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**THE SOFT SKILLS REVOLUTION IN THE  
POST-PANDEMIC LABOR MARKET**

**An analysis of soft skills training market in the Veneto Region**

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*The difference between where you are now and where you want to be is a gap of skills that you can close.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Presentation of the work

If recent years has taught us anything, it is the importance of being able to react to unpredictable events. Pandemic has exposed structural weaknesses in institutions and economies and widened gaps and inequalities. Employers and employees alike acknowledge that work is shifting to an online environment and that this novel setting calls for updated skills. As the need for highly skilled and multi-talented workers grows in different occupational sectors, more institutions are investing in innovative approaches that focus on training incorporating skillsets. Not coincidentally, the year 2023 has been proclaimed by the EU as the *European Year of Skills* a crucial theme, as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: “having the right skills empowers citizens to cope successfully with changes in the labor market and to take full part in society and democracy.

But among all the skills, one category in particular is supremely outperforming the others. McKinsey's latest research *Building workforce skills at scale to thrive during- and after- the covid-19 crisis* shows a shift in the most important skills to be developed, skills that until now were considered of marginal importance. We are referring to soft skills.

Today's hyper-digitalised reality, more than straining the hard operational levers, is a challenge for the soft ones, as the dynamics of relating to others and work management change.

Moreover, sustainable growth and the digital transition, on which the competitiveness of companies is at stake, can only develop if workers are able to deal with changes and that requires possessing and mastering soft skills. In fact, as reported by a recent Forbes article "When Times Are Hard, It's The Soft Skills That Will Save Us." And there is no denying that months of global pandemic have been easy to manage. Not only has there been a move to adopt a new acronym to encompass the new modern world (from VUCA to BANI) but gloom-loaded terms have begun to allege in the post-pandemic labor market such as job losses, great resignation, skills gap. WEF estimates that by 2025 50% of all employees will need skills training.

The new imperative of our automation age is the shift to a “learning economy,” in which human capital is paramount. The future prosperity of our societies, and the wellbeing of our workforce, depends on whether we are able to attain that goal. The way to do so is to be able to transform human capital into competitive advantage throughout the re- and upskilling programs

- well-structured and targeted
- combined with emerging technologies
- in line with future skills designated by market analyses

We're moving quickly toward a world in which the work we do is drastically different from what it was a decade ago, three years ago, or even yesterday. The nature of employment is changing as a result of AI and automation to place more emphasis on the traits and skills that define the human condition. We need to embrace those soft skills, look for them when hiring as companies, develop them as leaders, and hone them as employees if we want to succeed in the future. We are in crucial juncture, where there is a huge opportunity to reshape the workplace and start an upskilling revolution that will enable people everywhere to fully engage in the future of work, whatever it may be.

This report is intended to be a call to action for a capacity building process for the new workforce and a push for all relevant stakeholders to work together to turn this crisis into an opportunity.

Extensive research demonstrated that firms pursue several advantages in hiring individuals with a well-developed set of ESC competencies as well as bad hire most often results from a lack of these skills. Therefore, the role of the development of appropriate training of these skills is becoming vital, given that "traditional" learning methods are being challenged and questioned.

It turns out that a dynamic environment open to growth and learning, combined with the use of experiential learning and a mixed approach stimulate the acquisition of soft skills.

### **Purpose of the research**

This paper has two main purposes. The first one, indirect but essential to the development of the true purpose of research, it is intended to be a guide to better understand the complicated world of these soft skills and to serve as an exhortation to seize the opportunities (and remove the obstacles) that this emotional economy is generating. In this first part a careful analysis is reported on the labor market in the post-pandemic context with data, trends, challenges, and new emerging themes. This is followed by chapter two where soft skills are the masters, from their definition to the methodologies used to develop them to the new global training market. From this initial comprehension, awareness will be brought to light that whether enhancing the soft skills of the workforce is not only the possible solution to overcome the problems inflicted by the pandemic, but a more than valid best practice to overcome disruptive times of change.

Thus we get to the real reason behind this research, which is whether the Veneto region, following the pandemic outbreak, has become aware of the importance of soft skills and whether it is following global trends and guidelines in order to best develop the soft skills of its workforce. This is not only in order to get out of the post-pandemic situation, but also from a forward-looking perspective of anticipating trends on soft skills and preparing the Veneto workforce of tomorrow to deal with the new changes that will be there because they are already on the horizon, such as green revolution, greater inclusion, AI, as well as the unforeseen ones.

In this regard, one will illustrate the Veneto context and its relationship with post-pandemic, awareness of soft skills within the territorial fabric and the methodologies in use for training these. In this sense, questionnaires submitted to companies for training with a particular focus on soft skills will be used, and once the qualitative data have been processed, it will be possible to draw a line on the direction that the Wind is taking, both at the current level on closing soft skills gaps, and on its ability to be able to react to future changes and become a carrier or not of new production processes and ways of doing business.

# CHAPTER 1

## COVID-19 AND THE RISING AWARENESS OF SOFT SKILLS

### **Introduction**

The past decade of technological advancement has underlined the looming possibility of mass job displacement and untenable skills shortages, highlighting the need for large-scale interventions in employee skills building. Until the advent of the pandemic, however, these considerations were underestimated by companies and policy makers but now they have become a current issue.

The BANI World framework provides a lens through which we can understand the challenges and uncertainties that arise from the Fourth Wave of Industrial Revolution, characterized by digital technologies, AI, and automation.

And while companies are trying to adapt to the new changes in the post-pandemic world, we are realizing the presence of serious problems in the labor market: there is a big discrepancy between the existing skillset of the workforce and the skillset needed to perform successfully in this new scenario. With that, articles and discussions about how the skills gaps are impacting companies, the paradox between new hiring and great resignations, and upskilling and reskilling strategies for workers begin to flow.

The multifaceted notion of skill mismatch encompasses various measures of skill asymmetries and education systems, some of which have connections to one another.

The labor supply has a structural gap. Industries are transforming their business operations and embracing new technologies, but the specialized skills needed to carry them out are either hard to come by or nonexistent. The job roles and the employees' current expertise are not aligned. Degrees are also lacking. The success of Industry 4.0 depends not only technology but also on people, therefore soft skills has been called “the silent heroes of the Digital Transformation<sup>1</sup>”.

Confronted with this issue, one wonders, as the author Nicole Torres did in the article published by Harvard Business School (2015) entitled *Technology is only making social skills more important*: “while it might be too soon to start bracing for a dystopian no-jobs future, it’s not too early to think about whether people are learning the right skills they’ll need to succeed in tomorrow’s workforce”.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.peoplechange360.it/people-strategy/development-and-learning/soft-skill-che-cosa-sono-perche-svilupparle/>



Accelerated the arrival of the future work, also bringing new issues, insights and, first and foremost, new challenges. COVID-19 is forcing digitalization and automation at a faster rate, which has made the implementation of an ambitious global upskilling agenda more urgent.

### **1.1 A glimpse into post pandemic labor market**

Months and months into a global pandemic, and the look and feel of our workplaces have changed forever. Production stops, distancing, smart working and new forms of organization have profoundly transformed the dynamics of the labor market. The health emergency rediscovered values that had not been given due weight. It has upset the private sphere and had a disruptive impact on professional life. A major change of pace, both for businesses and labor force. The former had to learn not only how to juggle a totally new and complex context, but at the same time looking for ways to do things differently; the later had to deal with the adoption of new technologies and the need to match new required skill sets.

The impact of the pandemic combines with the economic shocks since 2020 has been so far-reaching that it has made us reconsider the lens through which we are seeing the changes in the world surrounding us. Yesterday referred to as VUCA, today as BANI<sup>2</sup>. The emergence of the BANI concept signifies a profound change in our perception of the world. The acronym BANI, which stands for *Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible*, encompasses the fundamental difficulties of our new modern-day existence. The conventional tools and frameworks that worked effectively for us during the VUCA era might not be adequate anymore. In navigating this new world, we are compelled to rethink our best practices, adapt our approaches and develop new coping mechanisms.

Over the last ten years, technological progress has led to a number of challenges, including the potential loss of millions of jobs, unsustainable skill shortages, and artificial intelligence's challenge to the belief that human intelligence is exclusive. In particular, AI has received a high grade of attention, with claims that 19% of the workforce could have over 50% of their tasks automated by AI and job losses making headlines, while others expect the technology to enhance jobs<sup>3</sup>. Data from the Future of Jobs Survey (2020) suggested that 15% of a company's workforce was at risk of disruption in the horizon up to 2025, and on average 6% of workers were expected to be fully displaced<sup>4</sup>. The

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<sup>2</sup> The BANI framework, represented by its acronym, encompasses the qualities of our contemporary world: Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible. It serves as a conceptual tool designed to articulate the unique traits of our modern environment, especially considering its intricacies, uncertainties, and swift transformations.

<https://digitalleadership.com/blog/bani-world/>

<sup>3</sup> nota 45 WEF 2023

<sup>4</sup> This figure is also confirmed by the International Monetary Fund, which, in an analysis of 35 countries, estimates that 97.3 million individuals (corresponding to about 15%) should be considered at risk of redundancy in the current context.

latest version of the report (2023) shows slightly better data considering the timeframe 2023-2027: the percentage reduction in employment is 2% (equivalent to 14 million jobs), assuming that 83 million jobs are projected to be lost and 69 million are projected to be created, constituting a structural labor-market churn of 152 million jobs.

While job losses are mounting and incomes are tumbling, a huge discontent in the global workforce is spreading. It is not only automation, technology or new organizational forms that threaten the workforce, but also the new awareness of workers. Following the outbreak of the pandemic, an exorbitant number of employees are leaving their jobs or are thinking of quitting. According to the McKinsey survey conducted in 5 countries published in September 2021, 40% of the employees surveyed reported being strongly inclined to resign in the next three to six months. Furthermore, of those who had quit in the past six months, 36% of them did so without having a new job in hand. This disclosure reveals how different the situation is from previous downturn-and-recovery cycles. This phenomenon, known as *Great Attrition* or even *Great Resignation* may seem a paradox in a market where the risk of losing a job is high and unemployment rate is rampant. To understand the magnitude of what is happening, it is worth looking at the numbers. According to data from the US Department of Labour, a record 4.6 million Americans have voluntarily left their jobs as of August 2021 reaching 3% of the voluntary resignation rate at the beginning of 2022. Similar situations in Europe: for example, France in 2022 reached an all-time peak, with more than 2.16 million employment contracts terminated at the employee's request with a resignation rate of 2.7% in the first quarter of 2022; in Italy in 2022, almost 2.2 million resignations were recorded (13.8% more than in 2021)<sup>5</sup>. However, this quitting trend doesn't seem to be quitting. According to the McKinsey Quarterly (September 2021 edition) more than half of the employers (53%) say they have experienced significant turnover on a voluntary basis and 64% of them believe the problem will continue over the next six months.

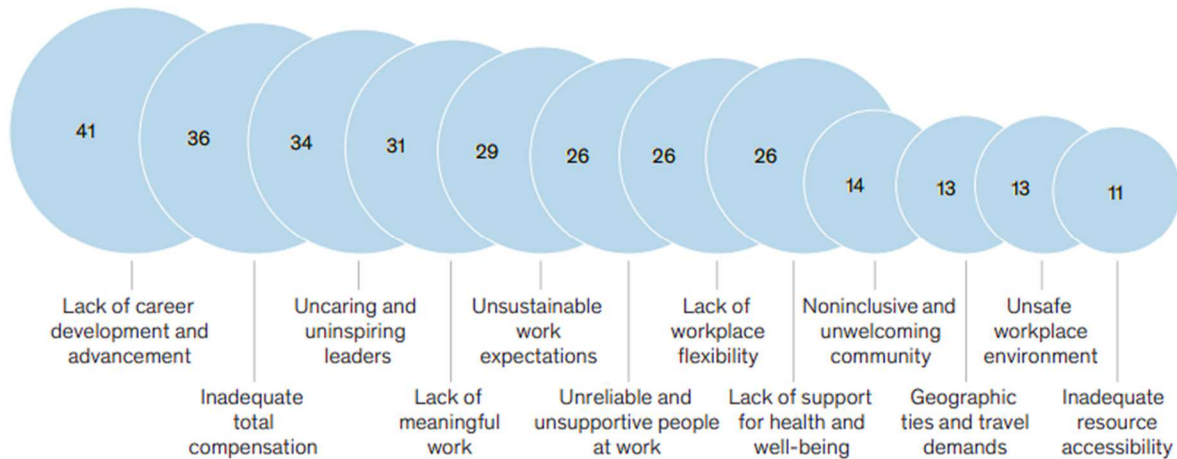
While employers are aware of the presence of this issue, they struggle with what employees are running away from, proposing quick (and wrong) fixes such pay bumps and “thank you” bonus putting their business at risk. When employers are asked why their employees are quitting, they cited inadequate compensation, unsustainable work-life balance and inadequate support for health and wellbeing. Although these are all correct reasons, they do not represent the truth and the employees' point of view. If we look at the graph below, with the exception of compensation, which in times of crisis such as these plays an important part, in first place we find the lack of support for career and

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<sup>5</sup> Ilsole24ore, marzo 2023. Lavoro, in Europa record di posti vacanti e dimissioni. È il “grande turnover”. Retrieved from <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/lavoro-europa-record-posti-vacanti-dimissioni-e-grande-turnover-AEyHA34C>

personal development, the absence of a corporate culture aimed at supporting change and the lack of a sense of purpose in one's work.

**Figure 1.1 Top reasons for quitting previous job, Apr 2021–Apr 2022, %**



*Source: Subset of respondents from McKinsey's 2022 Great Attrition, Great Attraction 2.0 global survey (n = 13,382), including those currently employed and planning to leave (n = 4,939), those currently employed and planning to stay (n = 7,439), and those who quit their previous primary jobs between Apr 2021 and Apr 2022 (n = 1,154)*

Considering the information in the figure above, it takes only a short step to deduce that the rapid rise of digitalization and remote work has placed new demands on employees who are asked to possess more complex problem-solving skills, to master interpersonal skills and to support significant changes. Employees simply demand the same effort to their employers and leaders: a deeper empathy for what they are going through, an organizational culture and leadership to guide them through these changes and investments in the human aspects of the work. In a Harvard Business Review article<sup>6</sup>, author Jennifer Moss cited a survey of 3,900 employees and business leaders in 11 nations that found nearly one-third of respondents expressed the desire that organizations act with more empathy. In addition, there is a high level of dissatisfaction with training opportunities. According to Manpower data, 57% of the employees surveyed undergo training outside of work, because company training programs do not provide them with relevant skills, do not advance their careers and do not enable them to remain competitive in the labor market.

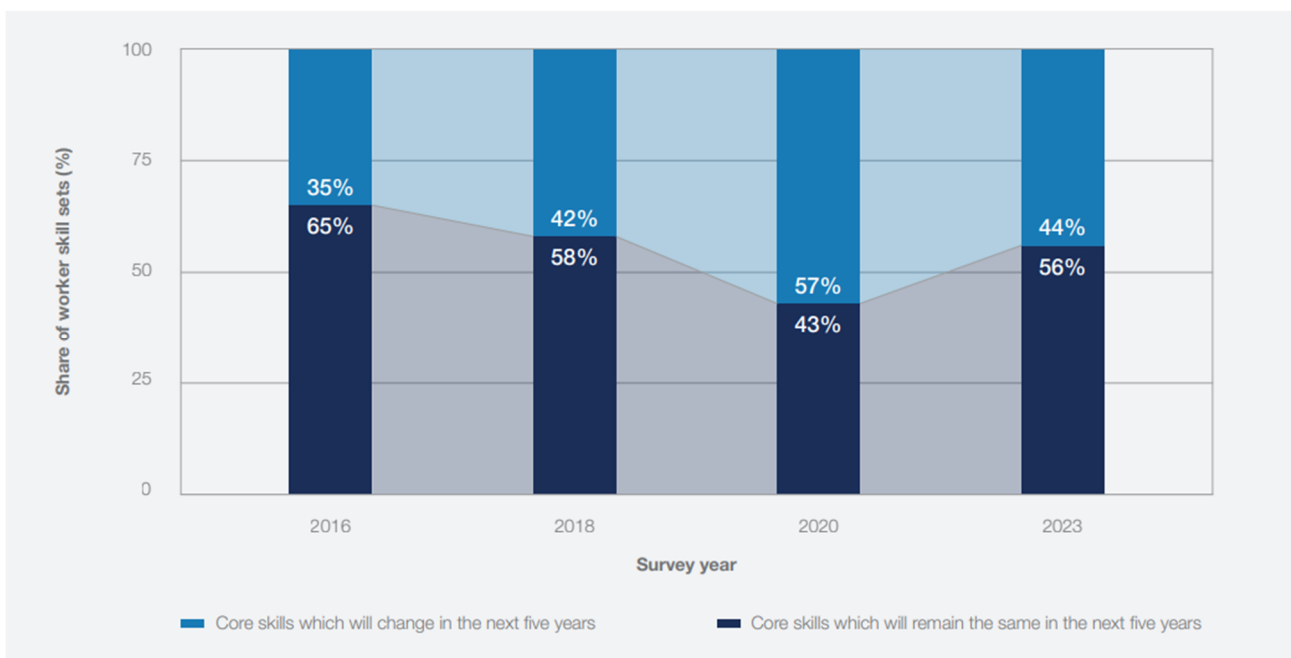
People are switching jobs and industries, moving from traditional to new roles, even starting their own business. Considering the current and projected rate of hiring, quitting and jobs creation, employment situation is unlikely to return to normal levels for some time. In many economically

<sup>6</sup> Harvard Business Review, September 2020. *Preventing Burnout Is About Empathetic Leadership*. Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2020/09/preventing-burnout-is-about-empathetic-leadership>

advanced countries, a labor shortage has developed, while forecasts point to weak or even negative economic growth. What we are seeing is a critical mismatch between the desperate companies' demand for talents and the workers willing to supply it. This provides us with an important insight into the labor market: the tensions within it are no longer about mass unemployment but rather about labor shortages and skills deficits. When the Future of Jobs Report was first published in 2016, the companies surveyed predicted that 35% of workers' skills would be disrupted in the next five years. By 2023, the predicted rate of skills disruption had risen to 44%, a percentage however more stabilized than the 57% predicted with the previous edition in 2020 heavily influenced by the disruptions induced by Covid-19.

### Figure 1.2 Disruptions to skills

Evolution in the shares of workers' core skills which will change and which will remain the same in the next five years



Source: World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Survey 2023

The world of work has changed forever, and it is better for operators to become aware of this shift as soon as possible. Employers have long held the position of power in the workplace, but this dynamic is changing. It is therefore evident how the pandemic has definitely impacted not only the ways of working and relating to others but also what people expect from work. The concept of good work or "decent work" as we knew it has changed. PwC defines "good jobs" as work that is safe, paid fairly, reasonably secure, reasonably motivating, and leverages the human skills of the worker, thus delivering higher levels of productivity.

### 1.1.1 Major Highlights

At the end of 2019, automation, technology, and globalization seemed to be the main players in the game of future labor market transformation. However, with the advent of the pandemic, the tables have turned. The changes heralded by the COVID-19 pandemic have added to the long-term changes already triggered by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, increasing the speed and depth of these.

In the report *The future of Jobs* of 2020, which aimed to highlight the first critical issues and needs after only one year later the outbreak of the pandemic, we find the following as the main points:

- **Technologies in tandem with the Covid-19 recession are creating a “multiple-disruptive scenario”.** Technological adoption by companies will transform different aspects of the workplace: automation and AI will impact on the tasks to be performed, increasing digitalization will see new ways of working, new technologies will create and destroy certain types of jobs, and there will be changes in the skills and abilities required to employees and how their training paths will be designed and delivered. Yet all this in just a couple of years. Understanding how technologies will impact labour markets is crucial for determining whether people will be able to transition from declining occupations to the jobs of tomorrow. As in previous years, big data, cloud computing and AI feature near the top of this list, these three years into pandemic have made it possible to identify other, more promising paths: the first is the digitalization of commerce and trade, with platforms and apps likely to be adopted by 86% of companies and e-commerce and digital trade likely to be adopted by 75% of businesses; the second-ranked technology is education and workforce technologies, with 81% of companies looking to adopt it by 2027.
- **Structural reconfiguration of labour-markets due to declining and growing roles.** Based on the figures provided latest version (2023) of the same report, by 2027, some 23% of jobs will be disrupted. Overall, the research suggests that 83 million jobs may be displaced by an upward trend that see enduring changes in the division of labour between humans and machines; on the other side, 69 million new roles will emerge. This would lead to a contraction of global labour markets of 14 million jobs in the next five years (equal to 2%). The problem is that the pace of job creation is still slow, reflecting unemployment.
- **In-demand skills are changing and that will cause skill gaps<sup>7</sup>.** With the emergence of new up-and-coming jobs and changing market dynamics, new skills are springing up as prominent

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<sup>7</sup> A brief introduction to this term is in order, although the concept and the inter-relatedness of the different types of mismatch will be discussed later. The expression "skills gap" describes an imbalance between the competencies that workers already possess and those that employers require of them in order for them to perform their jobs effectively.

such as those concerning the understanding and analysis of complex phenomena and those concerning attributes of the individual in handling and overcoming moments of crisis. The former include skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity; in the latter we encounter resilience, adaptability, and also active learning understood as the attitude of an individual to want to keep learning new things and get back into the game. On average, 94% of business leaders report new skills needed to be picked up on the job, a sharp uptake from 65% in 2018.

- **Online learning and training are on the rise, but with a difference between for those in employment and those unemployed.** There has been a four-fold increase in the number of individuals seeking out opportunities for learning online through their own initiative. A five-fold increase in employer provision of online learning opportunities to their workers. There is also a distinction on the type of courses sought: people with jobs focus their efforts on honing personal skills, while those who are unemployed prefer to attend courses on learning digital skills such as data analysis, computer science and information technology in order to be more appealing to find an occupation.<sup>8</sup>
- **The large majority of employers recognize the human capital as an important asset in which invest, but some issues outline a problem.** Training for new skills is expected to be needed by 50% of all employees in the next five years; on average, employers expect to implement skill building processes (via reskilling and upskilling programs) to 70% of their employees. The P+P model (which stands for People + Performance driven companies) proved successful, allowing companies to gain long-term benefits such as greater resilience to change and higher levels of talent retention<sup>9</sup>. 66% Employers that submitted the study predicted that offering their employees an adequate and targeted training program will pay for themselves in less than a year. However, there is still a large proportion of employers (around 20%) who are uncertain about the benefits and potential of training their workforce in new skill sets for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the time it takes to develop and master these skills is at odds with the need to cope with current economic shocks; secondly, the fact that most performance appraisal systems hardly include these skills; additionally, another important reason is relegated to the fact that these skills are transferable from one job to another, and thus from one company to another.

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Skills gaps differ by industry and are also subject to change over time due to advancements in technology, shifts in training and educational methods, and the characteristics of job seekers who are applying for their first jobs.

<sup>8</sup> Data is confirmed from the online learning provider Coursera.

<sup>9</sup> Performance through people

- **Companies need to invest in better metrics of human capital and matched them with renewed measures of ESG.** A significant number of business leaders understand that building the workforce through reskilling and upskilling programs is both cost-effective and has significant mid- to long- term dividends. Employees who feel valued at work are often happier, more productive and less likely to look for other employment opportunities. The pandemic has changed the way we see things: it is no longer just about benefits, flexibility and salary, but also about opportunities for advancement and skill development, valuing one's work and creating an environment for growth. When the company succeeds in doing this, it is important that it can keep track of this value. Also, not to be forgotten are the values related to sustainability and society.

- **The public sector needs to provide stronger support for the learning journey.**

The strong persistence of the skills deficit in the workforce has raised the question about the prowess of a nation to face economic shocks and future needs based on its current skills inventory. The public sector will need to create incentives for investments in the markets and jobs of tomorrow providing stronger safety nets for displaced or at-risk workers. Besides, it has to decisively tackle long-delayed improvements in education and training systems.

Currently, only 21% of businesses report being able to make use of public funds to support their employees through reskilling and upskilling. The public sector will need to create incentives for investments in the markets and jobs of tomorrow, provide stronger safety nets for displaced workers in the midst of job transitions; and to decisively tackle long-delayed improvements to education and training systems.

### **1.1.2 A drastic change in the workforce skillset**

It is clear by now that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a permanent and inevitable labor market disruption. In today's hyperconnected world, digital competence is a fundamental need and is no longer limited to the IT sector. As technology progresses and businesses increasingly gravitate toward emerging fields like artificial intelligence (A.I.), there is a growing recognition that people do not possess the appropriate skillset to keep up with new technologies and to cope with new changes. These gaps are referred to as *skills gaps* and encapsulate a set of practical, technological and personal skills and competences that are essential to successfully face this new post-pandemic era.

The rapid rise of digitalization, the wide spread of smart working and the fast pace of automation are the basis of digital transformation. However, to achieve success in a more flexible and higher digitalized workplace, more sophisticated skills are required. It cannot be denied that a skill such as resilience never ever has been so crucial throughout a global crisis, in responding, recovering and thriving. Resilience is in fact “something” that not only enables us to overcome a crisis but is also



useful in preventing it. Clearly it is far from being a new word, but recently the concept has gained new nuances declined in many other areas of knowledge, from physics to psychology, from management to economics. The common thread that extends to all of them remains the concept of “*facing an external force without breaking down*”<sup>10</sup>. Resilience is considered today not only as a predisposition or property that humans are endowed with, but as a competence that can be acquired or strengthened, and proof of this is the number of books, articles, essays and even courses that have been produced on the subject for pedagogical purposes. For these reasons it figures as a skill of the individual, a long-lasting attitude that sees a series of strategies that combined with other skills allows one to face change, and channel it according to one's will, in a winning way. Other skills to spring from this ability are the capacity for teamwork, adaptability, excellent planning and problem-solving abilities, a strong propensity to stay current in real time, and even the ability to communicate effectively and captivatingly. All crucial skills when facing a cultural transformation.

In fact, the big issue companies are facing is about people. Alexandra Levit, author of “Humanity Works,” wrote for Training Industry.com, “In a business climate dominated by human/machine collaboration, the skills that make us human are more important than ever”<sup>11</sup>. The concept of soft skills refers in particular to competences related to emotional intelligence and natural abilities that each of us possess. They are transversal and relevant to specific personality traits and also refer to relational and cognitive qualities. The ability to listen and communicate, teamwork, flexibility and leadership are other soft skills that are essential to participate in the world of work, especially with the new highly collaborative and more flexible models. In the past, hard skills were considered more valuable in the workplace than soft skills. Nevertheless, over the past few years, that point of view has drastically changed. According to Rohan Rajiv, Director of Product Management at LinkedIn, “Foundational soft skills have become even more important given the rise of remote and autonomous work, and are growing in importance across industries, levels and work environments<sup>12</sup>”. And the numerical proof is shown in the figure below from Wiley (2023).

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<sup>10</sup> Definition derived from: [https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua\\_italiana/articoli/parole/Resilienza.html](https://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/articoli/parole/Resilienza.html)

The possibility of adding new shades of meaning to the areas traditionally concerned by this word (such as metallurgy, psychology and ecology) also stems from the recent experience of the pandemic. For example, the choice to use resilience as an element of the titling of a delicate political-economic strategy in the context of European negotiations in the post-Covid era. PNRR stands for National Recovery and Resilience Plan. It is the programme drawn up by the Conte government, presented to Parliament and now being examined by the Technical Evaluation Committee, in order to obtain the funding made available by Europe under the Recovery Fund. The document presents several areas of intervention in which digitalisation, strengthening of the healthcare system, ecological transition, and circular economy are cited.

<sup>11</sup> LinkedIn, August 2022. *The Importance of "Soft Skills" in Today's Workplace.*

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinecastrillon/2022/09/18/why-soft-skills-are-more-in-demand-than-ever/>



**Figure 1.3 The pandemic's seesaw effect on skills**



Source: *Closing the skills gap 2023*, Wiley

Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic has triggered a kind of seesaw effect in the demand for skills required by companies: while the demand for soft skills has increased for 48% of organizations, 33% now need fewer "hard" skills. According to Frazer, in the article published by LinkedIn, *The Importance of "Soft Skills" in Today's Workplace*, people no longer refer to these skills as tacit knowledge whose passing on is difficult because they are complex and related to experience, but there is a real shift that recognizes the importance of these soft skills as part of the performance of individuals and companies. He continues by saying that while technical abilities are still important, businesses are realizing that what "drives outstanding results" is a focus on the interpersonal skills that keep organizations cohesive. In fact, these soft skills were featured in 78% of jobs posted globally over the last three months<sup>13</sup> (time referred to the period from July to September 2022). Adaptability, communication, empathy, and relationship building were most deeply attacked among all the soft skills and have required a significant consideration from both employers and employees.

The "*butterfly effect*," which was first proposed by American mathematician Edward Lorenz in 1962, states that in an intricately linked system, a butterfly's wing flap can cause a hurricane to burst hundreds of miles away. Through this symbolic image, the idea that a seemingly insignificant event can set off a chain of far-reaching, hard to predict, and difficult to control events can be advocated. If this is true, then man needs to arm himself with the means to survive in such a world. And this means are soft skills. While technical skills are still vital, soft skills have become the "glue" that holds people, teams and business units together. "Soft Skills: full steam ahead!"<sup>14</sup>, it is an incitement by CEGOS, the international leader in corporate training, which states that soft skills stand out as a crucial element of differentiation and success for both companies and candidates in the current labor market. These are the kinds of abilities that are connected to one's natural attitudes and sociocultural

<sup>13</sup> ibidem

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.cegos.it/news-ed-eventi/soft-skill-avanti-tutta>

background, and they are essential for interacting effectively and profitably in the workplace. It shouldn't come as a surprise if employers are starting to place a higher value on soft skills in an increasingly globalized and hyper technological world like ours, where new workforce forms (like artificial intelligence) are emerging alongside or even replacing more traditional ones.

According to data reported by CEGOS, when asked 'which skills are a top priority', this is what became apparent: 35% of managers answered digital skills, 34% mentioned soft skills and 24% answered hard skills. The dynamic and multifaceted nature of the post-pandemic workplace has led to a perception of work as varied, complex, and hybrid. I want to dwell on this last word: *hybrid*. Not in the manner in which we frequently associate it today referring to 'hybrid working', i.e. the possibility of remote working, but rather to the concept of '*hybrid job*', a job that involves the interaction of technical, soft and digital skills in a mutually inseparable form. It's not to say that technical skills have fallen by the wayside, but companies have increasingly come to realize emphasizing the interpersonal skills that hold organizations together are what "drives great results". Fully in agreement with the new literature that highlights the significance of soft skills as a supplement to hard skills (Hendarman and Cantner 2018).

But it's not just about recruiting employees with the right skills. An upward pattern of complexity has been identified as the industrial revolutions have progressed and companies are concerned about the shortage of talent capable of handling the new applications based on artificial intelligence and machine learning, nonetheless about the widening gap on skills.

## 1.2 Skills mismatches

The problem related to skills mismatch and gap in the workforce is not a new phenomenon. In fact, since the first Industrial Revolution the labor market has undergone transformations that have featured the new set of skills of the workforce re-defining the role of machines and workers.

Even before Covid-19 executives expected skills mismatches to occur in functions and sectors that have already started adopting automation and AI technologies such as data analytics, IT/mobile/web design, and research and development <sup>15</sup>. The fact is that the situation was already severe in the pre-pandemic scenario: according to our research, however, more than 1.3 billion people globally work in jobs for which they are either underqualified or overqualified.<sup>16</sup>

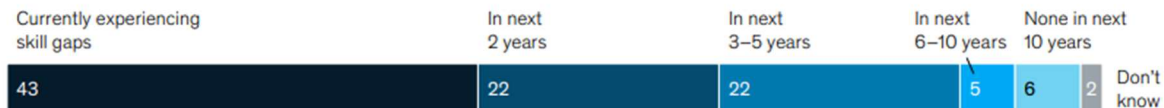
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<sup>15</sup> McKinsey Global Institute workforce skills executive survey, March 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Data are confirmed also by the research of BCG of December 2020, which reports that more than 1.3 billion people globally work in underqualified or overqualified positions.

This skills mismatch is in line with the worrying data collected by McKinsey in May 2019: nearly nine in ten executives and managers report skill gaps as a problem, more precisely 44% of respondents say their organizations will face skill gaps within the next five years, while 43% report existing skill gaps, leading to a total of 87% who believe that skill gaps are an imminent problem with the consequence of corporate roles at risk of being disrupted<sup>17</sup>.

