发生变化的分析，本章目的在于分析这种所谓的短缺会怎样影响中国劳动力市场并且有哪些办法来解决这突出问题。我们将更深入地研究中国传统系统的特点与西方经济、管理和教育实践对中国系统的影响。

大致说来，第三章介绍推动研究的那些问题、实证研究方法的应用、采用的定量和定性相结合的研究设计方法和研究结果和结论。研究采用的方法是定性访谈和定量问卷调查。本文试图从国外雇主和当地雇员的双重视角来分析软技能失配现象。为了达到这种理解并强调这两互补观点，调查在一个意大利品牌在中国经营的背景下进行，并且得到了意大利首席执行官和当地雇员的支持。被提到的企业 **Hangar Design Group** 两年前在上海开始它的中国成功经历。概括地说，该研究涉及三个研究领域：软技能相关性、软技能发展水平的自我评价和训练有效性。每个研究领域是从首席执行官和雇员这两立场考察的。此外，本章最后一个部分提供了与训练和动机关系相关的附加观察。

对于本文的结论，研究结果表明中国视野在软技能相关性方面与国际的越来越接近。双方具有共同的想法，软技能是各种各样公司面临全球竞争时重要资产。中国劳动力在经历对这一课题的认知发展过程并且被称为巨大不匹配的情况正在略微减少。沟通是必备的技能，而领导则在雇员提供的排名占据最后的地位。虽然中国企业在提升自己竞争力的意愿比较强烈，还有许多方面还需要进一步的改进。

不合适的正规教育制度、缺乏对所需技能熟练程度的认识、拒绝外国的管理实践、缺乏一个直系结构的培训活动被认为是技能发展的相关限制尤其是批判性思维、问题解决和主动性。此次研究的限制，比如分段的小规模，缺乏与镜面公司的比较以及回答者的匿名，这项研究的结果表明还要在中国劳动人口的体验与学习领域上发生巨大改变来持续促进国家的改善。

INTRODUCTION

There is no denying that firms operating in the current Economy of Knowledge increasingly focus on developing resources capable to provide inimitable value to win the struggle of competition. As a consequence, human capital and its inner knowledge as source of competitive advantage obtained greater importance; above all, employees' soft skills package and development opportunities became the heart of the debate. Global institutes as the OECD and British council, recruitment agencies and expertise called together for a serious soft skills shortage within Chinese labour market that may lead to huge challenges in facing the global competition. The main purpose of the dissertation is to understand whether this alleged shortage may still be relevant or not, taking into account seven of the most in-demand soft skills: (1) proactivity, (2) communication, (3) teamwork, (4) critical thinking, (5) time management, (6) problem solving and (7) leadership. To this end, three fundamental arguments are settled as research basis related to soft skills importance, the assessment of the mismatch phenomenon from foreign employers and local employees' perspectives as well as the analysis of the role of on-the-job training in support of soft skills development.

The first chapter intends to cast light on a better understanding of the meaning of "skill" conveying explanations from linguistic, theoretical and managerial perspectives. Investigating key issues related to employability profile and firms' competitive advantage in today's market, the discussion tries to understand the logic underpinning the trend to value more soft skills than hard skills. Soft skills relevance in today's ever-changing market stands as the main focus; the aforementioned seven soft skills appear to be the most relevant sources of competitive advantage. Furthermore, a general definition and categorization for each skill supplement chapter conclusion.

In the second chapter, the key of the debate moves from the general overview of soft skills to a more specific application of the topic to the Chinese labour market. Has been argued how this relevant mismatch, highlighted by global institutes as well as private enterprises, is making China struggling to train a well-developed workforce and gain sufficient advantages to overcome competitive forces coming from abroad. The main purpose of the chapter is to understand whether this alleged shortage may still be evidenced or not. In order to get to this knowledge, a brief statement is proposed about the process

through which China's human resources practices have changed, investigating, in addition, the fundamental pillars underpinning soft skills development within the context of formal education, vocational system and on-the-job training.

Inquiry questions are finally answered in the third chapter, which exposes the empirical research, the mixed methods applied, results and conclusions. The study is built on a mixed approach, which comprehends a qualitative interview and quantitative questionnaires trying to analyse the phenomenon of soft skills mismatch from a double perspective, foreign employer and local employees one. To achieve this knowledge, the double approach has been carried out within the context of an Italian brand operating in China, more specifically in Shanghai. Broadly summarizing, the study concerns three main reference areas: soft skills relevance, self-evaluation and training effectiveness. Additional observations are provided concerning motivation and its relation with training.

Lastly, we can affirm that the results evidenced support what affirmed within the first two chapters. Due to the increasing development of hybrid human resources practices, an educational system which tends to stress the introduction of "softer" elements to support a better and more efficient development of these crucial interpersonal assets, it can be stated that China started to fully exploit its possibilities. The literature has mainly been developed with regard to the analysis of organizational and managerial practices and their contribution to soft skills development. In accordance with the intent of our study, we decided to provide an additional viewpoint through which look at the subject. Cultural influences theories, above all Hofstede theory, may be exploited in order to understand the extent to which these dimensions could affect Chinese attitude towards the skills investigated. Though, several steps forward still need to be implemented to enhance communication between employers and employees conveying performances standards, deficiencies and training opportunities.

1. Skills, soft skills and firm's competitive advantage

The term skill today tends to be used erroneously or, at least, there is not a clear definition of this particular word that achieved great importance in the labour market. This tendency usually results from people mixing the concept of skill up with notions such as competence, people's fields of knowledge, value, beliefs and others constructs associated with personal features. The direct consequence is an overall misleading perception about what should be really meant with "skill". Keeping in mind this assumption, the first chapter will try to cast light on a better understanding of the commonly perceived meaning of skill conveying both linguistic and theoretical explanations. Moving across the importance of skills in defining people's employability profile and firms competitive advantage, the analysis will focus on the discussion about requirements in today's labour market and the widespread trend to value more soft skills than hard ones. The key issue for this chapter will consist of the explanation of the reasons that induced employers to give primacy to soft skills in the hiring process and which soft skills appear to be relevant in order to represent a source of competitive advantage.

1.1 Skill: a definition

Surfing the World Wide Web it is possible to find sources that elucidate a common scholastic definition of skill. The Collins dictionary associates the word "skill" with "the ability that requires special training, knowledge and enables to do something well¹". The Cambridge dictionary, on the other hand, states that skill is meant as "a particular ability that you develop through training and experience and that is useful in a job²". Furthermore, Wikipedia gives a third definition according to which skill is recognized as "the ability to carry out a task with determined results often within a given amount of time, energy, or both³". Broadly speaking, all these definitions associate the term skill mainly to a dimension dominated by an incremental learning process and abilities achieved gradually through practical experiences. Despite the fact that there is the possibility to learn and

¹<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/it/dizionario/inglese/skill>.

²<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/skill>.

³<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skill>.

develop certain skills, Kechagias's (2011) insight designs them as demonstrations of the personal ability to carry out appropriate performances thanks to adequate contextual and personal resources. His view encloses the holistic or integrated approach embraced by both Australia and England management systems. In accordance with this approach, skills development strictly depends on the combination of people conceptual and procedural knowledge, personal characteristics and contextual environment. This perspective, relevant because of the educational and managerial fields investigated, attempts to combine analytical and attributes models. According to a more sociological procedure is possible to distinguish four schools of thoughts regarding the categorization of skill: Positivism, methodological ethnicism, Weberianism and Marxism (Attewell, 1990).

These approaches introduce different points of view that could enrich the research of a possible definition of the skills domain. The positivist approach tends to consider skills as job specificities rather than features of people's attitude. This approach identifies and measures skills according to rigorous methodological norms that, sometimes, may appear too rigid and abstracted. Different aspects are investigated through quantitative analysis. Consequently, the subjective and qualitative dimensions that affect the nature of skill are overshadowed. A strong ambiguity in understanding the diversity of skills embodied in different occupations could show as a consequence of this reasoning. On the contrary, ethnomethodological view stresses the huge complexity of the human nature. This means that even the easiest activity requires a combination of perception, assumption and different skills in order to be accomplished. This approach clearly seems not to be affected by the "statistical blindness" of the positivist one; however, an integrated methodological approach capable to objectively assess and measures skills is not provided. The Weberian school tries to understand the extent to which occupations can be defined skilled and the processes by which some of them are determined more relevant than others. By doing this, Weberian researchers adopt the method of removing a specific occupation or its members from the market's competition enhancing, consequently, its inner importance. The main purpose of these studies is to underline whether occupational skills are required due to the supply-demand chain or task's complexity. Finally, the Marxist school of thought covers the topic assessing skills as a "common sense category"⁴. This general assumption suggests that a detailed explanation of what is meant with the term "skill" is not needed. Skill must be conceived as a multifaceted construction. Some neo-Marxists theories try to give a better

⁴ Ivi, 439.

explanation without adding, however, new perspectives; instead, their view mostly merges with positivist in some cases or Weberian thoughts in others. Summing up Attawell's (1990) theory, a skills can be seen simply as actions toward specific tasks (positivist) or more as a relational idea (ethno methodological and Weberian) that connects different social meaning across different contexts changing along with the perception of who, employer and employees, is up to define skills' requirement.

Further approaches add their contributions to this already wide assessment of the concept. From the definition of skill as the capability of accessing specific knowledge useful to execute specific tasks (Matteson *et al.*, 2016), to the idea of skills as competencies people are required to have in order to be effective workers and citizens promoted by the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and development). Even though these approaches highlight different aspects of the same concept, a common belief is that:

«Among the various definitions of skill, the concept that we can consider the basis of each definition is that skills, in order to be enhanced and improved imply the prerequisites of having and accessing certain knowledge, processes, or sequences of behavior leading to specific performances...something to be considered a skill, it must contain an element of action» (Matteson, 2016).⁵

Skills are capabilities of accessing knowledge, behaviour and approaches that improve effective work. When it comes to talking about the work environment and the concept's explanations within organizational contexts, the already mentioned definitions of skills need a further differentiation. Today's most in-demand skills in labour market flow from soft to hard, skills that are transferable or generic, emotional skills, people skills and other interpersonal skills that are in line with certain behavioural aspects such as motivation and discipline (Payne, 2004). Seems clear that such a wide and complex differentiation could result in a misleading effect on who is seeking for a clear guidance to develop an 'employable profile' in the 21st century.

How did employers' requirements change over the past ten years? Which skills are better to be developed before entering the current labour market? People must be able to

⁵M. L. Matteson, L. Anderson & C. Boyden, (2016). "Soft Skills": A Phrase in Search of Meaning. *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 16 (1), 73.

accomplish tasks required by their specific jobs, they need hard competencies, but a requirement's shift toward skills as work ethic, professionalism, integrity, and adaptability is undeniable (Texas workforce commission, 2009). In a constantly changing society like the one in which we are living, where technological developments are increasingly significant driving forces, information is a good to purchase and exchange, traditional occupations are slowly disappearing leaving space to a new generation of jobs, employees must be capable to understand and exploit these changes. Possessing technical skills is not anymore a synonym for secure employment (Fallows & Steven, 2000).

1.2 Skills as a measure of employability

«You can give lifetime employability by training people, by making them adaptable, by making them mobile to go other places to do other things» (Jack Welch).⁶

The economic forces that move and push our economy are becoming more and more important also in defining the background of knowledge employees have to provide within labour markets. What makes people a competitive workforce, therefore, defines what companies can use in order to succeed in our multicultural and strongly competitive marketplace. The broad definition of employability available conveys the concept of basic capabilities that employees must have to find a job. According to the ACCI (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry) employability skills, if well-developed, allow people not just to gain employment, but also to develop personal potential progressing within the enterprise while successfully contributing to firm's strategic decisions. Different sectors and specific industries require various employees' characteristics this assumption is obvious. However, in accordance with the general principle that hiring people with the ability to adapt themselves to the workplace culture provide support to evolve the organization and participate in innovative teamwork, employability enhancement turns out to be consequential (Lowden *et al.*, 2011). Self-reliant, trustable and able in self-managing are qualities representing the construct of skilled employees in our modern era. They are capable to pursuit enterprise goals taking advantage of personal knowledge and

⁶Jack Welch quoted by M.S. Rao, (2014). Enhancing employability in engineering and management students through soft skills. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 46(1), 42.

attitude (Hampson & Junor, 2009). Employability, meant as Lowden does, is a social construct more than a concept. This social construct blends all the above-mentioned elements: competencies, field of knowledge, beliefs and, of course, skills. Along with Lowden, Yorke confirms this statement saying that:

«Employability is a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment, be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy»⁷
(Yorke, 2004)

Develop the right set of skills, as could be understood from his words, is quite crucial for graduates, directly regarded as future employees, in order to get and retain jobs they seek for, responding at the same time to the incremental and complex business requirements. Keeping in mind the concepts of skills and employability already settled, just reconsider for a minute that, as anticipated, each field of national and international industry has its own requisites when it comes to workers' must have: numeracy, planning, logical thinking for accountants as long as problem-solving, ITC technicalities and software development for analysts and computer specialists. Problems arise due to complexity. Both employees and employers must be aware of abilities and expertise to develop, in the first case, or seek for, in the second. For every specific knowledge required, a general capability and personal attitude lie at the base of good development. In 2009, the OECD submitted a general framework developed to define the three basic dimensions to enhance adequate employability profile for the 21st century. Each dimension is connected to the following one, embraces the principal areas of improvement and related skills. Information, communication, ethics and social impact constitute the framework's components.

- Information dimension, developed as a result of the explosion triggered by Information Communication Technology (ICT), covers the capability not only to use IT platforms and tools but even more the ability to take advantage of them to create new knowledge and ideas;

⁷ M. Yorke (2006). *Employability in higher education: what it is-what it is not* (Vol. 1). York: Higher Education Academy, 8.

- Communication dimension and related communication capability. This capability makes learners in the position of becoming members of a community with a voice, a sense of responsibility to the society and a relevant role within it. Communication phase is a consequent of the information ones. Once collected the relevant data, the ability stays in using the right tools and language to communicate effectively our findings;
- Ethics and social dimension concerns the possible impacts, both in positive and negative senses, people's actions may have on society. The right mix of critical thinking, responsibility and decision making allow people to apply the right criteria in order to promote an adequate social exchange according to potential risks and social responsibility. Both issues are closely watched in our society increasingly developed through Web platforms and social media. Be conscious of the challenges in the new digital age is regarded as a new mission.

OECD framework works around one main dogma kept implicitly. Three dimensions, different steps of the same process, define the basic profile of an employable person but essentially are the consequent results of the core activity of learning. Learn how to provide information, how to communicate and how to express ideas without forgetting respect and avoiding the imposition of our opinion. The learning side of developing workplace's skills still represents the core point of several analyses; it is worth mentioning the conventional learning theory ⁸ that is the traceable common structure of the many proposed in the literature. Employability skills may all be learned according to the conventional theory. From a graduated perspective, tasks presented to be executed within a work environment seems and generally are always unfamiliar. By first learning and repeated practice, the novice could conquer the proficiency to interiorize the activity and develop the cognitive resources associated. Execute similar and more complex activities in the same field become this way a direct consequence (Hampson & Junor, 2009). Whilst contextually different, employability skills whether technical or emotional, from executives' perception can and must be learned to achieve two main purposes. Competencies, as Luthans et al. (2004) affirm, are sources of both personal development and firms competitive advantage.

⁸I. Hampson & A. Junor, (2009, April). Employability and the substance of soft skills. In *Proceedings of the 27th International Labour Process Conference*, 18.

1.3 Competitive advantage made of knowledge

Tough competitiveness, increasing saturation of international markets together with the flourishing development of technological surrogate of humans are all elements that are leading the market towards the application of additional competitive edge yardstick in deciding whether a candidate, his cultural and experiential baggage can be useful or not (Schultz, 2008). Worldwide firms push their strength over the search for resources capable of producing an economic return. Stay profitable and overcome competition is the motto. To stay in the market, firms first operate expensive physical resources as barriers to entry, applying, secondly, non-financial factors. Quoting Barney's (1998) findings, three type of resources are used: physical capital, organizational capital and human capital⁹. Physical assets a company is made of are the first resources in which a company invest its capital; money, plants, machinery and similar tangible resources provide the safest return together with the organizational resources of structure, planning and coordinating (Barney & Wright, 1998). However, is the safest solution what companies look for or maybe the advantage of allowing to compete at full capacity is the real objective? Valuable and inimitable resources may generate a firm's competitive advantage resulting in superior performance. These resources must be non- substitutable, sustainable and tailored, characteristics that hardly refer to physical objects while are better suited by human capital (Hatch & Dyer, 2004). Human capital is defined as the package of "knowledge, skills, abilities or competencies derived from education, experience and specific identifiable skills" (Luthans & Youssef, 2004)¹⁰. The uniqueness and core benefits that companies can experience in developing successful human capital stems from the fact that people and the set of knowledge and capabilities they internalized cannot be separated. Each individual provides to the collective human capital his indispensable and exclusive contribute. Before the community, the different teams now mentioned every time seems possible within organizational contexts is the individual, his singular baggage of knowledge, experiences, capabilities, hence his skills, build the know-how of the company (Gerli, 2002). Real collectiveness, where components provided by the single units give birth to competitive advantages, occurs when

⁹ J. B. Barney & P. M. Wright, (1998). On becoming a strategic partner: The role of human resources in gaining competitive advantage. *Human Resource Management: Published in Cooperation with the School of Business Administration, The University of Michigan and in alliance with the Society of Human Resources Management*, 37(1), 35.

¹⁰F. Luthans & C. M. Youssef, (2004). Human, social, and now positive psychological capital management: Investing in people for competitive advantage, 5.

all people involved within the same company provide their personal knowledge not only to leverage the benefits of “the more the best” but mostly trying to combine their skills and capabilities to be more effective in achieving company’s goals. Several assets provided by companies help people to use competitively their knowledge and develop more of that within the company’s environment. Strong values and organizational culture, beliefs shared among employees and managers are just some of the elements that strengthen the already existing knowledge heritage. In terms of competitive advantage establishment, people’s background turns out to be essential in all respects. Employees' capabilities to provide additional value come from their inner knowledge and experience, the commitment in providing new expertise tailored according to the reality in which they work sharing knowledge and inspiring colleagues is the main relevant advantage (Ping, 2006).

People’s explicit and tacit knowledge constitute the basis for organizational know-how improvement¹¹. Explicit knowledge conveys the kind of information obtained from books, encyclopaedias or websites and all the processes involved in the education field. Due to its nature, explicit knowledge is easily transferred and imitable. Looking at the situation of a firm, explicit knowledge is not only made of procedures and technical issues but includes also different strategic decision competitors could decide to replicate to their own environment. Positioning decisions, price-based strategies or product differentiation are some examples. Conversely, tacit knowledge is made of personal competencies and abilities matured within the company itself. As employees understand the firm’s structure and dynamic processes, learn how it operates in every single aspect, at that moment people start developing specialized tacit knowledge. This process, Luthans (2004) affirms, includes a huge investment in terms of time and effort, investments made by the organization, its managers and employees as a whole. Assuming that this kind of knowledge can be developed due to basic employment processes is a big mistake. The quantity and quality of exposure needed by employees are different along with people and companies characteristics. A generally recognized assumption states that tacit knowledge development is a high commitment process, must be sustained by proactive roles to successfully develop this unique, cumulative and long-term oriented knowledge (Luthans *et al.*, 2004).

¹¹ Ivi, 6.