**Figure. 1.4: When skill gaps are expected to occur within the organization**



Source: McKinsey & Company

As market and technology trends alter organizations' talent needs, executives are realizing the real problem behind skill deficits struggling with finding candidates who have well-developed skillsets: nearly 70% of human resources professionals believe their organization has a skills gap according to a 2023 report from Wiley, a global leader in research and education. Similarly, 68% of C-suite executives feel their workforce is lacking in needed skills, along with 69% of managers. A higher percentage of all three groups identified this skill gap in their organizations, compared with the 2021 survey<sup>18</sup>.

The term *skill mismatch* or *skill gap* is a broad concept that is meant to reflect many forms of labour market friction, including vertical mismatch, skill gaps, skill shortages, field of study (horizontal) mismatch and skill obsolescence. It refers to a suboptimal match between workers and jobs in terms of skills and/or qualifications (ILO, 2017). It is completely acceptable that some degree of mismatch naturally occurs as a result of labor market frictions in the short term; it starts to become a stronger concern to policymakers when the mismatch is more broad-based and persistent affecting the productivity of companies and the economic growth of countries.

Numerous countries are facing critical skilled-related problems<sup>19</sup>, particularly due to the fact that pandemic has abruptly changed the necessary skillsets to cope with a BANI world.

<sup>17</sup> Data from McKinsey&Company: Beyond HiringThe online survey was in the field from May 14 to May 24, 2019, and garnered responses from 1,216 participants representing the full range of regions, industries, company sizes, functional specialties, and tenures.

<sup>18</sup> Closing the skills gap by Wiley, Jan 2023

<sup>19</sup> We would like to remind our readers that the notion of skill is expanding from technical and cognitive conceptualizations to include "soft" interpersonal and social elements (Handel, 2003; Lloyd and Payne, 2009).

In order to tackle these skills deficits, it's required a deep understanding of the different nuances behind the missing skills (see ILO, 2017). The various concepts of skills mismatch that we are going to discuss differ greatly from one another, regarding how they appear, how they are measured, what factors influence them, and how their repercussions occur.

**Skills gap:** It tries to identify the extent to which workers lack the skills necessary to perform their current job. Basically, it can be described as a difference between the skills that employers consider necessary to successfully discharge the activities of a job position and the education and experience that workers possess. The general method for measuring skill gaps is to obtain data from the employer regarding the employees' perceived skill deficiencies.

Interestingly, this type of deficiency can arise from what is called **skill obsolescence**, which is another type of mismatch. As one might easily guess, it refers to the fact that employees' skills become outdated. Obsolescence can result from aging that devalues manual skills (physical obsolescence), but it can also result from technology (technological obsolescence) or economic changes (economic obsolescence) that make certain skills no longer necessary. And it is precisely in the latter two cases that we find the problem of the skill gap widening with the post-pandemic.

**Skills shortage:** it is related to a situation whereby employers are unable to fill key vacant posts due to a lack of suitably qualified candidates. Clearly this type of mismatch is measured at the firm level and it involves employer's view and evidence and reports from the human resources department. However, this type of measurement hides a challenge, namely to establish how much of the skill shortage can be attributed to the candidates' lack of skills and how much is actually due to the company's inability to offer adequate compensation and fair working conditions that attract the desired candidates. This one thought points to the issues raised by the post-pandemic as seen in the first paragraph, i.e. workers' dissatisfaction with low wages, a lack of support in career paths and scarcity of company resources to help them cope with change. In light of this, estimations of the magnitude of skill shortages derived from employer responses could be overstated.

Skills gaps and skills shortages have negative implications for the economy and the labor market. They can result in increased labor costs, lost production due to unfilled vacancies, slower adoption of new technologies, and the implicit and explicit costs of higher unemployment rates (Desjardins, 2012). Talking about skills gaps, inadequate skills can reduce output per worker, which raises average labor costs and can be detrimental to productivity. Due to the additional costs associated with training and hiring, skills gaps will also have a negative effect on firm-level profitability. They may also make

it more difficult for businesses to innovate and adjust to shifting market conditions. Macroeconomically speaking, reduced productivity and increased wage inflation can undermine competitiveness. On the other side, skills shortages are linked to lower levels and outcomes of R&D and higher labour costs. They can lead to skills gaps and poorer macroeconomic performance since they force businesses to fill open positions with underqualified employees, whether they are new hires or existing ones.

However, this inter-dependence can be used with a positive implication: when facing these deficits in human capital, we need to discuss them as ways to find incentivizing training solutions and if the competent institutions succeed in tackling a specific form of mismatch it can have spillover effects on other dimensions of the phenomenon.

**Skills mismatch:** Individual concepts of mismatch relate to the degree to which workers in firms are employed in an occupation that is unrelated to their principal field of study. Thus, resulting in a situation where people's qualifications aren't the ones needed for the job they do. This can be deduced from the answers of surveys where employees rate the degree to which their current job is related to the field of study of their qualifications. Two instances may also emerge: **overskilling**, when a worker feels they have more skills than what is needed for their current position; **underskilling**, instead is when a worker believes their current skill set is insufficient. While over-qualification can lead to a lack of motivation and higher turnover, on the other hand, by forcing businesses to assign underqualified employees—whether current or new hires—to open positions, can undermine corporate performance.

It is clear that many of the concepts discussed above are likely to be a combination of mismatch and can impact individual simultaneously escalating problems in the labour market. All the above can be translated into an extremely heavy burden for the world and its economy as reported in the article of BCG of December 2020, entitled *Alleviating the Heavy toll of the global skills mismatch*. Skill mismatch costed 8\$ trillion in unrealized GDP in 2018, a sort of hidden annual 'tax' worth 6% of world productivity. The worst case scenario considering the pandemic could be 11% of GDP by 2025 equal to 18\$ trillion (equivalent to EU's GDP in 2018).

The reported negative effects on productivity, performance and innovation are also confirmed. The studies in the same paper show an inverse correlation with these parameters that indicate corporate well-being. The higher the degree of skill mismatch in a country, the lower are the figures scored on indexes such as the Global Talent Competitiveness Index, the Global Innovation Index and the UN Sustainability Index.

These problems are not confined to hard, technical and digital skills but deficiencies are frequently reported in interpersonal and social skills. The call for social and emotional skills, better known as soft skills, isn't something new. Employers have constantly been stressing the need for workers who can collaborate and communicate on teams. If in 2016, executives ranked technical core capabilities for STEM and basic computer and software/application skills as the top two most critical skills for employees, in 2018, the top two skills sought were behavioral skills -- willingness to be flexible, agile, and adaptable to change and time management skills and ability to prioritize<sup>20</sup>.

As the director of Total Learning Solutions reports in an interview<sup>21</sup> on CEGOS, 'now priorities are really changing and the emphasis is shifting to soft skills'. Trends confirmed by America Succeeds, which reported that seven of the top ten most sought-after competencies across all job postings were classified as "soft skills," including planning, communication, and problem-solving. Unfortunately, many organizations are still focusing on technical skills, and ignoring or minimizing soft skills, especially if they feel their technical talent isn't competitive with other organizations in their industry. That leads to the problem of soft skills mismatch.

***Soft skills mismatch:*** worker's social and interpersonal current skillset is not the one needed for the jobs they do. It is a fact that work is changing rapidly, and companies find themselves operating in more complex and multi-skilled contexts which required to possess and master these interpersonal abilities, otherwise consequences can be much more severe. A lack of these abilities can turn into misunderstandings and conflicts that can affect productivity and strain relationships (Boyles, 2012). But one of the biggest issues related to deficits on soft skills concerns their role in senior management positions since their level of possession and development is closely linked to the effectiveness of good leadership (Goleman et al., 2002; Walter et al., 2011). Reduced leadership abilities can evolve in an unsuccessful organizational transformation whereas a lack of high-cognitive abilities can hinder innovation. In summary, the lack of soft skills can significantly affect customer satisfaction, team dynamics, individual performance, and an organization's overall success. For this reason, minimizing the mismatch among soft skills is crucial to establishing a supportive and effective work environment.

Within organizations, there often exist gaps or weaknesses in the system that, if left unattended, can contribute to long-term vulnerabilities that hinder resilience and adaptability. These issues might be overlooked, deliberately ignored, or left unaddressed due to a lack of skills, awareness, or resources.

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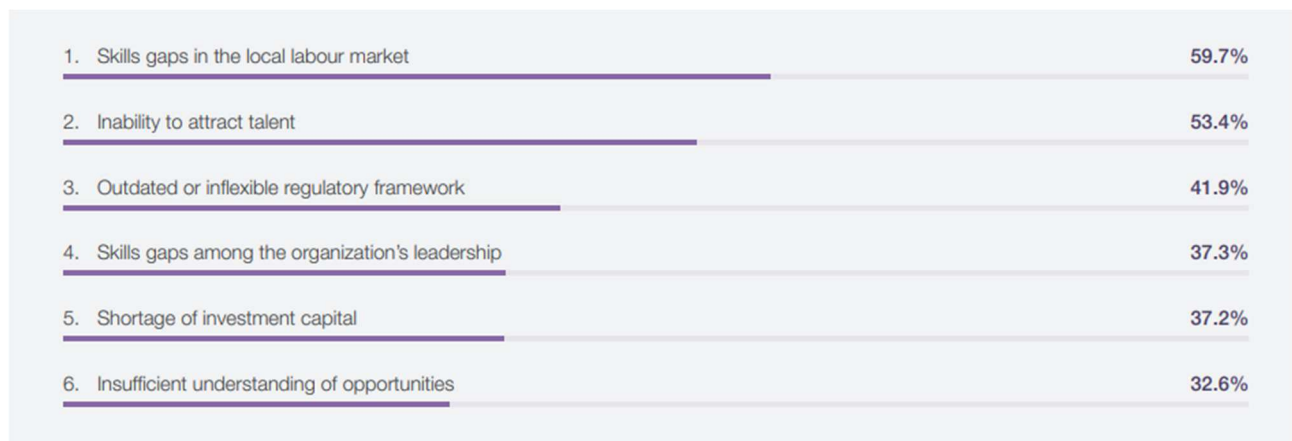
<sup>20</sup> <https://newsroom.ibm.com/2019-09-06-IBM-Study-The-Skills-Gap-is-Not-a-Myth-But-Can-Be-Addressed-with-Real-Solutions>

<sup>21</sup> CEGOS, ..., page 13

Nevertheless, we cannot deny that “*The skills gap is not a myth[.]*”<sup>22</sup>. Demand for new skills has emerged rapidly and organizations are mounting serious concerns about the demand for jobs and skills of tomorrow.

The difficulty in bridging skills deficiencies newly named is mostly attributable to the skill gaps themselves since the lack of talent in the local market with the required skill set does not allow the gaps to close and may even fuel a hiring cycle that can turn into skills mismatches. Another reason lies in the inability of companies to retain talent today: in fact, it is essential for the company to have an employer branding<sup>23</sup> strategy that makes it appealing in the eyes of possible candidates and, above all, results in a place where the new needs of employees that have emerged post-pandemic (see section 1.1) are considered.

**Figure 1.5: Top drivers of skill deficiencies**



Source: *Future of Jobs Survey 2023, World Economic Forum*

The stubborn persistence of the skills asymmetries raises questions about the relevance of a nation's skills inventory to its current and future needs. "Organizations are facing mounting concerns over the widening skills gap and tightened labor markets with the potential to impact their futures as well as worldwide economies," said Amy Wright, Managing Partner, IBM Talent & Transformation, IBM<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> IBM Newsroom, September 2019. *IBM Study: The Skills Gap is Not a Myth, But Can Be Addressed with Real Solutions* <https://newsroom.ibm.com/2019-09-06-IBM-Study-The-Skills-Gap-is-Not-a-Myth-But-Can-Be-Addressed-with-Real-Solutions>

<sup>23</sup> Employer Branding is that set of attributes and qualities, often intangible, that defines an organization's identity in terms of being a workplace, highlighting its distinctive characteristics compared to its competitors. The goal of the employer branding strategy is for the company to be recognized as interesting and appealing in the eyes of potential candidates, current employees (in order to avoid high turnover rate) and, cascading, the customers themselves.

<sup>24</sup> <https://newsroom.ibm.com/2019-09-06-IBM-Study-The-Skills-Gap-is-Not-a-Myth-But-Can-Be-Addressed-with-Real-Solutions>

It is certainly necessary to develop a shared awareness among managers and employees on the issue and they do have to understand that skill gaps will not have a negative impact in the more or less distant future, but already now.

### 1.2.1 Rewriting the “blame game” theory over soft skills

Let's focus for a moment on the soft skills gap. Soft skills with the pandemic were transformed into indispensable skills for the workforce, yet they were already an essential part of the employees' skill set, so much so that it was considered one of the trends that would have a major impact on the future world of work, this according to the report Global Talent Trends 2019 by LinkedIn.

**Figure 1.6: The 4 trends transforming the future workplace**

Percentage of talent professionals who agrees these trends are very important to the future workforce and recruiting



Source: Global Talent Trends 2019, LinkedIn

In a context where high-value-added activities have to be performed, more interaction between stakeholders is required and new challenges and market needs have to be met, having the right behavioral skills is a strategic point for the performance and innovation of companies, and for the employability and adaptability of employees. Therefore, both sides of the labor world should be incentivized -but also responsible- in closing the gaps referred to soft skills. However, many companies appear not involved in taking actions to close this gap even though 89% of recruiters say that a bad hire is typically due to a lack of soft skills<sup>25</sup>.

The “blame game” for these skill deficits is frequently attributable to the supply side (employee, family, education system) as many of these skills are learnt outside of the workplace (Heckman, 2000). If we consider individual concepts of mismatch, they are mainly related to the degree to which education and skills of jobs applicants meet the requirements of the hiring process (Cedefop, 2010; Quintini 2011). A greater employee empowerment is becoming clear from analysis of CEGOS

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/top-100-hiring-statistics-2022-rinku-thakkar/>



referenced in European Barometer (2020) where: 90% of employees in Europe say they are ready to train themselves to adapt to changes in jobs and professions; 45% are willing to finance a portion of their training costs; and finally, 71% would gladly take a course on their own time in order to update their skills.

Then it is worth at this point to attempt a demand-side analysis to understand the lack of effort in trying to address the issue in the soft skills deficit. Since, as we would see in the next chapter where we enter into the details of terminology and different definitions, several employers confuse – erroneously - soft skills with personal attributes, work ethic and commitment (Handel, 2003; Hurrell et al., 2013; Lloyd and Payne, 2009), as a result the risk of such skills being attributed to individuals' deficiencies is notably acute. Companies could also argue that the blame and the shame on skills deficits is on the education system that fails to “manufacture” job-ready candidates. This is surely a part of the big issue related to soft skills, however in this case we are primarily addressing skills shortages which counts less than skill gaps (Adams et al., 2022; Devins and Hogarth, 2005; Handel 2003). It may be time to change this perspective and to consider companies themselves, and therefore employers, as part of the problem with their practices.

The reasons supporting this opinion are as follows:

- The relatively high level of soft skills gaps compared with shortages may be because employers fail to correctly identify soft skills in job applicants resulting in problems once they are hired.
- A second possibility is that employers are reluctant to train in soft skills due to the fact that they are transferable or highly difficult to track [...].
- Another possibility is that employees with the correct soft skills are hired, but employer behavior cause soft skills gaps as employees withdraw skills in response to negative aspects of the organization (Vincent, 2011). Typically, what happens when strategies and compensation that support the employee's growth and well-being are not in place, or when the employee is in a stressful environment and where there is a lack of empathy from the employer. Observations that we reported when discussing Great Resignation.

These considerations rearrange the “blame game” of soft skills deficit. Addressing the lacuna is not purely a duty on individuals and education system, but organizations may be to blame for their soft skills gaps (Hurrell, 2016). It is a reflection of organizational resilience if companies manage to avoid 'skills lock-in' and its impact on competitiveness and staff employability.

Here we go into the next paragraph aware of three things:

- companies are to be held responsible for the soft skills deficits they are experiencing and have a duty to act in order not to further exacerbate them;
- if the lack of the right skills, and therefore the lack of well-developed and target-oriented training is part of the problem, it can also become the solution, throughout the companies' implementation of effective and customized skills development programs;
- alongside skills development programs is required that the company becomes a 'fertile' ground for cultivating the concept of 'lifelong learning'.

#### Heathfield (2008)

to achieve high work performance culture, an organization must provide its employees training and development programmes designed specifically to instill, build and change their attitudes and behaviors (training is an important element for companies)

### 1.3 A new concept: lifelong employability

The speed at which technological innovation is putting millions of workers at risk is unprecedented, not to mention that the pandemic has accelerated this process and changed the dynamics of the labor market forever. The fact that the social, economic, political, cultural scenario is constantly evolving must arouse a shared awareness among managers and employees on the issue that learning cannot be relegated to a phase of life but must become a constant process. Organizations have a duty to build a culture of continuous learning, where professional competences (and here we are referring to both categories, hard and soft) can be continuously acquired, improved and honed. The same sentiment is shared by Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, who writes in his book *Hit Refresh* of 2017 that only by nurturing a culture of continuous learning and a spirit of collaboration people can be empowered to think creatively, respond to changes, and lead revolutionary solutions.

*Lifelong learning is a process that the individual performs in order to achieve fulfilment in work and society. The term encompasses the concept that knowledge, skills and learning abilities are fundamental resources for finding and keeping a skilled job and participating in social processes and new opportunities that society and technology offer.*

The concept may seem recent, but in fact the Lisbon European Council of March 2000 had already given the European Union the strategic objective of developing a more competitive knowledge-based economy capable of combining sustainable growth with quality employment and greater social cohesion. Lifelong learning is a process (and also an attitude of individuals as we are going to see in the next chapter), related to self-guidance and self-education in which education and training are the indispensable tools for ensuring that skills are constantly updated in line with changes in society and

the needs of the labour market. Whereas before, skills that were acquired and developed during a training course (such as school, university and company courses themselves) could be useful and effective for several years, today they have to be updated after a much shorter time.

In this context, it is therefore necessary to support the career transition of employees whose skills are judged to be no longer up to date. ... keep up with future events ... + employability [meaning and note] the ability to adopt a “renewable” workforce is emerging strongly, and it goes under the name lifelong employability.

*Lifelong employability represents the concept of accompanying workers throughout their working lives to ensure their ability to find, keep or re-find a job over time.*

While, from an employability perspective, most of the efforts are to be attributed to the company and its managers, a slice of responsibility also belongs to the employees. Employees have perceived the change and are aware of the employability problems and the risk of their tasks becoming obsolete. For these reasons, they are embracing lifelong employability as it represents a guarantee for their professional life. According to the 2020 Barometer data, 62% of Europeans say that skills development is a shared responsibility between employer and employee. Thus, it is possible to say that the concept of lifelong employability is to be extended to both parties, company-employee. Companies, which since the pandemic outbreak are placing more value on learning (according to the report released by McKinsey, *Rethink capabilities to emerge stronger from Covid-19* of November 2020, as many as two-thirds) have major challenges ahead of them:

- promote a corporate culture that supports lifelong learning, also encouraging their employees to take responsibility for their own professional development
- implement a tailored competence development strategy for the success of their company

On the other sides, employees must:

- stepping out of one's comfort zone to determine flaws and blind spots
- adopt a resilient spirit in the face of changes required by the market and the company
- make available personal time and resources to invest in oneself

Organizations are putting **more emphasis on longevity** as a result of the ongoing labor scarcity and problematics. Before moving on to the next section on training, it is important to fix the concept that developing learning paths on skills, particularly soft skills, is a meaningful change for both the company and the employees. This is not a one-and-done statement, but it is a long-term commitment

that requires effort, resources and energy. For this reason, before getting people into a process of continuous training it is necessary to develop a learning mindset into the company's workforce [...]. Where organizations have shifted in understanding that people have to come first, before performance, investment in human capital can occur.

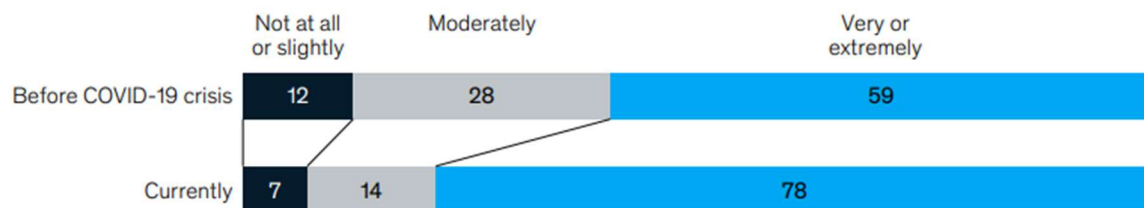
→ factors in the individual's environment that stimulate, support and hinder performance (Sonntag and Frese, 2001)

### 1.4 Building the future workforce

In today's complex and interconnected world, professional success heavily depend on the acquisition and maintenance of both hard and soft skills. In the modern workforce, employers are searching for the perfect candidate who can bring a combination of both skills on the table. The problem is that in today's turbulent talent market, employers are struggling to find people who have the skills and experience they need. The urgency of closing skill gaps is more important than ever to do because lacking the right skills, or delaying their introduction may mean losing market potential and postponing the adoption of new technologies.

Developing and enhancing human skills and capabilities through education, learning and meaningful work are key drivers of economic success, of individual well-being and societal cohesion. Across the globe, businesspeople ascribe great value to learning and capabilities and many organizations are investing accordingly. Concurring to the data collected and reported in the paper *Rethink capabilities to emerge stronger from Covid-19* of November 2020, nearly 80% of company leaders say that capability building has become a key point in organization's long-term perspective, as well as the value on learning has reached high value<sup>26</sup>. A number that has increased considerably compared to the 59% that placed a certain importance on capability building even before the Covid-19 crisis.

**Figure 1.7 The importance of capability building to organizations in the long-term perspective**



<sup>26</sup> The online survey was in the field from August 18 to August 28, 2020, and garnered responses from 1,240 participants representing the full range of regions, industries, company sizes, functional specialties, and tenures. Of them, 868 were in leadership roles in their organizations (for example, C-level executives, senior managers, and department, division, and/or business-unit heads).

Source: Rethink capabilities to emerge stronger from Covid-19, McKinsey

**Capability building** is the systematic process of enhancing and expanding the skills, knowledge, and overall abilities of individuals or organizations<sup>27</sup>.

It refers to acquire new competencies, strengthening current ones, and fostering an attitude that values lifelong learning and development. Building capabilities enables people and organizations to carry out tasks efficiently, accomplish goals, adjust to changing conditions, and ultimately realize their full potential. Capacity building goes far beyond traditional employee training and hiring: it is about a radical change in the way the work is done sustaining a more comprehensive capacity for resilience, growth, and innovation. An effective capability building precisely affects not only individuals, but also the company itself because it enables it to develop the mindsets and behaviors necessary to achieve transformational gains and to have at disposal highly skilled and agile workforce able to contribute to stay competitive.

To summarize, when capability building is well embraced and implemented it allows to align workforce with organizations 'strategic objectives accomplishing numerous goals essential to business success.

For employees	For companies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Enhancing their current skills and acquiring new ones increasing productivity and performance</li><li>• Fostering their careers throughout empowerment and professional growth programs</li><li>• Seizing new opportunities as their skillset becomes wider and deeper</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Obtaining better outcomes and customer satisfaction</li><li>• Enabling faster innovation thanks to the continuous learning culture</li><li>• Staying competitive for the combination of more well-educated and up-to-date staff and the ability to attract and retain talent</li><li>• Nurturing a powerful leadership and talent pipeline</li></ul>

The first step in activating a culture of capability building is to understand what goals the company is setting and what skills are lacking. When firms recognize the need to address its skills gap, there are two major roads that can be undertaken: either transferring new skills to the employed workforce

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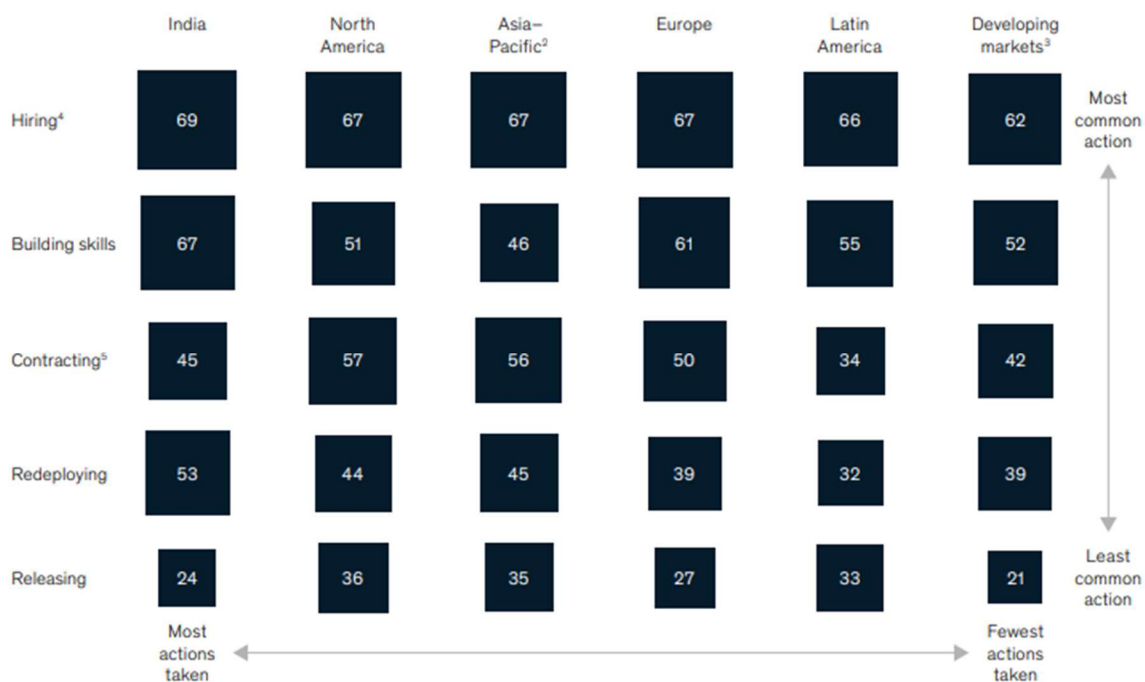
<sup>27</sup> Capability Building: Definition, Benefits and Strategies to Build your Program. Retrieved from: <https://www.togetherplatform.com/blog/capability-building-definition-benefits-and-strategies-to-build-your-program>

via specific training or relying on the labor market to hire workers endowed with the required skills. These solutions are not necessarily alternative, and their attractiveness varying according to the type of skill in-need (skill mismatch and the dynamics of Italian companies' productivity, 2021).

"Until recently, HR Directors solved problems in certain positions by recruiting new resources," states Christophe Perillhou, Learning & Solutions Director of the Cegos Group " (CEGOS, 2020). However, in today's world, problems are becoming more pronounced, more frequent, more complex and more cross-functional.

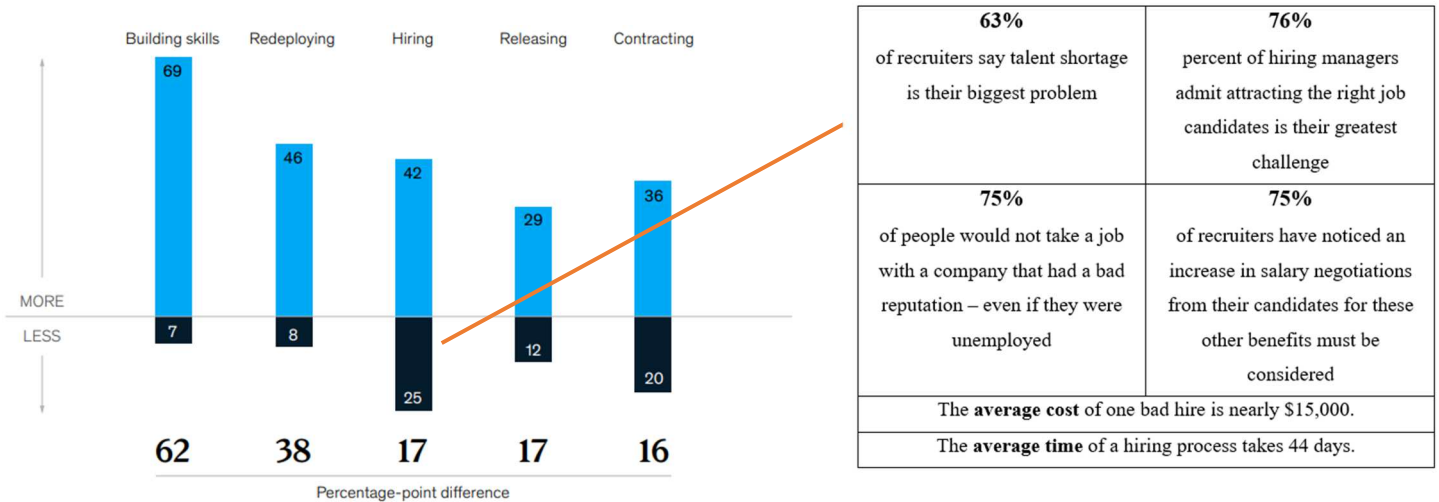
As can be seen from the graph below, for companies that were trying to address their talent needs at the initial outbreak of the pandemic, the most common tactic has been hiring and contracting freelance workers. It is the quickest way to stem the tide. But this is a primary response to curb the problem, not a preventive measure based on the idea of the long term.

**Figure 1.8: Measures taken by organizations to address their skills gaps at the outbreak of pandemic (by region)**



Source: McKinsey

In fact, a year after the discovery of the first Coronavirus cases, the report published by McKinsey&Company (April 2021) already outlined an important key to overcoming the pandemic as cited by the title thereof “*Building workforce skills at scale to thrive during -and after- the Covid-19 crisis*”. Thus, spotlighting that a significant shift toward skill building has been made.



More precisely 69% of respondents reported an increase in skill building in their organizations compared to the previous year. Additionally, the commitment of companies in this practice is inferred on the fact that more than half of respondents plan to increase their spending on skill building over the next year. While the hiring practice had the largest percentage decrease, as much as 25 percent. Another interesting fact is that redeploying talent to new roles has also seen an upswing, with 46% of respondents claiming an increase in this practice over the previous year in closing skill gaps. A practice that still requires a certain level of skill building.

It is acknowledged that the rapidity of matching the company's skill needs is critical to improve productivity and innovation and targeting the labor market by hiring talent with the skillset sought is a quick and practical way to address the talent shortage problem but there are trade-offs to be considered. First of all, a look at the hiring statistics on the year 2022 compiled by LinkedIn<sup>28</sup> and it becomes clear that hiring hides considerable challenges behind it. Secondly, it is necessary to take costs into consideration: in fact, if we consider a hire, we should include possible severance costs, administration and recruiting costs plus the fact that a new employee still requires a period of initial training to understand all the details of his or her job, which costs both money and time. Then, even though it is stated that firms devoting extensive resources to hiring receive a productivity premium (Fanti, Guarascio and Tubiana 2021), the turnover rate could prove to be a problem. In fact, if high,

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/top-100-hiring-statistics-2022-talent-solutions-shrm-cp/>



it can turn to be a wrong investment of resources ringing to the table the possible disadvantages of hiring other hidden costs, including a potential hit to morale and productivity as well as a lower-productivity learning curve for the replacement. One study discovered that a 10% rise in turnover would be as costly as a 0.6% wage increase for the entire workforce<sup>29</sup>. Finally, given the current complicated situation in the labor market, there are significant hiring challenges, which can lead to the hiring of unsuitable staff that lead to the widening of the much-rumored skills gap thus generating a vicious cycle.

The above, combined with the two main causes of hindering the closing of the skills gap, namely the very shortage of talent in the market and the ability to retain talent, are the main reasons for abandoning, or at least reducing the attractiveness of hiring to narrow the skills gap in favor of skill building. But what exactly does skill building consist of?

*Skill building is the process by which a company assists its staff in developing the skills necessary to meet its strategic goals and obtain a competitive advantage.*

*This is achieved by implementing skill-building activities designed to support employees in enhancing particular abilities.*

Employees and the company benefit from skill building in the following ways:

- **Enhancing worker and organizational performance**

Acquiring new competencies makes workers more effective, efficient, and financially beneficial.

- **Assisting workers and companies in getting ready for the future**

The goal of skill building is to cultivate not only the short-term competencies that the business requires in order to achieve its goals, but also to play for over the long term, anticipating the skillset needed for the challenges of the future.

- **Engaging and keeping employees**

Employees are more likely to be engaged and stay longer when an organization makes investments in their professional development. In fact, if a company invested in their learning and development, 94% of workers say they would stay longer<sup>30</sup>. This is very relevant considering that Covid-19 pandemic has created a new large pool of workers with different ideals who are shunning the traditionalist ways of working.

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Kuhn and Lizi Yu, 2021. *How costly is turnover? Evidence from retail*. Journal of Labor Economics, Vol 39, n.2

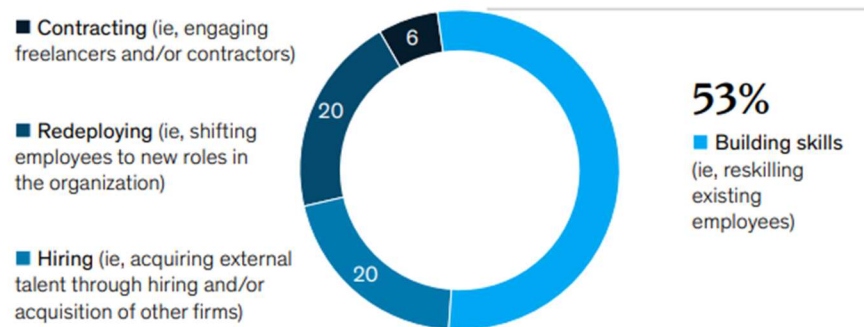
<sup>30</sup> LinkedIn, 2019 Workplace Learning Report. Retrieved from:

<https://learning.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/business/en-us/amp/learning-solutions/images/workplace-learning-report-2019/pdf/workplace-learning-report-2019.pdf>



And all these benefits are further confirmation that of all possible practices for closing skills gaps, skill building is the most effective, as the chart below shows.

### Most useful actions to close skill gaps



The problem is that only few companies claim to understand how to equip themselves in order to cope with the workforce disruptions resulting from technology and market trends. According to McKinsey research, nearly half of company leaders do not have a clear solution for building high-priority skills thus resulting in an incapacity to promptly meet the changing skill needs.

#### 1.4.1 Reskilling & Upskilling

As skills are being disruptive, businesses are designing and scaling up their training programs. That is possible through accurate talent matching into the form of reskilling and upskilling. Admittedly, both procedures aim to make professional workers learn skills and knowledge that they do not possess, however the starting point is very different and consequently the type of training to be undertaken is different.

**Re-skilling** = plans to help employees develop a new skill either for their current job or to be reassigned to a different position within the organization.

**Up-skilling** = process of training employees in new skill sets so that they can grow in their current role and add value to the organization.

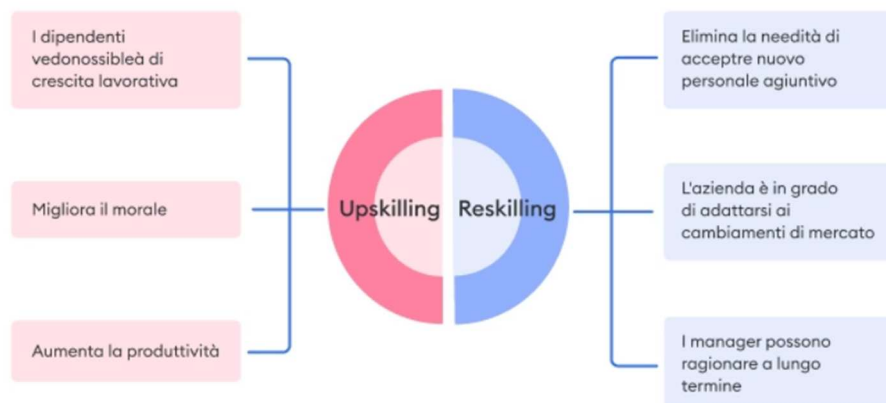
Upskilling is designed to make a person become more proficient in his or her job, without removing him or her from his or her field. This procedure should be performed if the position covered is still current and if all that is needed is for the employee to keep up with the latest developments in the field or simply to improve his or her performance or take on more complex tasks. Reskilling, on the other hand, is aimed at retraining a skilled person whose previous skills are, however, no longer useful

for the new direction of the company for which he or she works. In summary, in a labor-intensive industry, routine tasks will need reskilling while skilled professionals need upskilling.

The market changes rapidly, due to technological evolutions or situational limitations (such as a pandemic forcing remote work), and some tasks may soon be obsolete. Instead of abandoning the company's talented workers and professionals, reskilling allows them to be repositioned within the company, with all the consequent benefits. This solution is well suited when the company needs not only to change its offerings, but also when an expansion is needed. It is good to take proper care in selecting the "most suitable" employees for reskilling, people who, on their own initiative, tend to broaden their horizons and learn new skills related to their job position.

Upskilling and reskilling benefit both employees and companies.

### Advantages of upskilling and reskilling



source: re-do

A well-designed training strategy is useful in constituting that appealing employer branding so eagerly sought by potential candidates and employees. Not only does it put them in a position to meet the new challenges of the future, but it also gives them a work experience that conveys the value that business performance happens through people by making them more motivated and offering them the opportunity for professional growth. This as we saw in the first chapter are elements that the new workforce considers when they are looking for a new job or decide to leave their current one. Remember that one of the biggest problems in closing skills gaps lies precisely in the inability of companies to retain talent, and presenting oneself as a company willing to support its employees in the long term through skills development training makes a job position more attractive reducing the employee turnover rate by up to 28%<sup>31</sup>, with all the cost savings in terms of hiring new resources that we presented in the previous section.

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<sup>31</sup> The figure is from the survey conducted by the Boston Consulting Group reported in the following article.

Another reason why up - and re - skilling programs are important is because we must remember that new technologies and high competition risk making a company's offer obsolete. The issue of obsolescence is important, especially when we consider hard and soft skills. Based on report Closing the skills gap (Wiley, 2023) hard skills have an average shelf life of two years, while soft skills were found to be more durable with a large portion of respondents seeing an average life of at least 5 years. These findings lead us to two realities: technical skills need more frequent training and people skills, on the other hand, need to have specific training paths designed for their learning.

Coming to the benefits associated with investing in human capital, the McKinsey Global Institute article (February 2023) reports that upskilling and reskilling activities enable more consistent and resilient financial performance.

Figure: Data supporting the economic benefit of up-and-reskilling activities



Source: McKinsey Global Institute, February 2023

In addition, according to PwC research reported in *Upskilling for shared prosperity* (2021), businesses can increase the benefits of large-scale transformation initiatives by 10% to 15%, reduce workloads for individual roles by up to 40%, and increase overall workforce retention by more than 5% by integrating upskilling. Increased output, more chances to cut current expenses, and greater customer satisfaction are the results of these advantages.

It is clear then that as is evident from the above, companies that invest in professional skill development enjoy increased employee satisfaction, higher retention rate and improved productivity, thought also confirmed by the study of the SHRM (Society for Human Resource Management).

If organizations accept the notion that upskilling leads to meaningful, more motivating, and better-performing work, upskilling has the potential to trigger a virtuous cycle: upskilling leads to better jobs, and better jobs foster further skill development.

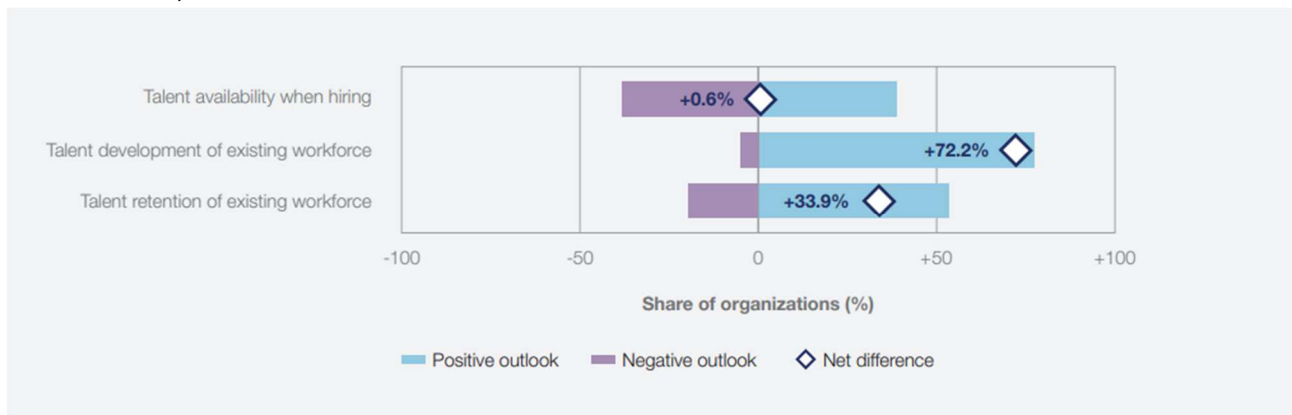
**Figure: the virtuous cycle of training activities**



Source: PwC analysis

Given that companies express skills gaps and lack of talent availability as their greatest barriers to transformation and investing in training as the most promising workforce strategy alongside automation, it is unsurprising that companies express confidence in their ability to develop their existing workforce and moderate positivity in retaining it but are less unified regarding the outlook for talent availability in the next five years.

Talent outlook, 2023 – 2027



Source: WEF, Future of Jobs Survey 2023

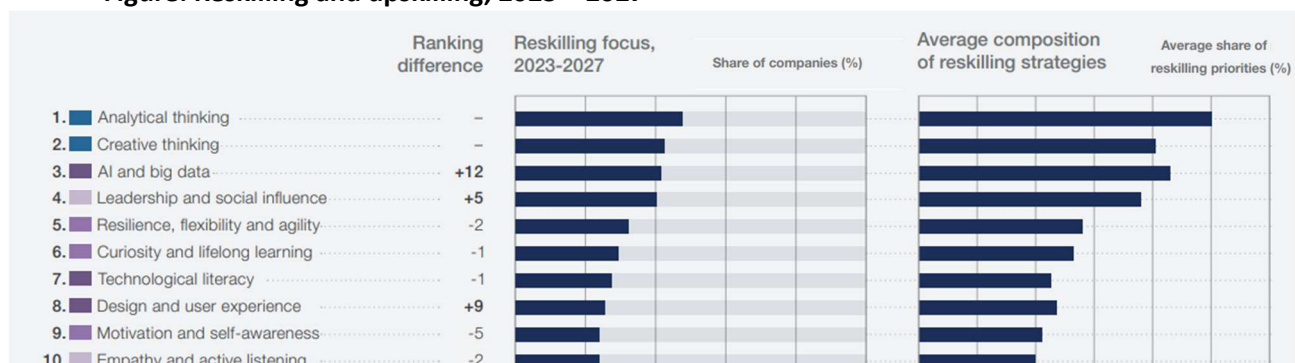
Over a period of just 3 years, cards have been largely reshuffled considering changing working patterns (remote working, flexibility, reorganization), shifted relationships to work (new purposes, new mindset) and the skills deficits (mismatches, gaps and shortages). It seems that the 21st-century economy now considers skills to be its global currency. However, this "currency" may lose value as people lose the skills they no longer need and as labor market demands change. Therefore, skills must

be continuously developed throughout life to maintain their value. Only if the workforce is well-trained and has the skills necessary to adopt automation and artificial intelligence (AI), the full potential of all workers is deployed and our economies will benefit from increased productivity growth.

### 1.4.2 Workforce strategies: priorities and players

The pandemic has been a stress test, in the sense that it has highlighted where to invest more in order to improve employees' well-being and abilities. There almost seems to have been a reversal of thinking, an evolution of corporate culture around the world about soft skills becoming the most important. Thought that is also emphasized in the article *When Times are hard, it's the soft skills that save us*, where the author invites reflection on the paradox brought to light by Tom Peters about the fact that “hard is soft, and soft is hard”. This short sentence highlights the upheaval just mentioned about how hard skills are perceived as soft skills used to be several years ago. The adjective soft in this case is used in a derogatory sense, wanting to downplay importance, underscoring that belief, of course erroneous, that prevailed until a few decades ago that soft skills were merely something extra, traits and characteristics that one possessed or did not possess and therefore were not relevant or were relevant in lesser amounts than practical and technical skills. Hard skills are unquestionably important, but they are frequently insufficient to succeed in the workplace. To develop a well-rounded professional, hard skilled must be enhanced and completed by soft skills. Ans soft skills need to be continuously developed, enhanced and tested through an appropriate training program in order to “extract” value from them. Hence, given what has been pointed out so far, and the urgency to bridge soft skills gaps, it is no surprise, that a large part of the efforts undertaken by companies through skill building relate precisely to 'softer' skills.

**Figure: Reskilling and upskilling, 2023 – 2027**



Source: WEF 2023

The highest priority for skills training is analytical thinking, which is set to account for 10% of training initiatives, followed by creative thinking subject of 8% of upskilling initiatives. The focus on these skills corresponds, as we will then see in the next chapter exactly to what are the two soft skills which importance are increasing fastest. However, if we take a look in the second column, we could see that there are other two skills that companies prioritize much more according to their current corporate reskilling strategies: leadership and social influence as well as AI and big data. Of course, digital skills have also gained in importance for businesses, as the boundary between work tasks performed by humans and those performed by machines and algorithms becomes ever thinner. These observations should be considered important because not always the skills considered to be most on the rise are then reflected in the average composition of business strategies on skills. Often, as in the highlighted case, the priorities that companies are facing are different from what market analyses suggest. In this case, the skills that are most present in training pathways are most needed by companies to address the digital transition and foster the view of a culture of continuous learning, in addition to the fact that creativity and analytical thinking development pathways are less developed because they are newer and given the complexity of these skills, more resources are required, both in monetary terms to the company and in terms of time and commitment to employees. But the need for soft skills training is not only due to past and present deficits, but also due to future trends. According to a Deloitte study, jobs involving an array of soft skills will expand 2.5 times faster than other types of jobs, accounting for 63% of all jobs by 2030.

Notwithstanding that great efforts should be taken to make these learning programs accessible, available and affordable to the workforce. Digitalization will certainly help in making training more accessible throughout dedicated platforms (LMS<sup>32</sup>) which can offer webinars and virtual classrooms, as well as e-learning modules and e-coaching.

However due to the training objective and the participant's level of digital addiction, training programs cannot be fully developed digitally.

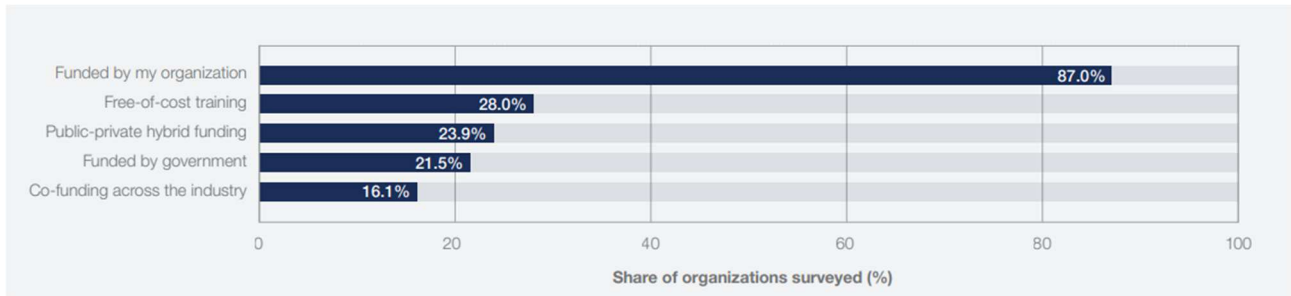
Another point to be unmarked is the following: if learning is in high demand, investments should match. As we have seen, companies have realized that they are part of the problem of human skills deficits (Hurrell, 2016), and in support of this, employers must provide the necessary training and mentorship to ensure that their employees have the correct skillsets for the job (Succi and Canovi 2020). In fact, taking a look at the chart below, the number one source of funding for corporate training

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<sup>32</sup> Learning Management System (LMS) is a software or SaaS platform for the management, distribution and measurement of an organisation's online training programmes.

is companies themselves (87% of companies surveyed believe they will use their own funds to implement training plans within the next few years).

**Figure: Funding for training, 2023 - 2027**

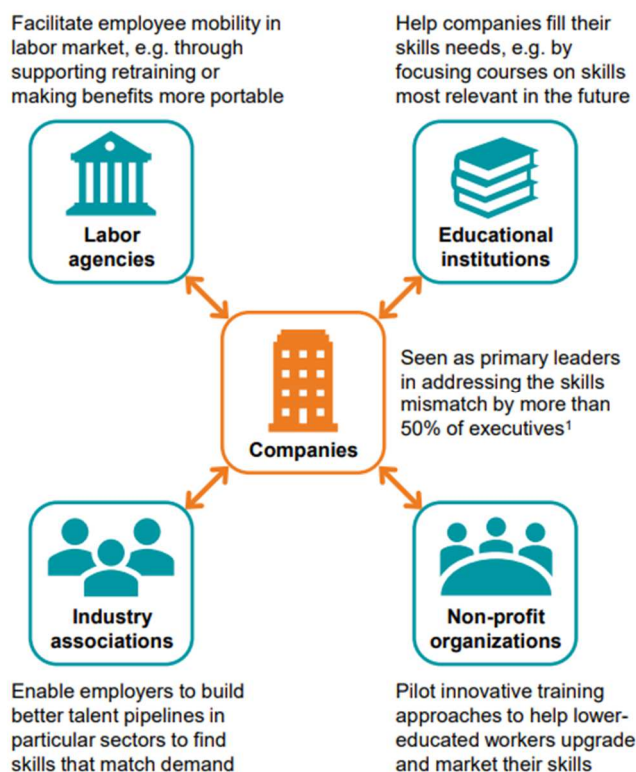


Source: WEF, Future of Jobs Survey 2023

Other common funding mechanisms include free-of-cost training, government funds and other more distinctive mechanisms such as co-funding across industry and public-private hybrid funding.

Even though workforce development is most commonly considered responsibility of workers and managers, companies should be able to rely on an ecosystem of stakeholders who can help them overcome the skills mismatch. Other stakeholders such as educational institutions, industry associations, policy makers as well as non-profit organizations should have an active role to play in building the future workforce and make training more affordable (Better skills, better jobs, 2016).

**Figure: Stakeholders of the ecosystem to overcome skills mismatch**



Based on the analysis and expert consultations reported in *Upskilling for shared prosperity* (2021) there are four main players that are part of the corporate training ecosystem, and therefore need to intervene by supporting and implementing the new up-and-reskilling agenda.

- **Governments:** to handle the enormous challenges brought about by shifting demographics, emerging technologies, and other global megatrends, governments will need to become more adaptable. Government digital transformation is a key component of becoming more agile, especially when it comes to the utilization of labor market information systems that predict skill demand. Along with flexibility and digitalization, , governments should concentrate on enabling the quick redeployment of workers who have been displaced from the labor market by investing in targeted reskilling initiatives in collaboration with businesses, unions, industries, and subnational and national government bodies such as labor agencies. The following are some actions considered beneficial:
  - Prioritize funding for upskilling in national recovery plans
  - Support and provide incentives for green investments and technology innovation
  - Nurture a pipeline of industrial investment projects via a “bottom-up” approach, potentially implemented through interregional cooperation
  - Incentivize citizens to invest in their own skills and education provide tax breaks or loans for skilling initiatives and creating partnerships among academies and businesses
  
- **Education providers:** any comprehensive upskilling agenda must incorporate education systems, especially secondary and tertiary education. As a moment of transformation for the industry, educators and training providers have the chance to build on the shortcomings in the current systems that COVID-19 has exposed. Prior to the pandemic, the education and training industry was rapidly changing, offering a variety of learning options that included blended lessons, online courses, and a more human centered learning experience. Several areas urgently need addressing:
  - Prioritize higher and professional education curricula that are “just in time” working with business to understand the skillset required
  - Connect schools and places of learning with each other globally through Erasmus and internship programs
  - Configure skill-centered learning rather than pure and simple college degrees. Adding skills-focused teaching within university pathways would bring graduates and companies closer



together by closing gaps and fostering a future where skills are the ultimate key to success in the 21st century<sup>33</sup>.

- Creating a credentialing system that involves digital badges and micro-credentials  
Demonstrating the development and acquisition by the individual of the listed skills

While companies tend to focus primarily on government help with skills training, the role played by educational institutions should become a primary focus, as they are the ones who provide candidates entering the workforce. Education will prove to be an important player in the training market as it trains talents, leads scientific innovation and prepares the future incoming workforce.

- Industrial associations and trade unions: At a time of increasing competition for talent, trade associations can enable employers to work together to create talent more quickly within a given industry. They have traditionally played a central role in training efforts in several countries
  - Creating a high-quality assurance system that can advise employers and unions.
  - Generate strong networks between educational institutions and the labor agency
  - Designing on-the-job training and apprenticeship initiatives to develop the skills required in young people.
- Labor agencies: they are no longer just agencies that offer a "passive" solution (unemployment benefits), but true active entities located in the entire national territory that manage and facilitate the retraining of the unemployed by providing
  - Retraining the unemployed to find new jobs by acting as employment centers.
  - Helping individuals use and enhance their skills in new occupations and sectors given the high demand for cross-mobility between sectors.
- Non-profit organizations: They have an opportunity to develop innovative approaches to skills issues.

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/skills-rather-than-just-degrees-embracing/>

Academic degrees from schools or universities typically place more emphasis on grades that indicate subject-matter proficiency or knowledge than on abilities like creative problem-solving or stakeholder management. In order to measure skills in a more comprehensive way, educators might need to think about redesigning and creating new metrics. Additionally, they could try teaching team-work, problem-solving and other soft skills in a less subject-specific manner, like by having students present in class, offering in-depth feedback on written assignments, and promoting deeper thinking that focuses on why and how questions.

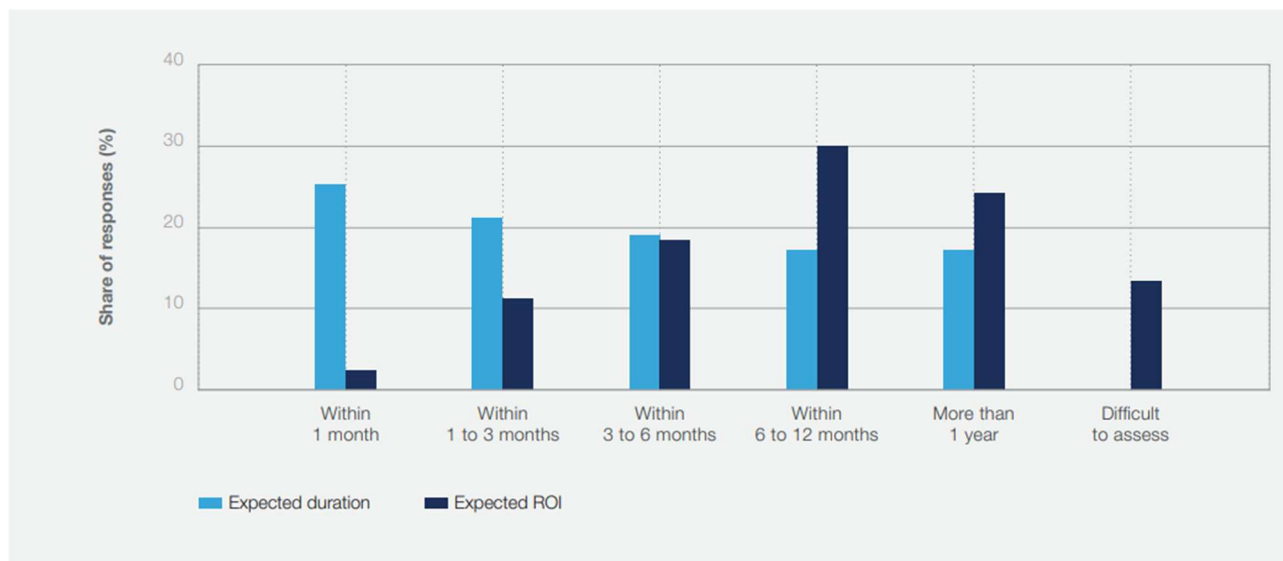
- Support companies through resources or by directly providing the company with staff who have attended training courses directly through the organization. One example is Generation, an independent nonprofit youth employment organization founded by McKinsey in 2015 that seeks to close the skills gap for young people.
- Push companies to establish foundations to support dedicated skills development programs or research and development centers
- Use philanthropic initiatives to bring awareness to new organizations on these issues and tighten networks

These stakeholders are tasked with mapping the changing employment landscape and forecasting future demand for skills, but only by working together and making strong connections will it be possible to identify the levers that are successful in driving future labor market transformations and develop a comprehensive, effective and needs-aligned supply of skills development programs for workers.

Another point to be unmarked is the following: Every organization must be able to measure the effectiveness of its training initiatives, and data collection and analysis are the key tools for doing so. Organizations can use the data collected to monitor learner performance against predefined objectives in order to be able to assess the actual effectiveness of the return on investment on something intangible and difficult to measure. In fact, identifying the ROI on a skills development plan is not impossible, but it certainly requires investment in time and money on the part of companies to create robust data collection policies, tools and training that enable them to capture quantitative information on the performance of their training programs. By understanding this data, organizations can create smarter training plans tailored to the needs of their employees, identify their trends in learning behaviors, and identify areas where further investment is needed to improve outcomes.

In addition, this type of tool will allow learning experiences to be made dynamic based on changing industry trends or to global markets.

**Figure: Duration of training and expected return on investment**



*World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Survey 2023*

According to the WEF, companies expect that 25% of their training programs to last less than one month, only 17% will last longer than a year. But what is really of interest is the expected timeframe for return on these trainings: one-third of employers expect an ROI within the first six months of completing the training, while two-thirds within the year. The returns on the investment can be really high: one example, according to MIT's reported up to 250%<sup>34</sup> return in investing in soft skills training. How much the return will be is influenced by various factors, but what is certain is that the benefits are countless.

We are in a pivotal time where the actions and choices we make now will shape the lives and economies of entire generations. Many companies are now at a critical juncture when it comes to talent development and skill building. High stakes are involved. Professionals are encouraged to undertake professional training to learn new skills, upgrade existing capabilities and master the skills of tomorrow. We are equipped with the necessary tools. Our modern era's wealth of technical innovation can be used to maximize human potential. Companies and their ecosystems have the capacity to reskill and upskill an unprecedented number of people, to put in place precise safety nets that shield displaced workers from poverty, and to design customized maps that point displaced workers in the direction of future employment opportunities.

The so-called “soft skills revolution”<sup>35</sup> has started.

<sup>34</sup> It was a 12-month soft skills training program with a particular focus on problem solving and decision making. More info in the link below:

<https://www.etnmagazine.eu/soft-skills/soft-skills-are-becoming-increasingly-important-in-the-job-market/>

<sup>35</sup> Reconciling hard skills and soft skills in a common framework

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **SOFT SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMS: THE POSSIBLE SOLUTION TO THRIVE PANDEMIC AND FUTURE CHANGES**

Now more than ever soft skills are perceived as a must-have more than a nice-to-have. Articles on soft skills seem to be a trending topic appearing in a variety of articles and disciplines, but when pressed to describe the concept it starts to become murky.

The issue of soft skills, in fact, is not so easy, starting with the fact that there is no clear and unanimous definition, to the extent that as the title of one report relays (Mattenson et al. 2016) soft skills are still "a phrase in search of meaning".

In today's workplace, soft skills are becoming increasingly important. While technical skills and education are essential, soft skills are what set individuals apart from their peers. Soft skills allow individuals to communicate effectively, build trust with their colleagues, manage conflicts, and work collaboratively towards achieving their goals.

And although the topic is so complex and perhaps even a bit confusing, we cannot but wonder: Why are social skills so prized in today's labor market? How can we acquire them?

We can certainly agree, as reported by the World Economic Forum in the Future of Jobs Report, that "AI will radically reorient the nature of all work". But we cannot neglect the fact that the emerging *emotional economy* has a truly significant weight in making tomorrow's workforce capable and successful.

#### **2.1 Under the umbrella of soft skills**

If we think of the word soft skills what might come to our mind is probably a list of these words: empathy, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, leadership, resilience, time management, adaptability, creativity. But this list enumerates examples of soft skills without answering what they are. If we try a little harder, we could say that soft skills are a combination of skills that help the individual to work effectively and efficiently in a given setting. Now the fact is that in our minds the concept will be confused and appear as a catch-all label. Within the academic world the debate about how to outline and classify soft skills is raging. Nevertheless, an academic article states in its title "Soft Skills: A Phrase in Search of Meaning"<sup>36</sup> stressing inherently the complexity of this issue.

In order to understand what soft skills are, we need to take two steps back and clarify two important concepts with which we can later address the different notions attributed to them in the literature so as not to confuse the different terms that are frequently confused and used interchangeably these days.

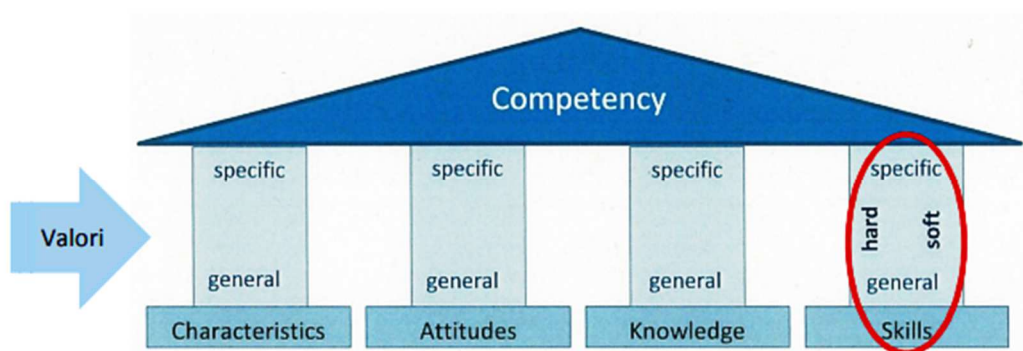
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<sup>36</sup> <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/609811>

Capacities or skills are competences, but they are not the only ones. In fact, we can divide competences into four main areas<sup>37</sup>:

- Personal characteristics: these represent an individual's qualities (physical and mental) and talents, which vary from person to person. The acquisition of knowledge, new skills and new behavioural attitudes can strengthen them.
- Attitudes: can be defined as a kind of prevailing predisposition to respond to internal and external stimuli. They are based on personal beliefs (cognitive aspect), feelings and emotions (emotional aspect) and on intentions and motivations (conative aspect).
- Knowledge: is the body of information acquired by an individual through learning and experience (work and personal). It is influenced by the context and culture of the group to which it belongs. It is divided into declarative knowledge (know-that) and procedural knowledge (know-how).
- Capabilities or skills: they represent the ability to act cognitively, practically and emotionally, as "knowledge in use" influenced by internal and external motivational factors and linked to innate talents and characteristics of the person. They are the result of learning, knowledge, attitudes and experience.

The image below provides a clear illustration of the above.



Fonte: EC, Transferability of skills across Economic Sectors

It becomes clear that characteristics, attitudes, and knowledge are not synonymous with skills, nevertheless they influence and complement the latter.

Analyzing the fourth pillar of competences, we can see that there are specific competences (which are acquired in a specific field/task or sector/company) and general competences (which are acquired

<sup>37</sup> Ceipiemonte S.c.p.a in collaboration with Erasmus+ Program, January 2016. *Quali sono le Soft Skill più richieste dalle imprese?* Retrieved from [https://www.centroestero.org/repository/23\\_06\\_2016\\_17\\_17\\_report-soft-skill-e-mdl.pdf](https://www.centroestero.org/repository/23_06_2016_17_17_report-soft-skill-e-mdl.pdf)

generically on the labour market or in private life). But the real distinction is between hard and soft skills:

- **Hard skills** are strictly specific to a type of job, strongly linked to the knowledge acquired in education and observable and therefore easily measurable and teachable (Lyu and Liu, 2021).
- **Soft skills** could be defined as everything that is not “hard”, skills unrelated to specific technical know-how and not specifically related to a job. They are closely linked to personal attitudes and the relational dimension. As personal skills they are 'intangible' and difficult to measure (Byrne et al 2020), but not impossible as it is not impossible to develop them.