Job rotation, expatriation, and international assignments are all good practical approaches companies use to develop this knowledge. Empathy developed through the exposure to all the different segment of the company (job rotation) and invaluable cross-cultural perspectives gained through expatriation are key sources to enhance effectiveness and profitability (Al Abduwani, 2012). As Gerli's (2002) study demonstrates people's knowledge, together with specific historical conditions and the right mix of skills complexity and ambiguity, could represent sources of barriers against imitation. Historical conditions concern the contextual nature considering space and time of the firm in which people work; this element results useful in assessing the correlation between a company's performance, individual contribution and the external environment. Ambiguity and complexity, on the other hand, are the outcomes of interpersonal relations, organizational culture, personal culture and resources that make difficult for competitors to understand, first, and copy, second, such a complex asset. Difficulties in measuring and assessing tacit knowledge are the main issues related to this topic but provide also benefits when it comes to competitors trying to steal the key to our success. The right people are organizations most relevant asset¹². (Dwomoh *et al.*, 2015). What organizations should be looking for is the potential of future employees, trying to forecast possible positive outputs coming from the combination of personal background and organizational environment. Selection criteria, up to this point, should focus on foreseeing the chances of a candidate to absorb, retain and utilize tacit knowledge over time. Positive feedbacks can be consequences for employee engagement and satisfaction, the consequent client's positive responses, increased productivity and profits. To fine tunnelling human capital field, as commented by researchers, the right people, right skills and right management system constitute the "human capital triangle"¹³ (Kaipa *et al.*, 2005). Understand how to effectively take advantage of people skills and knowledge, how to develop new tailor-made capabilities within the company must be the focus for organizations. Underestimate the power of this intangible asset is closely equal to, as Gerli (2002) comments, wrongly allocate firms resources losing, therefore, the whole system productivity and competitiveness.

¹² G. Dwomoh, W. K. Boachie, & K. Kwarteng, (2015). The Relationship Between Organizations' Acquired Knowledge, Skills, Abilities (SKAs) and Shareholders Wealth Maximization: The Mediating Role of Training Investment. *International Journal of Information, Business and Management*, 4, 172.

¹³ P. Kaipa, T. Milus, S. Chowdary & B. V. Jagadeesh, (2005). Soft skills are smart skills, 3.

1.4 Soft skills and Hard skills: two sides of the same coin

Specific categorization of skill, as shown, leads to an overlapping phenomenon. In some occupations, technical skills may seem close to, if not the same as, personal skills, although their application may be different. For example, customer service skills are largely the application of personal skills employed to provide an appropriate service (Dench, 1997). Literature suggests that, if with employability skills employers twenty years ago still considered hard technical abilities and know-how, many authors are now calling for a shift towards soft skills and their undeniable relevance.

Hard skills were the keystone for workers in order to have some control over the possibility of a more secure employment and a better pay (Payne, 2004). Hard skills or academic qualifications demonstrate professionalism, develop expertise and are imperative components of the skills set required for a job. Synonym for overall capabilities that would ensure people a stable job, hard skills twenty years ago were the “must-have” in order to be employed. These skills, still extremely on-demand, are proofs assessing technical capabilities to perform a certain kind of task such web design, typing, mathematics, legal skills, accounting, computer programming and other quantifiable skills included in specific job-posting requirements (Doyle, 2018). Hard skills, like writing, reading, math, software programs competence, are those achievements that generally are mentioned on a resume (Robles, 2012). Coming mainly from the academic itinerary, these are acquired through formal education paths and training programs organized by colleges, online platforms, certification programs and mostly on-the-job training; besides are measured in relation to the specific educational background, work experiences or through interviews work experience, specific technical knowledge and level of expertise. Several things changed since Payne’s (2004) explanation was enough to understand qualities employees should have to get a job, which kind of characteristics a company should seek for and how to stay competitive into the market. Hard skills, or technical if preferred, seem to be only a part, sometimes taken for granted, of the elements be reckoned with in 21st century worldwide market. The market in which a company operates defines qualities ‘standards, levels of competition and tasks that must be complied with according to market characteristics. Since the late nineties until the 21st-century, huge changes occurred. Starting from the unemployment, which affected youth workforces in the 1980s and 1990s, new conceptual frameworks were developed to make people understand how the world was changing,

which qualities should be developed and the brand new understanding of skill, different from the classic ‘generic’ or ‘transferable’ skills (Payne, 2004). Globalization, development of the Internet of things, a large explosion of communication technologies made countries located all over the world in the position to seek for their proper spot within the international market. Technological developments started to be the main drivers of all the social and working changes. Employees needed to gain more knowledge about problem solving, initiative and diagnostic skills. Secondly, the main focus of the World-Economy shifted from a product-centred to a customer-centred. Processes of production’s delocalization and quality improvements in domestic markets that guided European countries in the post-war period leave space to a tough search for a new direction to strive competitiveness (Audretsch & Thurik, 2000). This change in direction resulted from the advent of globalization, new potential labour force and the revolution of the communication. How could firms compete in a changing world where the new drivers were low labour costs in Eastern countries and the power of media in Western. The role of technology, information, faster expertise sharing and learning became key to resolution for companies and their desire of being competitive. As the Organization for the Economic Co-Operation and Development stated in 1996, nowadays is knowledge what must be considered the driver of the economic growth, the value enterprises must seek for. The relevance acquired by knowledge make researchers, leaders in the sector and recruiters in the position of declaring and denominating our current market governed by the Economy of Knowledge (KE). This running for becoming the market’s leaders is now shaped by the extent to which the labour market creates, evaluates and trades knowledge. Worker’s knowledge and their productivity, consequently, are features that make a firm successful. The alternative now, as proposed by Audretsch and Thurik (2000), is to shift economic activities from the before known as ‘traditional industries’ such manufacturing or third tier industries, where machinery were the core value-creation tools, into those industries in which the comparative advantage is made by people¹⁴.

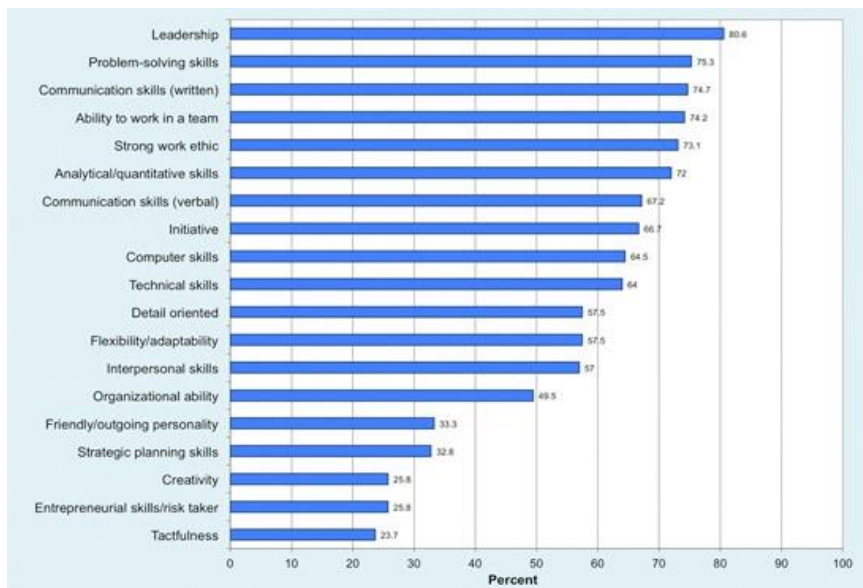
Today’s market where physical assets, marketing strategies and managerial approaches are easily copied by competitors, ideas, openness toward what is unknown and new knowledge seem to be the only sources of advantage that really count. The most valuable intangible asset, workers, is capable of producing sustainable and lasting competitive

¹⁴ D. B Audretsch & A. R. Thurik, (2000). Capitalism and democracy in the 21st century: from the managed to the entrepreneurial economy. *Journal of evolutionary economics*, 10 (1-2), 22

advantage because of the value created by employees that is different among organizations; when the value proposed is rare, distinctive among competitors and hardly reproducible on the outside, in that moment competitive advantage comes to life (Gerli, 2002). This is the relevant reason that push expertise in declaring that “people who can create new ideas and implement them become highly valued” (Audretsch & Thurik, 2000)¹⁵. Due to the increasing competition that embraces the global market, relevant institutions operating in this field, as the Stanford Research Institute and Carnegie Melon Foundation just to quote, have made several studies in order to provide shreds of evidence of what have been the consequences regarding skilled labour force innovative characteristics. According to them, 75 percent of long-term job success is strictly dependent on soft skills while 25 percent depends on technical knowledge, hard skills. Along with these researches many authors and associations stressed how important, managerially speaking, is to develop a set of skills that make in the position of being effective in enhancing company’s profitability, provide additional value, arouse consumers improving a sense of community and affection toward the company itself, its value and proposition within the society. The definition may change according to the sector in which a firm starts the Business. Machinery industries value more technical or transferable skills that, as talented developed, can improve the technological sphere of production, people ore social skills result to be needed in service-based industries and marketing actions where communication and empathy become the base for establishing a relationship with customers and, consequently, propose the right offering.

¹⁵ Ivi, 24.

Image 1: Top skills by Employers



Source: NACE (2017)

As shown by the tab proposed by NACE International, the list of the global most requested skills survey shows that only two are hard skills: computer and technological. Hard skills, that still contribute, are not a predictor of one's skills success as, conversely, soft skills are. This is why employees must look for them since the starting point of employees' work experience (Rani, 2010).

Soft skills are now the foundation of the filtration or screening step of the hiring process. The filtration process, part of the Image Theory provided by Silver and Mitchell (1990)¹⁶, is the phase in which applicants must show the basic qualities recruiters are seeking for just to be taken into consideration. Requisites such being capable to use efficiently IT platforms, software and other technicities are a first filter, especially for IT companies, designer or engineering, of screening applicants. What becomes extremely relevant during the filtration phase is to show personal motivation and attitude towards the job being, at the same time, close to company's social image and values. Qualities that, according to the previous explanations, concern with soft skills. Soft skills required together with the ones showed by the candidate lead to the final choice. Recent studies suggest that these types of personal skills are becoming of crucial importance across occupations and employers. Changing

¹⁶Silver and Mitchell quoted by C. R. Litecky, K. P Arnett & B. Prabhakar, (2004). The paradox of soft skills versus technical skills in IS hiring. *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 45(1), 71.

organizational structures, the development of a service economy and the consequent focus on customer service, an ongoing driver for quality and strong competition, as well as technological developments, have all helped in leading soft skills relevance (Dench, 1997). As a consequence, firms started seeking people capable of being reactive to this constantly changing environment, people characterized by certain attitudes and way of doing discerned at a certain point from the specific technical skills.

Thus, today's labour market became crowded by every sort of 'soft' and 'hard' skills, skills that are 'generic' and 'transferable', people skills, social skills, life skills, aesthetic skills; even certain forms of behaviour such as motivation and discipline now acquire the label 'skills' (Payne, 2004). Because of their importance in nowadays economy that is driven by customer needs and crazy competition, soft skills have arisen among the others. In order to assess the ability in skills development of the Knowledge Economy, in 2012 the performance of twelve Asia Pacific countries were analysed as a subject of Tan et al. study. The study, made through data envelopment analysis (DEA) showed that four of the emerging countries seem to be inefficient in compete within the market due to the lack of well-developed human capital. Among them, Mainland China's name arises. Before entering the area of discussion of soft skills development and assessment in Asia, must be clear in defining the construct of soft skills, their components and enhancement.

1.5 Soft skills: search for a meaning and categorization

One of the first time soft skills were referred as a real concept and theorized is been in 1972 during the soft skills conference settled by the CONARC (United States Army Forces Command). The first definition concerning these skills was the result of the U.S Army analysis about effective training procedures; according to CONARC, personal skills related to personal capabilities and characteristics were not be considered enough till that moment, because the emphasis was mostly given to technical aspects and hard competencies. The first evidence they underlined was that all the aspects that were settled as the essence of employability and effectiveness in work were related only to a technical and practical sphere of what actually work life asks from people ignoring the emotional component embodied by soft skills. A unique definition of what soft skills are is not easy to find. Starting from the simplest decision of a common words identification, the term soft skills

is almost used as a synonym of life skills, people skills, interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. Each sector tends to emphasize specific competencies that people need to succeed according to its needs; sometimes teamwork, other times leadership or basic critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Actually, these skills mostly are reckoned to be necessary components of a unique essential package. As the member of Education and Culture DG Konstantinos Kechagias affirms

«Concerning the definition of soft skills, we should emphasize that there are not globally accepted ones. Each discipline, educational sector and country defines soft skills according to their own needs. Even in the framework of a single country, discipline or educational sector the understanding of the function of soft skills from the educational staff and students may vary considerably»¹⁷.

(Kechagias, 2011)

The main problem of assuming certain characteristics and identities comes from, first, a lack of a common terminology; second, from the merge between the categories of soft skills and personal attitudes that often occurs. Some researchers define soft skills as intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills that help in master specific competences, lead to high-level performances taking advantage of interpersonal abilities ¹⁸ (Robles, 2012). Others consider them as “a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals”¹⁹ (Lippman *et al.*, 2015). Widely overlooking the previous assumption, Kamin assesses soft skills are “interpersonal skills that demonstrate a person’s ability to communicate effectively and build relationships with others in one-on-one interactions as well as in groups and teams”²⁰ (Kamin, 2013).

¹⁷K. Kechagias, (2011). Teaching and assessing soft skills. *MASS Project*, 55.

¹⁸ M. M. Robles, (2012). Executive perceptions of the top 10 soft skills needed in today’s workplace. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 457.

¹⁹L. H Lippman, R. Ryberg, R. Carney & K. A. Moore, (2015). Workforce Connections: Key “soft skills” that foster youth workforce success: toward a consensus across fields. *Washington, DC: Child Trends*, 1.

²⁰M. Kamin, (2013). *Soft Skills Revolution: A Guide for Connecting with Compassion for Trainers, Teams, and Leaders*. John Wiley & Sons, chapter 1.

Most of all the directions chosen to describe these skills until now are affected by the concept of personal attitude and the personal way of doing things (Robles, 2012). These skills are generally considered transferable to every kind of setting, vehicles that employees can use to change the environment. As shown from different studies, long-term job success depends on soft skills for the 85 percent while hard skills contribute to only 15 percent (Watts & Watts, 2008). Taking into account their centrality would be completely wrong to assume that personal orientations are the only key to be effective on work. Soft skills, even if now necessary for entering in labour market, are complementary to more technical and academic skills. For the purpose of this research, the definition proposed by Kautz and his colleagues will be considered the most appropriate. Soft skills are a broad set of skills, behaviours, competencies, personal qualities and attitude, which allow people to navigate their environment effectively, work well with colleagues, complete tasks achieving personal and organizational goals ²¹ (Kautz *et al.*, 2014).

A general categorization based on three main tiers of soft skills will help in finding an exhaustive definition for each. (1) Personal: regarding to people's orientation toward professionalism translated in communication, problem solving and adaptation capabilities; (2) social: concept of people's capabilities in relation to others and related teamwork and leadership; (3) methodological regarding people's way of approaching tasks such as proactivity, orientation toward innovation and critical thinking. Literature exhaustively analyse the main body of soft skills required. A cross-checking of the previous inquiries allowed to focus the current research on the seven skills with the highest rate of adoption and requirement within global index and studies accessed: Proactivity, Teamwork, Communication, Time management, Critical thinking, Problem solving and Leadership (Kaipa *et al.*, 2005; Robles, 2012; Cortez, 2014; Kautz *et al.*, 2014; Tulgan, 2015)

²¹ Kautz, T., Heckman, J. J., Diris, R., Ter Weel, B., & Borghans, L. (2014). Fostering and measuring skills: Improving cognitive and non-cognitive skills to promote lifetime success (No. w20749). National Bureau of Economic Research, 8.

Image 2: Top 10 most in-demand soft skills



Source: LinkedIn Business Solutions (2016)

<https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/trends-and-research/2016/most-indemand-soft-skills>

Some clarifications about these seven skills are reported below according to the literature on the subject.

▪ **Proactivity**, mainly considered the perfect mix of creativity and initiative, is conceptualized as a behaviour made up of several factors (Frese & Day, 1997). Proactivity stays in foreseeing instead of reacting. Make suggestion during meetings, ask for more assignments, and autonomously fix problems. These are some of the behaviours and attitudes employers notice in order to assess and measure proactivity. The capability to conceptualize, manage and trigger significant changes in the organization, being a sort of physical representation of creativity, risk-taking and innovation spirits (Evers *et al.*, 1998). Proactivity is seen as part of self-management skills and properly because of its nature is required in almost every work environments, no matter which are the sector specificities. Main constituents of this skills are creativity and initiative, as mentioned above. This is the reason why until now the concepts related to this skills are often called with many different names: proactivity, innovativeness, personal initiative. Without concerning about a real specific definition of the skill, a framework made of three basic features has been made to

allow employers to identify them and help employees to develop them. Self-starting, proactive and persistent are the fundamentals of proactivity's development (Frese & Fay, 2001). Self-starting covers our inner desire of being helpful and effective within our company. Decide to act spontaneously, solve problems not directly related to different areas of competence taking the initiative of self-setting our goals. These goals, personal ones, are the result of a deep knowledge of the company's tasks and can make us capable of responding to future needs in advance. A proactive attitude tends to make us willing to predict solutions thanks to a long-term focus on company's environment; "Thus, problems and opportunities are anticipated, and the person prepares to deal with them immediately" (Frese & Fay, 2001)²². Finally yet importantly, persistency makes people in the position to get rid of other's people inertia, overcome technical barriers that can occur instead of giving up in front of obstacles. Several are the advantages of having proactive employees. First, employees who are proactive are more involved and committed not only to tasks but also to the whole company's environment. By being active and highly re-active, employees can seek challenges, add complexity and control over routines and procedure making work faster and more effective. Researches often conceive the person as a mirror of the task, as goal description. In contrast, the concept of active performances follows the perspective whereby people at work can go beyond these assigned tasks, can develop their own goals, and can self-start those. Indeed, must consider some issues related to the topic. One of them, the most important, is the cultural boundaries that affect this personal behaviour. Cultural boundaries as uncertainty avoidance, risk perception are considered to be predictor but at the same time obstacles of creativity and innovation attitudes (Hofstede, 2001). Obstacles derivate by different cultural background take second place if the workplace environment allows employees feel free to express their inner motivation, unique ideas and innovativeness (Mumford & Simonton, 1997).

▪ **Teamwork** is the art of collaborating with colleagues, listen to them respecting their ideas and put efforts to do a better job together (Evers *et al.*, 1998). Intended as a multidimensional construct, teamwork results to be affected by the external environment and internal facets of the task they have to accomplish. Teams, as Salas describes, are set

²²M. Frese & D. Fay, (2001). 4. Personal initiative: An active performance concept for work in the 21st century. *Research in organizational behavior*, 23, 140.