It might seem a rather easy option to assume that everything that cannot be quantified as a technical skill can be grouped under the umbrella named "soft skills." Obviously, the issue is more complex because terms such as non-cognitive traits, social and emotional skills, growth mindsets, grit (all terms with slightly different meanings) can be used to describe this set of skills. For example, someone can categorize continuous learning and resilience as soft-skills attitudes. Critical thinking, active listening, problem solving can be considered examples of soft talents.

There is a second and final concept necessary to understand the notion of soft skills.

All core competences for soft skills have emotional intelligence as their basis.

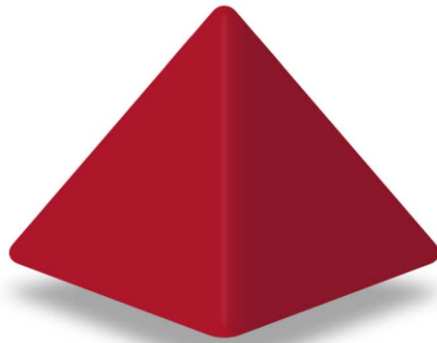
Emotional intelligence is a learned ability to identify, experience, understand and express human emotions in a healthy and productive way<sup>38</sup>. Goleman (1998) defined Emotional intelligence as ‘the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships.’

The key to emotional intelligence is to observe and recognize one's own and others' emotions, and to act with empathy. Emotional intelligence skills form the basis of the competences on which all soft skills are built.

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<sup>38</sup> EQ is an inventory designed to measure the capacity of effectively recognizing and managing our own emotions and those of others. EQ is the ability to make deeper connections at 3 levels: with ourselves (personal mastery), with another person (one-to-one) and within groups/ teams.

## Soft Skills



Self awareness
Self management
Social awareness
Relationship management

## Emotional Intelligence

When discussing soft skills, there are several terms that are used, including interpersonal skills, social competencies, cognitive skills (Matteson et al. 2016). A wider range of skills are included in social competencies, allowing people to effectively establish and sustain relationships, and collaborate with others. Communication, cooperation, flexibility, and cultural sensitivity are some of these skills (Rychen and Salganik 2003). The competencies require to collaborate, communicate, and interact with others in an effective manner are referred to as interpersonal skills. According to Spencer and Spencer (1993), these abilities include negotiation, active listening, empathy, and conflict resolution. Various form of reasoning, problem-solving and analyzing and interpreting data instead belong to the category of cognitive skills (Carroll 2003).

But the foregoing concerns a categorization of the soft skills currently present and studied in the field.

And there again the question arises: what are soft skills? Many authors have tried to provide their contribution by offering an answer as complete and accurate as possible.

Newell (2002) soft skills are manifestations of emotional intelligence (in contrast to hard skills that are indicators of cognitive intelligence). Dixon et al. (2010) claim that they mix interpersonal and social skills. With Muzio and Fisher (2009) soft skills begin to be conceived as skills derived from a multifaceted framework that includes behaviors, motivation, and other aspects of human interaction. Lorenz (2009) finds this cluster of qualities, habits, personality traits, attitudes essential to make someone a good employee and a compatible coworker, in agreement with Maniscalco (2010) who considers these skills useful the workplace as well as in everyday life.

At this point, it is clear what we mean by soft skills but it is necessary to include two further, and more recent, definitions in order to understand how this complex set of soft skills is evolving with the surrounding managerial environment and concepts. According to the report "What are the most

required soft skills by companies?" by the Ceipiemonte organisation in 2016, soft skills are to be considered a set of non-technical abilities and knowledge related to personal qualities and attitudes, social and management skills that support effective participation at work. An addendum also reports that "due to their intangibility, these skills can be difficult to quantify, recognize, assess and develop". This further specification gives an idea of how these competences are perceived by employers and employees, pointing to some of the problems inherent to soft skills such as the difficulty of finding the right method for learning them or the challenge for companies to recognise them in candidates for a job or in their own employees for the performance evaluation of the company and its workforce. Another important description is given by Niuko in *Soft Skills che generano valore* (2017), where the new aspect that emerges is the following: all the changes we constantly undergo in the outside world push us to react by using the transversal skill set that we already possess and to adapt to the new dynamics by learning new skills, developing in depth the ones we already have, always pursuing a perspective of continuous growth and learning. In fact, the definition is as follows: soft skills are understood as the set of knowledge and related personal skills and abilities regarding how to consciously re-act to the stimuli we perceive in experienced situations.

Needless to mention that the literature on this subject is extensive as it includes as many as 119 labels on what soft skills are, in a collection that counts 600 publications over more than 50 years (Joie-La Marle et al 2022). In the extreme, we could say that hard skills represent what we do, soft skills how we do it. Today's challenge is no longer about knowing how to do but about knowing how to be in and to deal with a situation (Soft Skills per il management, 2018). And the more complex the situation and the ever-evolving business landscape are, the more it is soft skills that save us because knowing how to adapt and remain competitive are the keys to overcoming challenging times.

### **2.1.2 The importance of soft skills**

Considering the above, it is now necessary to understand why these skills are of such relevance. While it is easy to understand why coding is necessary for software development, or why knowing how to run a spreadsheet is necessary in the preparation of a report, understanding why soft skills are so important is not so straightforward. Fortunately, although the academic-scientific world has not yet succeeded to conclude an unambiguous and universally accepted definition of the concept of soft skills, it is agreed to support a recognition of the importance of these skills, both in education (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Succi and Canovi 2020) and business as predicting factors in job performance, career success and personal well-being (Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Williams, 2008; Amdurer, 2014). To give an idea of the importance of these skills within the labor market, in 2021, there were more than 80 million job openings spread over 22 different industry



sectors and nearly two-thirds of positions included soft skills among their requirements, according to America Succeeds<sup>39</sup>.

Several authors (Kantrowitz 2005; Cimatti 2016; Ibrahim et al. 2017) have drawn attention to the importance of soft skills to support a success performance of the individual in the workplace. Research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center has concluded that 85% of job success comes from having well-developed soft and people skills, and only 15% of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge (hard skills)<sup>40</sup>.

However, it is in light of the new reorganization that the labor market is undergoing that the role of soft skills becomes rightfully pivotal.

- **They are transferable.**

Soft skills are part of people's experiences, traits and educational backgrounds and are skills that will stay with them for the rest of their lives, no matter what job role they take on. And it is precisely this inherent transferability property of theirs that makes them more critical given a volatile job market where roles and expectations can change in a matter of years. This property of soft skills turns out to be an invaluable asset for companies that are considering moving to an agile workforce model that sees changes in how tasks are performed and in team dynamics. The effort to train "supra-professional" skills, along with the need for cross-cutting knowledge and digital literacy, comes to the fore precisely as a necessity to address the pressing needs for global decision-making and interdisciplinarity (Krpalek et al, 2021).

In addition, the transferability of soft skills is critical for professional growth: indeed, these skills prove to be a valuable asset for employees contemplating changes in role, department, or even industry, as lateral shifts or nonlinear career paths are becoming increasingly common<sup>41</sup>.

- **They are a catalyst in an AI-driven world.**

The importance of soft skills will only increase with the rewriting of the definition of work by the fourth industrial revolution and artificial intelligence developments, which are already taking over the world. Not only will more complex assignments and projects, which require a human touch, move to the forefront, but in this new world soft skills such as creativity,

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<sup>39</sup> The importance of soft skills in today's workplace

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.etnmagazine.eu/soft-skills/soft-skills-are-becoming-increasingly-important-in-the-job-market/>

Study of Watts & Watts 2008

<sup>41</sup> INFO: dati percorsi laterali + frequenti

adaptability, and lateral thinking will be the real drivers of innovation, the real skills that can bring value.

- **They enable organizations to thrive complex situation.**

Agility, emotional intelligence, and open-mindedness are what will enable employees and organizations to handle complex situations, such as technological disruptions, organizational changes, or socioeconomic stresses. Azim et al (2010) determine that the key in managing complex projects is soft skills (75% of people surveyed say ss are the most important factor when dealing with complexity). Employees who possess strong soft skills and companies that readily recognize programs to develop these skills as an investment will be expected to have smooth transitions and be able to thrive even in adversity.

- **They are the glue for collaboration and teamwork.**

In an increasingly interconnected and globalized work environment, where virtual teams are more common than ever, soft skills play a key role in bridging cultural (or generational) gaps and facilitating interactions. The literature on the effects of COVID-19 on social soft skills is still quite limited but the challenges encountered under the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically during the lockdown, have served as a stress test for social skills. According to Brucks and Levav (2022), the increase of virtual interaction and work from home induced by COVID-19 may have inhibited social soft skills because in-person teams have the possibility to discuss their ideas in the same fully shared physical place. In contrast, virtual teams have a more constrained interaction, bounded by the presence of a screen in front of each team component. Due to these difficult interactions, the possession of developed soft skills has never been so crucial in being able to relate to others and lay the foundation for healthy teamwork dynamics aimed at building trust. Of course, trust also determines the quality of interactions between managers and their staff and is the basis for honest feedback sessions and one-on-one meetings.

- **They nurture a growth mindset.**

As we have seen, continuous learning-the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn-is one of the hallmarks of tomorrow's workers. One only has to look at the statistics to see why. For example, the World Economic Forum claims that by 2030 we will need to retrain more than 1 billion people. In this context, soft skills play a key role in cultivating a growth mindset that enables employees to embrace challenges and see them as opportunities for growth. As

industries are transforming, organizations will need people with a growth mindset and strong people skills, who have the ability to innovate, remain adaptable, and maintain their performance and productivity even as job roles and demands continually update.

- **They are the answer to the talent shortages.**

For companies, the interpersonal value of soft skills also emerges in the creation of stable and lasting bonds, because they guarantee attractiveness if they are an integral part of the corporate culture. Every year, the American magazine Fortune publishes a ranking of the most admired companies globally, including companies such as Alphabet, Apple, Starbucks, Walt Disney, Microsoft and other innovators in their field<sup>42</sup>. The interesting aspect of the ranking is related to the reasons why certain companies are chosen: it is not so much the organisational structure, process efficiency and financial strength that are attractive as the ability to innovate or respond to consumer desires. Soft skills are real intangible resources, of great weight and value when a company competes in the market, because they are directly linked to talent acquisition and talent retention (higher retention rate). It is evidenced that can play a significant role in enhancing work satisfaction and are linked to higher levels of engagement and productivity in the workplace (Palumbo 2013).

As a result, companies can gain a number of benefits from employing people who possess the collection of soft skills that are most significant to their success as a company (Robles, 2012), including a shortened period of orientation, increased output, innovative thinking, and organizational dedication. Then again, possessing these skills turns out to be essential in the hiring process for candidates as well. Indeed, as researcher Lydia Liu reports in LinkedIn's 2019 Global ... report, while hard skills enable candidates to get a job interview, it is the soft skills that ultimately "open the door" to the position applied for.

If we then consider that performance, they are also the skills that enable us to advance in our careers allowing employees to reach promotions and consequently to get higher wages. In fact, higher-soft-skilled workers have seen their pay increase (Upskilling for shared prosperity, 2021). Workers who can work on their soft skills and have special training available can improve their productivity and competency and with it gain better job options, consequently higher salaries, reducing wages inequalities, particularly those created by skill-biased technological transformation. In addition, if we consider the ever-increasing pace of an ever-changing world, we will remember that the obsolescence

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<sup>42</sup> <https://www.peoplechange360.it/people-strategy/development-and-learning/soft-skill-che-cosa-sono-perche-svilupparle/>

of skills, particularly hard skills, is eroding faster and faster (Dominici 2019; Schultheiss and Backes-Gellner 2022). This is why soft skills are to be taken into account in hiring processes as they constitute valuable skills. We are not saying that hard skills are not more important or are no longer current, on the contrary, fully in agreement with the new literature that highlights the significance of soft skills as a supplement to hard skills (Hendarman and Cantner 2018).

It is surprising to understand how these skills that are considered intangible actually have such a strong tangible impact on organizations. Soft skills affect people's lives and the well-being of nations in ways that go far beyond what can be measured by labour-market earnings and economic growth. They are seen almost as "*power skills*" instead of soft skills embedding the idea these human-centric skills are critical and there's nothing soft about them. By hiring candidates with these skills and further developing them, organizations will nurture a resilient workforce that can update or retrain as businesses rapidly evolve.

Considering all the above, the question arises as to whether building up the soft skills of the workforce is not a possible solution to overcome the problems inflicted by the pandemic, or even a more than valid best practice for overcoming disruptive times of change.

## **2.2 The new emerging soft skills**

Automation and artificial intelligence, as hybrid working, are changing the nature of work bringing an upcoming shifts in demand for workforce skills and asking companies to find prompt actions to prepare their workforce. It is possible to say that some of the issues and challenges we face today were already foreseen and outlined as trends before the outbreak and spread of covid-19. A certainly very interesting and almost 'prophetic' document, is the search *Skill shift: automation and the future of the workforce* of 2016 by the McKinsey Institute, where some changes that would occur by 2030 had already been highlighted. The projections anticipated a strongest growth in the demand for technological skills (at that time the smallest category), with an increase of 55% and a estimation 17% of hours worked (up from 11% in 2016). Even the increase in the demand for social and emotional skills has been foreseen: an increase of 24%, corresponding to 22% of hours worked. The available data even made it possible to understand and predict the need for a growth in demand for higher cognitive skills, with particular increases in some specific skills, such as creativity.

Now the question is: how accurate are the predictions made a couple of years later?

Cognitive skills are reported to be growing in importance most quickly, reflecting the increasing importance of complex problem-solving in the workplace. Surveyed businesses report creative thinking to be growing in importance slightly more rapidly than analytical thinking. Technology

literacy is the third-fastest growing core skill. The socio-emotional attitudes which businesses consider to be growing in importance most quickly are curiosity and lifelong learning; resilience, flexibility and agility; and motivation and self-awareness – evidence that businesses emphasize the importance of resilient and reflective workers embracing a culture of lifelong learning as the lifecycle of their skills decreases. Systems thinking, AI and big data, talent management, and service orientation and customer service complete.

The declining importance of physical abilities has been a feature of previous Future of Jobs Reports. Furthermore, ethical skills have been introduced to the report’s skills taxonomy for the first time in this edition, with 68% of companies believing that consumers becoming more vocal on social and environmental issues is likely or highly likely to drive transformation within their organization in the next five years.

In an increasingly dynamic and volatile world, where being able to adapt to new market demands turns into a competitive advantage, it is essential to grasp the new skills to be developed. However it is difficult to design the development skills programs for a fast-changing future without a blueprint. In this regard, the WEF report in the Future of Jobs (2020) provides us with a helping hand. It has drafted a list of the top skills that will drive the jobs transition by 2025 as part of appropriate reskilling and upbuilding programs. Considering the top10, 8 out of 10 falls within the sphere of soft skills. Not bad if we consider, that in today's context, AI and Big Data, or service orientation, programming or management are often the core skills that stand out.

But have a closer look:

<p><b>ANALYTICAL THINKING</b></p>	<p>processing and breaking down facts in a detailed, sequential and systemic manner in order to identify priorities on the basis of logical-sequential reasoning. It has to do with the awareness of cause-effect relationships between phenomena. The way of thinking is linear and focused and use facts to support the evidence. It helps for gathering and interpreting data for further understanding.</p>
<p><b>ACTIVE LEARNING</b></p>	<p>the ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons. It is important for an individual's competitiveness and employability, but also enhances social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development. This soft skill represented by an individual's aptitude, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is</p>

	<p>often sought after by employers so that their employees can take an active part in change, grow and learn new things all in line with an organizational culture oriented towards continuous learning.</p>
<b>COMPLEX PROBLEM SOLVING</b>	<p>understanding and managing problems and their solutions in today's working environment which results to be more complex and more interconnected. In the coming years, being able to figure out those tough challenges could transform the solution in a competitive advantage for a company. When faced with the need to think outside the box at the front of complex problems, other soft skills such as lateral thinking and the methodology of gamification may come relevant.</p>
<b>CRITICAL THINKING</b>	<p>ability to use reason and logic searching for errors, inconsistencies and weaknesses in order to arrive at the best solutions and discard unreliable ones. It is a process that does not proceed by accumulation but by subtraction and promotes an objective and systematic approach to reality. By thinking critically, it means identifying and evaluating information, establishing the importance of concepts, understanding connections, detecting inconsistencies and errors, solving problems in an organized manner and constructing arguments in a well-founded and objective manner. It is an open and flexible process and never stops questioning reality.</p>
<b>CREATIVITY AND ORIGINALITY</b>	<p>combination of existing information to develop new concepts and state-of-the-art solutions in order to become more competitive. Leaders are looking for people who can provide innovative approaches to the new needs of these rapid-changing markets. Besides they have a unique advantage: they cannot be automate so they will always be valuable both for workers and companies.</p>
<b>LEADERSHIP</b>	<p>the ability of a person to lead a group for which he/she is responsible, inspiring and involving the members in order to achieve the objectives set. In times when everything is in flux, having a reliable, motivated</p>

	<p>leader with a clear vision for the future is essential to guide one's workers and the company towards the common goal.</p> <p>Often alongside this ability we find social influence. It does not refer to followers and social media, but to something more real. It comes from building up a reputation and relationships over time, which can become an invaluable tool in your assets.</p>
<p><b>TECHNOLOGY USE AND CONTROL</b></p>	<p>how to use not only the technology that underpins normal work activities, knowledge of which is now essential for employability, but also technologies that are more specific to that sector, those products or that company, without forgetting the need to keep abreast of emerging technologies and the ability to pass this knowledge on to one's colleagues. Unsurprisingly, technology skills will be vital for workers going forward. Moreover, a constructive use of technology includes knowing how to gather information in order to observe, monitor and intervene in various contexts.</p>
<p><b>TECHNOLOGY DESIGN AND PROGRAMMING</b></p>	<p>the possibility of tailoring your technology solutions to your needs, or even creating your own solutions. It refers to more specific skills that can support companies' strategies, from sales to logistics to even skill development plans for their employees, with technology products designed and engineered for every need, maximizing performance and profits.</p>
<p><b>RESILIENCE AND FLEXIBILITY</b></p>	<p>a crucial skill that enables individuals to navigate challenges, recover from failures, and continue to perform at a high level, contributing to a positive work environment. Not only is it vital in highly stressful environments, but it fosters the ability to adapt to change. That is why it goes hand in hand with flexibility. This one indicates the ability to adapt to sudden changes, so that unexpected problems or tasks can be handled with ease. This is particularly important in today's constantly changing labour market, but also in sectors characterized by a high level of change and volatility. Both these skills have to do with a growth mindset.</p>

## REASONING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

rather than the solution of a problem, it means the effort deployed to arrive at it. It should be pointed out that, in this case, we are dealing with problems more relegated to the typical activities of one's job, whereas for more multifaceted problems we have seen complex problem-solving skill. Problem solving encompasses a range of skills such as the curiosity to want to explore a problem in depth, active listening to the parties involved and communication, the grit not to break down in the face of an obstacle, and the reasoning methods one decides to implement.

These soft skills are as sorely lacking as they are salient. They have the potential to provide better jobs, higher job satisfaction and more targeted education to the work world. This paragraph is useful for us to understand upon what companies need to focus their efforts and thus their investments when it comes to the inevitable moment of addressing the skill building of their employees.

### 2.3 Global Soft Skills Training Market

The development and improvement of interpersonal skills—which are necessary for successful interaction in both personal and professional contexts—is referred to as **soft skills training**.

Many top executives recognize the importance of developing and integrating within companies dedicated programs specifically designed for these skills. For instance, the CEO of General Motors Mary Barra emphasized the role of soft skills training in generating a workforce prepared to collaborate and provide new and creative solutions to problems. She continued adding that "(their) commitment to developing professional skills within (their) organization has enabled (them) to adapt to change, meet the needs of customers and stay ahead of competition"<sup>43</sup>. It is therefore evident that soft skills training has become a strategic lever for companies.

In order to give a clear idea of the speed at which this market is expanding we should have a look at the data provided by the IMARC Group<sup>44</sup> in their annual report entitled *Soft Skills Training Market: global industry, trends, share, size, growth, opportunity and forecast*: in 2021 the global soft skills training market size has reached the figure of US\$ 23.64 Billion, increasing again in 2022 to reach US\$ 26.5 Billion and hitting the US\$ 29.8 Billion in 2023. More impressive and representative of this change are the forward-looking estimates proposed by the same body: it expects the market to reach US\$ 83.5 Billion by 2032, exhibiting a growth rate (CAGR) of 12% during 2024-2032.

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<sup>43</sup> It's time we abandoned soft skills, Forbes

<sup>44</sup> IMARC Group is a leading global provider of market research and management strategy based in the United States. It analyzes data across all industries and geographical areas and provides market forecasts to find the best opportunities and to handle the most pressing problems.



It is evident that soft skills do not appear to be a fading trend, but rather a sector that offers great opportunities for interest and investment. One wonders, therefore, what the drivers and dynamics are that have led to growth at this breakneck pace.

- **The rising awareness of the concrete benefits of soft skills**

As we have made clear through our look at the post-pandemic labour market and the insights gained from the countless reports cited above, companies are increasingly recognising the importance of soft skills and acknowledging the mistakes made in not having addressed the skill gap earlier. While technical skills are vital, soft skills have become the “glue” that holds people, teams and business units together. It strengthens team chemistry, increases output, strengthens the effectiveness of leadership, raises employability, and fosters a positive workplace culture. Training in soft skills also contributes to better customer satisfaction, stronger relationships, higher employee engagement, better retention rates, and long-term professional success.

- **The new required skillset to deal with a rapidly changing business environment**

Due to the increasing pace of technological change and globalization, having a skilled workforce that can be resilient and adapt to the ever-changing business environment is becoming increasingly important. And in a world where everything changes so fast, hard knowledge becomes obsolete quickly, while soft skills remain always relevant, transferable and valuable.

- **The good and the bad of remote work**

Remote work has been a game changer in the professional landscape affecting workplace characteristics and working styles. It has completely reshaped the way we work by providing more flexibility, higher output, and access to talent from around the world. However, there are disadvantages as well: according to Brucks and Levav (2022), the increase of virtual interaction and work from home induced by COVID-19 may have inhibited social soft skills because virtual teams have a more constrained interaction, bounded by the presence of a screen in front of each team component. But absurdly, this has increased the need for individuals to be able to communicate more effectively and to collaborate ...

- **Digitalization and new technologies**

With the advent of new technologies, digital training is becoming popular even in the formation of soft skills. Particularly there are 3 trends that emerge: online learning platforms, micro-learning contents and VR/AR simulations which are the most innovative trends in soft skills training

- **Growing importance of emotional intelligence**

The ability to understand and manage emotions is becoming increasingly important due to the growing cross-cultural collaboration. In this context we have to consider

-clients with new needs and from different backgrounds

-employees their engagement and well-being

-focus on sustainability and CSR help employees to implement sustainable practices

- education

the structures most sensitive to understanding this ongoing change schools, universities and other academic institutions to improve employability and prepare students for future career success is favoring the market growth. The incorporation of soft skills training programs in the education as part of school and university curriculum... (lucrative opportunities and collaboration) completing their formal education

While we understand the broad nature of this fast growing market and its drivers, it is useful for us to take a look at the following three aspects:

- the segmentation of the market in order to get a more complete idea of what it encompasses, but above all this will come in handy in the following section on the teaching methods used for transversal skills as they differ - and this is how it should be - from traditional hard skills teaching methods
- the trends that are entering this market in order to identify particular developments and to try to anticipate new opportunities
- the hindering factors

The **segmentation** of the soft skills training market can occur on the basis of several factors<sup>45</sup>:

Soft skills type

It refers to the type of non-technical abilities and interpersonal attributes that are chosen to be trained. The most common are leadership, communication, teamwork, problem solving, decision making, time management. Creativity and critical thinking are certainly considered to be among the most important skills but being more specialized and

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<sup>45</sup> Data and evidence contained in the following table are to be understood as having been obtained from research carried out by Acumen Research and Consulting, which offers cutting-edge, industry-specific market research reports and consulting services globally. The Report is entitled *Soft Skills Training Market Size - Global Industry Share, Analysis, Trends and Forecast 2022 – 2030* (published in August 2022) and the insights and forecasts provided are available at the following link: <https://www.acumenresearchandconsulting.com/soft-skills-training-market#:~:text=The%20Global%20Soft%20Skills%20Training,at%20a%20CAGR%20of%2012.2%25.>

	<p>requiring a more focused approach, they are not among the most widely demanded.</p>
Channel provider	<p>It is the entity supplying the service.</p> <p>It may be a corporate, academic, or governmental body.</p> <p>Among all channel providers, corporate/enterprise has the biggest market share as of 2021 and is predicted to hold that position through 2030. Conversely, the academic/education channel provider is anticipated to grow at the quickest rate in the coming years as a result of the expanding number of academic institutions and supportive government initiatives to include soft skill exercises in the curriculum.</p>
Source	<p>In house or outsourced. In the first case, the source is internal, such as an academy. In the second case it is an external organization, responsible for the development of the skills on which the training is required.</p> <p>Outsourcing is the most popular option because it gives immediate access to soft skills courses and allows you to have competent professionals at your side who are prepared for your specific needs.</p>
Delivery mode	<p>In-person, online<sup>46</sup>, blended learning</p> <p>As soft skills require different ways of training to be learned and cultivated we could chose the delivery mode and the methodology: frontal teaching, mentoring, on the job, coaching, experiential learning, group facilitation/workshop.</p> <p>At the moment the offline sub-segment is leading the market, with the expectation that it will continue to hold the largest market share for the period 2022-2030. However, with the introduction of new technologies and the evolution of theories on the learning of these skills, attention is being drawn to the fact that face-to-face teaching and the alternation of several modalities in the delivery of training on a given soft skill may be more effective, presumably leading to a decline in the market share of online classes in favor of face-to-face or mixed-mode teaching.</p>
End user	<p>The tree main end-users are: individuals, SMEs, and large enterprises.</p> <p>Even different industries (healthcare, finance, technology, etc.) can also be considered as end-users since each of them has unique characteristics and needs, and training programs can be modelled and designed on their</p>

<sup>46</sup> As for online courses, they can then be in synchronous, asynchronous or hybrid mode.

	needs and challenges. As per the market forecast for soft skills training, BFSI held the largest market share in 2021 and is expected to maintain its position in the coming years.
Offering	<p>It can include three different types of service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- training and development: it includes programs specifically designed for learning those exact soft skills;</li> <li>- assessment and benchmarking: tools and methods used to evaluate the soft skills asset of a company and compare it with the industry standards;</li> <li>- consulting: it involves services which are tailored to the specific needs of a company in order to help it develop and implement ad-hoc soft skills training programs</li> </ul>

**Trends** in the soft skills training market concern technologies and new ways of delivering learning.

- virtual online training

Digitalization of contents make them more accessible anywhere, anytime and based on individual needs. In addition, it allows to recording-rewinding and rewatching options. However, training companies will clearly not be able to make their training portfolio fully digital. Delivering a soft skills course face-to-face is completely different from doing it online. Since trainers do not interact with participants in the same way, as the 'classroom', the exercises and the communication possibilities are quite different, trainers also need to develop new skills. Therefore, to adapt to the new dynamics of the training world, trainers need to be adequately trained in distance learning techniques.

Rising number of platforms such as Udemy, Coursera, Skillshare and many more offering online soft skills certificate courses. Growing trend of e-learning via modules and assignments.

- Technological advancements such as VR and AR

These technologies can impart real-time soft skills education and offer an interactive communication system simultaneously. The VR and AR environment enables employees to practice soft skills learning in a safe, life-like simulation (with the advantage that simulation is also more cost-effective than risking a trainee losing an account or mishandling a situation). Employees are more emotionally connected to VR contents than in other contexts such as classroom or e-learning, thus resulting in enhanced learning because when emotions are involved, people connect, understand, and remember things more fully.

The integration and adoption of these tech innovations can make the studying process more innovative and interactive, and therefore more effective<sup>47</sup>.

Looking at these technologies, there is an interest in leading this market to the next step integrating AR and VR technologies to formation because being complex and researched technologies can offer an opportunity to obtain niche market for big companies. They are broadly classed as EdTech and reskilling services companies can support the process of redeploying workers into the jobs of tomorrow. Such companies utilize advanced data and AI capabilities matched with user interfaces that guide workers and managers through to discovering possible pathways into new job roles. Companies with such capabilities can become part of a new infrastructure for the future of work which powers worker transitions from displaced to emerging roles. The efforts of matching workers to possible opportunities can be complemented by the delivery of reskilling and upskilling at scale through educational technology services. North America dominates the soft skills training market due to major players in this region and growing awareness about customizable and fast learning programs in corporates (ex. Pwc, Walmart, ..) and educational institutes. Asia Pacific is expected to witness significant growth during the forecast period 2022 to 2030 due to rising awareness about the importance of good soft skilled employees. Rising technological innovation, increased government investments, the existence of advanced infrastructure, and enrolment in soft skill training in academic and business settings are just a few of the drivers driving the North American soft skills training market. North America, especially The United States, will still play an important role which cannot be ignored. Any changes from United States might affect the development trend of Soft Skills Training. The market in North America<sup>48</sup> is expected to grow considerably during the forecast period. The high adoption of advanced technology and the presence of large players in this region are likely to create ample growth opportunities for the market. However, the Asia-Pacific region is poised to grow at a rapid pace due to favorable government initiatives, an increasing youth population, and an increase in the number of multinational corporations in nations such as China, India, Japan, and Singapore, among others.

Other possibilities regard gamification due to the fact that it creates an active engagement and friendly competition; AI and machine learning thanks to the real-time feedback, weaknesses assessment, customized training programs to suit and individual specific requirements.

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<sup>47</sup> What does virtual reality and the metaverse mean for training? Retrieved from: <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/tech-effect/emerging-tech/virtual-reality-study.html>

<sup>48</sup> Soft Skills Training Market Size In 2023 : Growth Opportunities and Future Outlook 2030 <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/soft-skills-training-market-size-2023-growth/>

The following **restraints** and challenges can hamper the widespread adoption of soft skills best practices and training and consequently slowing down the growth rate of the market:

**- lack of budget allocation**

organizations may not have the necessary budget to invest in soft skills training whether it is money, time and understanding of needs. Its deployment in fact is quite expensive and if account is taken of the use of technologically advanced innovations such as AR and VR and/or the integration of video-based learning technology the whole thing can turn out to be very cumbersome and costly, especially if we consider small and medium-sized enterprises.

**- limited effectiveness of traditional training methods and lack of technical expertise**

Due to their human and personal nature and the demands of the context, teaching soft skills can be a real challenge. Unlike technical abilities, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to mastering soft skills, and this requires time and money, not always at the disposal of companies and individuals. Moreover, it also takes time to master these skills in order to teach them, and the push towards this booming market has only recently been taken up, leading to an actual dearth of skilled professionals suitable for this type of training.

**- limited awareness of the importance of soft skills and lack of an effective measurement on the impact of training**

Some organizations may still resent the importance of these skills by ignoring their benefits or not seeing in them a valuable asset to invest in. This is due to the fact that, as we have seen, these resources are difficult to evaluate, and thus to be able to make a cost-benefit analysis for an investment and then be able to extrapolate a ROI and an evaluation, especially a quantitative one, of the results of the training undertaken [Yen et al 2001]. Hence it is essential to track and measure the development of these skills, exactly as it is done with any corporate asset. These two problems can be particularly threatening for underdeveloped economies and for some industries that still perceive productivity as the core of the whole business and therefore consider hard skills as the only ones to be developed.

**- limited adoption of new technologies**

the high cost of new technologies such as virtual reality or gamification, and the complexity of sourcing and integrating them into soft skills training programs can inhibit the effectiveness of training.

It probably begs the question of whether and to what extent digital training will impact soft skills training. But before we can answer this question, we need to understand how soft skills are acquired.

## 2.4 Methodology in learning processes

If defining the concept of soft skills is difficult, teaching them is even more difficult.

There is a subtitle of a chapter of a book I read (CEO Excellence, 2022) that particularly stuck with me and it says: “treat the soft stuff as the hard stuff”. It may sound a bit of a throwaway phrase on the surface, but if we think about it when it comes to technical skills, we are very careful in developing the best possible path and practicing the best techniques to learn them.

Why is it so difficult when we meet the reality and the world of soft skills to think and design pathways created specifically for those skills?

In order to answer this question, we need to understand that soft skills bring with them problems, or rather obstacles that require a greater understanding of the definitions seen so far and a greater deployment of resources in the development of their training paths. Such obstacles are:

- Their connection with human nature and the surrounding environment
- A broad categorization with different features
- Challenge to teachers and instructors

One of the first things to consider when approaching the development and teaching of soft skills is that they are related to human behaviors, and as Lewis reported in 1951, behaviors are an interaction of the person (P) and his/her environment (E).

If:

$$\text{behavior} = f(P, E)$$

it takes a small leap to conceive that:

$$\text{soft skills development} = f(P, E)$$

This concept was later developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) which who through his subdivision of the environment into a kind of matryoshka<sup>49</sup>, outlines in the middle system, that constituted by education and the work situation, an environment in which the individual has strong interactions and is influenced by these exchanges. In fact, an employees’ work performance is not the result of individual performance but also of the environmental constraints (or aids) (Bacharach and Bamberger, 1995; Sonnentag and Frese, 2001). In summary, according to Bronfenbrenner, if you want to catalyze human development, it is necessary a change for the better in the environment in which the individual

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<sup>49</sup> The environment is described as a "Russian doll" in which we have: the microsystem, the inner-most level, which contains the individual and the immediate surroundings; the next level is the mesosystem where the individual has frequent and important interactions (friends, colleagues, leaders/managers); the third level is the exosystem which includes people and events that influence the individual but are not in turn influenced by the individual; and the final level consists of the macrosystem that reflects the culture and society that surrounds the individual but does not influence him/her on regularly base.

is. This is reflected in the evidence reported by the studies of Landau and Meirovich (2011), who showed that changes in classical lessons, such as debates, group works, simulations, and role-playing games, allow for more interactions and thus the establishment of an environment more conducive to learning and development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

However, for the purpose of a successful soft skills development of the individual to occur, besides a learning environment to support a growing mindset, there is another piece that is missing. Soft skills development requires the personal motivation because only in this way can there be personal growth. (Dixon et al., 2010). This is the reason why the inclusion of activities that see the definition of one's dreams and aspirations, the assessment of personal skills through the identification of strengths and weaknesses, significantly increase individuals' ability to learn ESC skills (Boyatzis and Saatcioglu, 2008).

Dixon also recognizes the importance of one characteristic of the environment: it cannot only be supportive and conducive to growth but must also be "complex" because it must foster interactions among individuals and allow an ongoing exchange of feedback. He says that "we cannot learn soft skills by reading a book, we need the help of other people." And this brings us to the second critical issue related to soft skills, which is the fact that there are different types of these skills that can be encapsulated mainly in three clusters: emotional competencies which includes the ability not only to recognize and understand emotional information about oneself, but also the ability to use them; social competencies which comprises the capacity to identify, comprehend and use emotions about others; cognitive competencies that embed the ability to think and analyze information and situations (Goleman, 1998; Boyatzis, 2009).

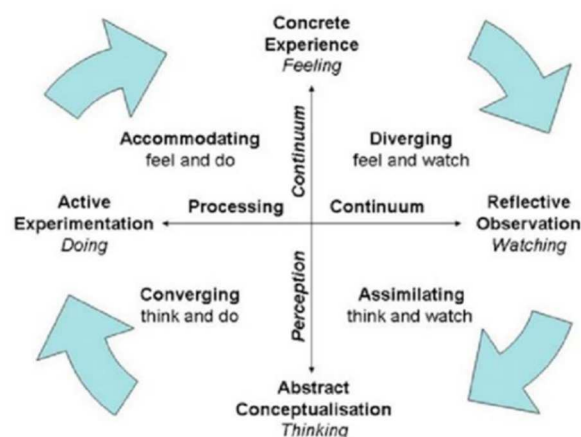
As for social skills, a course cannot be based solely on the study of concepts and transfer of knowledge on the basis of group work, but it is necessary to process these notions through in-class and out-of-class activities and group exercises (Chen et al 2004). This may include role-playing activities, peer-coaching sessions, discussions and feedback sharing. On the other hand, skills more closely related to self-awareness require self-reflections and constructive inputs. In front of these needs, activities such as writing a personal development plan, journaling activities, and coaching sessions make room. Finally with regard to cognitive type skills, mentoring activities, direct on-the-job learning, and interviews with professionals are all opportunities that enhance their learning.

It is clear that the development of behavioral competencies requires a didactic approach that moves beyond traditional methods based on lectures, discussions and exam formats (Bay and McKeage, 2006). And this latest finding leads directly to the last problematic point, which is that the development of soft skills is not only a challenge in learning on the part of students and professionals, but is also a challenge for teachers, instructors and training companies who must design dedicated



courses. First of all, implementing different learning approaches is time consuming and personally demanding for an instructor who needs to combine the role of expert as in the traditional learning with the role of learning facilitator in order to guide participants' reflections and interactions. Secondly, based on the specific behavioral learning objectives, instructors have the task to select the appropriate learning methods, related effective tools and coherent assessment instruments.

Yes, teaching behavioral competencies is more difficult and demanding than teaching technical knowledge due to the fact that that one is faced with a more complex environment that is compounded with engagement, interactions, and different teaching methods. To date, research has strongly proposed a clear distinction between behavioral and soft skills trainings and hard so technical skills trainings, a distinction that envisions for the former an experiential learning approach and for the latter the use of methods considered more traditional (Laker and Powell, 2011). Traditional didactic methods (homework assignments, textbooks, and lecture) impart knowledge base and facts, but they have low impact because they do not offer a lot of opportunities for interactions, which as we have learned are essential for development. Based on this differentiation Hoover et al (2010) propose the adoption of the experiential learning to simultaneously activate emotional, social and cognitive dimensions for soft skills acquisition. In fact, experiential learning has a prominent role in the reflection mechanism and it is linked to the assumption that people learn by doing or from direct experience (Schank, Gibbs).



Kolb's theory (first published in 1984) focuses on the learner's personal development and other life activities as knowledge creation. Unlike the conventional teaching method, in experiential learning it is the learner who drives his or her own learning process. Experiential learning is an excellent learning method because it allows learners to apply knowledge in real-life situations. Experiential learning

encourages active participation, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, collaboration and communication skills.

According to Kolb, the learner through immediate experience is able to generate reflections and observations that are then linked and absorbed to prior knowledge and finally translated into abstract theories or concepts, leading to actions and new ways of adapting to experience that can be explored and tested. The learning cycle in Kolb is a four-stage process:

- Concrete experience - In this stage, the learner shows personal involvement with others in everyday situations, testing feelings, open-mindedness and adaptability to change.
- Reflective observation - Individuals create an opinion based on their feelings and thoughts, analyzing experienced situations from different points of view.
- Abstract conceptualization - At this stage, students use ideas, logical approaches and theories, rather than interpersonal issues or feelings, to understand situations or problems.
- Active experimentation - In this stage, students show active learning experience by experimenting with different situations. In the active experimentation phase, students take a hands-on approach rather than merely observing a situation.

Effective learning occurs when they go through a concrete experience followed by observation and reflection on this experience that leads to the formation of the abstract concept (logical analysis) and generalizations (conclusions) that are then used to test hypotheses in future situations, leading to new experiences. Unlike other "confined classroom" approaches, this pedagogical technique can be used to create authentic problem-solving tasks, but more importantly, it enables individuals to improve themselves. This last feature is crucial if we consider that soft skills are related to human behaviors and traits, and so there is a need to reconsider and improve the approach used. Another important aspect that emerges from this methodology is the fact that it is based on a cycle, which makes knowledge a process, something that is in constant flux, being created and recreated. This is closely related to the concept of continuous learning seen in the first chapter. When it comes to skills, particularly soft skills, they are subject to a process of continuous transformation because in order to master them, it is necessary to practice them constantly.

According to the above, the solution would be to use traditional teaching methods for teaching technical skills, and instead use an experiential approach entirely or with a short portion of traditional methodology for acquiring behavioral skills. However, although hard and soft skills have different classifications and uses, they may overlap (Cinque, 2016). For example, communication, although categorized as a soft skill, it includes technical skills involving data analysis, use of presentation

design software, and writing skills. Lyu and Liu (2021) suggest the presence of an interdependence between the two categories that sees the need for combined synergy to successfully complete a task. This observation has the potential to reconcile the traditional distinction between the two types of skills, bringing the discussion to a more real-world level that is appropriate for today's context, where the line between the two types of skills is now increasingly blurred and where the complexity of work requires being able to use hard, soft, and even digital skills at the same time (concept of hybrid work in section 1.2) in order to complete successfully tasks.

It is in this context of complexity due to digitization, automation and the constant pressure to acquire new skills that the concept of competence-based learning. Born with McClelland in 1973, who argued that "classical intelligence," i.e., academic education, and ability tests are not predictors of real-life success. But it is only later with Robertson et al (2003) that we have a contemporary view of this model, in which he reports that there are four important determinants of successful job performance: potential skills (i.e., soft skills), competencies (defined as knowledge, technical skills, qualification, experience), context, and outcome. In fact, we can define it as follows:

**Competence-based learning** *is a teaching and learning approach that involves the ability to meet complex demands by drawing on and mobilizing behavioral resources, technical skills and knowledge.*

This could evolve in an opportunity for educators and trainers in training the skills of individuals, understanding that courses focused on the acquisition of technical abilities can be used as complementary to impact soft skills as well, and have individuals acquire the ability to best combine the two skills, creating pathways that can be seen as geared toward the development of professional skills or competencies rather than one type or another. This turns out to be perfectly in line with standpoints due to recent technological advancement, which has led to greater interest in educational policies and curricula that focus on learned outcomes of education (competencies) as opposed to time spent in education (Skrinjaric, 2022). Through this approach individuals can demonstrate mastery of each competency through various forms of assessment, such as presentations or projects, but also through real-life experiences, such as internships in the case of students, or promotions or projects in the case of workers. Through a skill-centered learning approach, the individual can see his or her own progress and focus on areas where he or she needs more support, thus making learning measurable, flexible and most of all personalized. This leads to a more customized and effective learning experience. In this regard, it is joined by the increasingly emerging concept of human centered design

learning experience. An educational experience is a continuous process. There is a connection between people, their surroundings, and their experiences. HCD is one level higher than UCD<sup>50</sup> in the sense that it is not just about a user, but about human beings. It is a more holistic approach that does justice to the complexity and diversity of people and their experiences<sup>51</sup>. That is why we talk about learning experience design instead of learner experience design. It looks at the complete experience of the person, instead of just the course in order to understand the true needs of the individual; the involvement of the individual in the design of the training path is required, increasing the chances of achieving the desired learning outcome; the path is not static but evolves in order to create original designs tailored to the individual; and finally, a personalized design of the learning path allows for greater understanding and empathy, generating a path that reflects personal, professional and even cultural differences.

Therefore, there is no longer simple discussion of corporate training for employees, but rather a creation of educational journeys for employees that are personalized to their current experience level, skills, job role and career aspirations. To fuel those journeys, companies should take advantage of an ecosystem of partners to expand their access to content, leverage innovative learning technologies, and even share skilled talent across organizational boundaries. Also, the research shows those journeys should be delivered through experiential learning that come to life in new ways of working, including peer-to-peer learning through agile teams with heterogenous skill sets, hands-on practice served up in the flow of work, and traditional classroom as well as online learning.

The fourth industrial revolution is shortening the shelf-life of employees' competencies continually demanding for a broad spectrum of new and updated competences. While monotonous and simple processes are being automated, cognitive and creative processes become more complex and intertwined. Therefore, to be able to keep up with modern technological and ever-evolving times, the role covered by adult learning, work-based training and training in the context of active labor market policies is becoming pivotal, preventing competence obsolescence and upgrading competence inventories. While a transition is taking place towards a skills-based talent strategy in the education and training landscape, bridging the gap between the workforce and organizations, there is no universal best practice solution to reduce the soft skills deficit, as the exact design of training programs should reflect organizational needs (Boxall and Purcell, 2008).

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<sup>50</sup> Through the iterative process of "user-centered design," or UCD, designers keep the needs and wants of users front and center at every stage of the design process. To create highly usable and accessible products for users, UCD design teams incorporate users throughout the design process using a variety of research and design techniques.

<sup>51</sup> <https://lxd.org/news/human-centered-design-for-designing-great-learning-experiences/>

### 2.4.1 Perspectives on workforce education of the post-pandemic world

Pandemic has been a real disruptive factor in the field of learning and development (L&D).

Once the company has identified the nature of its problems and chosen the strategic direction it wants to take to address the change it must act strategically in closing the gaps. In this sense, the role played by leaders and a corporate culture of 'continuous learning' is essential for the next phase, which is to develop and design the learning journey of its workforce. The choice of methodology with which to undertake training is critical because it has a significant impact both on generating innovative work behaviors and on the effectiveness with which these skills are transmitted (Sari and Amalia, 2022). Training methodologies are strategies, methods, approaches defined and implemented to achieve the objectives of a designated learning curriculum.

In order to implement an L&D plan and transfer the new knowledge to the participants, training methodologies must include:

- methods (solo-mode, time-spaced learning, experiential learning, peer coaching, ...)
- instruments (lectures, videos, case studies, simulations, ...)
- channels (in presence, online, blended, ...)

In this context, could be different providers such as online platforms, universities, technical organizations, etc.

The real challenge of soft skills development programs for employees in today's companies is how to deal with complexity and digitization. In fact, in the hyper digitized environment in which we find ourselves and the vast presence of course opportunities with which we come to interface, the real challenge lies in finding the right mix to make training courses as effective as possible.

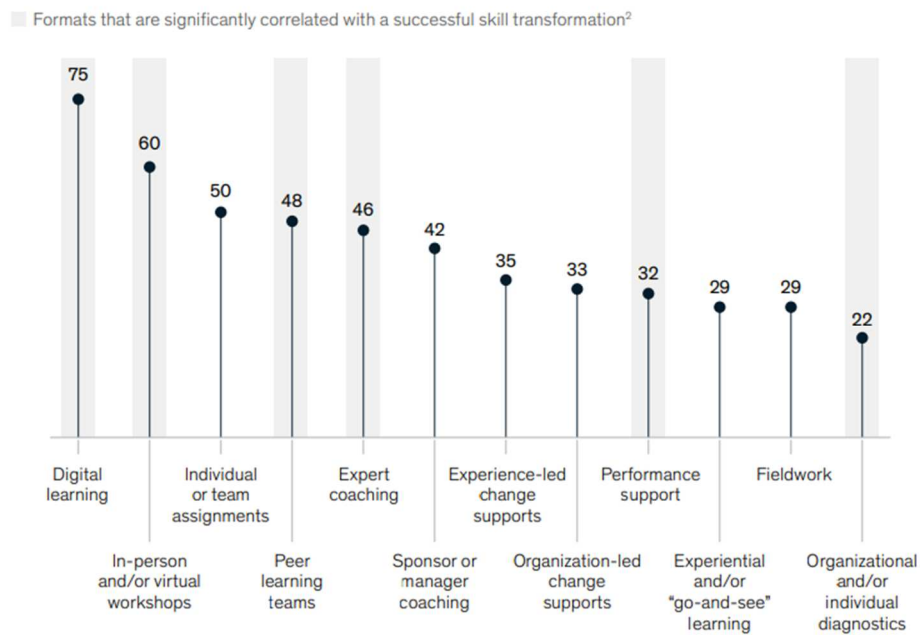
The training market will have to deal with:

- More technological and customized training
- More experiential learning activities
- Cross modal solutions

Speaking of the latter point, research has proved the effectiveness of the combination between different learning methodologies (Bonesso, Gerli, Pizzi, 2015). The impact of the interplay between different learning methods on soft skills has been recently confirmed in the McKinsey survey *Building workforce skills at scale to thrive during—and after—the COVID-19 crisis* (2021).

Digital learning is one that has certainly seen strong growth since the pandemic. The survey featured in the McKinsey article suggests that this modality works, but the real breakthrough comes from learning that combines digital sessions with in-person learning. Such blended experiences report higher overall success rates for skills training. But the survey also indicates that, overall, a diverse, multichannel approach to learning and skills development works even better.

**Figure: The best learning/skill-building formats for employees of the organization, % of respondents**



Source: McKinsey Company

In companies that have already begun skills transformation, the success rate is highest when respondents cite more learning formats: it is 50% for those who identify fewer than four formats and more than 70% for those who cite eight or more. According to the results, other less common learning modes are also linked to success. Respondents who cite peer learning teams or expert coaching are more likely to report successful transformations, which underscores the importance of team learning especially when the learning objective is interpersonal skills.

It's time to take a detailed look at what methodologies and tools can come in handy in the new soft skills development revolution.

## Digital

It is no secret that the digital landscape is rapidly transforming the way companies approach learning and development. The pandemic represented a turning point for the use of digital and online training. In fact, many training companies, and even companies themselves, offer digital learning programs.

By exploiting online and mobile learning experiences, employees are offered the possibility to learn everywhere and everywhen at their own terms. These possibilities enabled by digital are important for adult learners as they have already developed their own learning styles and, more importantly, are involved in the dynamics of everyday life, from work to personal and family life (Marian and Elena, 2008). In addition, employee engagement and learning outcomes can be monitored in real time to ensure that L&D programs are effective and responsive to employee needs. The video-based method of training delivery is becoming increasingly popular in L&D. It involves integrating videos into training materials to provide learners with a richer and more engaging experience due to the fact that they are visual and allow interactions among participants. Moreover, video-based instruction is a great way to increase knowledge retention by providing on-demand access to videos and related content. This means that learners can access the material when it is most convenient for them and go back to review it if needed.

Looking at the figures, there has been a four-fold increase in the numbers of individuals seeking out opportunities for learning online through their own initiative, a five-fold increase in employer provision of online learning opportunities to their workers and an even more extensive nine-fold enrolment increase for learners accessing online learning through government programs (WEF, 2020). These incredible achievements have given employees access to a wide range of high-quality courses, available with just a few clicks and at any time and any place, but most importantly, and this is where the real breakthrough occurred, it has allowed some often-unfounded preconceptions about digital training to be destigmatized.

That being said, a shift to digital learning is inevitable, however companies need to pay attention to not to fall into the trap of focusing only on digital channels for learning because critical interpersonal skills require different ways of learning to be cultivated. Indeed, there is a need to strike a balance between online and classroom learning, and the possible solution could be to build blended learning curriculum. The right mix would ensure that different needs and objectives are met, creating effective training paths that reflect the actual learning needs not only of companies but also of individual employees. The acceleration of the digitization of training has allowed for a new era, full of possibilities and opportunities for both training institutions and companies and their employees.

Tied to digital methods of learning, two important phenomena have come to the fore: digital badges and micro-learning.

### Digital badges and micro-credentials

A micro-credential is a short course, workshop, or program that students can sign up for to acquire the necessary skills for employment in the modern workforce. A digital badge serves as a visual

representation of a micro-credential to highlight the accomplishment of the bearer and can be shared on multiple online platforms. Micro-credentials are gaining momentum. They differ from a bachelor's, master's, or certificate program in that they involve only courses that offer the skills you want to learn. This allows you to combine different badges across a program of different micro-credentials and thus obtain a broader and more comprehensive set of skills and competencies, often related to a specific subject or related topics.

### The rise of microlearning

Microlearning is a type of learning that delivers knowledge and skills in short, focused sessions, often referred to as "pills" (of knowledge). Microlearning involves breaking down complex topics into small content fragments, making them perfect for online content. This methodology is related to time-spaced training (Simon and Nale, 2010) that consists of studying materials in a series of short study sessions interspersed with periods. That firstly allows to internalize what is learnt and put it to practice later in real-workplace environment and secondly it represents a way to learn more quickly and remember better. In addition, this methodology makes it possible to develop paths with content tailored to the level and needs of the learner.

But it is not only microlearning that is experiencing a surge in popularity. Performance support is also becoming increasingly important such as online tutorials, fact sheets and one-pages.

### Virtual Reality (VR)

Regarding the use of virtual reality (VR) in training, a great increase is expected in the near short future. This technology has already been used in numerous industries to train employees in both hard skills, just think of airplane pilots, and to simulate dangerous real-life conditions. But the combination of virtual reality - soft skills training paths promises great things. Currently, some of the soft skills courses developed with this technology involve new approaches to sales and negotiation, emotional intelligence training, public speaking practice, leadership training development, employee skill level testing and job candidate soft skill evaluation<sup>52</sup>. But what really makes the growth potential of this market is not the broad educational offerings as much as the credible results to which it is leading (PwC, September 2022).

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<sup>52</sup> Additional in-depth information can be found at the following online article:

<https://www.techtarget.com/searchhrsoftware/feature/5-examples-of-VRs-use-in-soft-skills-training>



## Figure: Top findings about the value of VR in soft skills training



Source: PwC 2022, US Metaverse Survey

The survey showed that VR can help business leaders to upskill their employees faster and more effectively.

VR will probably not completely replace classroom training or e-learning anytime soon. However, as the metaverse accelerates and remote work grows, VR training should be part of most companies' blended learning curriculum. This kind of experiential learning puts virtual reality technology at the forefront of employee development offerings in the next future, realizing the possibility of human-centered experience.

### Gamification

Gamified training<sup>53</sup> refers to the process of designing a training program using gamification in order to achieve specific and efficient learning outcomes. Although the caliber of training materials is important, it takes practice and introspection to get students to genuinely apply the soft skills they are taught. This is made stimulating by gamification, which guarantees that your training investments will pay off. You can use avatars, personalized messages and call-to-actions, role-play with other participants. Another advantage is that competitive elements can be added that also stimulate motivation to learn (e.g. leaderboards, beat your own score...). There is also the possibility to give out badges or other collectibles such as medals, tickets, mystery boxes, etc. in exchange for achievements and other accomplishments. Collectibles greatly boost learners' morale in gamified soft skills training and are also a highly effective source of extrinsic motivation.

### Artificial intelligence

Artificial intelligence is expected to have a significant impact on learning and development, especially when it comes to the capacity to customize employees' educational experiences. For L&D professionals, this is an exciting development because it sets them up to concentrate on developing

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<sup>53</sup> Additional in-depth information can be found at the following online article:  
<https://www.learningeverest.com/techniques-gamified-soft-skills-training/>

genuinely customized learning opportunities for staff members. Additionally, it will guarantee that workers are always acquiring new knowledge and honing the skills necessary for the workplace of the future.

It is important for a company to stay ahead of the curve and invest in the learning and development of its employees. But investing is not enough; it must be done consciously. In fact, the methodologies developed by companies for employees have an impact on change and the ability to develop those skills (Sari and Amalia, 2022). The methodology applied to the training course positively or negatively influences the development of soft skills in the employee.

In order to meet the new needs of companies and individuals, training programs will become more customized according to need and, thanks to new technologies, will be more interactive, allowing theory to be tested. Organizations are also adopting different ways for employees to learn and practice these skills. So, in order to allow employees to stay current and carry forward the concept of continuous growth, it is important for companies to pay attention to the latest trends in learning and development.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **SOFT SKILLS AND VENETO REGION: A STRONG BOND?**

The soft and hard skills deficit threatens overall economic, social and even personal growth.

The skills gap and the mismatch between supply and demand for skills in the marketplace are issues inherent in the labor market itself, but they have leapt to light with the advance of digitization and pandemic. This requires not only more specialized skills but also those soft skills that enable us to cope with change, to interact at our best, and that distinguish us as human beings.

Labor mismatch should no longer be considered an emergent global phenomenon but a structural element that affects all realities including local and regional ones. For this reason, areas that intend to maintain their competitiveness, such as the Veneto region in our research case, must hasten to "equip" themselves with the right skills, because a delay in their introduction within the workforce can turn into loss of potential markets, problems in accommodating new customer requests and postponing the adoption of new technologies (Fanti, Guarascio and Tubiana, 2021).

In this chapter, we will analyze the situation in the Veneto region in relation to the labor market that emerged post-pandemic.

#### **3.1 A picture**

COVID-19 has created a rare window of opportunity to rethink training and incentives on an international scale, but to achieve this goal requires greater coordination on corporate training at national and regional level.

The reason I chose Veneto as the geographical area for my research is not only to the fact that it is the region where I attended university and where I live. There are real reasons related to quantitative and investment data. The Northeast is the area where companies have done the most training according to Istat analysis<sup>54</sup>: with a percentage of 74,5%, followed by the Northwest a few percentage points behind (72,3%), while the percentages drop more moving to the Center (65,3%), the South (62,2%) and the Islands (56,9%). However, among the regions that emerge as the most active in the Northeast area are Emilia Romagna and Veneto<sup>55</sup> for that matter. They record a greater concentration of initiatives that testify a structured support for the promotion of the culture of continuous learning and innovation, both at the European level and declined at a more territorial level, with the activation of programmatic and operational instruments and local synergies. Veneto over the years has modeled

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<sup>54</sup> Istat, December 2022. Formazione nelle imprese. Anno 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.istat.it/it/files//2022/12/REPORT-formazione-imprese.pdf>

<sup>55</sup> Anpal, November 2021. XX/XXI Rapporto sulla formazione continua – Annualità 2018-2019-2020. Retrieved from: [https://www.anpal.gov.it/documents/552016/586510/XX+XXI+Rapporto+FC\\_DEF\\_24\\_11\\_2021.pdf/ed943797-276f-6786-7841-3dcf68f3487f?t=1637769493553](https://www.anpal.gov.it/documents/552016/586510/XX+XXI+Rapporto+FC_DEF_24_11_2021.pdf/ed943797-276f-6786-7841-3dcf68f3487f?t=1637769493553)

different types of interventions based on purposes and recipients with regard to the upgrading of human capital. This commitment has led the Veneto region to be the first region for continuous training for innovation with an allocation of 27,7 million euros<sup>56</sup>, when in 2019 in a long-term planning perspective sets the conditions for an organized and aware enterprise equipped with tools to foster competitiveness and professional growth. An action that put the region in the right perspective of anticipating the needs of businesses and creating a focus on issues such as environmental sustainability, digital economy and innovation.

In particular, Veneto, as well as Emilia Romagna, Puglia and Tuscany, are part of that group of Italian regions that tightly weave a dense network both for the development of the skills of the people already in the company, and those needed to increase competitiveness and develop new tracks of work by intertwining the different training chains (from higher education institutes, universities, up to higher education and business training paths). Examples include:

- the presence of academies, both for emerging and more traditional sectors of the regional economy
- initiatives to support unemployed adults or those at risk of redundancy through vouchers that allow the individual to have costs covered (partial or total) with the subsequent obtaining of relevant certifications
- countless school-to-work alternation activities aimed at building school-business networks and the development by young people of soft skills. In addition, considering that, in the area of training there are also direct interventions to teachers for the acquisition of innovative teaching practices (Scuola Innovativa).
- development of analyses by regional agencies in sectors of particular importance to the Veneto economy (e.g., eyewear, handicrafts, furniture) with the aim of identifying the training needs of the industry being investigated, thus working on the training of those already employed and candidates close to entering the workforce.

Therefore, Veneto, thanks to a base already well laid to meet the emerging challenges of the labor market and the strong entrepreneurial spirit of the companies present in there, is on the upswing, but since no territory is immune to the effects generated by skills gaps, there are issues related to labor shortages and the lack of adequate skills. Projected hiring in the region at the beginning of the year

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<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, page 101

2023 was 134.000<sup>57</sup>, with one-third of the demand for jobs targeting young people under 29. However, one out of every two positions is likely to remain unfilled and of this unobtainable half, 50% can be explained by a skills shortage and the rest by demographics<sup>58</sup>. Due to the fact that the right skills (IT, technical, managerial, social and emotional) are lacking it happens that there are no people available (talent shortage) for certain jobs as companies compete fiercely to attract talent, often stealing them. This is exactly in line with what we saw in chapter two related to the issue of employer branding. Not only that, but another global issue is also found in the Veneto region: 200 thousand voluntary resignations in the year 2022 in the region. This scaled phenomenon of large resignations is a sign that even in local areas employees have embraced the change and work is no longer just a paycheck, but is also value, career position and welfare.

Below is a chart from Forema's research on the Veneto region<sup>59</sup> (2022) where the reasons behind the difficulties related to finding professional resources are shown. This chart represents a focus on the Veneto skills gap between the demand expressed by the system from industry and the profiles available on the market.

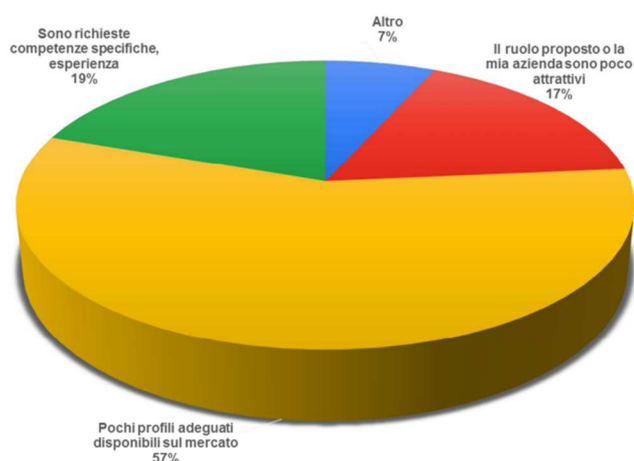
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<sup>57</sup> Il Gazzettino, February 2023. *Pronti 134mila posti di lavoro in Veneto: ma 1 su 2 non si trova*. Retrieved from: [https://www.ilgazzettino.it/nordest/primopiano/veneto\\_posti\\_di\\_lavoro\\_dati\\_confindustria-7232553.html](https://www.ilgazzettino.it/nordest/primopiano/veneto_posti_di_lavoro_dati_confindustria-7232553.html)

<sup>58</sup> The data, provided by Excelsior and Unioncamere Association, are given in the following article: Corriere del Veneto, February 2023. *Dimissioni volontarie, nel 2022 hanno lasciato il posto di lavoro in 200 mila*. Retrieved from: [https://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/23\\_febbraio\\_13/dimissioni-volontarie-nel-2022-hanno-lasciato-il-posto-di-lavoro-in-200-mila-8a8a6d46-aa2f-11ed-bb59-32a1a3237536.shtml?refresh\\_ce](https://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/23_febbraio_13/dimissioni-volontarie-nel-2022-hanno-lasciato-il-posto-di-lavoro-in-200-mila-8a8a6d46-aa2f-11ed-bb59-32a1a3237536.shtml?refresh_ce)

<sup>59</sup> The study in question concerns an analysis conducted in April 2022 via online survey involving 208 companies in the Veneto region among HR managers, entrepreneurs, and function managers. Useful data from the panel to provide a better understanding of the analysis are as follows: 55 percent are small companies, followed by 32 percent of medium-sized companies and a 13 percent of large companies. The majority of the companies surveyed are from the province of Padua or Vicenza. Finally, the production sector in which these companies operate should be considered: more than half of the panel is in the metal-mechanical sector, followed in importance by companies in the technology, chemical-pharmaceutical, wood, and furniture sectors.

**Figure 3.1: reasons behind the difficulties related to finding professional resources**



Source: Forema, Survey skills and work in Veneto 2022

First of all, a good 88% of the panel, meaning 184 companies, say they are experiencing difficulties in recruiting staff compared to 69% in 2021, with the percentage rising if we consider large companies (93%) and innovative and technological services companies (96%).

The first motivation behind the recruitment of new professional resources based on the needs expressed by companies in the Veneto region is dictated by the lack of available professional figures, either because they are already employed by other companies or because the education and training system cannot cover the demand. The figure in the graph of 57%, when compared with that in the 2021 analysis having a value of 44%, is a clear indication that the skills gap has worsened significantly. An additional 19% reporting as the main cause a mismatch between the skills on the market and those needed to operate effectively in the organizational context, encountering what is the problem of skills mismatch. Finally, we could not fail to mention the other problem (already highlighted always above) associated to the lack of attractiveness of the company and the role offered. In fact, as many as 17% of respondents report little attractiveness in the role offered or in the company as a whole.

As for the figures with the most difficulty in recruiting, there are operational figures, as many as 56%; a new element is the unsatisfied demand for programmers and technicians specializing in the IT field, which has seen a doubling since 2021 from 6% to 13%; finally, an indication of the need to respond to new organizational forms in the face of the complexity of markets is the search for responsible figures to be placed at the head of business processes and areas of activity with 7%.