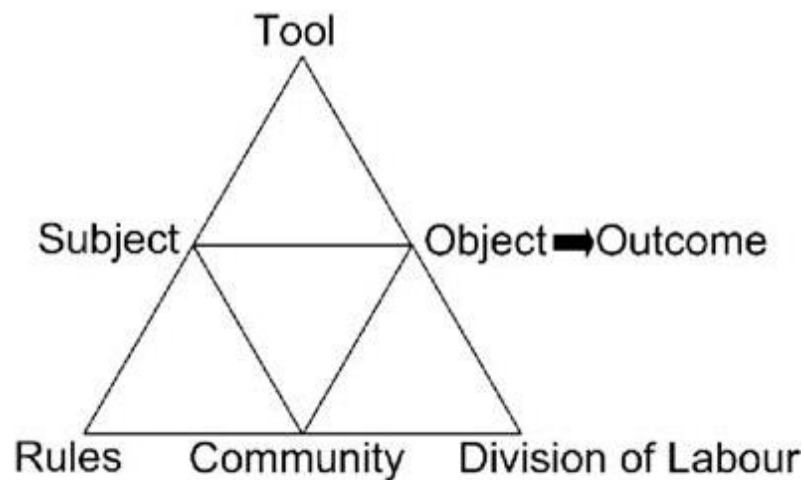
of two or more people actively interacting, being independent while dynamically exchanging information and adapting their work to other members' demands within a limited lifespan.²³ Be effective, quickly and together for a common purpose (Salas *et al.*, 2000). Come together to common solutions in order to achieve satisfying outcomes seems to be the core value that stays at the root of teams efficacy (Cortez, 2014). According to the study about “International Technology Adoption and Workforce Trends” made in 2015 by CompTIA, teamwork has been rated as one of the top five most important soft skill by the majority of surveyed tech executives. Support and celebrate other's success is an extremely important key that makes teamwork the engine to reach a larger mission: a company success. An effective development of teamwork abilities starts from higher education, where students must be sustained during the acquisition of specific abilities such as leadership, coordination and conflict management, all conveying in what is perceived as “effective teamwork”(Sancho *et al.*, 2009).

Along with the classical method of frontal lectures in which teacher are the main sources from which absorb knowledge, other tools have been developed following the process of technological progress. An example is the e- learning framework NUCLEO designed by Pilar Sancho, Rubén Fuentes- Fernandez and Baltasar Fernandez-Manjion within their study “ Learning teamwork skills in university programming course”²⁴. Students, using role rotation strategies, can actively understand each role importance and the logic of group dynamics. This system use as fundamental component the activity theory and related combination of rules, objects to achieve, subjects of the game, communities, activities and division of labour making students in the position of acquiring both technical and teamwork capabilities.

²³ Salas, E., Burke, C. S., & Cannon-Bowers, J. A. (2000). Teamwork: emerging principles. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 2(4), 341.

²⁴P. Sancho-Thomas, R. Fuentes-Fernández, & B. Fernández-Manjón, (2009). Learning teamwork skills in university programming courses. *Computers & Education*, 53(2), 520.

Table 3: Diagram of the activity system



Source: Sancho-Thomas et al. "Learning teamwork skills in university programming courses" (2009), 520.

This system is just an example of a tool could be used in order to develop and enhance teamwork. Literature reviewed argues without any doubt that teamwork is increasingly essential. As a result of the analysis, people already trained or opened toward the reality of 'teams' is an essential requirement from companies 'perspective. Academic training must be supported by on the job activities. As Ellis (2005) highlights, different are the formats that can be used: from lecture format developed around case studies to actions team training. Stress critical aspects of planning, collaboration and communication remain the main purpose. Despite the assumption stating that tailored training activities are the only solutions able to help people involved in teams develop specific knowledge, workplace team-generic training are quite useful. A positive aspect is that generic training, instead of specific ones, allows employees to develop knowhow like collaborative problem-solving and task-planning abilities applicable to a wide range of contexts and offered to a broad range of employees (Ellis *et al.*, 2005). Although attitudes required change along with the two variables of teams and tasks complexity, some principles are acknowledged as mandatory to work within teams: be flexible and adaptive toward colleagues and responsible for individual decisions; meanwhile, be able to communicate, share and consolidate knowledge to lead directly to a better productivity, staff- retention and related satisfaction (Salas *et al.*, 2005). Not least in importance, according to cooperation and competition theory, leaders capable of establishing common goals and constructive

controversy help employees in developing collaborative synergies, cooperative interdependence, openness and a higher level of services (Tjosvold & Wong, 2000).

▪ **Communication** is one of the essential skill needed in order to be effective in executing a task, involving the action of conveying a message and establish relationships with others (Odhayani & Ratnapalan, 2011). Effective communication is primarily conceived with good writing and oral communication capabilities. Along with verbal and non-verbal skills, other elements actively compose the set of communication abilities such attentive listening, body language, adequate your voice tone to the audience, stress management, the capability to understand the feelings of the people you are communicating with. Ask questions and make others feel you trustworthy (Rana, 2015). In the workplace, people need to communicate as quickly as possible. This need strongly boosted due to the technological advancement that reaches both people's personal and professional sphere. Responsiveness and effectiveness in using websites, e-mail and instant messaging, if still a few years ago were necessary for working within the digital area or fields as advertising and marketing, now the requirement a digital way of doing everything is shifting toward all the main sectors of the worldwide industry. An effective communication is perceived with the use of a concise and direct writing style combined with positive and active verbal communication (Steven, 2005). Examples of basic components of communication behaviour that affect both oral and writing field of knowledge are listening, asking and answering questions, sharing information, seeking feedback and proposing suggestions (Cortez, 2014). One theory about communication style, meant as the way we interact to others, states that generally three main paths could be followed: aggressive, passive, and assertive (Dasgupta *et al.*, 2012)²⁵. The aggressive communication is expressed when personal ideas and needs are considered more important than others are; we tend to impose our view adopting behaviours perceived disrespectful by colleagues or subordinates. In passive communication style, conversely to the aggressive style, feelings and thoughts are kept as secrets often resulting in damaged relations with others due to the lack of free communication. The assertive style can be collocated between the two already explained extreme styles. Being assertive means act in our own interest, stand up for our self without

²⁵S. A. Dasgupta, D. Suar & S. Singh, (2012). Impact of managerial communication styles on employees' attitudes and behaviours. *Employee Relations*, 35(2), 176.

denying others' rights. Believe in our ideas, respect at the same time colleagues keeping open our mind to their advice and opinions is the key to build long-term relationships within work environment. Recognition of their work, support and constructive feedback enhance employees' sense of belonging, self-esteem and satisfaction. In order to develop the right communication skills possible activities, without mentioning frontal lessons and refresher training, can be watching activities like videotaping. Videotaping as a teaching tool allows learners to identify areas to improve when they have to teach others and recognize their actual behaviour. Role-playing is another example. Working in groups with the support of role rotation can increase the sense of participation, assessing different communication skills in different environments and situations. (Abdulaziz *et al.*, 2011).

▪ **Time management** is surely one of the most discussed planning behaviours that employees must possess according to 21st century requirement from the labour market. "Time management aim at achieving an effective use of time while performing certain goal-directed activities" (Claessens *et al.*, 2007)²⁶; a sort of facilitator of productivity and alleviate stress implying an effective use of time (Claessens *et al.*, 2007). How employees manage their time determines a company's success; thus, effective time management is a relevant index of companies competitive advantage. An important aspect related to time that generally is ignored is its importance for 'incubation'²⁷; individuals should be given sufficient time to carry on both technical and creative tasks. It takes time to move between ideas, to execute effectively actions required, to solve organizational problems. What stays in the definition of time management is the ability of employees in deciding which tasks must be given priority, how to execute them effectively. Time management, considering all these aspects, can be considered a way of goal-setting processing (Zampetakis *et al.*, 2009). Variables affecting how individuals manage their time at work should be broadly described. Task complexity, first, as the perception of time needed by works in order to accomplish them through daily planning (simple task set out in the short run) or long-range planning (complex task settled over long time horizons); personal perception about time

²⁶B. J. Claessens, W. Van Eerde, C. G. Rutte & R. A. Roe, (2007). A review of the time management literature. *Personnel review*, 36(2), 262.

²⁷L. A. Zampetakis, N. Bouranta & V. S. Moustakis, (2010). On the relationship between individual creativity and time management. *Thinking skills and creativity*, 5(1), 23.

and beliefs about how the way we plan may affect the way time is spent or how time can affect how employees work. Moreover, the feeling of having control over available time and overtime pressure (Grissom *et al.*, 2015). As researches made during the nineties' by expertise in the field of recruiting and staff retaining, constructive time management demonstrated positive influences on both stress reduction and job satisfaction. Beneficial effects can be assessed to effective time management on both personal perceptions toward work life and relation among time and variables as creativity and efficiency. Due to that, several efforts have been collocated in developing tailor-made training programs. These programs, as demonstrated, allow people to reinforce organization capabilities, priority classification, limit procrastination, goal-setting and monitoring one's own progress (Karim *et al.*, 2011).

▪ **Critical thinking and Problem solving** are often measured together as one “higher-order thinking construct” by the research literature reviewed (Lippman *et al.*, 2015)²⁸. The same treatment would be given to the topic by considering them as two components of a single multidimensional cognitive capability. Brief definitions of both with a focus on relations among them will follow. With critical thinking generally is considered the ability to adopt logical and pragmatic aspects to analyse day-by-day problems. Consider multiple options, assess the pros and cons of each, use criteria as facts, principles, definitions, and conventions avoiding issues related to personal judgments (Hemming, 2000). The Critical Thinking Community defined critical thinking as “the intellectually disciplined process of actively conceptualizing, applying, analysing and evaluating information generated by observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action”²⁹ (Snyder & Snyder, 2008).

According to the study carried on by Peter Facione in “Critical Thinking: What It Is and Why It Counts”, critical thinking definition twists and turns through six core components. (1) Interpretation, and so the ability to interiorize situations, ideas or information and decoding their significance and clearly express the meaning. (2) Analysis as the

²⁸ L. H. Lippman, R. Ryberg, R. Carney & K. A. Moore, (2015). Workforce Connections: Key “soft skills” that foster youth workforce success: toward a consensus across fields. Washington, DC: Child Trends, 2.

²⁹ L. G. Snyder & M. J. Snyder, (2008). Teaching critical thinking and problem solving skills. *The Journal of Research in Business Education*, 50(2), 90.

identification of relations among concepts, opinions or judgments explaining the beliefs and intentions meant under them. (3) Evaluation considered the ability to analyse a person's perception or experience assessing the logical strength at the base of his and consequent credibility. (4) Inference, or being able to underline relevant information, form hypotheses, identify reasonable conclusions related to questions, descriptions, or other forms of representation. (5) Explanation interpreted as presenting in a coherent way the findings of personal reasoning. "This means to be able to give someone a full look at the big picture: state and justify that reasoning in terms of the evidential, conceptual, methodological and contextual considerations upon which one's results were based".³⁰ (6) Self-regulation and consequently apply skills in monitoring sincerely personal reasoning, cognitive activities, validate and correct results from one's own inferential judgments³¹ (Facione, 1998).

Problem-solving, as already said, may be seen as a second side of the same argument. It includes the ability to "identify an issue and take in information from multiple sources to evaluate options in order to reach a reasonable conclusion"³² (Lippman *et al.*, 2015). Problem-solving skill assess the capability to create a mental representation of the problems, called problem-space, which can be manipulated using the cognitive abilities of analysis, critical thinking and objective consideration (Jonassen, 2000). Several different models have been developed to explain how problem-solving process works. The General Problem Solver and IDEAL problem solve are two of the most globally known, both based on the assumption that all problems can be treated the same. This assumption is regarded as the main limit of both models. The General Problem Solver see the problem-solving processes mainly articulated in understanding processes and search processes while the IDEAL model specifies how problem solving is a process aimed at the identification, definition and representation of potential problems. Once identified, problem solving ability allow exploring possible strategies and evaluating the consequences of those strategies. As Jonassen and other many researchers propose, elaborate and multiple representations of problems are the keys to solve problems affecting the above-mentioned models. Problems constructions must reflect the magnitude and relevance of the problem itself.

³⁰ Facione, P. A. (1998). Critical thinking: What it is and why it counts. Retrieved June, 9, 2004, 6.

³¹ Ivi, 3.

³² L. H Lippman, R. Ryberg, R. Carney & K. A. Moore, (2015). Workforce Connections: Key "soft skills" that foster youth workforce success: toward a consensus across fields. *Washington, DC: Child Trends*, 3.

Broadly speaking, the theories reported assuming some characteristics which allow defining, according to our analysis, a common foundation of these two capabilities in values as logic, evaluation capability, self-analysis and dynamic vision. These abilities lead people to, firstly, critically analyse and objectively identify solutions, or in other words critical thinking and problem-solving.

▪ **Leadership** is not a simple ‘skill’, can be seen more as a process; a process that includes, it could be said requires, all of the above-mentioned skills to trigger. A Leader, quoting Pontiggia’s (2016) statement, is capable of influencing people, makes them feel involved and motivated toward achievement of specific goals.

Leadership can be defined as a multi-level phenomenon (Mumford *et al.*, 2000). The person that we see as the “Leader” is vested of many important duties within companies dynamics. Among them, the first and most important stay in the ability to affect and influence co-workers to achieve organizational goals. This may seem like a quite direct mechanism. However, from the very first step of this process, leaders need to find the right way to combine companies desired achievement with employees’ ones. Only promoting a merge between these two dimensions the company with all its levels, positions and workers will be effective. Here comes the figure of the leader. He or She must inspire a sense of spirit, cultural and psychological involvement sparking people to make difference.

*«Leadership consists of involving people, influencing them while being at the same time influenced. Between the leader and followers, the influence is mutual, together, they influence the environment around them in some way.»*³³

(Parikh & Gupta, 2010)

To just broadly summarize, a leader is that person inside the company who: (1) is a technical expertise of its tasks and his colleagues ones;(2) communicate effectively with its subordinates;(3) drive his colleagues toward a feeling of inner motivation, responsibility, and involvement;(4) seek for self-improvement and higher responsibility;(5) develop a

³³M. Parikh & R. K. Gupta, (2010). *Organisational behaviour*. Tata McGraw Hill Education Pte. Limited, 519.

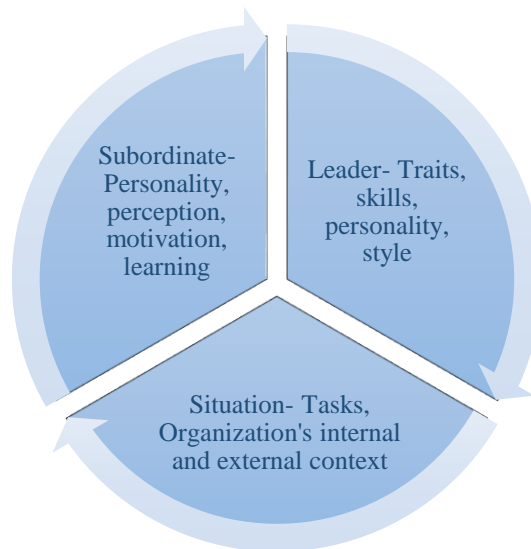
strong team identity;(6) look for co-workers well-being; (7) is a role model for his employees. (Amanchukwu *et al.*, 2015).

Leadership must encompass all the skills, from hard, across personal to soft ones; but this is not enough to understand this complex process. The topic of specific attributes inherited or developed that shape the figure of the perfect leader finds within the related literature wide definitions, sometimes so much different than a single theory is impossible to identify. Taking as a reference what Carmeli *et al.* (2006) state in their work "Self-leadership skills and innovative behaviour at work", innovative behaviour and self-leadership are increasingly important in order to be exactly 'what' a Leader should be. The concept of innovative behaviour, that partially we already discussed talking about proactivity, is strictly related to the capability in improving existing processes, generating new ideas and the application of them to improve organizational performance. Inner motivation, self-consciousness and self-management are the main values constituting "self leadership"³⁴. This personal acknowledgement can be developed through personal experience, creative thoughts improvement, constructive thinking, challenging tasks. A similar process can lead to self-regulate themselves. Self-regulation can be described as the process of alignment among a leader's value, its real intentions and actions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Effective Leadership makes the difference in a company's national environment, surely. However, what is progressively needed nowadays is more a global leadership competency that can help companies exploit new possibilities, operate in new markets and expand their organizational assets and purposes (Pontiggia, 2016). Scenarios in which teams must deal with brand new issues, create solutions rapidly to multiple and unfolding problems is when leaders have the greatest impact on organizational performance (Mumford *et al.*, 2000). According to Parikh & Gupta (2010), effective leaders go beyond goals. They interpret the environment, create a unified vision that connects the whole company's human asset in

³⁴ Carmeli, A., Meitar, R., & Weisberg, J. (2006). Self-leadership skills and innovative behavior at work. *International Journal of Manpower*, 27(1), 76.

order to exploit synergies created by organizational culture and people's values merging together.

Image 4: Elements of Effective Leadership



Source: author's elaboration based on Parikh & Gupta "Organisational Behaviour" (2010)

Assuming that all leaders around the world follow the same path and adopt the same methods for pursuing strategical objective is a Utopia. How people act in private everyday life and relatedly within his workplace is defined by the personal attitude itself, by the person's history, organization size and objectives, the environment in which he used to and have to operate, the content of specific tasks and, as Hofstede³⁵ model teach us, by cultural background. As demonstrated by the GLOBE project, cultural values change across countries resulting in different preferences in terms of leadership styles and attributes.

³⁵ The study carried by the psychologist Dr. Geert Hofstede has been the first that investigated how specific cultural dimensions that differentiate one country from another can affect people's behaviour and attitude within the organizational context. Influence of further projects as the World Values Survey (WVS), Hofstede theory still stands as the main source for sociological studies within organizational contexts. More specifically the dimensions investigated are individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, indulgence and long vs. short time orientation.

Premise according to which society value more a specific style that is congruent with their national culture. If European countries tend to value more a participative style with a strong attitude toward innovation, risk-taking and employees 'involvement, Asian countries are more likely to adopt instead a paternalistic approach, task-oriented in which leaders take over the reins (House *et al.*, 2002). When talking of 'personal' influences as attitude and personality, people's behaviours cannot be questioned. Charry, quoted by Amanchukwu, Stanley and Ololube (2015), identifies eight major leadership theories from which the most common styles have been extracted.

- Great Men theory: leaders are born to be, they do not need to learn how to be so. Leadership is something innate and resulted from people personal attitude and values;

- Trait theory: state that certain behavioural characteristics are mandatory to develop the inner spirit of leadership. This system of theories is quite similar to the great man and, how the previous does, does not mention the limitations of the statements. How to explain why people having the same characteristics are not leaders;

- Contingency & Situational theories: these two theories focus on the environmental variables that can affect leadership effectiveness. The main difference between these two is that with contingency we consider the variables as determining forces leadership styles; situational, on the other hand, focus on the adjustments made by leaders according to the environment;

- Behavioural theory: behavioural theorist believe in leadership as result from training activities, so something completely adverse from the "great man" belief. The focus here is on actions, not skills or personal characteristics embedded by leaders;

- Participative theory: the key to success for leaders stay in getting employees involved in decision-making processes and management decisions. Leadership becomes a team dynamic instead of a personal duty;

- Skill theory: learned skills, acquired knowledge and a well-developed style are the real keys to leadership performance;

- Transactional theory: being a leader is translated in being able to reward or punish employee according to goal attainments. Leader's valuation is the main cluster that defines both performances' effectiveness and employees' motivation;

- Transformational theory: a mutual connection between leaders and employees is what makes leadership effective. Through positive flows of communication, leaders and followers can influence reciprocal motivation and involvement with the company.