It is clear, then, that technological and digital changes are the disruptive factor within the Veneto economy. Venetian manufacturing's propensity to invest has grown in 2022 with one in two

companies invested in the business to support growth and improve production processes, allocating 20 % more resources to evolve their offerings through digital transformation<sup>60</sup>. As reported in a newspaper article from northeastern Italy<sup>61</sup>, the intention of companies to invest in equipment, machinery and vehicles with newer technologies that can cope with customers' needs and expectations is the form of investment most pressing for companies in the Veneto region, a signal that is reflected in the increased demand for loans from banks. Indeed, according to the following data (Unioncamere Veneto, 2023), manufacturing firms' investments were mainly focused on improving production processes, with 90.9% investing in the purchase of machinery and equipment, while 43.7% chose to optimize office automation. Training, considered indispensable tool for improving and enhancing the human capital, takes second place in terms of investment represented by 33.7%, while about a third of enterprises invested in renewable energy and energy saving (31.2 %). As reported in an article by Ruggero Segatto<sup>62</sup>, Director of Isre - Salesian International Higher Institute of Research - if the market on the one hand demands technical and highly trained professionals, on the other hand there is a strong focus on aptitude, ability to learn and team spirit. He states that "these inclinations and attitudes make it possible to better respond to the technical needs of companies because they optimize the process of innovation adoption not only from the technological side but also in a human perspective through a capacity aimed at continuous learning.

Under this straightforward explanation, soft skills are also coming back to the fore again, proving to be a key element for this region to foster technological transition and where the environment and well-being of businesses, especially in an area like the Veneto region characterized by SMEs, is generated by the people who work in the area. Reporting another chart from Forema's research (2022), based on the complexity and dynamism of today's business processes, knowing how to master hard, soft and digital skills has the same level of relevance, thus signaling the cultural shift from "knowing how to do" to "knowing how to be."

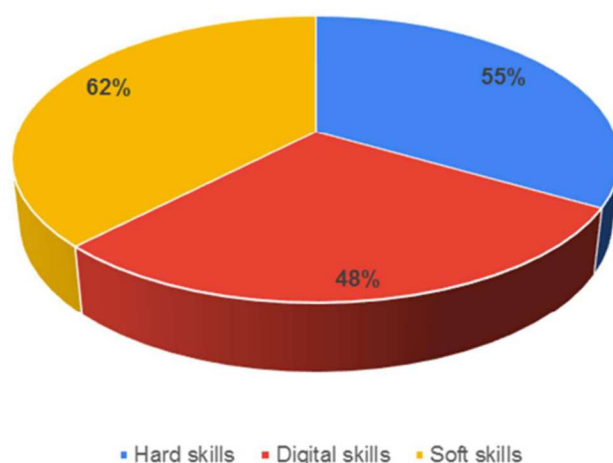
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<sup>60</sup> In 2022, based on the VenetoCongiuntura survey, 55.9 % of Veneto manufacturing companies with at least 10 employees made tangible and intangible investments, committing 20.9 % more resources than in 2021.

<sup>61</sup> Il Nord-est Quotidiano, February 2023. *Imprese venete in buona salute e pronte per tornare a investire*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ilnordestquotidiano.it/2023/02/03/impres-venete-in-buona-salute-e-pronte-per-tornare-a-investire/>

<sup>62</sup> Article available at the following link: <https://www.genteveneta.it/attualita/fuoridibanco-e-mondo-del-lavoro-le-aziende-chiedono-le-soft-skill/>

**Figure 3.2: Distribution of priorities for Veneto companies based on skill category**



*Source: Forema, Survey skills and work in Veneto 2022*

In relative terms, soft skills are more important than the other two components, with 62% of respondents placing the highest value on them, compared with 55% for technical skills and 48% for digital skills (a trend that becomes more pronounced for these skills in the case of large enterprises and technology service companies). These data suggest that nowadays a proper interaction of soft, hard and digital skills is necessary to perform well in one's job, a logic that results in the concept of "hybrid job" already seen in the first chapter. In a labor market and industrial system undergoing accelerated change due to technological and market dynamics, soft skills play a decisive role in promoting and accompanying the transformation of organizations. But within the Veneto region, what are the soft skills most in demand? Again, Forema's 2022 research collected data in this regard, which can be analyzed below.





	Creativity
SMEs <i>enterprises with up to 249 employees; annual turnover not exceeding 50 million euros and an annual budget not exceeding 43 million euros.</i>	Flexibility Problem solving Team working Time management Lifelong learning

These differences are due to the fact that while large companies show less concentrated professional needs in the production area, SMEs appear to be still focused on production and design. This is evident from the type of profiles sought by companies in the Veneto region: in particular, the trend that had already emerged in 2021 of looking for production workers (specialized and non-specialized) is confirmed, while although there is a search for management-level figures to govern processes and work groups, it is a trend more accentuated by large companies.

### 3.2 The born of investigation

On the Veneto side, words like attractiveness and employer branding are also definitely entering the agenda of HR and business leaders with the understanding that they can be valuable tools for expanding the pool of potential new employees and improving talent retention. The issue of soft skills and the urgency of strengthening these skills is also considered significant.

In light of the above, the question that arises for us is:

what are Veneto companies doing in the area of soft skills training to cope with changing working patterns, more complexed interrelationships and increasing skills shortage phenomenon?

While an important part of Veneto's productive fabric believes that soft skills can be strategic in a context of change, there are still significant difficulties that companies face in the face of soft skills training.

Among the biggest obstacles to training (ISTAT, 2022), companies reported:

- high costs
- lack of time
- lack of financial resources
- technical difficulties in organizing training

It should be noted that the average cost per hour of training in Italy is equivalent to 56€, but this figure varies both according to the size of the company and from a territorial point of view. In fact, costs per

course hour in northern and central Italian regions are albeit slightly higher than the national average, at around 60€, while lower costs are found in southern areas with costs as low as 42€ per course hour. Cost is a determining factor in the propensity to invest, so it is particularly reflected in small businesses: investment affected 50.2% of small businesses (10-49 employees) compared with 81.2% of medium-large businesses (50 employees and more) (Unioncamere Veneto, 2023).

With regard to the difficulties in organizing and choosing which training courses to undertake, it is found that the most common mode for business training is still the "traditional" one, i.e., face-to-face, although with the advent of the pandemic, distance learning has seen considerable development, both for lectures and webinars held online in both synchronous and asynchronous modes. Additionally, the range of training activities used by enterprises includes work-based situation training, job tutoring and job rotation, seminars and workshops.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE RESEARCH**

#### **4.1 Research question and hypothesis**

The previous chapter described the context that anticipated my research, a territorial context, that of the Veneto region, and also a training context, related to the soft skills training activities carried out during my university studies.

The world of work has changed radically in recent years in the face of a crisis that has disrupted traditional production systems. The companies that have been able to react to these unexpected changes and new market demands are those that have been able to imagine new business models, new organizational models and have invested in people's skills.

But what is the situation in the Veneto region regarding business training for soft skills? The trends found globally, are they reflected in what way in the training that employees of companies receive? The objective of the research is to assess and understand whether the current trends in global corporate training for soft skills are also found in Veneto, or whether there is still a gap in the training of these skills and the way they are taught.

To approach this research, we keep in mind two very important theoretical concepts (Sari and Amalia, 2022):

H1: Soft skills training influences employee performance and company's success

- ➔ More and more companies in Veneto want to invest in training courses for their employees, as there is a growing awareness of the importance of these skills

H2: Training methodology adopted influences the effectiveness of soft skills learning for workers

- ➔ the course methodology implemented for training their employees should reflect the most effective methodologies and current trends in the soft skills training market

In light of what has been reported in the previous chapter, Veneto being a region attentive to international trends and with a forward-looking logic of investment in skills, it is logical to think that companies, after the pandemic shock, have embarked on a path of change in production processes and organization, leading therefore to an increase in the demand for soft skills training. Having verified this hypothesis, it remains to be discovered, however, how the business fabric characterized mostly by small and medium-sized enterprises has affected companies' up-and-reskilling training choices in soft skills. Also of interest is an assessment of how these courses are administered to companies, and whether there is a correspondence at the level of effectiveness of the methodologies implemented and whether these correspond to global trends. Not least, it is necessary to investigate

the impact of digitalization on the training offerings of companies that administer training courses to other companies and what are expected to be obstacles and opportunities in the future.

#### **4.2 Instruments and sample of the survey**

Given the complexity and breadth related to both the topic of soft skills and the entrepreneurial fabric of Veneto, the most suitable option to gather more qualitative data, different nuances, and delve deeper into any related topics is the interview option. The interview in brief is a participatory relationship involving a verbal exchange between two or more people in which an expert (or interviewer) seeks to gather information about personal data, actions, attitudes and behaviors.

If we wanted to give a definition<sup>63</sup>, we could use that of Marradi and Fideli (1996) who gives the following explanation:

*The **interview** is an interaction between a respondent and an interviewer, stimulated by the latter with cognitive purposes, and guided on the basis of a questioning scheme, addressed to a substantial number of subjects who have been chosen on the basis of a survey plan.*

The value of interviews in social science research has long been recognized such that they are considered an important component in research design. One of the features most that make it such an attractive research method lies in the fact that they are interactive giving interviewers a way to press for comprehensive answers and to ask additional questions if a new topic may arise. In fact, Kvale (1996, and later Alshenqeeti in 2014) and emphasize the importance of talking directly with people in order to glean and explore as many perspectives as possible on the phenomenon being investigated. As a method that takes place in a more realistic context and with a more heartfelt emotional impact, this leads to the assumption that knowledge of the analyzed phenomenon will be wide and with the possibilities to ask clarification.

The kind of structure we can give to an interview is as follows<sup>64</sup>:

- non-structured which involves only the definition of the central theme, with the freedom for questions to emerge from the chat with the interviewee.
- structured that requires an outline with all questions well thought out.

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<sup>63</sup> Explanation of Marradi and Fideli (1996) available in the paper titled: Un singolare dialogo. L'intervista nella ricerca sociale.

<sup>64</sup> Into the minds, November 2022. *Ricerca qualitativa: definizioni, tecniche, esempi*. Retrieved at: <https://www.intotheminds.com/blog/it/ricerca-qualitativa/>

- semi-structured, a less rigid variant of the former, that assumes an outline containing only a few questions, mainly concerning the topics absolutely to be covered.

A free or so-called non-structured interview and the semi-structured one allow the collection of much richer and more in-depth information useful for more extensive investigations. To avoid ending up with an unsatisfactory result, it is good to have questions ready and, at the same time, leave yourself the option of adding unforeseen ones as you go along.

The interview then can be distinguished on the presence of closed questions, open questions or a mixture. Indeed, the presence of open-ended questions makes it possible to gather particularly rich and useful insights especially in understanding a phenomenon. Definitely, they allow the recording of comprehensive responses with key words directly gathered from the interviewees. However, since they are not standard answers, a purely quantitative comparison with data is not possible. Finally, the difference between a one-on-one interview and a simultaneous interview should be considered: in the former case, the relationship that is created between the two parties allows for a more in-depth study of the various topics, giving the possibility of using a less structured interview; in the latter case, on the other hand, given the greater presence of people, it is necessary to use a more standard instrument.

For the purpose of this research, the use of a semi-structured interview was chosen, which included a series of questions that were asked of the respondents, however, leaving room for possible further investigation. In addition, the order of the questions was not always adhered to as in order to facilitate the conversation and fluidity of the course of the interview, it was preferred in some cases to anticipate questions in order to better address the topic under discussion and give the interviewee ( and also the future reader) the opportunity to grasp connections and insights. The type of questions asked of the respondent is "open-ended," and even in the few questions where an affirmative or negative answer was required, a statement of reasons was always requested and reported to give a way to fully understand the reasons behind a short answer in the face of a varied and complex topic. Finally with regard to the mode of interview administration, the chosen mode was one-on-one interview through the medium of video calls. This was because despite the impossibility of an in-person interview, it was necessary to ensure the accessibility of the interviewee to the interviewer by allowing an exchange as real as possible and the possibility of interaction.

With respect to the reference sample the decision involved the idea of placing the interview with a couple of training companies present in different locations in the Veneto region. The decision to interview companies dedicated to corporate training, rather than companies with in-house academies,

was dictated by the fact that the Veneto region is predominantly composed of small and medium-sized companies who often have few resources in terms of money, time and expertise and therefore prefer to turn directly to companies with expertise in the training sector as opposed to large companies who are given the opportunity to develop ad hoc in-house training programs.

Below are the 3 companies in the research sample:

- UNIS&F

It is the Confindustria System's service and training company that operates in the provinces of Treviso and Pordenone and aims to flank business with highly specialized support services, offer human resources training activities in all topics of business interest, and assist companies in recovering financing to implement training plans and consulting services.

Direct link to website: <https://unisef.it/>

- FO'REMA

Founded in Padua in 1983, Fòrema, has established itself over time as one of the largest training companies in the Italian confindustrial system and a point of reference for the growth of people and business competitiveness. It is also a training institution accredited by the Veneto Region, able to design and implement funded courses aimed at both companies and people (workers, students, unemployed and unemployable people residing in Veneto).

Direct link to website: <https://forema.it/it/>

- ZICO

It is a social enterprise that likes to call itself a collective ingenuity zone, in which projects of social innovation and social-work inclusion are born and grow. Based in the province of Rovigo.

Direct link to website: <https://zico.me/>

### **4.3 The interview**

Before proceeding with the structure of the interview, it is important to point out that professional fairness requires that the interviewee be informed about the subject of the interview and the objectives of the survey, and that the interviewer exercise all possible caution so that the information obtained is used and disseminated according to the purposes previously established.

It can be stated that the interview reported four sections:

- The first had an introductory function in order to understand the responses of companies and entrepreneurs regarding soft skills in the post-pandemic. It was intended to explore whether

there had been actual awareness of the importance of such skills and whether this interest had been recorded in any way through quantitative data. In addition, they wanted to understand the issues reported by companies related to gaps and mismatches and whether these had moved companies to think that they were part of the problem and therefore should also be part of the solution.

- The second section was led to find out which soft-skills-related training courses were most in demand and, of course, to investigate methodologies and channels by which they were administered to learners. One question was aimed at capturing possible differences in the needs of small and medium-sized companies toward large and multinational ones, precisely because although the Veneto region is composed mainly of SMEs, there is certainly no shortage of large companies. Finally, an additional question was present regarding the difficulties of companies in dealing with these types of training courses, with a particular focus on possible financing.
- The third part was on digitization and particular trends found in chapter two on the global soft skills training market. In particular, we wanted to understand the impact of digitization on the training offerings of training companies and whether the pandemic had helped reduce the stigma attached to online courses and digital awards. Of course, in this context, the topic of new and emerging technologies such as AI, AR and VR and their possible current and future use could not be missed.
- The last section, on the other hand, can be described as relating to an analysis of the future. In particular, it sought to explore respondents' views on trends and challenges in the coming years, as well as the role that various stakeholders around education should play in supporting this education revolution. The interview was always ended with a reflective question regarding the terminology used to describe soft skills and the possible "harm" it may have played in diminishing their role over the previous years. The intent was to capture additional food for thought from the experts interviewed about the actual importance of these skills.

The list of questions from the various sections can be found in the appendix (a) of that research. Furthermore, in the appendix you can find the complete transcript of the three interviews with related information. The interviews have been reported with an “intelligent” transcript or better known as *clean verbatim*<sup>65</sup>. This is precisely a "clean" version compared to the full transcript, where repetitions, elements of uncertainty are eliminated in order to promote better readability of the written text.

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<sup>65</sup> Your audio or video files have been minimally edited for readability when they are transcriptions that are clean verbatim. With the exception of the removal of all unnecessary distractions, the transcript is exactly what was



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recorded. Never paraphrase is used—clean verbatim transcription accurately captures the speaker's words but clarifies them.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **THE RESULTS**

Data analysis is a crucial step within a survey, as it allows the empirical base, as in the collection of data obtained through typical social research tools such as questionnaires and interviews, to be processed and made "intelligible" to the researcher and users. The goal of the analysis is to accomplish "statements" that can confirm or disprove the initial hypothesis. These statements must be the result of the analyst's interpretations based on the data he or she has collected: in fact, if at the data collection stage, in the case of this research during interviews, there is an initial interpretive phase constructed by the interview participants who give their own account through communicative and interpretive processes; at a later stage, the qualitative data collected through expressions, manifestations and responses must undergo further interpretation by the researcher through an analytical process<sup>66</sup>. For this reason, we speak of a "double level of interpretation."

#### **5.1 Analysis of data**

After transcription of the interviews and a careful re-reading of what was reported by the experts from the three training companies in Veneto, it was necessary to compare the responses obtained in order to identify similarities or divergent thoughts regarding the aspects of soft skills training investigated. Below are the main considerations regarding issues, thoughts, trends and challenges in the soft skills training market.

While at the global level phenomena such as the "Great Resignation" and smart working have marked an awareness that there is more to it than just work by beginning to overturn somewhat the position of power held until now by companies, at the territorial level the awareness of the importance of soft skills has occurred at a partial level. In the sense that soft skills have not been recognized as important because of their nature, as much as their importance is linked to the need to meet other needs: the first as reported by interviewee 2 because of the importance of being able to retain talent; the second as a means of supporting process change, as reported by interviewee 3. The issue linking soft skills and change is really very interesting because it emerges from the interviews that it is this inability to deal with change that is the real problem related to the gaps on these soft skills, an issue that resides on all levels from operational to managerial. Territorially, there is an awareness that these skills are lacking, yet few move entrepreneurs to do self-reflection and point the finger at themselves, but still prefer to blame individuals and education as unable to provide workforce with the skills sought (*the soft skills blaming game*).

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<sup>66</sup> Salvini, A., 2015. *Percorsi di analisi dei dati qualitativi*. De Agostini Scuola spa, Novara.

Talking about the major soft skills required by companies we meet in common agreement among the three interviewed parties:

- Communication
- Problem-solving
- Team-working
- Leadership

And here a reflection turns out to be necessary: in fact, we do not find the transversal skills listed by WEF 2023, which sees creativity, analytical thinking, resilience, life-long learning, etc... This finding is not new since already in the Fòrema report (2022) those listed above were highlighted as the major soft skills required by companies in Veneto and not those reported by the global analysis. The reason lies in the region itself, or rather in its production fabric, since it is characterized by a high number of manufacturing companies (almost 48 thousand companies) that being strongly linked to hard skills require more "basic" soft skills. Related to this characteristic of the Veneto region, it is found that the courses provided for the development of soft skills are actually structured with the intention of making people learn a competence rather than the single soft skill (competency-based learning). Companies in Veneto need concrete application of knowledge, not surprisingly facing courses on communication always comes to include a part of hard skills ranging for example from knowing how to use tools such as email, phone calls effectively. In particular, interviewee 3 reports that a good part of the company's training offerings includes the modes of projects and direct activities on the job since in this way soft skills are also trained implicitly and are certainly experiential in nature. Experiential learning that is also true for the other two training companies, which through traditional lectures but with innovative support material first address the briefing of the proposed activity, then through team building and outdoor activities see the concretization of the activity, finally there is the debriefing activity for food for thought. Coaching is also widely used, primarily for personal and focused development of the individual with activities for reflection and self-awareness (e.g. journaling, forms to be filled out to then have a personal dossier, skills assessment), but the coaching offer is also expanded to managerial coaching if it is the training of middle managers and even team coaching for small groups operating on projects as reported by interviewee 2.

As regard digital, all three training companies agree that the pandemic has cleared the way for the use of technological tools for soft skills training, especially for those activities that involve learning pure knowledge through skills pills, webinars, and short updates; again, however, all three companies

agree that totally digital training is not suitable for all activities and skills, as confusing objectives and tools can prove catastrophic for the success of the training course. In this regard, one of the challenges of training in the coming years, namely to create the right mix of tools and methodologies to develop effective training, is perfectly hooked.

Other commonalities include the presence in both training companies of an in-house area responsible for providing funded training and that there is currently no use of digital badges.

Regarding the use of innovative technologies in training programs instead, only two companies reported an affirmative response: Respondent 1 who described working with a company that provides a platform (Skillgym) that through algorithms and AI was able to support the first company's training activities regarding the employability of young graduates ( these conducted simulated interviews with avatars in the platform and the system allowed feedback and a kind of statistics to be returned, which was then used by the company Zico to enhance and costumize classroom training for young people, achieving maximum effectiveness); Fòrema, on the other hand, released to use augmented reality for safety training courses, while it had considered gamification in the case of soft skills training activities but the appeal to customers was not as hoped.

Summarizing the future challenges gathered from the interviews, the main ones that emerged are:

- the balanced use of digitization in soft skills training courses, keeping in mind that soft skills require certain needs in learning, but that new generations also have specific needs
- knowing how to motivate and stimulate continuous learning (the example given by interviewee two on age-management was interesting)
- the integration of new skills that are related to soft skills such as intercultural skills for migration policies and people shortage and green skills due to sustainable transition that is still seen as related to the company's narrative and image and little instead to change and innovation in production processes

Against this backdrop of such major challenges three things must stand out:

- companies are not a closed system, but must make use of stakeholders who understand the importance of these skills, pass them on from primary education and especially to young people about to enter the labor market, and provide means and resources to implement programs to support them;
- the role of leaders and HR has changed and they are called upon to be facilitators of learning within companies

- there is a need for people in charge of being able to understand the needs of companies as well as the macro-trends of industries in order then to anticipate changes and provide the right skills training for employees so that they are a ready future workforce. Not only that but knowing how to understand one's client's needs helps in ad hoc design.

In this last case, it should be reported that in the context of the Veneto region, where there is a multiplicity of companies of various sizes, it is important that the training company, as interviewee 2 reports, knows how to best understand its client: in fact, if it is a large company in them the managerial figures are already more skillful and the training of soft skills may concern an adjustment or a particular case or activity; on the other hand, in small companies it is sometimes required to cope with a people strategy and since the training development path is more complex, the entrepreneur seeks a "partner" in training companies.

## **5.2 Verification of hypothesis**

The de facto pandemic should not be seen as the trigger for the changes we are experiencing today that structurally affect the labor market, rather it should be understood as an accelerator that anticipated changes that had already begun. In fact, with regard to smart working and well-being in the workplace, the younger generations had already begun a movement of change.

At the level of the Veneto region, companies, partly due to their highly internationalized nature through exports and foreign alliances, are aware of the main trends.

.Indeed, not only are they aware of it but some entrepreneurs and some companies are in fact implementing what are global trends that have actually proven to be effective.

In this sense we are talking about the digitization of training that has been united in soft skills courses in a skillful way, alternating the "on" part dedicated to knowledge with the "off" part dedicated to experiential learning and putting learned concepts into practice.

Not only that, but also an increase in the demand for courses on soft skills or skills that see a well-rounded course on a given skill, as well as the demand for the presence of figures in training to support the entrepreneur in the company's training development plan, make it clear that not only have companies in the Veneto region perceived the need to train their employees on these skills, but also that they are crucial to sustaining change and coping with new production processes.

However, size of companies, lack of sufficient financial resources, and a cultural and entrepreneurial retrenchment still based on the mere ability to do in a productive sense are factors that in a way "set back" the chances of Venetian companies in knowing how to deal with disruptive events tomorrow.

In this sense, training companies and other stakeholders will play a crucial role in making a process of changing the mindset of companies and entrepreneurs for the change of the future happen.

## **CONCLUSIONS & INSIGHTS**

This paper, in its introductory stage allows us to observe the impact of covid-19 in the labor market, the changes, issues, challenges, but also opportunities it has brought. This paper then analyzes the effect of the pandemic on the Soft Skills Training market first from an international perspective and then from a closer one, namely that of the Veneto region. The paper outlines the scale and complexity of the soft skills revolution, the characteristics and trends for the Soft Skills Training industry, and then goes on to a deeper understanding of the methodologies and channels by which they are taught. To emerge strong from the pandemic, many organizations have chosen to invest in skills transformation and apply the lessons we have so far decided to put off, both tech and soft. Schemes undertaken to cope with up-and-reskilling activities during the pandemic have proven to be effective and therefore to be considered good best practices to implement when faced with market change. Coming to Veneto, the region of our research interest, not only is it possible to note a putting into practice of a good part of effective actions implemented to get out of the pandemic (awareness of the importance of soft skills, hybrid work, needs also dictated by the age of employees and their position, etc. ) but we can even outline a kind of path that soft skills training is taking in order to know how to cope with the needs and changes of the future. Because the day before yesterday was the pandemic, yesterday was the war, and today is the blockade of the Suez Canal.

We don't know what disruptive event will happen tomorrow, but we can certainly expect it to happen and more importantly we can be able to prepare ourselves, workforce, companies and their whole ecosystem, to deal with it.

Point one, companies have learned the importance of the mix of training in order to make it fit the needs of the participants and the type of expertise. This makes it clear how the focus on motivating their employees is important for companies, because it is in the external environment and above all intrinsic motivation that change can take place. The second point concerns business continuity: nowadays whether black swans or gray rhinos important changes are bound to take place. However, businesses cannot have failed to learn from the pandemic not to immediately address any skills gaps and mismatches, because they run the risk of not knowing how to handle the transaction when it happens. And there is already a shadow of transactions, think of the green one, the diversity and inclusion one or the artificial intelligence one that is only in its early days today. Finally, the understanding of human capital as a value and the present phenomenon in the market of talent shortage will increase the need to include different cultures in one's workforce. This is precisely why companies in the Veneto region have already begun to consider the development of intercultural skills important, which includes the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural situations. It is supported by specific attitudes and affective peculiarities as well as (inter)cultural knowledge, skills and reflections.

The pandemic was a great chance to fully understand the problem of skills gaps and provide insightful input to reform the education system and rethink skills training. Of course, it is our decision whether to seize that and turn it into an opportunity. Because as the Unisef expert reports in the interview collected, “knowing how to do your job is no longer sufficient, maybe it never was. We created the illusion that it was sufficient because it worked”. However, now time has changed, and then a continuous learning approach and readiness are needed when considering the context of soft skills formation.

I believe that beyond the important observations collected, there are still some valuable insights that, thanks to the research done and the extra-curricular activities carried out such as the Elle project for Inclusive Leadership, should be highlighted in order to make us realize how complex and multifaceted the issue of transversal competences is and so that they can be a further point of reflection (or food for thought as it is said today in more colloquial language) for future research and in order to find more efficient ways of embracing these essential skills in our career and life paths.

- **The need to reframe the term “soft skills”**

An interesting academic article by Parlamis and Mannot of 2019 begins with a striking sentence that might not be immediately understood without careful analysis. The sentence in question is “*We need to retire the term soft skills*”. This may sound a bit extreme, but lately there have been many articles on the web discussing the possibility but especially the need for a shift towards a new long-overdue terminology. The titles range from “[..]Time we abandoned the term soft skills<sup>67</sup>” in a Forbes article to “*Stop labelling them soft skills*<sup>68</sup>” as posted in a LinkedIn article, but the concept is always the same, the fact that the adjective *soft* has for so long misled people's perceptions of these skills, often causing them to underestimate the importance of these skills in the work context, failing to consider possible investments of time and money by companies, and actually leading to the skill gap problems discussed above and to the inadequacy of the companies' current skillset to cope with the pandemic change.

The first issue is to unhinge the fallacious idea that skills preceded by the adjective 'soft' are less important than 'hard' skills, when in reality they are the bedrock of effective workforce delivering higher retention rate, better teamwork and increased productivity. But the negative connotation of the term *soft* does not stop in underestimating their pivotal role in the corporate world, but in fact it brings to light a matter already pointed out by Hong (2016) related to a problem of gendered language. The

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<sup>67</sup> Forbes, March 2023. *It's About Time We Abandoned The Term 'Soft Skills'*. Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danpontefract/2023/03/27/its-about-time-we-abandoned-the-term-soft-skills/>

<sup>68</sup> LinkedIn, April 2023. *STOP labelling them 'Soft Skills'*. Retrieved from: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/stop-labelling-them-soft-skills-northreach-uk/>



terms 'hard' and 'soft' are in fact linked to social constructs of masculinity and femininity relegating the perception that hardness is purely a masculine characteristic, while softness is linked to the feminine world<sup>69</sup>. This perception not only downplays the value that soft skills have in that a worker, regardless of gender, must possess both types of skills as they are essential to perform their job professionally and competitively, but also implies a wage gap issue: professions that see greater demand for skills belonging to the soft skills list are often over-feminized and therefore considered less valuable than others, precisely because of the association described above. This is exactly the case in certain types of jobs, especially in the STEM disciplines, where gender stereotypes and salary differences are also attributable in part to the hard skills-masculinity correlation. Finally, there is the pressing need to modernize the term by linking it to the modern hyper-connected world and to the significance for career and organizational success.

Perhaps instead of retiring the term soft skills we could more correctly speak of reframing the term, because what we are interested in is changing the way we think and perceive that something, giving the right representation to that concept. Some of the terms proposed and presented are *people skills*, referring to the fact that they represent the person's abilities that can be learned and developed over time just like hard skills and the fact that they concern the interaction between human beings; another interesting terminology that can be encountered is *professional skills*, eliminating the two distinctions present up to now and emphasizing the fact that they must be part of each individual's professional background; finally, there is also the acronym **CORE** which stands for *Competence in Organizational and Relational Effectiveness* (Parlami and Monnot, 2019) providing a term that fits better and which plays on the meaning of core underlying the importance of these skills in today's world of driving business success.

Considering the preceding, and the fact that soft skills unquestionably contribute to a successful career and performance (Moreno-Luca and Braco-Alzate 2019), it is our responsibility to refer to soft skills as a term that eliminates any kind of negative association and reflects current thinking on the importance of developing these skills.

- Redefining the role of the leader in the reskilling area

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<sup>69</sup> Hong, Renyi. 2016. "Soft Skills and Hard Numbers: Gender Discourse in Human Resources." Big Data & Society, Vol 3  
Throughout the history of human resources, women who have tried to articulate their competencies outside of biological assumptions have faced challenges from men, and as women have been hired precisely because of their supposed transversal competencies, it has become difficult for them to claim competencies in another field. What is discussed in this paper is related to the field of finance and informatics, purely masculine environments where gender issues are even more evident and where the use of a more correct and inclusive terminology can contribute to challenging the preconceptions hitherto held.

For the optimal return on investment in human capital, it is not enough to develop people talent programs and a culture aimed at learning. It requires leadership that is ready for change and to transform talented individuals into a cohesive team. It is important for leaders to make a change from managing people to coaching people. This is generative coaching, so called by studies conducted by James Flaherty in 2014. It is an approach that focuses on long-term sustainable results, which include the whole person, working on both hard and soft skills, but also on commitment, which as we have seen is an important part of assessing employee health<sup>70</sup>.

Managers should facilitate the development of these soft skills (therefore he/she should be named Learning Facilitator in chief) in modern knowledge workers through the right processes and practices. Managers influence to the extent of 10-20%. They guide the change in mindset, navigate uncertain situations, and define the destination. Considering that when senior leaders role model the behavior changes they're asking employees make, transformations are 5.3 times more likely to be successful<sup>71</sup>.

The role of leaders and managers is essential in the ongoing process of reskill and upskill because they are the ones who take charge of activating a readiness for change and create a more systematic method in the development of soft skills in the workplace.

When it comes to leadership positions, having strong soft skills will only become more important, both now and in the (short-term) future. That's because newer generations who are joining the workforce, like Gen Z, place a lot more value on:

- a sense of purpose
  - meaningful and challenging work
  - professional and personal fulfillment
- 
- New professional figures such as the Learning Designer

If we consider training a key corporate asset, then being able to detect future market trends and having HR staff ready to act for change is equally important. Unfortunately, training in today's companies is still not sufficiently geared towards developing the needs of the future and is not yet sufficiently valued and properly funded. In fact, in the McKinsey report *Rethink capabilities to emerge stronger*

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<sup>70</sup> Considerations from the book "Nuovi modelli di Leadership partecipativa", chapter 1, written by Angelini L., Banfi A., D'Amato V., Tosca E. Università Cattaneo Libri, publication of September 2020.

For the concrete study please see: Flaherty, J., (2014). *Coaching: Evoking excellence in others*. Routledge, New York (NY).

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/transformation/our-insights/how-capability-building-can-power-transformation>

from Covid-19 (November 2020), while the majority of respondents in organizations with ongoing or planned retraining programs are confident in their organization's ability to choose the employees to be trained and the skills to be taught, most say that their organizations are unable to design other aspects of programs. Gathering some data, we have that almost six out of ten say their organizations are good at selecting employees for retraining and that they have effectively prioritized the skills to be taught; but less than half say their organizations have a strong ability to design the programs and only a quarter say their organizations have designed the incentives of the programs such as communication to engage external stakeholders well. These issues give birth to a figure that is increasingly in demand, but still scarcely present figure in the labor market was born: the Learning Designer, which as reported in the article of *Il Sole24ore*<sup>72</sup> concerns a figure specialized in consultancy and corporate training oriented to complex needs. This figure, through his or her background, which must be able to combine the area of economics and project management with that of human resources, together with the study and analysis of the mega trends of the training market and the sector in which the company to which he or she provides consultancy operates, must be able to develop a soft skills training program, involving and coordinating those directly involved. In this regard, Fòrema, a training organization to which we have already submitted our questions, has founded a veritable Academy to train the Learning Designers of the future in order to be able to provide practical training-consultancy intervention to companies in the area who request it.

We're rapidly entering a world in which the work we do looks radically different than what we did a decade ago, a year ago, or even yesterday. AI and automation are rewiring the nature of work to focus more on the very qualities and talents that make us human. To succeed in the future, we'll need to embrace those abilities, seek them out when hiring, nurture them as managers, and hone them as individuals.

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<sup>72</sup> Il Sole24ore, Agosto 2022. Una academy per formare professionisti capaci di anticipare il cambiamento. Retrieved from: [https://barbaraganz.blog.ilsole24ore.com/2022/08/08/una-academy-per-formare-professionisti-capaci-di-anticipare-il-cambiamento/?refresh\\_ce=1](https://barbaraganz.blog.ilsole24ore.com/2022/08/08/una-academy-per-formare-professionisti-capaci-di-anticipare-il-cambiamento/?refresh_ce=1)

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## APPENDIX

### a) Interview questions translated into English

#### Section 1: Introduction

1. In the aftermath of the pandemic outbreak, there has been an awareness among companies and entrepreneurs of the importance of the role played by soft skills in coming out of the crisis and succeeding in the new marketplace that is emerging with new customer needs, greater complexity, and not least strong digitization. Has there been any way to detect this growing interest?

If the answer is yes, from what data have you been able to infer this emerging need of companies? (e.g. increased demand for soft skills courses, increased participation in seminars and conferences on this topic, increased budget of companies allocated to their training, ...)

2. The issue of soft skills is hot because it is linked to gaps and mismatches that are created in the marketplace: what are the main issues that companies report as a result of these deficits?
3. Do you think that businesses and entrepreneurs have realized that the "burden" of soft skills that we are experiencing today is in a sense their fault as well, in that, in the previous decade, although they were aware of the issues related to these skills, they intentionally or unintentionally neglected the problem?

#### Section 2: Soft skills & Methodologies

4. What soft skills training courses are most in demand by companies?
5. Is there a difference between the demand of SMEs compared to that of larger companies?
6. What methodologies are most commonly used in training programs for these skills (e.g., outdoor activities, simulations, peer-coaching, coaching-individual, etc.)?  
What about channels (face-to-face mode, online, recorded video lectures, hybrid)?
7. What are the major difficulties companies face when approaching to undertake soft skills training for their employees? What kind of support is provided? Is there also financial help?

#### Section 3: Digitalization and Trends

8. The impact of digitization is undeniable within business activities see hybrid work, automation. How do you think digital and online have affected the training paths of these skills?  
If there has been an actual change, do you think it is positive or does it have negative aspects?
9. Has digitization also, in your view, allowed for some clearing of the notions that online courses and related awards are often considered "second-class"?
10. Do you use micro-credentials or issue digital badges or as recognition of course attendance + skill acquisition?
11. Do you make use of particular technologies such as AI, virtual reality, etc.?

#### Section 4: Future

12. What trends do you think will be of particular interest in the near future regarding the methodologies of these skills? Do you think there will be major changes, including with regard to AI and digitization, or will things stay fairly in line with the current situation for now?
13. Instead, what challenges will persist in the future?
14. Do you think that, given the complexity of teaching these skills, there is a need for the training of specific figures to act as intermediaries between training companies and the companies themselves (e.g., that of the learning designer)?
15. What do you think the role of education should be, specifically as it relates to colleges and universities?
16. A final, more reflective question: do you think that the terminology that identifies soft skills, known to all as soft skills, is in any way "detrimental" to the importance that these skills have? That is, would the possibility of identifying them with different terminology such as interpersonal skills, people skills, or emotional, social, and cognitive skills help to reverse their (not "weak") position?

## b) TRANSCRIPT INTERVIEW 1

Tuesday, 13th February 2024

The person interviewed is Chiara Facchinetti,  
HR and School Area manager for the Rovigo-based company Zico

Interviewer

Starting with the first question: following the outbreak of the pandemic, can you say that there has been, and have you also had any feedback from it, of companies' awareness in terms of the importance of soft skills? If yes, based on what data have you been able to infer a growing interest in soft skills and their training by companies in the territory?

Interviewee

A little less on the soft one. We in Zico, being precisely a reality that tries to bring social innovation to the territory, we are against the trend of course. In fact, even when we are hiring people we value yes the hard aspect for example, but having no of the jobs that are carried out for 99% in teams in our research, for example, it has a very important majority that the person, for example, knows how to work in a team, knows how to communicate because we have had experiences where these skills were not there and it was very complicated to carry out the work for objectives that we have. So if I have to look at my business reality, certainly over the years after the pandemic this need has been felt more and more, I have to make a speech about the context instead territorial context of Rovigo is not yet, has not yet acquired exactly in toto this awareness.

Interviewer

Okay? And in terms of the companies that come to you, what are the soft skills that they ask you for the most? Both maybe as courses, but also, when there is a job seeker who is asking for certain skills, all the time.

Interviewee

Related to the soft part, then if I look at the companies that maybe we are asked to broker, demand, supply of labor? The majors that are required vary a little bit depending on the role, but here, if I have to make a more general point, definitely the fact that they know how to work in a team definitely. The second one is not so much communication, but more the ability, maybe in complex situations, to be able to try maybe even creative or alternative solutions.

Interviewer



OK.

Interviewee

No problem solving, now we want to call it, so mainly these two are kind of the skills that we are most asked for by companies. If I have to reason instead about maybe possible courses that we offer. It is public speaking, then, anyway always related to the issue of the ability to communicate effectively.

Interviewer

Which let's say in this case is more one falls a little bit into what is the new trend of competency-based learning, which is to combine hard skills with soft skills and develop one skill all together, OK? You were saying earlier a little bit about the differences of the territory, yes, you have also encountered a little bit all the time. In the courses you do a, difference between companies and the somewhat smaller ones. Small and medium-sized enterprises on the other hand maybe somewhat larger companies in the approach or even in the demand precisely itself of what are they looking for, what are they looking for? Of the needs that they need?

Interviewee

So yes, we have purely dealt with and are dealing with non-major realities. So anyway my feedback that I'm giving you is a little bit let's say conditioned by more experience on the small ones than on the big ones. For those few experiences that we have had with the big realities yes, certainly you can see the difference. And it still remains a little bit that then I understand the need that anyway the person has at least the pages relatively to the technical skills to perform that role, that remains. Let's say it's different the perception of the importance that it acquires in smaller realities, it's 100 percent important, so maybe it's not even there to think about just what is the spectrum of soft skills. In more structured realities on the other hand, even there maybe the perception may vary, but certainly. While on the one hand they almost don't even talk about it, on the other hand they really start asking you in the profiles to assess more or even these aspects, so both a difference is definitely there. There are so many spectrums to take into consideration, then so.

Interviewer

Okay. Again connecting a little bit to the small business owners, the big companies. There is also an awareness and saying on the part of companies. Yes, the burden of these gaps on soft skills also belongs to us entrepreneurs, or something that maybe is left a little bit to training? Of the individual slash to the training of universities or high schools anyway. I mean, has there been this switch, in the mindset of entrepreneurs?

Interviewee

Then we have to deal because we as I say, have both the work area but also the school area; therefore, we experience both environments a little bit and. You talk to not everybody, however, some entrepreneurs tell you that the fault is that the schools don't train the kids enough. Or some of them say that precisely you do a lot of work on, maybe even technical skills, especially if we talk about vocational or technical studies, but you don't then do work on the part, maybe precisely, of soft skills? So very good, building, very good. But then when there is teamwork, they don't know how to do it, so yes, there is this aspect here. Few entrepreneurs, I've heard make a self-reflection, that is, about whether it could be maybe their job to also take care of this part of training their staff? After that now so much goes into outdoor training and whatnot, but it depends on what is done with it, very often it is perceived as a fad, as a moment maybe of leisure, a little less is used for the tool it should be.

Interviewer

Okay here, coming a little bit to what your training offerings are in the area of soft skills courses, what do you offer? Also how maybe they are broken down, maybe by individual offerings, for school, for companies. How is it structured?

Interviewee

Yes, so we work mostly on calls, so on funded, so in this case. Based a little bit on the characteristics of the call, we have to structure the activities that we propose, so we have the funded strand. After that as Zico yes, we also propose a strand for private individuals, but that is still under construction at the moment, so we have more structured the part on calls. Regarding the calls related to the world of work, we propose courses that are mainly related precisely to team building, to the development of the ability to work in a team and the part precisely, on effective communication, having also precisely our own office that deals with communication in the strictest sense, we have this collaboration that we activate with them, which give us a hand up to even better structure the proposal that we make. On an individual level what we propose is u more of a skills assessment path. Yes, so the person has their own package, maybe it's a young person who has never found a job, so they're trying to maybe reason about themselves rather than we've happened to people who want to change jobs totally and so they need a little bit to get their ideas in order, figure out maybe some skills how they can be switched or used in other contexts and so here, that's kind of the offer that's made on the job side. On the schools side, we go into schools by offering workshops. These workshops focus on three different directions that are paths to develop self-entrepreneurial skills, but always from a teamwork perspective, because even when you decide to open a startup, a business you work in a team and so there is still the nuance related to teamwork. Then there is the whole aspect related to wellness with which we collaborate with psychologists, so the more emotional, relational part, empathy, so everything that you communicate, also the sphere of emotion management. The last part is that just also personal orientation, so empowerments and figuring out where you want to do, where you want to go in your future.

Interviewer

Great. By the way I had seen just the part about schools. I liked it a lot, it's really good work you do, wish we had it earlier.

Interviewee

Eh, it's not easy because anyway within the school they do both inbound and outbound orientation. To make them understand that it's not just that, it's not easy, that there's a whole working on the person to be done, that it's not enough to present the different schools to have done orientations and so there too a work that we've been doing for two or three years now. With some schools we have been able to get in, with others they are a little bit more closed and they claim that they already do and that there is no need to do.

Interviewer

I understand. In all of this offering what are the methodologies that you use most frequently let's say in addition to maybe what can be the use of digital, but also at the very level of group activities, role playing, et cetera, in short. I also saw that you do coaching. Which ones do you use the most?

Interviewee

So in terms of the experiences that maybe we have groups do, we use mostly, an experiential type of methodology, so at a very, very general level there is the briefing where the activity is proposed and presented, there is the concrete activity and then there is the final debriefing activity where everything is kind of picked up again and a reflection to then give an output. At a very, very general level the structuring is this, we use materials such as may be the Tower of Power rather than other activities, anyway, which should be done outdoors where possible, so where we can where we have the facts available and we also do it just as outdoor training. On the other hand, as far as more individual activities or they are interviews, especially if maybe precisely psychologists are doing it, they are individual interviews. Fact sheets are also used, especially in competency assessments, we have a whole series of fact sheets from one's life history, to identifying one's competencies, to figuring out how they can be structured in another way, and a dossier is constructed and then at the end of the course is given to the person. In addition to the interviews or communications.

Interviewer

Let's instead get a little bit closer to what digital is before we talk about Skillgym. Do you think that the world of digital, online, however, has been kind of cleared through customs with the advent of the pandemic, so is it considered more normal, let's say taking online classes? Related to this then I anticipate two more questions, one if you make use of micro-credentials or otherwise digital badges, and two if it has been cleared customs that a course taken, in part entirely online, is a "B" course and leads to less proficiency in the skill that is decided to be developed.

Interviewee

So let's say that certainly as a result of the pandemic there has been a little bit of a shift away from using technological tools a lot more it has been a change in a sense imposed but it has definitely paid off, I mean in many cases also just on a logistical level, it has been very helpful to be able to use these tools. And so yes. On the fact that it is always useful or however it is better to use the aspect of technology (at least this is my personal opinion) I would use yes, we use technology, but as a support, that is, it does not go to replace in toto what it is, the one-to-one experience, however in presence, because we working also in the social field, however we have strong value of the need to work with the person, even in presence. Then that you are flexible and then in case of need you do, you also use maybe of remote interviews or whatever. Yes, however, that is not our main mode that we like to work with. So even in the case of skill gym it is a support, a tool that we in short we wanted to experiment with as a support to an activity that is done in presence anyway. And to answer your second question, we internally do not make use of digital badges, we don't have any intention of that kind and I don't remember the third question anymore.

Interviewer

It had always attached itself somewhat to what was the concept of changing the stigma of the online course being seen as "inferior" to the totally in-person one.

Interviewee

OK, so I think first of all it also depends a little bit on how much the topic interests the person. If the topic interests, I think the person doesn't notice this huge difference between being online and being in-person, so there is a little bit of this factor to take into consideration. After that, I personally I think the attention span, if the thing is done, if the course is offered entirely online, sooner or later it tends to drop. It kind of lacks that whole dimension, even of being able to compare yourself with your, maybe fellow students, but also just just the fact of exchanging looks and exchanging, smiles, exchanging faces. It still lacks that social aspect that it's not that it makes it of on a B plane it makes it on a plane that you may or may not like, after that on the fact of the content or the importance it may have, I don't see much difference. But having followed and following even now a master's degree in human resources, the lectures that are done entirely online, I'm the first one that has a harder time following them than when I'm in the classroom with classmates and the opportunity to interact in a way anyway that is different. So I really think they are two different ways of offering training and it doesn't mean that one is necessarily better than the other.

Interviewer

Well, actually yes, hardly what even a little bit I've found at the level of global trends, hardly people will move to fully digital training, especially talking about soft skills that require special attention and as you also said, just even interacting with peers, perceiving smiles anyway helps in developing those skills, like for example emotional intelligence and empathy. So there you go, yes, I agree with that. All right, moving on, let's talk about Skillgym instead. Can you tell me a little bit about how the project came about and how it is evolving? And you were saying earlier that it was also linked to a support activity, that's how this collaboration works?

Interviewee

Yes, then the collaboration with Skillgym was born now more than a ago within a larger project, where precisely on the one hand there were corporate realities that expressed on a cross platform of their needs. We were developing the labor area and the part more dedicated to training people to especially to help them enter

the labor market. So this came in handy for us both for people who had already come out of school, and the young people who were maybe getting ready to come out. To have something, of an instrumentation, a support that would make us a little bit more attractive, especially maybe to young people who are using technology for whatever. Proposing the usual mode of interviewing, let's call it normal, we didn't like that. We wanted to innovate a little bit in that respect as well. So we expressed our need and this platform put us in touch with precisely Skillgym, which was this startup, by now it's a structured company that was proposing this platform. They are based in Switzerland and they have countless collaborations with very large entities. They propose this platform where there are personas managed through a whole series of artificial intelligence algorithms that allow you to simulate job interviews. Or in the upgrade formula they also really allow you to simulate various situations related perhaps to conflict or problem-solving or even other situations. We as Ziko focused more on the interview simulation part. The interesting part of this platform was that the character, although registered with as a real person, so they were not puppets but they were really real people, was able to interact with you based on the answers that you gave and the time that you took, and so by replaying, redoing maybe several times the interview, the outputs that you got were not always the same, but they were always different. So it wasn't that simulation that then repeating turns out to be always the same, but you were getting different responses, different feedback, based on just how your interview was going. So you could actually notice in the course of the simulations that you did, whether you improved, whether you stayed the same or whether you got worse. The interview was structured in the following way: the interviewee could see the recruiter's emotional state before the meeting and then could assess whether he was annoyed, calm. This was to make the experience as real as possible: in fact when you go to an interview the recruiter is not a machine, so he maybe has a whole series of things that he carries with him from the day that may lead him to behave with you in one way rather than another, regardless of you subject. This is related to the emotional state with which you come to the interview. Then there is the interview stage: at that time there was still a choice of three answers. In recent times, thanks to the advent of new technologies and AI, the platform was working on the possibility of interacting without choosing the answer, but as if there was a real conversation in real time, making very interesting upgrades from this point. After the interview was over, you would see the recruiter make a phone call and give feedback on the interview that was just done.

At the end of the whole experience a screen was returned where you have a whole set of indicators, information, data, even statistics, that tells you a little bit how you did, what your performance was in fact. It gives indications of what there is to improve, even some insights, so you can do a whole reflection that allows you to improve future simulations in order to refine your soft skills. The project took place with students at the University of Padua. We involved about 30 of them, so they were given access, each had their own account that they could access and four different scenarios that they could interact with. They would do their rehearsals, after which once a month, once every two months, they would have training sessions, supported by us Ziko, in that we had access to each one's data and results and we could understand what to make them think about and how to foster a positive development of their skills. So at the end of the whole course, which lasted 10 months, the goal was to see a little bit from start to finish with even statistical data in hand, as well as qualitative data, how the students had improved within this particular activity.

Interviewer

An experience for you that is certainly unique, as well as an interesting and truly educational path for students.

Interviewee

Yes, we liked it because it was exactly what we were looking for. Then fortunately, the "wedding," as we called it, went well, so we worked well and were also happy with the results we achieved.

Interviewer

Good. Just connecting to the technologies, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, data reporting, real-time feedback... Do you think these technologies will be able to have an increasing impact in the training industry, particularly for soft skills?

Interviewee

So let's say they can be one more tool, along with the ones that are already there. They can be useful. I believe that this development in part also goes a little bit hand in hand with what are the ways of people today to train themselves. So certainly this kind of mode can work perhaps with younger people. In fact it is as if in a way the modes of training proposal are following what is a trend since it represents a little bit what is also the target audience. I don't think it's going to totally replace maybe forms that are already there, I think of it rather as one more instrumentation that goes alongside the methodologies that are already there and so a trainer can have a broader package of instrumentation that he can use based in my opinion also on the target audience that he has to train.

Interviewer

So, coming to the last questions: what will be the challenges for the future and the critical issues related to them? Reconnecting also to what was said earlier to the wide and fragmented reality of the area, the mentality still not fully mature if you will. Or maybe even at the level of funding in that it is not always easy, precisely, to deal with this type of training especially if more employees are involved. This is what do you see in the near future?

Interviewee

The challenges are basically what you said. The first one is that we are working drop by drop. To understand it, in a reality like the Veneto, precisely because it is complex, it has potential, that is, the moment you enter an area where a whole series of services, of proposals are not there, and you manage a little bit to be a battering ram, to break through the barriers, afterwards you have a very fertile ground on which you can still make your proposals. So there is painstaking patience work here to get to our result. On the other hand, there is of course also the economic issue. In the sense that, the big companies that propose training courses do not have low prices. Yes, training costs money, knowledge costs money, and so obviously there will be a little bit to find a parameter there as well. We need to be able to offer training in these new ways but without risking being absolutely over budget in relation to the target territory.

Interviewer

What do you think will be the role played by players in the always training field? I am referring to those that are not the training companies, but belong to education, governments, nonprofits. How much impact can they have and how can they help then, the companies that deliver these services to make them more effective or help them in resources?

Interviewee

Then I first and foremost go inside the schools to do workshops, so: if I have to reason about the current state of how our schools are, in short ... I would say that it needs to be given a little bit more help, especially also because, if we reason about the school part maybe there are, let's call them "enlightened" teachers who understand the importance also of putting the canonical teaching of pathways alongside the development of soft skills, also because what teachers point out to us is just the total inability of today's young people to relate to each other. There is this cell phone and everything around the cell phone is important, the rest is not. So what we have as feedback are big gaps on the aspect related to getting into relationships, which once they enter the working world I think we will pay for. And the problem is that then there is the didactics and the fact that at the end of the year, just talking about institutions, government, you pupil have to complete the course, your program. And so there is a major deviation here between what is the school institution as it is understood, and maybe the slightly more innovative features that should be introduced. In fact the role that these players play is fundamental the problem is that to date I don't think they have the tools to be able to actually make themselves useful. So maybe there is also awareness, however, there is a difficulty in succeeding in implementation.

Interviewer

As a last question, instead there is a somewhat more reflective question, here. Do you think that the term by which we identify soft skills, i.e. soft skills, has somehow in fact created a "damage" to these skills that are seen precisely as weaker, and so the idea of perhaps changing their terminology, of perhaps associating them with people skills or professional skills, can in some way help to give a boost or to break down what to date are still stigmas attached to these skills?

Interviewee

Yes, it actually makes an interesting question to me, because I had never actually thought that calling them soft skills would somehow make them perceived as less important. I think that the issue maybe is not so much related in itself to the name, which okay maybe changing it would make the perception different, but the fact that actually it's really a paradigm shift that needs to be made. And to understand that actually, as much as a person has to know how to do that job however maybe it's better to get over the fact that they lack one or two technical skills, because those, maybe with a course in short, if that person, precisely, is smart, makes it up to them. And to understand that whether it's instead a person is not able to work in a team and you put them in in a group, that group is very likely to explode and that's a little bit more complicated to make up than a couple of technical skills. So it's really a paradigm shift that has to be made. Change is never an easy thing to do, bringing in change factors takes people time to process. There are realities where this processing has already been done, and we are glad that it has been, on others, perhaps most, we are still in the process of understanding this process of change.

Interviewer

I skipped a question that was related to the need for new figures to be a bit of a connector between what are the needs of the companies, and then going to the company, figuring out what are the needs that the company needs to develop and then bringing them back to the training companies to figure out how best to develop it. Do you notice that there is perhaps a lack in the market for this type of figure? Can it be helpful?

Interviewee

But it certainly can be useful. As far as I'm concerned it's a job that I already do, and so do my colleagues. At the moment when there is a selection to be made for an outside company I take, I go to the company, I visit the company, I talk to who I need to talk to, I gather the needs and only at a later stage do I make or not make the hire, sometimes even going to disagree with the owner. In the job description of the person, if he asks me for an individual who can do the four jobs together, who is flexible, who has to work 25 hours a day and whatever else, we talk and reason about it. My colleagues and I in the training area apply this process: you go to the company, you get to know the company, you understand what kind of needs they may have, and based on that you propose a package. An offer that is, however, here is built ad hoc based on the needs that they have expressed. So I think at least it should be something that entities like ours that are involved in training do. After that it is true, even in other cases you don't go, you don't do this activity, you have ready-made packages and you offer them. We have a very keen eye from this point of view; so, certainly these are important figures that I hope already exist within some realities that deal with this.

Interviewer

Well, I would have finished with the questions.

c) TRANSCRIPT INTERVIEW 2

Wednesday, 14th February 2024

The person interviewed is Enrica Bianchin,  
HR and Soft and Performance Skills area manager for Unisef training company operating in the province of Treviso

I would start with the first question regarding companies' awareness of soft skills. Have you experienced through, for example, increased demand for courses on these skills or increased participation in webinars with this theme, this change in thinking on the part of companies in the Veneto region?

So I was telling you, after the pandemic, we were able to record two phenomena basically, but we, but like all great observers of what is somewhat the labor market. Definitely a reaction from people. That they find themselves working, therefore employed with respect to some great reflections. On the sense that they need to find in the workplace hence various phenomena such as the great so-called great resignations, which on the one hand are these names that are given to phenomena, but in reality we also in our area, in concrete we are faced with companies that have a great need to find staff and especially they have a great need to have tools to keep them in the company. So a phenomenon that after the let's say, after the pandemic may correspond, may have, may have even simply as a motivation the change of values in the generations that are now entering the world of work. So on the one hand external phenomena, but on the one hand also perhaps an evolution of the world of work in terms of values mean that objectively companies, finding themselves with large exits HAVE had to begin to reflect on the motivations, I have made this preamble to say that then the origin I do not know whether it is post pandemic or whether it is, much more simply, the evolution that all eras have in terms of even precisely the values and meaning that then also the new generations find in the world of work. One fact is that the issue of retaining people has meant that, a greater sensitivity began to mature with respect to the issue of soft skills. So anyway a maturation that comes from an objective fact and that is a need or a crisis. So answer is yes. Increased demand and increased participation in courses? Here again I would tell you yes. Especially, however, some let's say professional figures that within the tent are a little bit more sensitive, so the whole world of hr, the whole world of HR managers has Reacted with because it has also felt the most protagonist in some way, so there is also an evolution of this role, there has been an evolution. In the sense that somehow, in recent years the figure of the personnel manager has acquired its own, how to say its own central function. Compared to perhaps the past, where it was a really. Complex but perhaps underestimated, then. Certainly among our trainees the ones who show more sensitivity are the hard and. The proprietors, the owners, certainly also.

Perfect, in fact, exactly I started just the thesis talking about the great resignation and this new let's say. Finding a meaning, a motivation, a purpose to what is the work and then precisely developing the whole thing, coming to the fact that. You're looking and there's really a need to retain this talent and the role played by training, skilling, is critical because it's something that people nowadays value. It comes to say, the pandemic, it's probably been an accelerator but it hasn't been an opportunity that was allowed people to reflect and have different experiences. From those we are, as it were, raised and educated for. Our area for generations like mine were work, do take care I mean it was all very functional, even education, even training. Historically from the 1960s, from the postwar years to a few decades ago it was all very much seen as a function of work, employment anyway. And so just we territory also kind of grew up with the idea that our knowledge must be useful to The sense of usefulness. At the time when instead the pandemic has allowed us to discover something else, having different times perhaps has been disruptive more than in other territories, precisely because of this reversal. Valoriale, now, just I repeat, in my opinion is an accelerator that made understand some things, some needs even human needs. Reconciling work and doing with other is reconciliation that you talk about?

Totally agree. Then, with regard to precisely the issue of soft skills, it is often related to the words gap mismatch. So how are these issues found in companies? The entrepreneur who says, I don't find young people who know how to work in a team, I don't find people who are motivated, enterprising, which are all skills that are precisely in the person, in one's skills, transversal, in character also. Or are there in addition to these issues other issues that are expressed related precisely to soft skills, lack?

Then the lack of perhaps awareness or consciousness of the importance of soft skills. It is transversal, precisely, to all generations, so it is not the preserve of young or old, on the contrary. In fact, probably the somewhat more senior generations have a harder time recognizing the importance, because as precisely as we started to

say a moment ago. Our education, our own. Our own, even in some ways. If you'll pass me the term training during the evolution had been to mainly work on the technical aspects that could be functional for the organization. so we have generations of seniors who have neglected the importance. Of relationship management. And so they obviously did not calculate that the continuity of the enterprise Could also be related to the motivation of people to stay. Because traditionally what brought business continuity was investments, technological investments rather than investments in markets, so those were the key things. And and was that okay? No? It was an economy that basically always worked. So this thinking really about individual motivation is if we think about having posed it 15 years ago was alien. If not if not for the maybe sales force part that then yes, it was necessary to do the training no on the motivation of salespeople because they had to develop these psychological relational skills with customers, so anyway a customer-related thing, the gap so what happens? That now instead we are in a world of work, youth labor market where what is required instead is other, indeed, just the young people who. They're tending to be stirring consciences, he asks in the interview process, what kind of welfare is there in the company? What kind of incentive systems, what kind of career plans, so real innovation, are young people bringing, It happens or it doesn't happen, in my opinion, obtorto collo, as they say, companies are getting it too. By reflex, if only by necessity. So this in my opinion is a great and what they are doing there. Ha has in mind that our business reality is extremely fragmented, they are small, very small, so it is difficult to sample, certainly though the more enlightened. Entrepreneurs, companies are trying to work let's say on management, so anyway on those famous no bosses. Of a certain age. So that they develop the appropriate soft skills to retain to welcome young people, that is to give a corporate brand that can be recognized as a hospitable, open brand, attentive to the needs of people rather than diversity. And so there is work on this management, because then it's not like you can just take and renew and send everybody home, so the big investments are. On people, so on all managerial skills, with respect to feedback with respect to conflict management, with respect to motivation and group management. And it's a job. Definitely more challenging than doing a training versus a technical update. Why is it an unpredictable variable? So I don't know if I answered that, but what you try to do is a lot of in-house activities, so very very custom. As a type of training you try just to give you an idea of how a little bit we work and from what they ask me and what I suggest to do, I always suggest to start. We have we are a training provider with a kind of Faculty, obviously of

Times in soft skills, coaching, counselor there is a little bit of everything because then really each company has its own, how to say, its own needs and then no. The choice of the coach or the trainer is very, is very much related to the sensitivity, to the ability of of to trust. You have to trigger one thing, the basic pattern, very fast usually here I suggest to do this, a reflection with the trainer or facilitator. Yeah, even that no, it is changing. Nowadays we talk about facilitation. What that maybe years ago you didn't know what it was? No, years ago soft skills training was, I give you the communication course, you learn the techniques and then you reproduce them, which didn't work. Now we try to do that. A moment of then I usually call it goal setting, so that in my opinion is somehow the change. It comes more the the or however the owner comes and says Eh I need to get people to communicate better, but our approach as an entity is no longer to say OK, Get me the list and I'll get you a trainer. The first thing is we try to do is say owner rather than managers. You tell me what is not working. And You give me the along with the You create the perimeter of this change. So what are the behaviors you want to change? What are the expectations and you do training, starting with the owner or starting with the top management. They are the first people who then have to follow this path and they themselves over time become coaches and facilitators of change or mentors of change. Then we can find everybody. And then fellow collaborators will come into the classroom. With mixed classroom and coaching activities, so group activities and individual activities. Okay? Okay, yes, in fact, precisely, this this new idea of the chief learning facilitator, related both to what are the echars and also maybe a leader, if we are in more complex realities, precisely. What he told me I found it precisely among the trends and changes that have emerged. to close for a moment, the introductory part. After this reflection, after this post-pandemic period, you can say that companies, entrepreneurs have made their own the burden of the lack of the soft skills or. Exactly due somewhat to the complexity, the type of companies in the area, especially for small businesses, there is still work to be done. Fortunately for us or unfortunately there is a lot of it to be done. And then look, there is a theme in my opinion, the way I see these subjects is constant training, that is we will never get to say OK, that is once you have opened up this awareness and then it's like going to the gym and like preparing for a marathon, that is training has to be constant. So there's no goal that once we've achieved it we can say, OK, we've achieved it, it's like a paradigm shift of one's own way of working. Constantly in training? There are those who are already in training, there are businesses that are unfortunately still groping instead.



Coming a little bit instead to what is the training offerings that you do on what soft skills is there most demand for? Then also taking a look for a moment. And how and also what are the methodologies that are used for teaching? And the channels, so whether it's a hybrid mode, whether there are some courses that are totally digital or however maybe particular ones are used. Technologies like may be augmented reality, artificial intelligence?

The most in-demand topics are leadership. And so within this big container that is leadership, because in my opinion then leadership is. Set of many things. The activities that we start from, the development is just very basic in the sense that it starts right from communication, so effective communication. There is the ability to give feedback, to handle consensus, dissent, sorry.

And so I would say that secondly then you also reason about motivation of people, which then is related, but basic I think the issue of communication is still a central issue. It was discouraging, maybe I don't know, I don't judge, but in short it's still quite, so the methodologies are still very traditional, a little bit pass me the term and it remains between us a little bit basic. The need is a little bit basics that are still the instrumentation or instrumentations, in the sense that in-presence activity is still very much appreciated. Not traditional aura then, however with much more interactive methodologies, much more hands-on, much more case-related, so a bit of a learning no? Doing and activity as I said before coaching, a lot of individual accompaniment because It allows people to mature their awareness and take responsibility, with respect to the goals to be achieved. A hybrid blend, but. I tell you however a hybrid comparable to aura, in the sense that however that connections replace what could be a presence. We not infrequently do some of the asynchronous, training pills, something is being asked of us, on onboarding. So building onboarding trainings for new hires? With respect to what might be on the one hand the company, procedures, best practices. But on the issue of soft skills we are still a bit behind, we don't have. Great demands with respect to the to the activity on augmented reality, not in the soft skills, not now, in short not in this yet not in a widespread way. Okay, yeah, that was what I was expecting to get as feedback. Yes, big trends, yes. The new ones. Creativity, analytical critical thinking, but nowadays, in the face of the practical need to work of small and medium-sized businesses, precisely, communication, knowing how to work in teams are kind of the key factors, let's say, that is what there is more to work on. But even I tell you, the traditional outdoor team building. To say so just this need to connect even the big companies, which maybe they are also the ones that adopt more smart working, so anyway they work so much with remote teams. At the end of the day, the need for physical relationship, the need to see each other is almost primordial, however, it remains a theme so training, even for remote teams, they do it in presence. Because it is a time. No, to see each other, to get together as a team, to Side by Side then a whole series of things that in the remote then fade away, are not clarified then. I would say that in principle. Is it preferable precisely with respect to even the theme of before? No of the however of the distance that is somewhat generated over time between people.

is there a difference perhaps of particular prominence? As far as. the demands between small and medium-sized businesses and those maybe a little bit larger.