Transactional and Transformational theories developed firstly by Bass in 1985 are a core foundation of the whole literature assessing leadership styles. Among the different theories available in well-established literature, skilled-based theory, path-goal theory, Contingency theory, Theory X and Y and other, we will follow this classification as the main kind of leader's attitude: (1) Autocratic (2) Bureaucratic (3) Democratic (4) Charismatic (5) Transactional and (6) Laissez-faire (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Parikh & Gupta, 2010; Amanchukwu *et al.*, 2015; Pontiggia, 2016). The Autocratic is a form of transactional leadership in which leaders take decisions by themselves, have complete power over staff, do not involve colleagues and bears only on their vision and ideas about the problem or the situation. This model works efficiently during crises but most of the times lead to employee dissatisfaction and low involvement. In Bureaucratic environments, rules play a crucial role. Leaders tend to follow them without exception blinding people's innovative outputs. A typical approach in routines or risky businesses. A common decision process is a key to enhance the democratic attitude. In this case, leaders have open minds toward colleagues ideas, hints and suggestion even if the decision will be taken by the person in charge all alone. Creativity, motivation and job satisfaction increase together with leader's openness. Negative implications may arise due to employees' lack of fast responses or tasks knowledge. Charismatic leaders use their innate attitude to motivate employees to move forward. The main focus is on leader, creating a sort of myth and cult spirit. If a charismatic leader decides to abandon his team, a company risk a collapse due to the centrality of his figure. As transactional theory states, the leader-follower relationship is based on a reward-punishment process. According to the leader's evaluation of the performance, intrinsic or extrinsic solutions are adapted to either encourage or punish employees for their outputs. Sometimes this attitude has been sawed as a paternalistic way of doing business. The last method can be considered the most dynamic and modern one. The leader stands as

coordinator among people who freely express their opinion and take their decisions. As mandatory duties, a Laissez-faire leader has coordination and valuation of the result of the decision-making process. In a word, a participative method that is both work-centred and people-centred. A Leader is someone, summing up what said until now, capable to develop trust, build a cohesive team, foster positive relationships, perfectly understand the environment around the organization and within it to both explore new opportunities and exploit existing competitive advantage (Kamin, 2013). Is driven by inner positive motivation, ethical principles and respectful attitude toward colleagues. A smart leadership blends hard and soft skills being, at the same time, both task-oriented and humane-oriented. Employees 'self-motivation and job satisfaction, good performances, focus on quality, autonomy and caring are consequent results of the values instilled by Leaders (Mahoney, 2001).

To recap, any choice in terms of the definition we decide to focus on, soft skills are a multidimensional concept; personal traits and developed capabilities are on the same level components. Can be acquired through performances, repeated, assessed and verified (Abduwani, 2012). These behavioural patterns, starting with proactivity getting to problem-solving and leadership, are developed around different key elements; whilst being able to forecast underpin proactivity (Frese & Fay, 2001), the right combination of analysis and adjustment of personal beliefs proposed by Facione's (1998) model become the core ability in developing critical thinking. Soft skills, as already widely explained, are the product of people's personal attitude and experiential field. A huge paradox could be underlined is the extent to which formal education worldwide is now shifting its programmes and way of teaching towards practices conveying 'soft' elements without assessing the challenge of establishing an equilibrium between hard and soft skills. Starting soft skills development from education early stages seems to be the key to create a well-developed workforce; thus, the early stages are the ones in which major attention is put on traditional knowledge and hard competencies as the first element to be developed with regard to employable profiles. Even if different at some point, according to pedagogical approaches a common criterion to develop them is incremental learning commitment adaptable to all the different stages of the educational profile, from school to workplace (Kaipa *et al.*, 2005). Continuous learning should be the starting place for both students and employees. This attitude applied to educational level learning allows students to take full responsibility for their learning, while in the workplace along with on the job training support skills development.

2. Chinese labour market and the skills mismatch

Once assessed the relevance of soft skills in today's ever-changing market, several have been the studies, index and surveys developed to analyse the consequential degree of cross-cultural development. Global institutes as the OECD, recruitment agencies and expertise called together for a serious soft skills shortage within Chinese labour market. As a consequence, China may face huge challenges in gaining the sufficient advantage to win the competitive struggle of the 21st Knowledge Economy. The main purpose of the chapter is to understand whether this alleged shortage may be evidenced or not. In order to get to this knowledge, a brief statement is proposed about the process through which Human Resources (HR) practices have changed, investigating, in addition, the fundamental pillars underpinning soft skills development within the context of formal education, vocational system and on-the-job training.

2.1 A review of Chinese HR policies

The world of principles that converge into the broad concept of Human Resource Management (人力资源管理 *renli ziyuan guanli*) was unknown by the Chinese management system and labour market since the late 70s. Labour managers were assigned to the implementation of policies, administration with a straight focus on 'institutional' activities rather than the development of organizational strategies that already was, meanwhile, a main concern for Western companies (Zhu & Dowling, 2000). This system of personnel management was borrowed in the late 50s from the Soviet tradition merged with values like harmony and obedience inherited by Buddhist and pre-communist heritage (Chen & Wilson, 2003). The result of such a mixture was the complex apparatus of the 'three old irons': iron rice bowl, iron wages and iron chair (Ding *et al.* 2000; Ding & Warner, 2001; Warner, 2009). Employment was controlled by governmental plans for labour quotas: the government was in charge of selecting new hires according to the number of spots and qualities required by companies. If on one hand this highly centralized system guaranteed lifetime employment, monetary and job security, on the other hand has been the cradle of motivation collapse, flat-reward system imposed to enterprises, overstuffing, low productivity and weak performances. This system was inherited by the Soviet experience

but tailored to the reality of SOE (state-owned enterprises) which constituted the main segment of Chinese industry (Warner, 1997). SOEs were historically under the jurisdiction of the government and supervised by the party organization for what concern basic issues as employment, reward and managerial decision; this lack of autonomy and low return on capital as a consequence made SOEs the perfect starting point for a huge change.

Image 5: Major characteristics of the ‘three old irons’

The iron rice bowl	The iron chair	The iron wages
<input type="checkbox"/> Unified job allocation <input type="checkbox"/> Guaranteed life-time employment <input type="checkbox"/> Cradle- to- grave welfare	<input type="checkbox"/> Factory directors regarded as state cadres <input type="checkbox"/> Governmental authority and control <input type="checkbox"/> Selection based on political orientation <input type="checkbox"/> No punishment for poor performances	<input type="checkbox"/> State-administered reward systems <input type="checkbox"/> Low-wage policy <input type="checkbox"/> Flat wage structures <input type="checkbox"/> Complicated and inflexible wage schemes

Source: Ding & Warner “China’s Labour-Management System Reforms: Breaking the ‘Three Old Irons’” (2001), 317.

The beginning of 1980 set the base for a period of changes and modernization driven by different factors both inherited by Chinese socio-cultural status and external variables dictated by the new direction towards openness and a market-orientation. Deng Xiaoping, leader of the PRC since 1978, covered the role of creator and executor of the so-called ‘modernizations’ (Warner, 2008; Zheng & Lamond, 2009; Stewart, 2015). His aspirations for a modern China were sustained by the policies of ‘open door and the four modernization’ that, economically speaking, prompt the image of a globally present China while introduced the modernization of HR policies starting exactly from “what was understood in the PRC as ‘people-management’ in its modern guise, using terms like labour-markets (劳动力市

场 *laodongli shichang*) in order to optimize factor-productivity”³⁶(Warner, 2009). Be the country of low labour costs was not enough to win the battle for Chinese internationalization. The pragmatism and commitment of the PRC’s Leader put aside the old iron system in support of an international and fair approach highly inspired by the American and overseas models (Warner, 2009). The new model makes clear the urgent need to give labour force more dignity, better conditions and a system of rules capable of providing securities and chances of growing. Not surprisingly, newness is always matched by favourable responses as well as negative feedbacks. As Warner (2009) affirms, the ideological implications underpinning the acquisition of Western management concepts split Chinese society into two factions. One side was opened to the new democratic and international approach and moved by the idea of China as a global force, while the other side was worried by the shadow of consumerism and individualism brought by globalization and opposed to the typical collectivism of the Chinese tradition. Despite the different perceptions and positions derived, the huge change that China was facing could not be questioned. Deng’s policies can be considered a basis from which this opening up process started: consequent staffing policies and the introduction of contractual basis, performance-related compensation, appraisals no more attained to criteria of morality, attitude and competences and increased on the job training are some examples (Zhu & Dowling, 2000). Above all, the introduction in 1978 of Foreign-invested enterprises, or better known as Joint Ventures (JVs) has been a turning point into Chinese organizational and managerial history (Ding *et al.*, 2000). The growth of Chinese domestic market and its policies of low-cost production become irresistibly attractive.

JVs now, as in the past and maybe more, represent a relevant source of pledged investment and economic securities. Moreover, due to their inner feature of mixing different managerial and technical peculiarities within the same system, JVs has been the main vehicles used to import managerial mechanisms from marketing and research field to issues of personnel relations. The refreshing new tone brought by Western managerial notions and a market-oriented mechanism collided with differences in terms of ownership, size and industry. Despite the fact that a degree of centralization and inertia in advancing still exist in large enterprises, SOEs resulted to be finally in the position of getting rid of

³⁶ Warner, M. (2009). ‘Making sense’ of HRM in China: setting the scene. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20(11), 2171.

the old iron rice bowl. Reform were made to the reward system and bonuses distribution, first in 1978 and later in 1992, performance-related rewards and the institutionalization of contractual basis employment definitely institutionalized in 2007 making mandatory written contract, restricting short-term labour and adding securities to employees for wages, benefit and lay-off problems (Warner, 2008; Warner, 2009). Foreign-invested entities, on the other side, were embodied by a higher degree of autonomy in regulating hire and fire decisions, wage levels, welfare and safety regulations. JVs development and these pragmatic innovations brought both by external entities like foreign partners and internal forces as the opening process leave China in the grip not only within JV administration of following an international path or apply a localization and so merging these new HR policies with principles culturally like-minded.

Localization and Globalization of HR policies are two different scenarios affected by some relevant and noteworthy issues. According to Goodall and Warner (1998), China that is now officially among the top three World Economy is still a transactional country under transformation; consequently, such innovative and culturally distant reforms produced uncertain outcomes. Moreover, the strong cultural identity and territorial vastness could be causes for emerging barriers, misalignment at the local level and mismatches between foreign partners' requirements and regional HR issues. Needless to say, both national and international parties generally believe in the superiority and effectiveness of their policies. Chinese JV's partners could count on cultural specificities normally embodied by their structures, belief in the inefficiency of imposed policies not aligned with local environment or even entrust local managers expertise and knowledge of market network. Conversely, the foreign MNE may have developed strategic advantage in their industry sector and international experiences, well-established HR structures replicated worldwide and so the expectation of an HRM standardization sounds obvious³⁷ (Chen & Wilson, 2003). According to numerous expertise and specialists that analysed the phenomena, the fundamental dilemma that arise stays in the prevarication of Western system focused on employees motivation, well-being and ROE, a more Chinese one strictly supervised and geared to profit while the possibility of a hybrid resulted from the integration of both (Warner, 1997; Chen & Wilson, 2003; Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Zheng & Lamond, 2008; Warner, 2009). This hybrid model, as demonstrated by the above-mentioned sources

³⁷ Chen, S., & Wilson, M. (2003). Standardization and localization of human resource management in Sino-foreign joint ventures. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 20(3), 398.

together with the PRC State Council Development Research Centre, is demonstrated to be the most commonly adopted. Seems clear that become a pressing issue for Chinese companies to set up HRM systems that can meet both corporate and human development needs, as the economy moves into the *knowledge society* (Warner, 2008)³⁸.

Researches into this field have been widely carried out bearing witnesses that successful experiments have resulted from the combination of two systems. Zhu and Dowling (2000) take the evidence of an efficient hybrid method in performance appraisal field, where the individual performance is encouraged along with Chinese values as harmony, group orientation and colleagues fulfilment. A study made across sixty-two manufacturing JVs and Wholly Owned Enterprises (WOE) demonstrates as both reward system and selection process seem now to go through a learning process closer to international standards (Björkman & Xiucheng, 2002). Furthermore, a huge step forward has been made through further arrangements that made China in a position to add an international prospective to its national regulation. Worth mentioning based on Zhu and Warner's (2004) contribution is China WTO accession in 2001. This huge change led to a new possibility to enter in international trade and introduce new capital, improve labour standards together with HR practices more consistent with worldwide standards as carrier development, training improvement, freely staffing decision and performance-based rewards. Besides, the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities represents a relevant step forward for people management and employment regulation. The agreement made possible the mutual share of experiences, knowledge on employment policies and relevant issues such as youth employment, workforce ageing and skills development together with national practices comparison (European Commission & Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2010)³⁹. Trade unions historically meant as supporters of the Communist party rather than labour force interests, improved their active participation boosting labour mobility and rapid signs of progress (Ding *et al.*, 2000; Zhu *et al.*, 2000; Zheng & Lamond, 2009)

³⁸ Warner, M. (2008). Reassessing human resource management 'with Chinese characteristics': An overview: Introduction. *The international journal of human resource management*, 19(5), 780.

³⁹<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=5769&langId=en>

2.2 The phenomenon of skills mismatch

The phenomenon of ‘mismatch’ occurs when the supply of specific products, characteristics or qualities, do not equate the demand of the market at the moment of the request⁴⁰. Due to its transitory nature, the best solution in terms of soft skills mismatch appears to be increasingly adjust the gap emerged among educational outcomes and workplace performances requested. As the analytical work made shows, many authors and managerial practitioners claim a critical situation, which is making China’s workforce unable to satisfy the requirements of the global market. The shortage of a skilled labour market is broadly recognized as the main reason for this failure in matching worldwide standards (Chen *et al.*, 2013; Molnar *et al.*, 2015; Morgan, 2016). Several practical experiments and surveys have been carried out in order to define the nature of the mismatch with regard to specific skills perceived undeveloped. Noteworthy are the results proposed by the OECD’s survey (2015) based on MyCOS data, according to which most of the soft skills presented above are perceived important and well-developed by graduates while inadequate by CEOs of major global companies in relation to the expected performance. Time management, coordination, problem-solving are the leading ones with a percentage between the 60 percent and 70 percent of relevance and inadequacy level. Internet companies, start-up, big industrial and I-tech companies as Honeywell and Siemens along with the automotive sector in which a proper war of talent has been declared, are all facing the challenge of hiring unskilled labour force, note online reports in *HRAsia*2016⁴¹ and *Chinadaily* 2017⁴².

As the Chinese market shifts toward a service-based economy which is slightly replacing industrial and manufacturing sectors, still the main pillars, this skills ‘shortage become hardly identified and so solved. As assessed by Jeremy Chan from the British Council (2015), China now is dealing with a mismatch “massive in scale, hard to define and nearly impossible to address”.⁴³ According to the literature available, Chinese researches within

⁴⁰ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/mismatch>.

⁴¹J. Savita (2016), “HR Candidates with Strong Soft Skills are in Demand by Employers in China” <http://www.hrinasia.com/recruitment/hr-candidates-with-strong-soft-skills-are-in-demand-by-employers-in-china/> .

⁴²S. Jing (2017), “Skills shortage to hit Chinese companies” http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-03/07/content_28455833.htm .

⁴³J. Chan (2015) “Is China creating a workforce with no soft skills?” <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/china-creating-workforce-no-soft-skills>

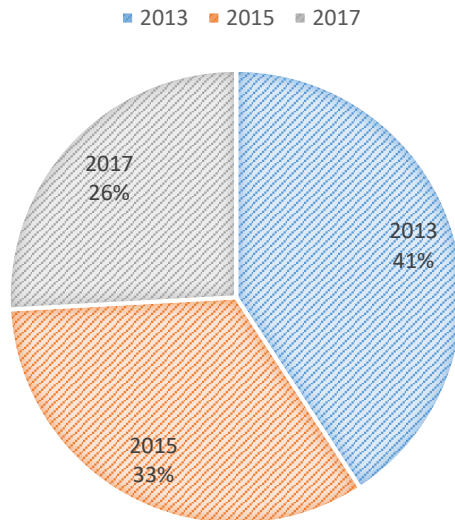
the organizational and managerial fields do not demonstrate such urgency in defining soft skills connotation or relevant differences with definitions provided by European studies. Morgan's words and McKinsey researches argue that Chinese's industry is switching from developing components to delivering high-end product and services worldwide, Huawei and Xiaomi experiences are striking proofs. Thus, firms human resource should possess high-level and valuable soft skills capable to support this kind of development. China, as one of the major force of the global economy, is now hardly focusing on this kind of issues. Develop the right set of skills, especially soft skills, may be not the main focus of Chinese educational and political programmes that, as shown later, have always been characterised by indoctrination and productivity enhancement. However, significant reforms are taking shapes, which are going to change the overall picture.

Chinese wide territory has always been characterized by disparities in economic development, distribution of industries and relevant structures arranged mainly in Eastern regions rather than Western ones; as a consequence, skilled workers 'proportion and specific labour requirements vary across the country. Three factors result to be significant; (1) territorial economic structure. "For example, in Chongqing, demand for highly skilled workers in the manufacturing, financial, and service sectors is lower than in the same sectors in, say, Beijing, Shanghai and Shenzhen"(Morgan, 2016).⁴⁴ This situation results in a higher request for skilled workers in eastern regions while western one are experiencing a more relevant shortage due to poor conditions of the economy and service development. (2) Firm size. SMEs with growth expectations generally suffer from shortage in planning, strategical and high-end technological skill; large firms, instead, experience shortage in capital and cross-cultural management skills sources of competitive advantage and innovation. (3) Misalignment between educational programs and market demands. Unrealistic expectations of University graduates, even more serious that vocational college students (Molnar *et al.*, 2015) aggravate the situation of Chinese workforce already struggling with elder people who hardly follow the transactional changes that occur within organizations, comments the British council (2015); rural immigrants' unemployment, low wage conditions and companies 'dissatisfaction are huge consequences (McKinsey, 2013). In addition to the relevant lack of skilled migrant worker, following the statement of the Ministry of Human Resource and Social Security of China, higher requirements for better

⁴⁴J.P Morgan (2016). "Skill shortage in the Chinese labor market" [PDF file] available from <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/corporate/Corporate-Responsibility/document/skillsgap-in-chineselabor-market-exec-summary.pdf>, 9.

conditions and labour securities in terms of wages and public service from graduates, needs of contracts formalization also for the floating workforce are additional discrepancies that gave rise to this thorny issue (BSR report, 2010)⁴⁵. Although several are the sources and studies, as referred to earlier, that assess China’s skills gap as unsustainable, many institutions show evidence of how this gap is slowly coming toward a resolution. Above all, according to the 2017 Global skill index provided by HAYS recruitment agency, Chinese employees contribute to the improvement and vacancies filling through the development of the right set of both hard and soft skills.

Image 6: China Talent Mismatch Index



Source: author's elaboration using data from HAYS Global Skills Index, 2013/2017

As shown by the survey, talent mismatch level decreased of around 15 percent within the period of 2013 and 2017, demonstrating a strong rebound. Chinese employers are stressing an increasing localization process of the workforce within technical and managerial positions due to positive skill’s matching with regard to the digital sector, account

⁴⁵https://www.bsr.org/reports/Labor_Shortage_and_Employment_Practices_in_China.pdf

management and R&D in high-tech industries. Workforce localization allowed China to reduce the expenditure for hiring and maintaining expatriates, improve local labour force responding more positively to skills requirements from the global market (Hays, 2017).

The conclusion drawn here is that a mismatch should not be assumed without clarifications about which sector and specific skills are examined. For every sector in which employees resulted to be in deficit there is a significant number increasingly developed. Whether could be the trigger reasons for the alleged skills shortage, several have been the solutions already proposed and implemented by private companies and public institutions to remedy this shortcoming or its appearance. Some firms decide to rely heavily on internal training, task-based training, vocational training programs, investment in local educational structures and internship to promote skills development and a connection between educational courses and firms' reality, as the Hape toys enterprise teaches (DEG, 2016).

⁴⁶Trying to integrate this process up to 2020, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security provided a new set of policies allocating around 6 billion RMB. *Chinadaily* 2017's reportage⁴⁷ demonstrates that both migrant and local workers gain easier access to training courses, overseas training improving the incentives for skilled workers and consequently create a pool of workers with adaptive, advanced and high-level skills. At the same time, vocational education and migrant educational opportunities have been pushed by the will of the Ministry of Education (Chen *et al.*, 2013).

⁴⁶ DEG – Deutsche Investitions “Bridging the skills gaps in China” (2016) [PDF file] available from https://www.deginvest.de/DEG-Documents-in-English/About-us/What-is-our-impact/Case-Study_Hape-Holding-AG_EN_2016-02.pdf

⁴⁷ See note n. 43.

2.3 Formal Education and VET roles in developing soft skills

The abilities and skills that make employees' performances effective within the company they work for are the results of a multi-faceted process that starts with the educational path towards the working life. Educational and personal improvements have always been a consistent part of Chinese politicians' programs even if due to different objectives to reach. As both educational and managerial literature suggest, students along with employees' development are two key issues determining society and firms success. In order to ensure a high level of efficiency and responsiveness to today's business challenges, setting a well-established educational system and as well as providing organizations with ad hoc regulations to support and enhance employees' capabilities is essential.

▪ 2.3.1 *Chinese formal education*

The multifaceted process of developing an effective and employable workforce has its origin at the very first level of education. Gaining competitive advantage within international trade dynamics has been already assessed as the key issue to face today's such a complex environment. China came to this knowledge maybe later than others big players of the global economy but its educational system is still going through huge changes intended to respond quickly to these requirements. Taking firstly acknowledge of the shortage of specific literature applied to the Chinese context, convergence between formal education and soft skills development results evident but may be tough to asses. Education, quoting Sun Yat-sen, stays at the heart of the State's foundation⁴⁸. This is the reason why important periods of political and social changes have always been followed by transformations involving the educational system. Since the late nineteenth century, when soft skills conceptualization appeared, Western countries started developing differentiated educational paths to stress the urgent need for a well-developed future workforce. Whether would be seen the starting point of an innovation process,

⁴⁸ L.Liu, X. Wang, M. Luo, 中国教育的近代化研究综述 (An Overview of Research On Modernization of the Chinese Education),2012(03), 101.

Opium War (1840) for some while the Westernization movement (1860) for others, the first step towards openness and internationalization occurred at the ending of the last century. Chinese government started to promote international study experiences, the improvement of business and legal educational portfolio followed by the modernization of courses contents, especially into scientific fields (Liu *et al.*, 2012). Above all, the ideological dimension that always been critical in defining the evolution of Chinese society, played a significant role within the educational field (Hu, 1969; Zhao, 2014).

The Confucian philosophy, PRC's main pillar, made education meaningful in building a society in which people were able to develop literacy skills, memorize, interpret and interiorise classical texts. Formal practices and a constant dialogue with others were crucial to becoming a wise capable of governing himself. The result, taking into consideration the nature of the educational system, was a huge concern on learning by hearth due to cognitive skills. "These men were excellent guardians of the existing order, and they helped maintain a unified nation. Their minds were steeped in Confucian philosophy, their lack of knowledge and skills outside the narrowly defined domains of the imperial exam rendered them incapable of putting up a rebellion, even if the thought had occurred to them" (Zhao, 2014).⁴⁹ The Communist ideal project of education clarified how students must be trained to become "red and expert"⁵⁰: an expert due to the capability to perform a job professionally, be oriented toward efficiency, while redness 'concept encompassed the characteristic of possessing a correct ideology, the socialist mindset, and being perfectly willing to political indoctrination (Hu, 1969). Thus, be guided by a correct ideological belief and devote to work were essential characteristics. Even if perfectly able to understand and believe in the past, these men failed to develop the spirit of innovation (Zhao, 2014). The Leader of the PRC led the system to value the attitude towards productivity and obedience to the Party as emblem of efficiency. It may be argued that these two systems lay major emphasis on cognitive skills such memorization and application of dogma while possessing a conformable ideology and apply technical capabilities to job performances. Against the tide, the spirit of modernization that Deng Xiaoping breathed allowed China to understand how borrowing technological innovation was a confining way to initiate a process toward modernization. A mindset projected onto openness and development was the key point from which to start. In 1872 China's first effort to acquire western technology sending 120

⁴⁹ Y. Zhao (2014) *Who's afraid of the big bad dragon?: Why China has the best (and worst) education system in the world*. John Wiley & Sons, 41.

⁵⁰ C. Hu (Ed.) (1969) *Aspects of Chinese Education*. Teachers College Press.

students to study in the USA through the Chinese Educational Mission (CEM). The experiment, even though positive in term of academic results did not respect Government willing to acquire western technological knowledge respecting the cultural stability of their nation. The education system was still focused on traditional path, more specifically into the technological and scientific field engine of the socialist modernization.

Over the past thirty years, China has launched several reforms aimed to change the educational framework in the wake of Xi Jinping program of inclusiveness an openness towards the external environments. The main reforms institutionalized by the Ministry of Education and Development ⁵¹ have been developed around the key issues of coming closer to international standards. Provide more autonomy to Universities regarding admissions, diversification of subjects taught and opportunities offered (2001); free the system from the power of exams banning the use of them in advancing, for example, from primary to middle school (2014); improve the transparency of admission, opportunities to study abroad (2013) are some of the reforms applied during the last decade.

Image 7: Chinese Formal Education’s features

Confucianism	Communism	Post-Mao	Nowadays
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Formal practices •Memorization •Literacy •Exam- oriented •Cognitive skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Indocrination •Redness and Expertise •Exam-oriented •Ideology •Productivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Technological and scientific fields enhancements •Exam-oriented •Stage of openness (contents and opportunities) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Educational reforms •Closeness to international standards •more 'soft' elements •still developing system

Source: author’s elaboration based on Yong Zhao’s (2014) study

⁵¹http://www.moe.edu.cn/jyb_xxgk/

During these different stages, the focus of the educational system was different; Confucian system, aimed to improve cognitive capabilities and literacy, changed after 1949 due to the willingness of developing a country built on a common ideology and productivity. Two features that built China up as a low-cost global manufactory. Being the manufacturer of the world made the country in the position of focusing more on technical skills development, the ones needed in such context. As said above, now China is shifting its focus towards becoming more than just a producer for others but more on developing new technologies and a new ‘made in China’ label, a synonym for quality. Communication, negotiation, creativity are the key to be developed in order to reach this outcome. Just for this reason the discussion about soft skills relevance and development, already a key issues for world economies, is now emblem of educational reforms. According to Yong Zhao (2014), Chinese system still appears devoted to social control instead of enhancing students’ possibilities of personal development and professional fulfilment. Even if affected by foreign models, Chinese educational system maintained its inner characteristics:

- Impose conformity in terms of belief, ideology and aspirations;
- Suppress intrinsic motivation in favour of an honourable and respectful profession the only valuable accomplishment;
- Exam-oriented educational framework. Exams starting from the imperial exams through the *Gaokao*, The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have always been relevant in determining students’ capabilities, in assessing cognitive skills rather than non-cognitive ones.

Chinese students generally take leading positions according to OECD results ranking index demonstrating Chinese academic excellence at the cost, could be assumed, of creativity. Therefore, compulsory education seems to be a channel to provide theoretical and more moral education instead of being projected toward active learning practices that enhance students in adding their proper contribution to a simpler mechanical and information-based learning (Venter, 2003; Nealy, 2005). Confidence, social skills, motivation, creativity, teamwork are those skills that makes the difference in today’s society. Chinese students overcome well-defined problems but fall in the trap of routines and established formulas that do not work in uncertain environment, do not allow to gain competitiveness through the development of skills needed in a marketed economy (Fallow & Stevens, 2000; Venter, 2003; Fang & Monné, 2010). Along with the institutional innovativeness and reforms

applied a clear sign that demonstrates major attention into this field lies in the fact that more and more “soft” elements are incorporated within traditional education programmes. Many private institutions are now converting their programmes according to Montessori and Waldorf taught as well as universities providing MBA classes specifically made for enhancing soft skills (Chen, 2013). Courses built on simulation, training focused on soft skills enhancement incorporated into Chinese universities, programmes on negotiation, communication and teamwork development are just few examples (Yan *et al.*, 2018). Whether innovative education boosting, uncritical disposition, reliance on examinations, psychological pressure, lack of institutions’ autonomy huge intraregional disparities among public and private are all elements may still constitute limitations to the enhancement of creativity, innovativeness, mental agility and self-expression.

▪ 2.3.2 Vocational Education and training (VET)

The practical field of education systems, also known as Vocational Education, stands its ground especially in the last two decades. Focused on developing practical knowledge by reference to trade, craft or more technological activities, Chinese vocational institutes have always been parallel to traditional schools and colleges. Administratively speaking, these institutions are directed by the Ministry of Education with regard to occupational education, and the Ministry of Human Resources for what concern skills training. Vocational education and Training institutions (VET) in China follows the path of three years programmes after which students could directly enter the labour market (Stewart, 2015). Over time, several efforts have been made politically in advancing academic learning. Conversely, vocational education suffered from low quality and inadequate policies due to the low status in the public mind and influence of Confucian belief “those who do mental labour can govern those whom do manual labour”.⁵² Under the influence of the reforms planned in 2010 by The Ministry of Education, which encompassed primary schools to university, VET attained greater attention. A set of tailored made regulations have been established between 2011 and 2014, years that saw the introduction of many educational practices from abroad and especially from the USA (Guo *et al.*, 2016; Yan *et al.*, 2018).

⁵²V. Stewart, (2015). Made in China: Challenge and Innovation in China's Vocational Education and Training System. International Comparative Study of Leading Vocational Education Systems. National Center on Education and the Economy, 19.

During a public intervention, in the 2013 the President Xi Jinping expressed his strong support to vocational institutions, a respectable choice beyond academic paths in math, science and languages (Stewart, 2015) stressing how system improvements, cooperation among institutions and companies, along with a better quality of courses aimed at creating “comprehensive competencies”, including soft skills are now extremely needed. Problems that could arise regarding both Academic and VET courses for soft skills development have to deal with the belief of teachable and un-teachable nature of soft skills (Nealy, 2005; Yan *et al.*, 2018). Believing the impossibility to teach and acquire soft skills *ex post* means assess self-realisation and personal experience as the only way to develop these skills without including them in school programmes. To support this view, new teaching classes have been experimented; an example provided by Chinese and Australian researchers is the Family Wellbeing programme (FWB) that relies on harmony, a relaxed environment and free classes where foster and help the development of qualities as empathy, creativity, self-awareness through brainstorming, sharing and analysis of real life experiences. Considering “generalist” this way of seeing, the “specifist⁵³” way argues the importance to build programmes in support of soft skills development within disciplinary contexts.

Several steps forward has been made following, as may be argued, the specifist assumption. Assumption widely demonstrated by the relation between soft skills and effective performances. Based on the experience of international institutions as the Secretary Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), Job competency labs and workforce development agencies, China started developing specific programs underpinning the needs for a well-developed workforce and improve students employability within the 21st century. Implemented by the government, many programs focus to enhance soft skills through a skill-based learning process (Gerli, 2002), a mixture of theory, practice, peer evaluation systems and experience within job environments. The Vocational Education Law implemented in 1996 allowed more autonomy to both local governments and institutions and a wider economic participation by external partners through decentralization and social partnership reforms. Courses offer a wide range of possibilities, from developing know-how around specific issues towards implementation of generic critical thinking and teamwork through role-playing and business-games (Guo *et al.*, 2016). As Zhong’s (2017) study demonstrates, advanced practices have been developed by companies operating in Jiangsu province, where soft skills enhancement revolve now

⁵³Moore quoted by K. Kechagias, (2011). Teaching and assessing soft skills. MASS Project, 57.

around specific courses aimed to develop higher knowledge in the field of occupational skills, foreign languages, visual and technical arts. Languages improvement would help in communicating and trade practices along with developing a wider view of the world; knowledge of arts allows a better understanding of Chinese spirit and physical health, while occupational skills prepare students to enter a modern and continuously innovating labour force. In addition, the introduction of a complementary *Gaokao*, specially planned for entering vocational studies, add their contribution to enhance technical-track programmes. Liu Han and Wang Xizhen (2017) add to the existing theories a vision of a system developed around internet platforms and networking. According to their view, these platforms managed by the Government could be helpful to connect different educational levels and at the same time promote faster collaborations between educational and business worlds. Students who equally develop cognitive and non-cognitive skills may face the war of talent in our network-society, nurture a global mind-set, understand the improvements can be brought to strengthen Chinese position as a big player in world economy. Through an in-depth analysis of relevant literature, some challenges still seeking for solutions could be underlined (Stewart, 2015; Guo *et al.*, 2016).

- VET programs suffer from narrow curriculum mainly focused on developing generic and entry-level skills still not in accordance with a changing economy and need for competitiveness;
- Discrepancy among regional development. Costal and Eastern areas saw a relevant development in the last ten years compared to Western and Inner provinces;
- Outdated teaching models and equipment that do not back up experiential learning, one of the main source of efficiency within existing international frameworks;
- Dialogue and cooperation among educational institutions and the business world still seems under-evaluated especially in relation to foreign owned enterprises, generally advanced in terms of employee development;
- Salaries discrepancy. The vast majority of VET students end their education at secondary school starting their work life as Blue-collars. Low salaries, compared to managers and white collars situation, may stand as a barrier;
- Need for occupational standards update. At the moment, VET system still represents the major industry for low skill occupations. Thus, higher qualifications on the base of on demand knowledge and skills must be provided;
- Development in adult education through legal framework and detailed policies.

A persisting criticism against VET system characterises JV and foreign owned companies, as evidenced by additional studies made mainly in Shenzhen province (Venter, 2003). Even if has been registered a significant growth and seems little more de-coupled from those limitations above-mentioned, still result to be less efficient than managerial universities and in work experiences in developing students' non- cognitive attitude.

2.4 On-the-Job training: forms and effectiveness

There is strong evidence that employees' development represents one of the key points in determining a company's success. Several studies covering Chinese HRM system stress how much importance has been put on this subject. According to Li and Sheldon's statement, "formal education and workplace training are necessary investments to enhance the quality of a labour force and to increase productivity"⁵⁴(Li & Sheldon, 2010). Should be evident that the support offered by educational institutions may not be sufficient in order to develop the broad set of skills needed in the workplace; training's key purpose may be seen to rebalance and adjust students perceptions, knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA) gained to company's culture, strategical objectives and the ever-changing market (Xiao, 2002; Dwomoh *et al.*, 2015). Experiences of simulated job tasks and internship are widely applied to conciliate educational and work-based learning process making students in the position to go beyond a passive-learning format and master specific business-related and soft skills within professional context (Hasbullah & Sulaiman, 2002; Andrews & Higson, 2008; De Rossi, 2017). Nonetheless, training activities settled within the organizational framework provide advantages that cannot be acquired otherwise. Even if undeniable expenditures, however On-the-Job Trainings (OJT) unlike generic programs offered by external entities, is advantageous in several respects (Luthans *et al.*,2004). OJT serve as the starting point, along with job rotation and expatriation practices, to enhance employees' tacit knowledge, create certain unique capabilities, strengthen commitment with the company at once (Hatch *et al.*, 2004; Luthans *et al.*,2004). Clearest outcomes of training activities could be differentiated into qualitative and quantitative performance

⁵⁴ Li, Y., & Sheldon, P. (2010). HRM lives inside and outside the firm: Employers, skill shortages and the local labour market in China. *The international journal of human resource management*, 21(12), 2176.

improvements. Quantitative results, as sales increases for manufactory industries, product lines extensions and technological developments, are generally measured according to data provided by comparisons among large samples of firms or specific case studies. These measurements often suffer from too generalized or specific outcomes hardly applicable to different realities (Bartel, 2000). Qualitative improvements, more related to employees' attitude as higher turnover resulted from motivation and satisfaction are easier to be analysed and lead to long-term benefits. Furthermore, the relevant advantage of training activities relies on the fact that knowledge and abilities derived from them are intrinsic to trained resources and so hard to get copied from competitors (Rowold, 2008; De Grip & Sauermann, 2013). As demonstrated by the research carried out by almost twenty Chinese companies together with the Guanghai School of management, training is regarded as one of the ten critical issues for a well-established development in 21st century global market together with retention, performance management, commitment and return of investment on Human capital.⁵⁵

With regard to training's regulatory, Chinese system used to provide OJT exclusively for newly hired workers and interns starting from the regulation of PRC in 1951 until 1975. This way enterprises could train employees and integrate on-demand skills, especially technical, in graduates' portfolio acting as vocational educators; should be noted that vocational education was not well-settled yet (Zhu & Dowling, 2000). Due to the westernization process attributable to foreign influences growth on JV, unsuitable HR practices and soft skills revolution (Björkman & Xiucheng, 2002), in 1993 pieces of training started to be extended on a regular basis to maintain a strong matching between workforce development and market requirements under Educational and Training development plans request. Based on Cooke's (2005) analysis, some elements could still be considered highly Chinese-oriented. Exams, positional training and vocational competency tests⁵⁶, regional disparities, variations according to enterprises ownership and unfair training's allocation within firms played again a relevant role. Even so, this was the very first attempt to overcome lacking in well-defined carrier paths, carrier changes and training activities often nominally planned.

⁵⁵<http://learning.sohu.com/20050304/n224536676.shtml>

⁵⁶ See Fang Cooke (2005) Vocational and Enterprise Training in China: Policy, Practice and Prospect, *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, 10:1, 39.

Several are the efforts still in progress to understand which the essential characteristics of effective soft skills training are. The main question that may arise regards the nature of the skills to be taught and consequential method to use in teaching. Soft skills result from behavioural attitude and field of experience and, as already mentioned, may be considered teachable or innate⁵⁷. Whether arguable or not, these beliefs cannot question how people's orientation surely determine trainings outcomes and success. Deep orientation towards sharing and collaboration surely sustains teamwork and communication development. Conversely, people who value more harmony, relations and obedience to supervisors, as Chinese employees traditionally do, may face difficulties in that (Zhu, 2016). Despite which skills is most desirable to be developed, a first and commonly regarded as crucial step in coaching is the establishment of awareness about tasks, organizational environment and relations (Hampson & Junor, 2009). The teaching system improved through OJT should follow the rhythm of individual learning, for the most part an incremental learning process, which flows through three main stages; (1) Adaptive, in which knowledge acquisition occurs due to imitation and a passive approach, (2) Generative, characterized by a strong initiative in the field of training activities and (3) Transformative, in which employees interact with the environment autonomously and add their personal contribution matured through the process (Mumford *et al.*, 2000; Sessa & London, 2015). Needless to say, if hard skills trainings require performance-based methods, procedures, immediate feedback and formalistic measures of performance, soft skill trainings, on the other hand, rely on trainers and trainees' openness towards activities, managerial supervision and comprehensive feedbacks (Laker & Powell, 2011). In accordance to what said, Chinese enterprises are increasingly innovating their training practices that still remain more prevalent in technical skills development rather than behavioural ones, allow little margin for experiential activities as role play, peer evaluation courses, focus group and diversified situational trainings rather than frontal lessons and didacticism (Cooke, 2005, Liu, 2015; Zhu, 2016). Although a strong lack of knowledge and experience, according to Ng and Siu's (2004) such modern OJT seem the result of a hybridization that combines Chinese characteristics and essential values as relations (关系 *guanxi*) and harmony with an

⁵⁷ K. Kechagias, (2011). Teaching and assessing soft skills. MASS Project, 57

individualistic approach⁵⁸, innovative aspect that may raise as unmatched competitive advantage .

2.5 Job-hopping, Poaching and their relevance on soft skills development

According to what said before, people's education, behavioural attitude and experiences have a profound influence on soft skills development. Although, there are other external phenomena that play a relevant role into this process. Markets globalization, strong competition, war of talent and networking boom are all factors that increasingly affect international economies and workforces conditions. Referring to Chinese marketplace, in addition to these factors, a couple of phenomena can be underlined as barriers to overcome in order to develop a competitive and skilled labour force: Job-hopping and Poaching. The phenomenon of Job-hopping became significant during the last two decades within Chinese enterprises involving people employed in managerial position as well as lower level workers. Wages level is now the determinant from Chinese employees' perspective of the hopping from one job to another. Increased wealth, higher wages and GDP growth demonstrated to be directly related to the overall picture worsening in cities as Shenzhen, Beijing and, most of all, Shanghai. They are facing huge struggles due to the extent of the phenomenon, primary cause of organizational deficiencies, poor performances and in the worst scenario firms' failure (De Rossi, 2017). Researchers from the National Natural Science Foundation of China and the Program for New Century Excellent Talents in University of the Ministry of Education shown as the phenomenon saw a higher growth rate within companies "characterized with lower annual remunerations, lower company reputation and higher job risks. Employees tend to prefer listed companies capable of secure higher economic return and securities" (Zhou *et al.*, 2009 p. 410)⁵⁹. In line with De Rossi's (2017) recommendation, bonuses as guarantees of long-term achievements, improvement of harmonization and commitment among local and migrant employees, an installed strong sense of belonging sharing common mission, improvement opportunities and well-settled carrier path are simple adjustments could stand as fixing settlements.

⁵⁸ Y. C.Ng & N. Y. Siu, (2004). Training and enterprise performance in transition: evidence from China. *The international journal of human resource management*, 15(4-5), 880.

⁵⁹ F. Zhou, J. Tan, & Y. Jian, (2009). Reputation incentive or economic incentive? An empirical study on job-hopping behavior of independent directors. *Frontiers of Business Research in China*, 3(3), 410.

Some argue that job-hopping could be extremely dependent on another important phenomenon affecting Chinese labour market, that is to say poaching. Poaching refers to the recruitment strategy of acquiring the advantage of competitors through their human resources. In other words, stealing talent from competitors on the market (Sheldon & Li, 2013). Widely spread in high-end industry, the poaching system allows companies to acquire knowledge easier and faster undermining competitors' advantages already developed through training, technological improvement and experience on the market. This strategy has several negative implications. Promises of higher wages are one of the main causes enhancing job hopping, unwillingness to sustain training expenses and consequential unskilled labour force. Thus, employees' negative behaviours are encouraged, insane and unfair global competition along with overpaid workers and firms' failures in achieving their strategical objective increasingly undermine market equilibrium. Even though enterprises can hardly demonstrate the phenomenon and consequently adopt measure to constrain the effects, especially in legal terms, some organizational improvement could demonstrate their effectiveness in minimising losses. Rather than focusing on wage raises, which could easily lead to seek for better opportunities and limit employees commitment, long-term contracts, enhance training focused more on specific skills, strengthen the sense of belonging aligning employees and organization's objectives (Li & Sheldon, 2010; Gao *et al.*, 2015).

The straight consequence of these two phenomena on the development of soft skills is the unwillingness to form and train workforce. If on one hand hard skills training are nowadays considered generic and provided by different kind of company, on the other hand training focused on leadership, creativity or negotiation, lead to higher and specific competitive advantage. Due to this relevant outcomes, this kind of training requires increased spending that Chinese firms are not encouraged sustaining at the risk of losing their formed resources by poaching from foreign invested start-up who needs people with a strong understanding of the local market and know-how of the industry (Sheldon & Li, 2013). Understanding how important soft skills and well-developed workers are in today's global market could represent the basic turnaround to overcome these challenges in favour of maintaining the role of one of the bigger international economy. But, how far these strategical reasons could get China through such deep challenges?

Summarizing, Chinese educational systems, whether formal or VET one, whilst is moving towards innovativeness still maintain the vast majority of its inner characteristics. Educators, which still tend to focus on hard competencies and traditional programme paths, are encouraged by Xi Jinping's new insights of openness, growth and institutional reforms straight through the implementation of new practices devoted to strengthen 'soft' components of students' school education. The same can be demonstrated talking about OJT. Historically meant as basilar assistance for newly hired aimed to develop technical competencies within SOEs, the activity of training is now reconsidered and implemented in the light of its effectiveness on performance's enhancement. It may be argued that China, at least at some extent, is setting aside some of the basic cultural reference trying, in parallel, to overcome challenges as job-hopping and poaching in favour of an higher internationalization of practices, relations and consequential economic development. Thus, this attitude looking at changes and improvement would be positive for all the different entities operating within Chinese environment? Would be able to solve the inadequacy in supporting soft skills development through the various stages of education? Answer these question surely will need further analysis and years of experience and experiments. Doubtless, several steps forward and these practices settled to prepare a brand new groundwork for greater developments should be noted.

3. Research

The third and last chapter describes the mixed methods used, results obtained and conclusions of the inquiry. The purpose of the study is to analyse the phenomenon of soft skills mismatch from a double perspective trying to understand if it could be perceived still as a barrier to overcome within the Chinese labour market. Broadly summarizing, the study concerns three macro arguments: soft skills relevance, self-evaluation and training effectiveness. Additional observations concerning motivation and its relation to training activities are provided. In order to adequately investigate the subjects for the debate, a double approach consisting in a qualitative interview and quantitative questionnaires has been adopted. The issues of soft skills relevance, development and training effectiveness are faced from foreign employer and local employees' points of view. Both qualitative and quantitative kinds of research are reported within the chapter followed by a summary and discussion of the results. The literature has mainly been developed with regard to the analysis of organizational and managerial practices and their contribution to soft skills development. Due to the intent of our study, we decided to provide an additional viewpoint through which investigate the results. The analysis has been made through the lens of a cultural dimensions theory and the extent to which these dimensions could affect Chinese attitude towards the skills investigated.

3.1 Research purpose

The literature exploited so far has settled the scenario for the research made in the field of soft skills mismatch on Chinese labour market. As above assessed, soft skills implementation results now mandatory for countries to be proficient, exploit inner competitiveness and explore new opportunities of the international market. The relevance of these inter-personal competencies and attitudes has been prompt by the overall changes, which have affected both Western and Easter economies. Service Economy development, fierce competition along with the willingness expressed by China to gain a different guise within the Global Economy are all elements that served as supports for the development of a discussion concerning soft skills. Is still argued that Chinese labour force is facing a

situation of under-development (British Council, 2015; OECD, 2015), but to what extent this mismatch is still perceived from foreign companies operating now within Chinese environment? Which are the terms according to which this mismatch phenomenon could be generalized?

The basic aim of the inquiry is to answer the following questions:

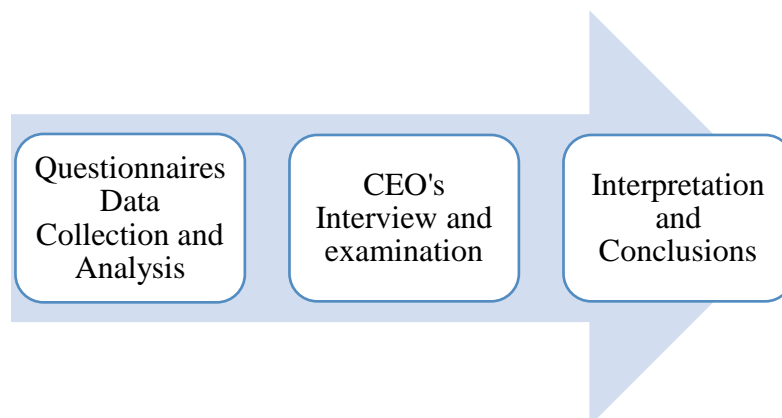
- 1) Is the relevance of the above-mentioned seven soft skills recognized by Chinese workforce?
- 2) If the mismatch phenomenon is still persistent, employees and employer's perception about could converge in terms of causes and solutions?
- 3) Are on-the-job training and external courses, in their various forms, the right tools to sustain soft skills' developments?

Several surveys made into this field have focused on proving the existence of a mismatch problem among Eastern labour markets, more specifically Chinese one. The specific aspect that is going to be developed within this dissertation concerns the explanation of the two different perceptions about the issue, according not only to the CEO that represents the international point of view, but also giving the right importance to local employees' shreds of evidence. The Chinese subsidiary of an Italian Design brand, Hangar Design Group, has served as the location to implement our research. Conversely to MNEs and global known companies that have often been favoured as the ground of research, HDG is an Italian family business operating into the design field. HDG's experience within the Chinese environment gives us the possibility to exploit our examination field from a narrow, friendly and more specific perspective. Both local workers and the Italian CEO taken part in the inquiry through questionnaires, interview and feedbacks on the ground.

3.2 Research Design

This last chapter describes the procedures implemented to acquire the knowledge about the topic through mixed methods. A straight definition of the qualitative or quantitative nature of the applied method results hard to be assessed. Indeed, we could say that the research proposed here is built on a qualitative inquiry due to the explanatory willingness to understand the aspects of the mismatch phenomenon according to two specular point of view within the same company. The company's CEO interview stands as the example of specific qualitative method used for our purpose. The interview, integrally reported below, has been made at a later stage to the collection and analysis of the additional data provided by the questionnaires. At the same time, the deployment of questionnaires makes the study quantitative relevant in some terms; measurable data try to provide additional evidences to the qualitative assumptions. The two parts of the empirical study have been used to underline two different aspects of the research: the employer perception expressed through the interview and employees' view stressed by the questionnaires. The results of the two single analysis are shown below. These two segments of responses are discussed, embedded and configured within chapter conclusions.

Image 8: Research Design



Source: author's elaboration

3.3 Methodology

A descriptive approach has been applied to understand the logic underpinning different perception within the same company with regard to the relevance of the above presented seven soft skills without a straight focus on dependent and independent variables. The questionnaire has been developed in order to measure specific items using either scales, closed and open answers in accordance with the kind of questions asked and feedbacks desired. Three macro-arguments are faced: perception about soft skills relevance, self-assessment and training methods effectiveness. Relevance assessment and self-evaluation sections are built on a five point Likert scale, from one as lowest score up to five, in order to ensure a proper evaluation. A third field devoted to training variety, effectiveness and external training courses is organised on closed and semi-open answer. Based on what seen before, an additional part of the questionnaire has been dedicated to a broad analysis of the best practice to improve employees' motivation towards tasks and organizational objectives; the overall influence that training practices could have on employees is analysed mainly with the support of a semi-opened format. The same topics are treated in accordance to employer's vision about them, about workers' condition of development and the specific context of the company. The specular data, once collected, are analysed and proposed here as proofs to demonstrate the result requested from the question driving the inquiry.

3.4 Subject Selection

The choice of developing the research thanks to the support of an Italian brand operating in Mainland China find its roots in the possibility to take advantage of a company that possesses a field of knowledge and expertise close to international environments but, at the same time, has the opportunity to develop a specific field of experience within Chinese market. This way, a comparison in terms of real experience burdens between soft skills assessment of the two different contexts should be more significant. Several studies addressed the issue of soft skill development on Western countries; this study tries to deal with this question with regard to the foreign perception and local one. Both employees and the CEO have shown their complete support and availability within the research field. As mentioned above, we asked employees to fill a tailored questionnaire about their perception,

self-evaluation within soft skills field and training effectiveness. The sample is composed of twelve respondents, all of them HDG staff members employed on project and product design. The questionnaire has been presented to them in anonymous form trying to make them free to answer according to their real feelings and beliefs. Although the anonymity, a broad segmentation of the target could be made in relation to the understandings of the interview and monitoring during the period of internship.

Image 9: Segment's characteristics

Total number of employees: twelve

Characteristics	Mean
Age	25
Male	2
Female	10
Degree	12
Work/ study experiences abroad	10

3.5 Hangar Design Group (HDG) history



Hangar Design Group' idea arises from the inner desire of delivering quality and beauty. Their strategies and design projects aim to help brands in developing their idea starting from the very first step of brainstorming and giving them tailored specificities, significance along with a global impact. "Ideas, not Airship"⁶⁰ is Hangar's motto, the signature of their personal intent of increasing brands' uniqueness and competitiveness through design that arises from concrete commitment but evolves around creativity. The firm was established in 1980 in Mogliano, Italy. The beginning of this experience has been inspired by the motivations and ideals of Alberto Bovo and Sandro Manente, co-founders. Firstly in Milan at the beginning of 2000, then America one year later, HDG started early its journey to the openness and internalization of their approach mixing a fresh up-to-date approach with the traditional Italian taste. 2015 marked a turning point: the dream of beauty of two Italian lands in Shanghai. Just as said before, China started to be the final destination not only for manufacturing industries seeking for low-cost workers, but also for firms within the fashion, luxury and design field on the lookout for new customers able to understand and perceive the reliability of their products. Several were Italian brands and the new generation of Chinese young rich and middle class could suit their requirements. HDG has followed the rhythm towards the new land. But exactly what have been the reasons pushing the Italian company to do this huge step forward? Marco Fortini, CEO of the Shanghai's field office, pointed out the highlights to us in the given interview.

"Strategic reason in terms of market size have been, of course, a relevant issue that we took into account. However, the main reason stays into the 'new' characteristics of Chinese customers. They are asking services for creating, revamping or rebranding their companies for Mainland China inner market; but they wanted into a particular

⁶⁰ <https://hangar.it/approach/>

way different from what they used to, with a specific taste that is increasingly closer to modern vibes and Italian taste”.

Several have been the development reached by the company within not only the territory of Mainland China, but also Taiwan and Hong Kong. The Shanghai experience made HDG in the position to be worthy of important awards as the China awards for the Design issued by Fondazione Italia-Cina and take numerous chances to share their passion and work with colleagues and student , as at the Lectio Magistralis at the Design Department of Shanghai’s Tongji University. We could say that China was a challenge that Hangar successfully overcame, and now is a constantly source of success for this Italian brand. Following the global development of networking, HDG is strengthening its presence through digital communication and competitive strategies both for their own activities and for their clients. Contents creation, advertising, social content, digital marketing, online and offline media planning are just some of the activities provided by the company, now distinguishing features of their work and main reasons for the success obtained on Chinese ground.

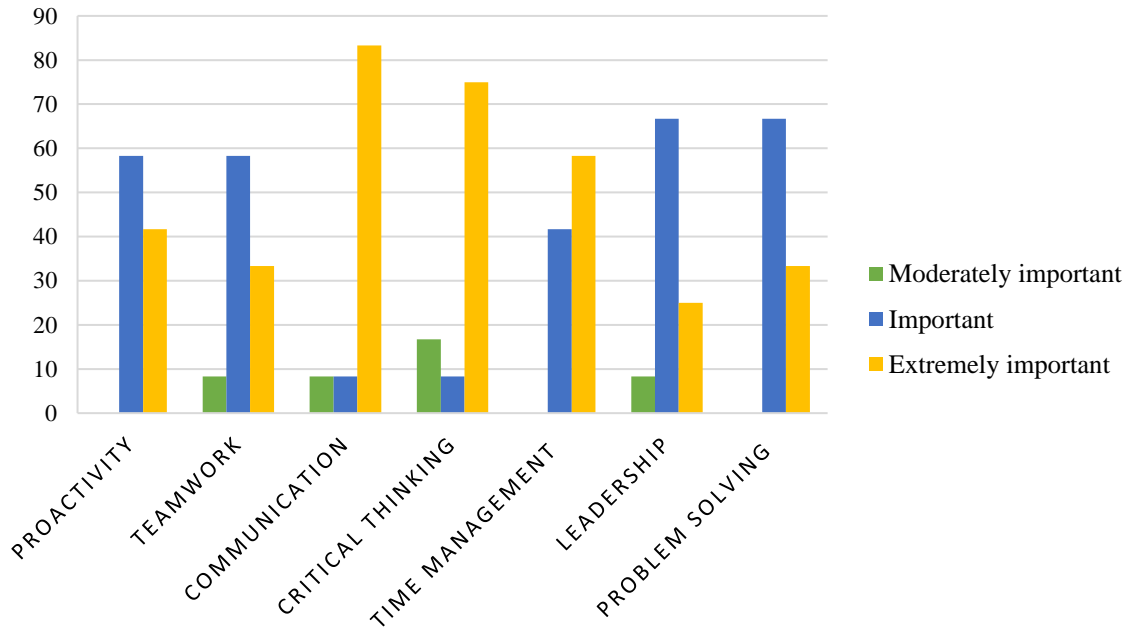
3.6 Data collection and analysis

Several studies, already mentioned in the literature review, has served as the basis of the current research. Looking at the conflicting assumption proposed by Mckinsey, British council and HAYS the intent is to analyse the following data with the prospectus of understanding if China’s soft skills mismatch, following Mckinsey and British council theories, is still a relevant issue or is going under a huge revolution towards a complete resolution, as affirmed by HAYS organization. These studies have already been a source of inspiration for several scholars and academics researches in the field. Different are the dissertations made to evaluate the average age of under-skilled workforce (30- 40 years), the impact on Chinese GDP of the phenomenon or the extent to which a specific industrial sector rather than another one is affected by the phenomenon. Keeping in mind time and target size limitations that concern our study, the survey stands as a trial to highlights the positions about the topic of a foreign company and Chinese employees trying to provide a different key to interpretation. The following questionnaires results are reported and analysed as well as the interview, integrally included and summarized. The findings are investigated and finally exploited in the section dedicated to research conclusion.

3.6.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire, as explained before, has been developed around three macro-arguments. The first section intends to explore employees' awareness of soft skills relevance in today's labour market analysing at the same time how they evaluate their personal capabilities into this field. The questions format is built on a five point Likert scale to investigate relevance and self-evaluation about the seven soft skills academically examined in the second chapter. The scale's values follow the order of 1-not important, 2-slightly important, 3-moderately important, 4-important, 5- extremely important. In accordance with the answers collected the graph reported below contains just three of the five scale's points, the ones linked with the choices of the target. The reason is of purely stylistic nature. Just to recap, proactivity, teamwork, communication, critical thinking, time-management, leadership and problem solving are the skills taken into account.

Image 10: Soft skills relevance



As the graph shows, the average results that these soft skills obtained in terms of importance vary among the levels of “moderately important”, “important” and “extremely important”. None of the items registered scores of one (“not important) and two (“slightly important). As a result, the entire package of seven skills benefits from a good perception from employees’ point of view. On one hand, 83.3% of the respondents ranks communication skills as the most important to have followed by critical thinking with 75% of “extremely important” ranking. On the other hand, both leadership and problem-solving are considered as important to have, not a must-have, with 66.7% of votes followed by proactivity and teamwork (58.3%). In the light of our findings, is possible to summarize an overall ranking of each skill according to the level of importance expressed with the numeric evaluation of a Likert-style scaling. A mean of all the answers is attached to the data presented into table N 10. Table values remain very close to the fourth level of the scale, from a highest point of 4.7 for communication to the lowest 4.2 given to leadership and teamwork. As a result of that, we can assume how all the presented skills are equally important according to HDG’s employees. Moreover, the results confirm how communication still stands as favourable skill to possess, while teamwork and leadership occupy the lowest positions still remaining within the dimension of “important” skills.

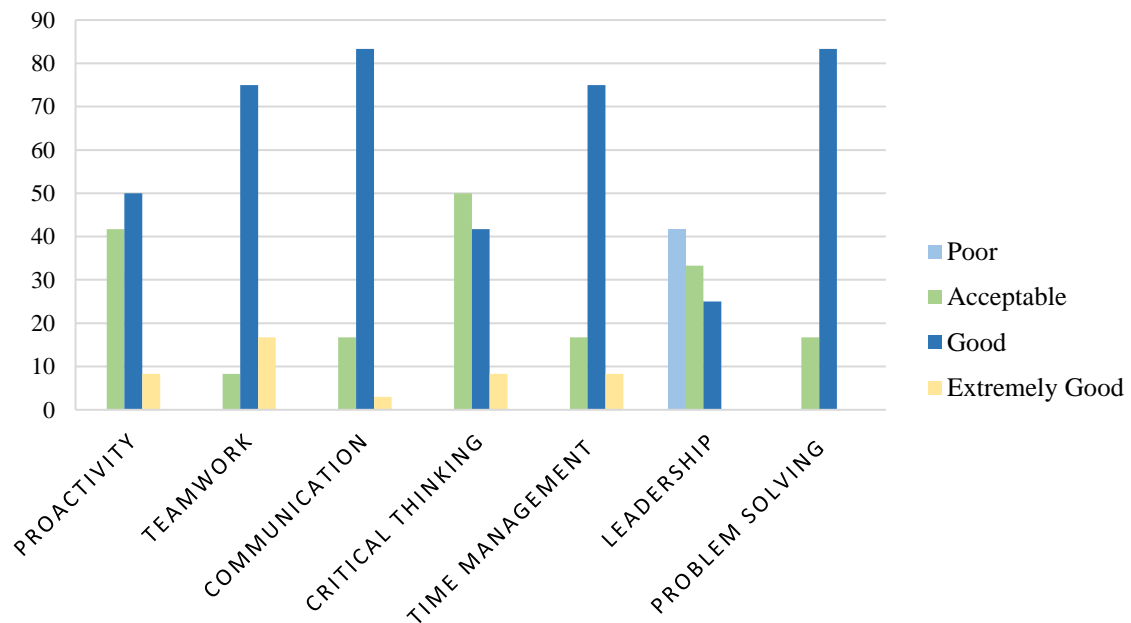
Image 11: Soft skills’ ranking

SOFT SKILLS	MEAN ON RELEVANCE
Communication	4.75
Time-Management	4.58
Critical Thinking	4.5
Proactivity	4.41
Problem solving	4.3
Teamwork	4.25
Leadership	4.16

* 1 = Not important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = moderately important, 4 = important, 5 = extremely important

The second section of the questionnaire relates to employees' self-evaluation with regard to the seven soft skills. As the previous section, the questions are built on a five-point scale which assesses the proficiency developed into each skills from the level one "very poor" to the level 5 "extremely good. Seems worthy to mention how, conversely to the graph presented above, the one below is composed by four of the five variables of the research. None of the skills has been ranked as very poorly developed.

Image 12: Self-evaluation on soft skills



Communication skill, exactly as within the ranking on skills' relevance, is perceived as important and consequently well-developed with an 83.3% of the segment responding "good". On the same level has been putted Problem solving followed by teamwork and time-management with the 75% of "good" answers. Furthermore, 50% of the target gives a positive evaluation of proactivity. Critical thinking results to be the only skill with 50% of the evaluation positioned on the "acceptable" level. Lastly, leadership that as we already said seems to be least appreciated and developed with 41.7% of the respondents evaluating

their level of proficiency poorly developed. A comprehensive overview of the results assesses how the skills are all ranked within a “good” evaluation; communication still represents the most important skill while leadership occupies again the latest position. Just two of twelve people ranked “extremely good” their proficiency level on soft skills.

As can be seen in Table 13, the mean of vast majority of the skills is about 3.7 except for teamwork and leadership that, respectively with 4 and 2.8, are seen as the most and least developed. In contrast to skills classification about the relevance, self-evaluation section represents a more diversified context in which employees mostly evaluate their skills within an “acceptable” level. Although Communication has been evaluated as the most relevant skills, when it comes to a peer-evaluation of their capabilities, employees ranked teamwork as the better developed among the other skills.

Image 13: Ranking of self-evaluated soft skills

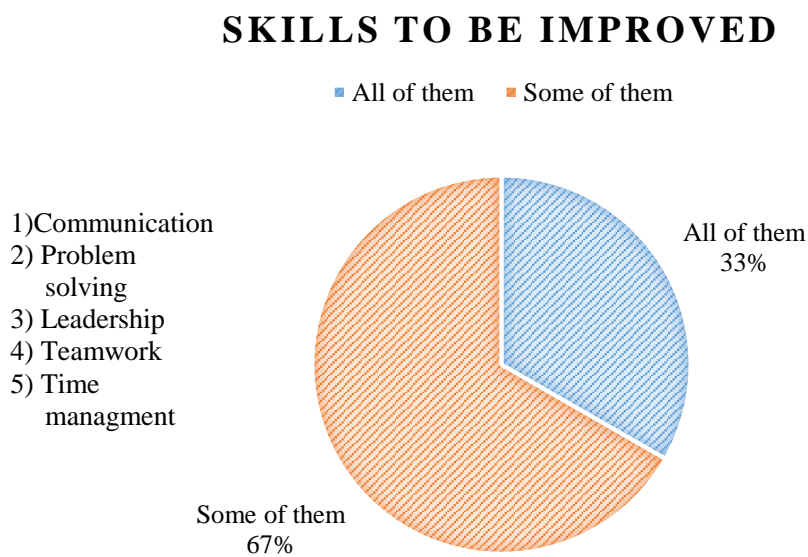
SOFT SKILLS	MEAN ON SELF-EVALUATION
Teamwork	4
Time- management	3.9
Communication	3.8
Problem solving	3.8
Proactivity	3.6
Critical thinking	3.5
Leadership	2.8

* 1 = Very poor, 2 = poor, 3 = acceptable, 4 = good, 5 = extremely good

The third part of the questionnaire intends to investigate issues related to soft skills training in terms of structures and effectiveness. In order to analyse every single aspect of the subject, the third section is composed of eight questions about skills development, training offerings from the company, training attendance and some suggestions to broadly improve the service. According to the answers collected, we can develop research's findings on three macro-categories.

I. Soft skills underdevelopment

Image 14: Skills requiring improvements



In relation to the aspect of soft skill underdevelopment, our sample of twelve people expresses on the vast majority the need for activities implemented to improve soft skills development. More specifically, 66.7% of them recognized the urgency for improvement related to the above-mentioned seven soft skills; in particular, communication, teamwork and problem solving are the skills considered to be in huge need for development among others followed by leadership and time management skills. When asked to identify which,

according to them, are the reason for this under-development phenomenon, the vast majority of them (58.3%) addressed the main causes to the inadequacy of Chinese formal education still guided by traditional academic paths not in line with global market requirements nowadays. Secondly, training activities prompt without a straight structure and reasoned purposes represent another important issue (41.7%) that limit skills development process within the company.

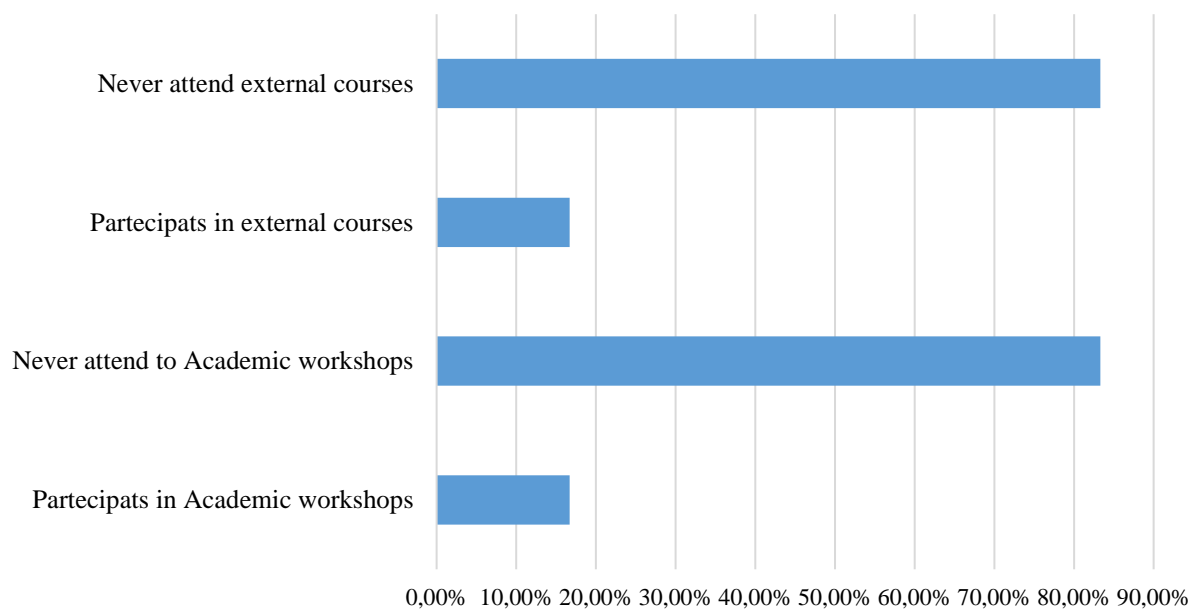
II. On-the-job trainings

When it comes to go deeper into the analysis of the activities proposed by the company, HDG in this case, the answers have exposed two important aspects in our opinion. When asked whether the company is used to organized activities made to support personal skills development, our segment of respondents has split into two different segments answering differently even if part of the same team. 58.3% of the respondents assumed that the company do not provide any sort of training activity into this field; on the other hand, the remaining 41.7% resulted to take part in activities, both practical and theoretical, settled by the same company. A relevant information that helps to understand the bivalent nature of the answers proposed results from the interview carried out with the CEO who explain how the company schedules training practices, especially internal meetings, based on cross-cultural comparison about business practices and staff members' attitude, practical case histories in favour of the development of employees' proactive and problem-solving attitude. Moreover, as said by Mr. Fortini, the company manages to send several employees to the Italian Headquarter for training periods. This last practice has been further demonstrated during the internship period in which two of the staff members have arranged by the willing of the CEO to spend certain periods around the Italian headquarters for training purposes.

III. Academic and external training courses

The last aspect inquired into this second section of the questionnaire intends to analyse whether Chinese workers are used to attending courses and workshop, internal to academic institutions or proposed by external entities, related to topics as workplace requirements, skills needed and soft skills' application on the job.

Image 15: Attendees in workshops about soft skills



The majority of our twelve people tester respond to the question negatively. 83,3% of the respondents never attended to Academic workshops, career days neither courses settled by external entities about the relevance of well-developed soft skills package, how to improve personal capabilities and which are the skills needed in today's labour market. All subjects of the utmost importance to improve, as demonstrated, our employability profile. Because of that, when they were asked if these practices, in their opinion due to their lack of experience into the subject, would have helped to develop some of these skills, 80% of the respondent answered positively. So, are students and employees lacking interest into

developing knowledge about the field or is the system that does not support this kind of improvements?

The last section of the questionnaire tries to broadly exploit the relation between employees' motivation and training. As said before, if scheduled and well structure according to company's objectives, training practices make employees feel the company interested in their personal growth as they really are sources of value within the organization itself. The decision to invest money for improving the human capital have positive feedbacks both on efficiency and people commitment (Björkman & Xiucheng, 2002; Ng & Siu, 2004; Zhang, 2012). According to our tester, a supportive environment results to be essential to let motivation flourish. In line with what said before, training practices belong to the field of intrinsic contributions focusing on the process of personal development instead of efficiency and economic benefits. Keeping in mind this inner characteristic, the principal aim of the questions proposed was to understand the extent to which Chinese employees could perceive the advantage and motivation coming from intrinsic contributions to professional and personal development rather than just from extrinsic retribution and wage raises. Looking at a general overview, Chinese workforce still seems to value more extrinsic remuneration than intrinsic ones both in terms of improving motivation and rewarding goals achieved. From the perspective of a foreign brand, this could be seen as a limitation. Indeed, several step forward have been made to enhance the value of extrinsic rewards as additional trainings, more autonomy and challenging tasks, higher responsibility;

3.6.2 Interview with HDG Shanghai CEO

▪ HGD has already 2 years of experience operating in the Chinese market. What do you think are the main challenges of hiring and dealing with Chinese employees?

- Several challenges are common occurrence if you work within Chinese business environment in which, of course, firms have to deal with local workforce. A shallow attitude in the preliminary study before approaching the work affecting project development, fuzzy carrier aims, low attitude towards long-term commitment and lack of transparency in terms of real feeling toward work environment are complex issues that the company faced during these four years of activity

▪ In your opinion, what kind of so-called “soft skills” are the most relevant in working within an environment where consumer and partners are Chinese? And why?

- I. Proactivity: being able of proposing solutions and way of doing without being obliged to do it. Something related to an attitude towards creativity and initiative.
- II. Problem-solving and critical thinking: the extent to which employees are autonomous and capable of dealing with unexpected problem considering pros and cons.
- III. Teamwork and Communication: the capability of working well together feeling free to express their opinion through all company’s different levels.
- IV. Leadership: the capability to guide colleagues toward achieving company goals.
- V. Time management: Respect for deadlines and capability of organizing work schedule.

- I think that proactivity, autonomously deal with unexpected problem developing problem-solving and critical thinking capabilities are the most valuable nowadays. In addition, are the most challenging to find in average Chinese employee and so they are more relevant also in the relationship with clients.

▪ Soft skills have been one of the main discussed topics in the last few years especially talking about strategic assets. Taking the skills already mentioned as a reference, do you think that Chinese workforce still needs to be educated about this topic? Or

maybe is the HR system that must shape soft skills requirement looking at different cultures specificities?

- I think that the right solution should be in between, a compromise between education of the employee and adaption on HR side. The formal education should accommodate market trends forming students for their sake and future possibilities. Along with education, companies' HR managers have the duty to increase new hires awareness about the topic and capabilities according to both firms specificities and international requirements.

▪ Talking about the specific situation and environment of your company, are you used to organize training activities to support personal skills development? If yes, what kind of activities?

- We use to have internal meetings with education purposes. According to the practices we have in our offices in Europe, these meeting are useful for comparing with practical case histories in favour of the development of employees' proactive and problem-solving attitude. We also managed to send several employees to the Italian Headquarter for training periods.

▪ In your opinion, what do you think is the most suitable and effective approach to training for Chinese employees, a practical, theoretical or a mix of both?

- I suppose that the practical approach tend be more useful, facilitates a faster development of skills and improves productivity.

▪ Some studies show how employees tend to be resistant to change when we talk about soft skills that, at some point, concern with personal attitude. What do you think would be the impediments to such programmes effectiveness?

- Our Chinese experience taught me that the main impediment is that employees think that remarks on their work may be intended as personal and cultural criticism. They perceive suggestions like we pretend to do everything in the "western way" and so to force them to abandon their culture and way of doing. This misleading perception of Western enterprises that do not value their cultural background, university education, previous work and their

way to relate with clients and partners is one of the main barrier to overcome for an organizational network oriented towards communication and teamwork.

▪ Some researchers start to speak of a ‘skills gap’ in China, where employees are under skilled compared with foreign employees and managers. Yet the nature of the skills gap remains obscure. Do you agree? Do you think that this problem can be really assessed?

- Honestly, I agreed until two years ago. Nowadays the problem seems to be , cause mostly of the employee we are hiring are Chinese people that had study or working experience abroad and so their attitude is for sure more flexible and somehow “contaminated” in a positive way.

▪ Do you think that motivation can influence some or all of these personal skills development in the workplace? If yes, what are the most effective motivators that can be used with Chinese employees?

- Yes I think so. Motivation is the principal force to enhance people commitment, proficiency and desire to grow within the company’s environment. Considering the complexity of an organizational context, is hard to define just an effective strategy; improve awareness about their role within the company, underline the importance of their contribution to solve the problem and accomplish the objective. Settle challenging tasks, make them in the position to switch from task to task and plan in the long period certainly are useful methods.

▪ For the extent of your knowledge and experience till now, how Chinese formal education and cultural background can affect the development or lack of specific personal skills?

- Formal education system certainly represent the first element of affection in students, so future employees, development. Avoid taking responsibilities, a close mind attitude are just two features that according to our field of experience are noteworthy influences attributable to Chinese education strictly dependent from a passive attitude of students. Moreover, could be argued that relevant misunderstandings of Western culture and organizational

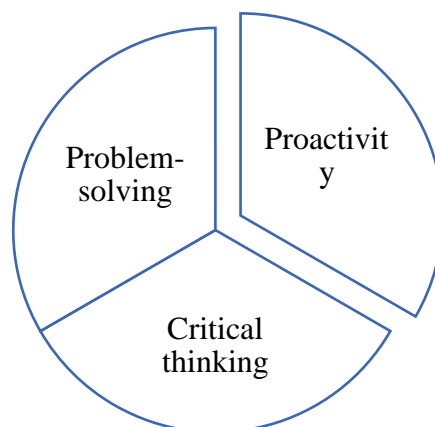
management often saw as impositions results from educational and organizational heritages, which benefit from a strong culture but at the same time a little closed against others.

▪ **If this lack of personal skills can be really assessed, which kind of effects we will expect on employees performances?**

- Probably a more independent attitude and so time saving are characteristics that can be developed and have already been developed at some extent. At the same time a higher awareness about their skills and so a clearer idea about their carrier paths in the long-term perspective is something that still need to be improved.

In the light of the interview concerned, several challenges are common occurrence if you work within Chinese business environment in which, of course, firms have to deal with local workforce. According to the CEO Fortini, lack of long-term commitment, a different attitude towards tasks and personal development are complex issues that the company faced during these four years of activity. The double approach used in our research give the chance to underline two different but at the same time complementary viewpoints: Employees and their perception and self-evaluation of the presented seven soft skills while the perception of their capabilities according to employer view. Proactivity, problem-solving and critical thinking are considered the most challenging to find and consequently they are more valuable in average Chinese employees.

Image 16: Most challenging skills to find among Chinese employees



Starting from this knowledge, we should go deeper into the analysis of the widely discussed skills mismatch and the perception that the CEO has about. The three skills already mentioned still result to be undeveloped if compared to the overall contexts in which the firm operates. The hard challenge of matching skills requirements results from an educational format that pushes students to perceive the learning process as passive and so the inability to develop critical thinking and problem solving results to be the obvious result. Nevertheless, it seems that employees' suitability is slowly getting better due to enhancements that Chinese government has implemented into the field of international agreement and opportunities for students. Quoting Fortini's words, much more Chinese employees have wider possibilities of engaging study or working experience abroad. Their attitude, as a result, is more flexible and influenced in a positive way from western practices. Impose a Foreign mindset may stand as a barrier to overcome instead of being a contribution to employees development, Fortini explains. Chinese workforce cannot work using practices or approaches that are completely distant from their local behaviour. A "contaminated" approach aware of the multi-faceted context we have to deal with together with tailor made on-the-job training, such as meetings proposed by HDG, could be the successful resolution for the slowly changing Chinese workforce development. Motivation should be conceived as the keystone. People who perceive their role within the company fully exploited and their contribution strongly valued will be tempted to increase their commitment also through the personal development prompt by skills acquisition. Training practices can be used by firms as a tool for both enhancing employees-company relations providing, at once, the opportunity to get through deficiencies in favour of company's efficiency.

3.7 Data discussion

Broadly summarizing, questionnaires and interview serve us as tools in order to understand the positions of the two subjects of the inquiry in relation to two macro arguments: relevance and self-evaluation on soft skills as well as evaluation of training effectiveness. An additional section of the research is dedicated to a pioneering analysis on motivation.

1. Relevance and self-evaluation on soft skills. The aforementioned soft skills received an overwhelming average of positive feedbacks in terms of importance from employees. Communication stands as preferable skills to possess, while teamwork and leadership are ranked at the lowest positions of worker's ranking. When it comes to evaluate their personal level of proficiency on the subject, the overall perception vary among good and acceptable levels of development in all of them. Teamwork, even if ranked among the latest in term of importance, results to be extremely developed conversely to critical thinking and leadership. In accordance with both sides of the analysis, the skill of leadership has been ranked in last place with regard of both relevance and self- evaluation factors. Consistent with the proposed considerations, employees see communication first, ranked just before teamwork and problem solving, as skills most in demand for improvements. According to Hangar Shanghai's CEO, critical thinking, proactivity and problem solving are the most important skills to be developed and, at the same time, the most challenging to find within the average Chinese employee. The evaluation proposed by the CEO seems to be convergent to local employees' one with regard to relative importance and lack of development of these three skills. Inquiring underdevelopment reasons, staff members reveal the inadequacy of Chinese formal education, still guided by traditional academic paths not in line with global market requirements, and training activities lacking of straight structure and reasoned purposes as relevant limits to skills development process. Likewise, the company confirms employees' statement considering the formal education system unsuitable to accommodate market trends due to its focus on student's passive attitude. Lack of awareness about soft skills significance for the Business context and mind closeness to foreign managerial practices are additional barriers. These findings result to be in line with Zhao's and Li's statements elucidated in the second chapter.

Moreover, remarks are often perceived as personal and cultural criticisms and consequently, communication and teamwork cannot find a breeding ground.

2. When employees are asked to measure OTJ training effectiveness, answers are quite fuzzy. Most of the segment assess how the combination between practical and theoretical practices results to be the most suitable solution to be applied within Chinese workforce. A relevant issue arises from the fact that according to employees' perception about the topic the company does not provide training activities of any sort. In contrast to this statement, Hangar's CEO demonstrated how the company, as well as the other headquarters settled around the world, is used to schedule training activities. These activities, generally organized in form of internal meetings, are built on cross-cultural practices, case analysis and direct feedback on projects. If agreed, employees can also benefit from training periods at the Italian headquarters. In line with his focus on productivity, practical activities are more useful due to their contribution to a faster development of the abilities requested. The problem arises when the two sides of the company, employees and employer, have different perceptions about the same topic. Some possibilities according to our research could explain the reasons why there are such contrasting ideas. Maybe this mismatch could be the result of previous work experience in which employees were used to attend specific courses and activities structured and scheduled specifically as training aimed to improve soft skills package of its employees; the opposite situation maybe also be the cause for the misleading perception: most of Chinese companies still see trainings as mandatory only when it comes to technical capabilities, when employees are just hired within the companies or when training serves as an activity made to solve deficiencies of any sort. Since the company decided to adopt less structured forms of trainings, such as mentioned before, this could be source of misleading perception and limitation in terms of effectiveness. The question that arise could be seen as self-evident, but to what extent the mandatory and highly structured nature of trainings, typical for global MNE, are predictors of efficacy and commitment from employees' perspective?

3. Our tester does not deviate from the expectations already predicted by the literature overviewed in terms of motivators. A strong preference to extrinsic motivation forms has been highlighted, money remunerations when it is about promotions or rewards for goal achievements. Motivation, considered one of the principal forces to enhance commitment and willingness to grow within a company, seems to be increased by intrinsic rewards. This is CEO's thought on this matter. In accordance with his idea, give challenging tasks, highlight employees' role within the company and improve awareness about their possibilities and carrier paths are all practices that undoubtedly are effective.

3.8 Limitations

Some distinctions should be made in order to assess inquiry limitation and strengths. The research has been developed during a two months period aimed to intern in HDG Chinese office located in Shanghai. The internship has been a chance to carry out both questionnaire and interview, looking at the variables and aspect of the inquiry at first-hand. As a fully integrated component, the study has been implemented through the already mentioned methods while leaving some room for additional hints coming from observation activities. The sample examined comprehends twelve people within the age range of twenty-three to twenty-seven years, both males and females, all born and raised in Mainland China provinces. A large majority of them attended university, master courses or work experiences abroad. Therefore, during the process of findings analysis the sample is shown as the main feature to be representative of the new generation of young Chinese that still possesses the broadly conceived 'Chinese heritage' with a more global mind-set. This aspect should be noted as a distinctive feature of the qualitative method. On the other hand, the small size of the analysed segment, the lack of comparison with specular companies along with the anonymity of respondent could be seen as research barriers and aspect to develop in further examinations. Furthermore, must be taken into account that the lack of specific control variables makes harder to provide a comprehensive picture of the cultural asset. As a consequence, outcomes

result to be partial and applicable only to narrow segments. Different cultural assets influence how the subjects analysed, in this case, the Foreign CEO and local employees, attribute specific dimensions to each skills and their domains. Emphatic abilities that generally are valued positively from western perspective, may be replaced by task-focused, efficient and autocratic view in other culture, especially Asian ones. The explanatory nature of the study has been introduced at the beginning. Therefore, It would be advisable to evaluate results, methods, considered perspectives along with suggestions and try to apply them to further researches in order to assess research reliability and validity.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the study outcomes, it is possible to highlight some basic assumptions in order to answer the questions that drive the research. With regard to the relevance of the seven soft skills from local employees' perception, it could be argued that conversely to the studies analysed underlying our dissertation, Chinese workforce is going through a process of awareness development. The context of an international brand, which HDG is just an example, as well as increasing opportunities to study and work abroad allow staff members to develop a global understanding of the skills needed to succeed in such complex and cross-cultural environments. According to questionnaires results, the entire package of soft skills obtained segment's positive feedbacks in terms of relevance. More specifically, as assessed above, communication stands as preferable skills to possess, while leadership occupies the last position. Employees' evaluations integrate CEO statement, which assesses critical thinking, proactivity and problem-solving as most in-demand and relevant skills to possess. The huge mismatch expertise called for is now slightly decreasing, as demonstrated. The phenomenon that reached its peak during the past two years seems now improving due to both efforts made by companies in providing adequate training and workforce's awareness about the requirements of our ever-changing market. In spite of this, employer viewpoint converges with employees one sustaining that further efforts still need to be made in order to sustain a steady enhancement. With regard to locals, communication first, ranked just before leadership and critical thinking, are considered to be extremely needed to be improved. On the other hand, critical thinking, proactivity and problem solving are the most deficient from the employer's perspective. Unsuitable formal education system, low level of awareness about the level of proficiency needed, mind closeness to foreign managerial practices and training activities lacking of a straight structure and reasoned purposes are considered relevant limits to skills development. Training structures and effectiveness are together with motivation fields subject to differences between the two subjects viewpoint of our investigation. For what concern training, the data extrapolated are consistent with the theories proposed on the second chapter. By focusing on human resource field, a relevant mismatch in understanding which practices can enhance skills development can be underlined. It could be argued that this is the result of different background for employees coming from Chinese enterprises and foreign participants to Chinese market. As said, Chinese HR system started to explore new

types of trainings and extend them to all kind of employees, not just newly hired, since 1993. Far too little have been tried in order to enhance experiential and behavioural learning about interpersonal capabilities, potentially due to a decennial focus put on technical field of expertise, phenomena as job hopping and poaching that discourage companies from invest in human resource training. As a consequence, local workforce is not used to be trained and foreign enterprises that are moving towards the increasing necessity to train employees' inter-personal capabilities to make them proficient in the modern knowledge economy do not find within Chinese market employees who satisfy their requirements.

Moreover, extrinsic remunerations seem to have a decisive effect on Chinese workforce motivation compared to intrinsic ones related to personal fulfilment as may be considered the process of training and growth within an organizational context. Several have been and still are the attempt made to understand which are the drivers of motivation, if can be generalized as assume the universalist theory, maybe directed by the job content or by hygiene factors as salary, company's policies and working conditions. In accordance with the literature and the observation activity carried during the internship program, it may be argued that Chinese system relies heavily on motivational practices that convey into the extrinsic categorization using, above all, remunerations. Chinese employees perceive superiors' loyalty and gratitude when remunerated with material concerns rather than intrinsic factors⁶¹(Fisher & Yuan, 1998). On a practical level, can be summed up in specific HR practices in term of reward system and performance appraisal. The compensation system tends to follow a hierarchical, long-term basis and be seen as a status projection rather than achievements. Except for service industries and SOE, Chinese collectivist culture often results in a tendency towards low differentiation of pay in an egalitarian reward system, reflecting a need to minimise competition and foster harmony in the workplace⁶² (Jackson & Bak, 1998). On the other hand, appraisal practices even if strictly focused on saving employee' face, formal mechanisms individual goal setting, direct feedback on performances discussions and periodical appraisals are expected. Better bonus systems, higher responsibilities and commitment, frequent trainings are practices Western firm are already used to that are increasingly applied by local managers (Li *et al.*, 2014).

⁶¹ C. D. Fisher, & X. Y. Yuan (1998). What motivates employees? A comparison of US and Chinese responses. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 9(3), 526.

⁶² T. Jackson, & M. Bak, (1998). Foreign companies and Chinese workers: employee motivation in the People's Republic of China. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 11(4), 288.

Start focusing on organizational culture enhancement to make staff member in the position to accept, make efforts and value this kind of commitment with the company, allows to perceive these practices as strengths and contributions of the enterprise, reason for retain and career implementations may strengthen labour force growth effectively networking employees and company's goals.

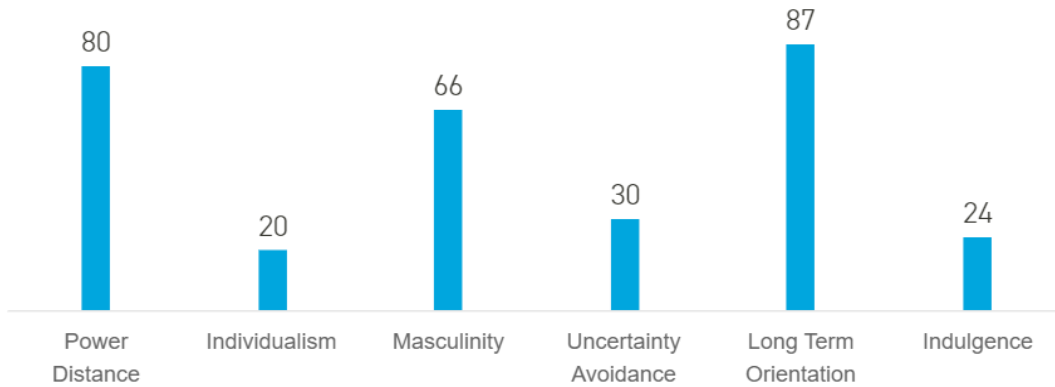
A cultural perspective: hints for future research

Despite the assumption according to which huge steps forward have been made by China in order to reconsider and give the proper recognition to soft skills relevance, for the purpose of our research we decided to provide an additional viewpoint through which look at the subject. Cultural dimensions affection theories may be exploited in order to understand the extent to which these dimensions could affect Chinese attitude towards the skills investigated, which could be the reasons underpinning the difficulties that Chinese labour force had and, at some point, still has in developing these interpersonal skills. Even though the lack of references from specific literature, this study tries to explore if Hofstede's framework may highlight the extent to which specific cultural dimensions affect skills development in accordance to the definitions of soft skills already settled. The idea is to see whether these dimensions, already explained above⁶³ could influence positively soft skills development or not. Chinese social system is built on a millennial historical heritage characterized by a strong hierarchical framework, high uncertainty avoidance and social conformism in favour of the collective wellness, a Communism legacy. Strict focus on relations and collectiveness nourished over individualism, formality, attention toward the value of 面子 *mianzi*⁶⁴, a circular notion of time with a long-term perspective still are essential component of the "being Chinese" construct. Although Chinese tradition tend to discourage aggressiveness in favour of the harmony and community wellness, restrain is something unborn in Chinese mentality where leisure is not mentioned if can limit productivity and efficiency.

⁶³ For further clarifications see note n. 22

⁶⁴ Meaning of reputation and prestige that is stressed through all the stages of Chinese society, from school grade to work success. For a deeper understanding consult Lin Yutang, *My Country and my People*, 1935.

Image 17: Chinese culture according to Hofstede



Source: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/china>

All these cultural attitudes and peculiarities have been evaluated, their influences have been applied to the business environment by Hofstede insights (2018) which report is mentioned above. Inequalities are considered acceptable, employees tend to rely heavily on superiors feedbacks avoiding go beyond their duties and tasks are accomplished in the light of supervisors' guidelines. Top-down communication, achievements based on people status, authoritarianism are just few features. Hofstede's approach was developed on the assumption that these specific cultural dimensions contribute developing a psychological and interpersonal attitude that can be defined peculiar to each country taken in exam. Starting from this knowledge, we may argue that soft skills, considered as results of a complex mixture of personal attitude, educational, contextual as well as cultural influences, are to some extent dependent from these cultural variables. Soft skills at a certain point could be seen, according to the definitions proposed within the first chapter, as the peak of the iceberg made of people's psychological and social attitudes. These attitudes undoubtedly are determined by the values underpinning the country in which we live. On the analysis of the psychological structures on which the process of developing soft skills is built, some links can be underlined in relation to Hofstede dimensions. Just consider the influence that such a high power distance may have on creativity, initiative, pragmatism and autonomy. In a situation where employees mainly rely on supervisors' opinions and judgments, proactivity, problem solving and critical thinking may not find sufficient ground to grow. Likewise, a society in which uncertainty avoidance reach high levels such

Chinese one, values as motivation and commitment implied on being a leader are undermined. Strive to satisfy company's needs maintaining both task and human orientations may suffer from fear for taking risks. The high level of restraint deeply influence that openness, spontaneity and lack of judgement necessary to a free communicative flow within business contexts. A further limitation may arise when every interaction, even the simplest, is built through a technological surface as China does for example relying on Wechat mostly for every interaction and connection, starting from everyday life to business contexts. To what extent the connection between people could be substituted or channelled without undermining the essential human component of relationship and communication? A formal and indirect communication style that can be perceived as respectable could be cause of failure when operating in a multi-cultural environment. On the other hand, it may be argued that the collective nature of Chinese system positively affects teamwork development. Lastly, a long-term orientation may be helpful to develop planning and organizational attitudes while, at the same time, could serve as a boundary when it comes to overcoming short-term deadlines. Certainly, assuming that these six dimensions influence singularly the personal and psychological aspects related to the interpersonal capabilities analysed would seriously constrain the research's outcomes. Along the lines of what explained by the Big Five Model ⁶⁵within the psychological field, the resulting overall picture of specific cultural contexts comes from the conjunction of all the six Hofstede's dimensions. Composite characteristics that constitute the basis of each dimension may influence at the same level different skills. Just to exemplify, Chinese high power distance level, as well as the high-context dimension of the country's culture, could be the reasons why an indirect communication style is used, employees are afraid of taking the initiative, go beyond their tasks and likely express opinions diametrically opposite to their supervisors' ones. Thus, it turns out that the understanding process of the nature and development of soft skills could not be separated from a deeper analysis of countries cultural identity.

⁶⁵ Advanced in first place by Tupes and Christal then extend to the organizational context by Goldberg, the Big Five Model aim at understanding the logic underpinning the different kind of personality and how personality characteristics influence the language commonly used to live and describe others. Five factors are applied as yardstick. These are extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness and neuroticism. For further explanations see P.T. Costa Jr, & R. R. McCrae, (1992). Four ways five factors are basic. *Personality and individual differences*, 13(6), 653-665.

Hofstede perspective comes together with certain limitations that need to be disclosed for the clearness of the study. The related framework has been developed with the help of American and European researchers within the context of a single company without taking in consideration how several countries, China as an example, convey many different cultures within their boundaries. Further studies take inspiration from Hofstede research trying to overcome the above-mentioned barriers. Straight after his trial, Trompenaars follow Hofstede's theory adding two relevant factors that are time and environment, variables that definitely influence people behaviour and attitude within the context of an MNC. Developed in 1991 and still ongoing, the GLOBE project mixing both theories aim at investigating which distinctive national attributes can be used to understand the most effective managerial practices within the specific culture taken into account. The main advantage of the project is its international staff, which follows and gives its personal contribution. Additional validations come from the World Values Survey project (WVS) which supervise how changes in values and norms across countries affect business practices. Beyond all doubt, although overtaken, Hofstede theory still provide a relevant framework from which start to develop a better understanding of how culture affects the business context and at this juncture understand dissertation's results taking into account the challenge of a huge lack of references and the pioneering nature of our choice to link cultural boundaries to soft skills development. The relevant limitations would be a starting point for further researches into the field.

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APPENDIX B: questionnaire

Soft skills perception

Consider the list below of personal skills. Do you perceive them as important to be effective in the workplace? Score them from 1 to 5 according to your personal experience.

Scale's value: 1 = Not important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = moderately important, 4 = important, 5 = extremely important

1. **Proactivity (be able to propose solutions and way of doing without being obliged to do it).**

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

2. **Teamwork (the capability to work efficiently and achieve goals within group dynamics).**

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

3. **Communication skills (the capability to express your opinion through company's different levels and promote flows of information).**

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

4. **Critical thinking (the extent to which you are capable of analysing situations and propose solutions considering pros and cons)**

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

5. Time management (Respect for deadlines and capability to organize work schedule)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

6 Leadership (being able to guide colleagues toward company's goals achievement)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

7. Problem solving (the extent to which you are autonomous and capable of dealing with unexpected problem)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely important

Self-evaluate your personal ability referring to these skills in a scale from 1 to 5.
Scale's value: 1= Very poor, 2=poor , 3=acceptable , 4=good, 5=extremely good

8. Proactivity

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely good

9. Teamwork

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely good

10. Communication skills

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely good

11. Critical thinking

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely good

12. Time management.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely good

13 Leadership

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely good

14. Problem solving

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very poor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Extremely good

Soft skills' training

15. Looking at the above list, do you think there are some skills needed to be improved?

- Yes, all of them
- Some of them
- No, none of them

If your answer is "some of them", please list below at least three of the skills mentioned.

16. What do you think could be the reason for un-developed skills?

- Formal education system
- Lack of knowledge about the topic
- Lack of training activities in the
- _____
workplace Other:

17. Is your company used to organize training activities to support personal skills development?

- Yes
- No

19 If yes, what kind of activities?

- Practical activities in which they present you the problem and you are supposed to take the initiative and solve it
- Theoretical activities with the support of material and digital support
- A mixture of both practical and theoretical activities

20. Have you ever attend to Academic workshop related to this topic, career days where employers explain skills needed in workplace?

- Yes
- No

21. Have you ever attend to specific courses (not academic) related to this topic?

- Yes
- No

22. **If yes, do you think that these have helped you to develop some of these skills?**

- Yes
- No

23. **If no, do you think that these would have help you to develop some of these skills?**

- Yes
- No

Motivators

24. **What types of approaches discourage you or take away your initiative?**

- Lack of a supportive environment
- Critics from colleagues
- Fear of failure/
- _____
Other:

25. **What types of approaches discourage you or take away your motivation?**

- No/ insufficient extrinsic retribution (wage raises, benefits etc.)
- No/ insufficient intrinsic retribution (promotions, more responsibility etc.)
- Lack of commitment with the company/ Other:
- _____

26. **What would you expect or like your trainer to do if you get behind on your goals?**

- Encourage you to do better
- Give you the tools to understand your mistake
- Expected to be released with a
- _____
fine/ Other:

27. What would you expect or like your trainer to do if you achieve your goals?

- Receive extrinsic retribution (wage raises, benefits etc.)
- Receive intrinsic retribution (promotions, responsibility etc.)
- Receive more challenging tasks/ Other:
- _____