So, paradoxically? It comes to me to say then. Again it's always a bit complex. Then there are large enterprises and large enterprises. so basically always making Reflections on a sample X not. The large enterprise? It focuses less on the objectiv, I try to explain myself in the. In the sense that in the large enterprise we already have. Very often more skilled managerial figures with respect to the issue of soft skills. so by and large the large enterprise Has already accrued the need to have managers with good interpersonal skills. And therefore has already is already long on the road of training through coaching and through activities or internal academies or with some training even external training on those who just update these skills. The small business, We find ourselves maybe doing some training, which is more as I said before, more of a training than really a need to

affect in change management, because maybe it has already arrived, I mean they are in already more mature stage in terms of change. So you need moments more so more to be together in the classroom with the group, get to know the other department managers, so the training has a little bit different purpose on these issues more just to make a group, but they have are already aware managers. Instead, in the small realities we are facing in the small and medium realities, dealing with just issues of change. OK so I'm redefining, is. Both corporate, now I have to do a people strategy within this people strategy. The Char in this case there is always a la Char a little bit more enlightened than others, where it says well people theme, we have to address it also on the theme of skills development and then training. So it's a playbook that is much more challenging for us, because it allows us to create a path and also be able to follow an evolution that defines intermediate points and longer-term points. So there is an action where you also see more of the change because you have more direct contact. There's an enterprise of I don't know 100 people obviously with I don't know 5 10 figures of responsibility where you know well you've mapped out really well who they are, where they're coming from, what their false and weak points are. And where the. Here is also the difference of entrepreneur wants a partner, that is he sees in us someone who helps to map, helps to define goals, because maybe the HR department is an office that doesn't have the 360° skills and. So it really needs help, the big company tends to signal you, that is, it already has an office that does needs analysis, goal development, path development. Entity you somehow get to do the. More executive.

So I don't know if I've made them if I've answered them.

I make it perfectly, perfectly clear, actually no, interesting this one. Difference between large and small businesses, precisely, just in the path and in the in the need that there is.

Yes, League large outlets have if they are then acquired or multinational, they also then have then foreign or at least central offices that already have the definition of let's take the topic of KPIs, that is, they already know where they want to go, they have already determined what dimensions to keep under observation, what results to achieve, so the training plan. Whether they are then efficient or not efficient, that's not it, is it? The issue, though, where does the need originate from? Many times it originates much further than maybe the Italian location than even the training.

Earlier he was talking about precisely the strong need. To be able to communicate, to take full advantage of this, this. Competency in the courses that you do is also linked to a more let's call it technical part, that is, we are talking about competency based, that is, a competency that is no longer seen as just soft or just hard, but it is really a well-rounded competency to know how to communicate. So yes, this the you is present, both the both sides.

I mean, so I'm sorry if I if I understand it correctly, I mean if it's dealt with both from the more technical point of view and then application point of view, I don't have, maybe I didn't catch the question?

You also have with, for example, the tools in which you can communicate with. Trivially, I don't know.

Yes, so then this is another issue. Look at us that we get a lot, that we get a lot and we get asked help us communicate better, because there is a bulimia of emails here and people don't know how to use the tools. Then this yes actually grew in the in the no post pandemic because the tools of need increased, not everyone found themselves. So from following we do communication, both so internal. communication as we handle it to so many nuances, in the sense that then there can be the most basic part, which is just how to give feedback, that is so more relational, This has a lot, how to give feedback, how to motivate people? What are the tools that can be adopted to then get feedback? And how to look for them? Then you get more technical at the point where you do training instead. To use email trivially, that is how to write, then communicate through writing, communicate through a call. How to handle a presentation? So we also go to. but always in terms of

communication. One thing that I've been asked a lot lately, often is since then also between colleagues, so internal communication not with clients of their own work. I have to explain a business plan to you but maybe you 6 1 commercial, I have the head from administrative, you have the head from commercial and this communication topic. I have to be able in 10 minutes to make a clear, structured presentation that gives you all the tools to understand what, what I need or what I'm sharing, so? And that's communication. So it's not so much relational, that is thinking with somebody's hat on, with, with somebody else's head, getting out of your own hat, getting out and figuring out what you need. What can the colleague serve? We have a lot of activity on that as well. A lot of requests.

One last question on the part let's say, more related always to courses. Do you also have a type? Do you also give financial type of help, are there any calls for proposals?

We have an area that deals only with financing, the division also big because it is almost 50% of our structure in terms of just turnover and also people. but turnover of training not of yes. Then instead. At the level of digitization, here is the. Pandemic has kind of cleared, let's say the doing, the online training course, whether it's in toto or in blended mode. There is A different recognition that is being given to these courses that until the other day were considered a little bit second rate, that is, pandemic has somehow managed to clear a little bit this view that was attached to online courses. it certainly has facilitated the you get into the habit in people's habits. There's, there's no doubt, it has cleared this this issue of online for us has been useful to select a little bit the activities that you can, I mean we obviously have been keeping a little bit track of people's satisfaction trends and so the shorter training pills, the updates, the webinars, those. Three-hour ones, I mean, so even just with the duration. They come more easily. Welcomed indeed companies are happy to connect for a for a regulatory adjustment. The three hours, some of them. Then the day gets heavy and some topics just not not appreciated that they are covered online, certainly and very much in use.

Do you do by any chance?

Our what is it?

Use of microcredentials and digital badges as well, no?

We tried not then it is an activity we are working on, but we did an experimental activity but we don't have, we have a platform, but from there we don't have then say.

Coming a little bit to what the future will be, what do you foresee as some of the trends for precisely training and what challenges will persist in the future.

I think then. The three in scope we are always talking about soft skills. Certainly anything that can be related to the world of youth, so inevitably the digital dimension will have to take not the upper hand, however it will have to be evaluated wisely, in the sense that it is clear that. The new generations, on whom we absolutely must focus, have. More familiarity they have more facility to the use of devices and also therefore to the to a digital training, so we must in my opinion necessarily be able to create a right compromise between that on and off Line, because I think it will be necessary, so it is about a good mitigation between the two dimensions. Why then in the content? training will have to go more and more on engagement, so a narrative of both what the company, what are the goals of the company, what are the goals of the person coming in, what is his so more openness, more engagement, more transparency. It is a challenge to make the person involved, So I think this is a big one. Theme that we have to work on to find what are and I'll give you an example with respect to a theme that is Age Management that I'm working on, where we are looking for Some methodologies, such as reverse mentory so activities where within the company we can make transmission and sharing of knowledge between generations through moments of facilitation that, in addition to promoting the transmission of

knowledge, also promote. The generation of precisely good and healthy relationships. I think that is among the most important activities to think about.

So involvement a bit like the new challenge.

Yes, that is, so in some ways also maybe abandoning judgments, prejudices, seeing people as bearers of personal values. Of knowledge, of growth and then just seeing the resource as a broad value, broad in character. Not just for the knowledge that needs to be applied, but for something more, for an even personal theme that can that can bring. It is about changing the dynamics in a much broader way, and so training can. This can happen in the form of training. If we have directorates and organizations that also change their model of acting clearly with respect to why then do you have to be on the plate, that is, does the organization have to function? Clearly not, that is an issue. But and so there is. The big effort is to make it work with respect for individualities, personalities and with the goal of engaging people in that famous sense that we were talking about at the beginning. In my opinion that is the challenge.

what will be the role that education has to play in the future, so related more to universities or at any rate to high schools and also a little bit to the role that other that other players, I'm talking for example about government nonprofits. They have to start in short to take on, to bring forward, because it's an issue that affects everybody a little bit.

What a good question. Then it is difficult. I obviously speak for myself. It is clear that we. We need to heal the gap between school and business as much as possible. But this must take into consideration in my opinion. The fact that both must implement changes, in the sense that knowledge, as I understand it, must have pure, abstract value in itself, that is, it has its own value. The moment this knowledge is. Put into use in some way? It takes away that sort of I don't want to call it personal dignity, though. A knowledge cannot just be put to use because we have realized that the person is so much more, so on the one hand. Schools, education, the university has to foster more and more the connection with the business world, but. Also to other worlds, the whole world, in fact. We were saying voluntary work, health care, that is, so many worlds. There cannot be only enterprise, tourism, commerce. So broadening the vision. Remembering, however, that a person is always a person, that is. In my opinion, also trying to. But developing more and more awareness, because it is no longer possible or practicable that then 1, 1 boy, entering the world of work, has to suffer the frustration of not feeling. Corresponded in what was his expectation of not feeling valued, valued. this then holds care of this. Linking, then, probably also helping and fostering orientation. And companies, as we were saying before, have to do this reflection On welcoming, that is hospitality, when you welcome into your reality a resource, you have to know that it is a person that therefore it will be his knowing work to your profit and your performance, but it is a person, therefore of interest. Yours as a company being able to get to know her and? Helping her to fit in will probably be able to foster that match. in the interview yes that I'm collecting, precisely, this was brought to light. Need for orientation support with awareness and so yes, especially precisely for what it's all about, the part of the schools. So it finds itself. But then I'm just going to make a reverse argument, that is, according to a little bit of a retrospective logic, in the end the technical institute no, that precisely until years ago formed good technicians who however now we are realizing that they are lacking that basic competence that we call. Transversal competence. It is more practicable, so knowing how to do one's trade is no longer enough, maybe it never was. But we created the illusion that it was enough because that's the way it worked. An era has changed. Even in doing business it has changed, I think it has changed for the better because reflections can only foster improvement, and so it is necessary that on the one hand the school does not delude itself that knowing how to do is enough to be. Why is that not the case? Improvement will be constant, it will be continuous. It will always be the result of mediations, so it's not that I who have a degree hyper no, with master's I have the whole package apposto, it works, it's okay, now it's not. So a constant ability of even on the part of the candidates to mediate, to conciliate. So even here we are still in the realm of relational?

do you think that the terminology that has been so far associated with soft skills, so being called soft skills, has been somewhat detrimental to these skills? And also the use of a new terminology, whether it's interpersonal skills, performance skills, people's skills might be somewhat helpful in changing that view a little bit. That there has been, in short.

But you ask an interesting question, and why? Then you really grasp something that I think deeply, that they are not soft, I mean I in my idea for a manager, but not only, though, especially for those who have to lead, they are not soft, that they are hard skills, I mean they are role skills. I'm sure, it's not like you can measure them the way you measure a skill, I don't know IT rather than technical. So from that point of view we have maybe great dilemma of how we measure them, however believe me they are hard skills. So beyond the name, the value I give, these skills are basic.

#### d) TRANSCRIPT INTERVIEW 3

Thursday, 15th February 2024

The person interviewed is Roberto Baldo,  
Responsible for Activities and Funded Projects for Fòrema, a training and consulting company in the province of Padua

Interviewer

I would begin by addressing the first query about how much awareness businesses have of soft skills. Have you noticed, for instance, a shift in the way businesses in the Veneto region are thinking, as evidenced by the rise in demand for these skills-related courses or the rise in attendance at webinars on the subject?

Interviewee

Traditional, so a teacher and learners who in the classroom, more or less virtual, learn knowledge. It is residual, that is this issue that is the one we say most like education. Schooling at the university weighs about 7-8 percent comes among us, we are upset mostly on business activities. Where the demand of the company is not so much staying within its skills, it's not so much do a leadership course, but the need of the company is. Because I have changed a process, I need my people to be better problem solvers, for example, out of which comes a problem-solving course, but that. Has a always has a has a strong practical connotation, that is the application of knowledge and skills directly to on the job, so if you want the model is of job-based learning, this mode we also use it on the activities. Net of apprenticeship, but on the activities, we target for example the whole segment of the individual, to if so all those active policy measures, where you maybe it's about doing a course of. Hello administration, however, the theme is not that there is a teaching professional, that is, a teacher who explains accounting to young people or to the unemployed and so on, but there is a professional who as his first job does consulting in companies, who brings his expertise within a working group that is a Classroom and in which the part, of frontal training. And it's always kept to a minimum. And if they give exactly what they need to then get people to work on concrete cases, issues and so on, this training model naturally calls for soft skills development. Both explicitly, many times implicitly, I explain better when we give a project work to do to a classroom. We are actually training everything there, a range of soft skills and problem solving, the team with communication, leadership, not in a manner. Explicit in the sense, it's a leadership course, but we're having them acquire that skill directly. By trying, and it's a way, let's say, of pervasively interpreting the concept of experiential. And beyond the models in the face of the metaphor to then managing the filter, et cetera. But it is actually inherent. Our models, then? Within this framework, soft skills for us have always been a key element If I'm here at 15, though. Epoch there were really, let's say modules related to the to the soft skills, I'm afraid communication and so on. Today maybe they are not

stated, but they have been incorporated into the training model. Covid has only accelerated this trend, because really then soft skills are not needed per se, that is, for an organization to be relatively that the person is good at communicating, unless it's their job, then it's no longer an underwriting of a technical skill. But does it matter that they are able to support the transformational processes that the industrial system is experiencing? Then Covid gave a represented a lot, a caesura, because it forced a reconfiguration of all business processes. I remember De Masi, Sociologist, talking about the of telework, smart working, 92. Something did not also come out then during the pandemic, he was the first to talk about this model. As well as the idea learning, etc., as a training company we have. For 20 years. Then, as is often the case in Italy, when faced with the problem, that is, if the system adapted very quickly. It is clear that. To manage processes that have changed, we also see what's left in the Covid no, smart working, and so on. One of the things we were most stressed on was to work on, for example, communication skills, remote team work skills. The work themes maybe are no longer dislocated. Synchronously, within the same building, four weekly. But they provide that in rotation, OA second shift, in short of various roles, maybe concurrently, people are deployed elsewhere. And so certainly there has been an acceleration of this with two keys. Both who has to work in these processes and who has to design these processes, so the whole managerial side. We work from the apprentices to the entrepreneur. So we kind of have the whole spectrum of the caseload. And so basically we had to build pathways, but again not as an end in itself, but linked, for example if we stay in the scope of smart working to go to manage documents, communications on working styles. Synchronously or asynchronously, but without the assumption of being in the same office. And so the whole theme, for example a little bit slack, rather than the Google Suite. That is, all these related always to a technicality. Because, again, the need that we intercept is not an end in itself, but it is always aimed at an outcome, a goal to do something. And that's what we can also measure against from client companies.

Interviewer

Okay, so it's more a kind of competency-based learning, that is, the development of a competency that has both the soft and the hard part in it, all together.

Interviewee

Let's say that I know they often serve to support change. So there. I give another example whenever we go to manage the revisiting of a factory layout, so we are in the area of consulting related for example to the purchase of hyper connected machinery for 4.0. They are the little houses in short, very recursive there, what happens? That then Work processes between programming steps and so on must be revised, but people's behaviors must be revised. Working on behaviors means working on the soft and then the what maybe staying on the digital. Maybe it used to be that the machine operator would do the machining and then report no on pen and paper, on a card, what he had done, signed, etc. etc. This process has become digital. But enabling the use of new tools by a 45-year-old, just as an example, is not so easy if you don't work, even if you don't train those skills as well.

Interviewer

so a little bit linking to the second question, which is the issues related a little bit to the gaps and mismatches on these skills, the problems that are encountered, I'm telling myself, are More related to the executive part of the job, but in order to make it Manageable with the change that has been there.

Interviewee

It affects all levels, it affects both those who the operators, the workers, and the chieftain, but also all the. What about management? Everyone for his part is called, that is, he sees his daily role to change and manage this change as it used to, it goes through the ability to do it within an organization, to do it, using certain tools, to find a motivation to do it, because this is not trivial of. And this thing is never done alone. So when they

call themselves they call the. To the group Of the process organization have to be propose attention to these more intangible aspects as well, if you will.

Interviewer

As for businesses and entrepreneurs a bit? The pandemic has served, in a sense, to make them more aware of the burden of soft skills, or rather the lack of these skills in their workforce.

Interviewee

I would say no, for the simple fact that the awareness was already quite mature before. Then one of the issues after that, We obviously work with companies with an industrial, manufacturing, service character, our typical customer? It is a company on the 100 150 employees. Big help, then there are also multinationals and so on. But the bulk is played there that. That already operates within translational supply chains, so in short it sees in reflection to all the dynamics, macro trends and so on. But this is something that, for example, the Confindustria Association itself is standing on the issue of importance. It has been fighting for many years, in the sense that it is always a. element that it has, I don't say contested, however, in the dialogue with the training systems, that is, of formal education, it has always emphasized the importance for entrepreneurs, for companies to that young people, students have the opportunity to train on soft skills. And this recalls again. The theme Where is it that you learn the trade? Without the trade you don't learn, in a course you learn in a company? And then the technicalities that the system of education, training can give comes up to a certain point, because then each company has its own technologies, its own problem processes. What is constant, however, is the person's ability, for example, to learn, the ability to fit in with everyone. The ability to operate effectively in the organized environment, which for those who have never seen a company, is by no means trivial or taken for granted, so it is not that Covid has brought to light to this need, because it has already well in the heads of entrepreneurs.

Interviewer

Okay then turning instead to a little bit about your training offerings, what are the courses that deal with soft skills that are going for the most or that there is most demand for anyway? What are the methodologies by which they are addressed, possibly also related, channels, if we are talking about digital courses?

Interviewee

So let's distinguish for a moment because, the soft component is really present in all the training offerings, maybe they are exempt from it, but in part actually the apprenticeship courses, but we're talking about a 0 point and then we're up ahead from the region there's little to do. Everything else, whether it's inter-company activities, done in-company or for individuals, still has that software component that I tried to summarize for you After that we also have courses specifically related to soft cases, that is, like avowedly related to soft skills. I look at what this is about, why? It's not. We have for example in the catalog we have the whole world, human resources and organization I keep a few titles, Huh?

Capacity The art of listening leadership. National building performance management decision making, look at that by just taking the list of the most in-demand Soft Kisses. For convenience, because I have it here conveniently. And I'm sharing it. Good or not. They are all, they are all required and solicited in pretty much the same way. Then if you ask me but how many leadership courses do you do? I have no idea. what the one that might be interested. Then I'll show you the figure in also the first one passed and closed yesterday. Is this related to staff to bring in? No, we ask them. Just that it are fundamental. All right. How important do you think they are for new employees in the lead what is it? Flexibility and adaptability, organization, time management, team work and problem solving. It is more or less a similar figure as last time. That is, these are the ones that are most in demand, that is, most in demand. I have to say they have the highest score, however as you see from the astrograph they are all something a little bit less. But if with that it's related a lot to the

way of the people who have that in their head there that instead. So I expect that there will be a growth of the next few years. Are these the cross-cultural skills why? Tied a little bit to the review, migration policies, what in short should happen. In contexts. This stuff here, found in fact to grow. After that the typical courses no, when? Fix a leadership course I need a team course. To start a communication course. But do you know if you read them, though? It's not that the situation is very different from the 1990s, because these are the things that are normally required. The most interesting key is to tie just the demand for soft skills with the transformational processes pulled by digital and sustainability by companies. Because there you can see why they are asking for this. And why maybe actually and why do? Leadership course and understand, I talk that maybe in the 90s this thing didn't. Because their role has changed, they find themselves no longer having to watch some people, make sure they keep their head down to work, but it's about getting them to manage a team. Getting them to improve performance, to understand what they need, to organize their work in an increasingly disrupted environment where maybe tomorrow, if we are not machine, I mean Repeat, they are always ancillary, however they are central to the is happening.

Interviewer

In fact yes, precisely, I was a little bit expecting to find these results Not surprisingly, precisely precisely, it's flexibility, resilience, adaptability to all those most required precisely to support the changes that have been and are taking place currently. Here. Whereas, in terms of the modalities. They are in mixed presence.

Interviewee

Eh, everything is fine now, in the sense that. Compounded also by the fact that you president that the finger 40-50% of our activities. Is supported by funding. It means that on the one hand half of our activity na. Orders from direct contracts to companies the other half arises from contracts from orders from companies but they see the intervention of a financing, when a financing comes into play, the paying agency dictates the rules of execution. Among other things then, until the pandemic It was absolutely forbidden asynchronous training and learning. All of those two. There was a lot of talk about it, though. Because in the minds of those who decide on the calls, let's say, it's always going to be the school model, right? So a teacher of learners. The pandemic has forced this barrier down today, years later. I see that both regionally and nationally. There is always a lot of suspicion and concern. Use of modalities other than the traditional ones because all the control systems are geared to that training model so whenever we put on track asynchronous elearning or synchronous video training, we actually run into additional management burdens and this does not play in favor Of blended though. Let's say the model we propose works in this way all that. Simple knowledge? Then, codified codifiable and easily acquired, we try to move it to elearning systems, and that is why from 2019, that is during the pandemic, we have equipped ourselves with LMS Which then leans the COM and allows you to do of. Save resources, time, money, et cetera, because there I have codified knowledge, you can disintermediate it in the fruition process, and people can access that kind of content whenever they want. This is a pattern that the funds like so much for. After that It is clear that there are some things that have to be done in presence. Because learners are part of the training process. From the logic of project work, group work, etc., then on this we intervene either with bare, raw in-presence activities, however always using proactive methodologies. Or in blended mode, so you can have maybe the person, somebody connected, somebody in presence. And here come Good all those platforms that facilitate these processes a little bit, so, so documents. The remote work, et cetera. This supply side demand side I have to say there has been in 2021 2022 A little bit of a reflux? In the sense, companies telling you no more online stuff please, we can't take it anymore, it's totally understandable. Today we've gone a little bit. A new balance, so This pattern, what you can, you do in a way. Asynchronous that the rest we are not there or in presence OA distance. Each state. Also funds also end. Funding environments give you a little bit these calmed possibilities, but in short they give you. So we try to stay in there. Give you an example, we in 2020. 2021-2022-2023 the. Our catalog we did only online. So this stuff here I like, you have to just by connecting to our platform. Where there is they have to and were a synchronous training, so faculty connected. We had enjoyed a study here by us and then people



from work. This year we went back to doing them in-presence one part precisely because. After years of indigestion of videocalls had also think. I mean, to go back to doing things in presence.

Interviewer

speaking precisely a little bit about the digital, the pandemic has somehow managed to clear the air a little bit about the notion that the online training pathway is a. Pathway a second-class choice?

Interviewee

Then in part, in the sense that. My personal opinion, that is at the time when. We use the most appropriate tool with respect to the goals that we give ourselves, it works and is valued if we instead claim to rip off online things that are much more productive for people more enriching. If there is a real? Let's say de visu interaction, we risk diminishing again in meaning. It's kind of past the prejudice of saying to, let's say the example of degrees, then now someone who graduates with Pegasus is someone who does. Is that the same thing? But why, because I have seen some Pegasus lectures? there is a person talking, I mean there is not, the learning process is not managed with online tools, it is simply there is one person talking and people connected, but this is not video training, this is video conferencing. you always have to be very clear about the covenant that you make with the Learner. Then the system is this stuff you can learn by watching videos, pills, slides, etc. But then to ground that knowledge, bad case incompetence, you need to see yourself doing things. Then it is appreciated. The mistake is to confuse the i.e. tool with the goals. Of not using it properly.

Interviewer

do you also make use of micro credentials or digital badges?

Interviewee

Then we do, we have releases, sector certifications, after that on the whole regulated part, so of safety. To courses for Unemployed, but also for those who work in companies. We actually fail to issue open badges for a very simple reason that. I mean the ones in Bologna, cineca, no, what are they called? An entity certifies Bologna so you have to lean to release open badges. He always bounced me, if not I'm here explaining the reasons. So we don't issue microcurrents, we do, however, issue certifications. And attestation of learning linked for example then to the regions' training and competencies. And so there is a mechanism of putting in transparency of learning outcamps that we ground daily.

Interviewer

do you also make use of particular technologies or do you plan integration such as virtual reality or artificial intelligence?

Interviewee

we have a safety course starting next week. Just done with visors. And so it also allows people to access a metroverse where you have critical actions and they can virtually interact with spaces and then understand because here it finds the concept of hopefulness, the correct behavior is the incorrect behavior what it entails. Let's say we have in the MS that we need precisely to manage online training processes. We activate technologies, Tied, precisely, to digital or need. We had addressed gamification. Of our courses, again a lot of vendors came to us with a variety of platforms. I frankly don't see it that way, though. Strategic for the. Customers, so let's say they are very nice things, very peeling never little you don't play there.

Interviewer

Coming a little bit to what will be the future of corporate training, what are some of the trends and challenges that you foresee?

## Interviewee

But nothing. Bigger issue that we are facing today is the issue of business continuity. This is really the heart of entrepreneurs, in the sense, but at 15, 20 years, will my business still be there? Why is the theme that you have to change? Yes it does transform. This is widely digested and in the base. Whom do you work? I love you, the theme of what technologies will be in use, what will be the target markets? These are now unknowns on which now is the latest, it is fresh from a week ago the block on the Google shipping Suez channels is reconfiguring transnational figures. Why don't our companies start receiving supplies 4-6-8 weeks late Why do container ships no longer go aroundla but land directly in Rotterdam? There was a sailing of Africa. What does this mean, however? First of all, the loss of the supply chain, of the assumptions of Venice and Trieste. And the fact that the account is going to get the goods in Venice the account is Rotterdam. And so always at the expense of costs, there is a shortage of Noli of carriers for transportation. Because obviously From that side there and so it starts to be difficult to meet the delivery time, that's just to say. What and? By now every event, in an internationalized foundation system like the Veneto, every disruptive event, then, results in critical elements. Of ours. Of course, fetish in the sense that it is necessary to put in place tools of. To reconfigure. Supply chains, go to understand, negotiate supply contracts, sales contracts with the customer, redesign processes, all this this what is happening. How can it enable our company to do just in. I mean, moreover, this mechanism. This is an element of change, it is a certain element, the issue of business continuity has to do with the ability of the enterprise. Organic system. To reconfigure its processes knowing that today it is Suez, before it was Ukraine, before it was the Covid, that is now every year every two years events of planetary scale happen that it needs in somemanner to cope with. The issue is that it is no longer something that affects the entrepreneur, it affects the whole company. And therefore, cascading, how much each. Its. And its level is called upon to contribute to these reconfiguration goals. Then there are two drivers, two key macro trends at work. One is related to people shottage. We used to be used to the screenshot, that is, I can't find the skills. Today we are and. I find the people. And so what I was saying, cross-cultural skills will be called into play. Because demographic policies, assuming there are functions no, they give a result after 25 years, so the only strategy today is the is to review migration policies. But this means that the company has to equip itself to become a central place of innovation, and it is not trivial, because the company does another job. It becomes a tool for integration. And it is no coincidence that in November Confindustria regional Veneto signed a workhouse protocol. For migrants? Veneto, remember governed by a leghista, so much for what macrotrend front issue? Policy beyond proclamations, then actually has to go along with the other macro trend of that is at work is related. To the Twin transition, then to the impact of digital technologies that this. We have already seen. Whether hardware investments, what investments on the material part, software and so on. That then called into play a whole series of up, screening and screening processes of staff. But it's also happening on the sustainability bottom line. So the green transition Green transition, what does it mean to do? Ecco innovation, now innovation is just. Here innovation means reconfiguring ll products, processes, materials. It means reinventing the business model. The underlying question is, but how do I continue to generate the value association of obligation to do so to a company that given wood I management? Like attacks generation does not scoop it with. Yes, except on the fact but me dealing wood? No matter how certified and so on and so forth, how can I expect to continue to generate value for my customers, for the market, using a resource that, although renewable, has a whole range of critical issues? Do I have to, do I have to change, change my product, change the material, change then the technologies, the processes, and then review all the choices of Changing business? So these are the concerns that entrepreneurs have in their minds today. Will they ask us in terms of training, will they ask us to help them change? We at the Second Theoretical exercise, but it is not. Periodically we draft business planners for the company In the first place There is the consideration that. Again the company is the place, the real place of learning, so we have to facilitate these processes. Knowing that people will tend more and more to self-educate themselves go and getù The information, the knowledge, only what they need and where they need it and when they need it, so it's a penalty completely the course mechanism. We have to equip ourselves to make this happen and then

translate it into action. So knowledge. Move to competence. This is the dynamics that already happen in school, however projecting into the medium term, or should they come to school, projecting into the medium term? We know that the next generation after millennials, after Generation. It already shows a completely different approach. At work compared to mine, for example. Who are millennials. No, an X generation. It's different coming to terms with that. On the one hand, how do I go about managing? Knowledge management systems, basically. How do I go about reconfiguring skills within my organization, how do I go about building an organization that is responsive to the emerging needs of people. The other new element is that increasingly there is an awareness that the enterprise is no longer. A closed system, but is a system interconnected with the territory that has to dialogue. With this territory? Here's good love.

Interviewer

you were just saying that the enterprise is an open ecosystem at the level of training always how what is the role that other stakeholders within training must have in a future talking about school, government, nonprofits, of course.

Interviewee

So it will be the opportunity to pass I'll give you a copy. No, the. Again it's not rhetoric, we put it in our play off in the say consist, that is we see stop considering ourselves as watertight compartments so we do a continuous information schools do school, university out university, ICFP do. CFP etc. Employment agencies do employment agencies do, etc. etc. The ambition is to say, but in the face of certain challenges either move or we have a systemic approach, where you build alliances based on a convergence of goals, they will always all be on time. Sometimes it gets done sometimes it doesn't, with some people yes, with some people no. Some are a little bit ahead, some are a little bit more mature. By these reasonings, who is not? We try, in the sense that. We are a generalist company, in the sense that we do a lot of things, but we are not all-rounders, so we have a number of collaborations with a plethora of entities both institutional, public and private as well as other training companies at the university itself school, that is, a little bit with the whole ecosystem. After that it's clear that not everybody is in. Beyond logic no, but it is. My client I do. Without understanding you, no.

Interviewer

With then I would like to ask you a more reflective question, that is, has the fact that we have called soft soft skills up to now been in any way detrimental to these skills?

Interviewee

No, We used to call them transversal. Then started calling software that's cooler. Here's why. Our main interlocutor is the entrepreneur and. Hello manager. The entrepreneur is not told about it. Because then, even though maybe sometimes they look like scammers but sfagli entrepreneurs, a reason assai. The cham managers, I'll tell you the truth, they really like to talk about soft skills, et cetera, et cetera. I would say though we know what's behind it, I mean in short those things, those tags that they don't know how to explain, so we call them soft. We know that there is a family in there and. It is by no means belittling them, by the way. There was a passage also about digital skills, we go to the interview class and we touched on it, however, it's something I like to point out. When we talk about lish test list we have to understand each other. Because digital skills, as we are seeing them in action, but also as the Ic compa of the Commission's digital has defined them, are actually nothing more than soft skills, that is the ability to use, to use in a confident and professional way. That of digital tools however put like that becomes much more understandable to companies. Why? If I when it comes to digital skills here yes there was the misunderstanding digital skills AX. Beautiful, isn't it? It is not the topic of taking the Excel course with the License, it is the topic of but are you using it? Am I tool in managing your activities, or when you get an Excel file, do you print it out and correct it by hand just for the

hell of it. I mean you do the data imputation by hand, that's it, so even the visits to the re-enter. The soft skills Then we focus them by range, especially because it's also good to make them explicit, in the sense that just to avoid, I mean, after three years I see. But then. The concept of business has passed, I am that stuff. But nowadays, though, when we go to read a requirement, we go a little bit, we use the Hybrid Jobs model, so? Intersection soft digital technical skills. we are Trying to introduce the topic of green skills, however I see that still so much of frontier is not received. Even in the latest surveys I see that yes, for goodness sake, it is important however all in all it affects much more managers and it is very much related to telling sustainability, telling what the company is doing for sustainability, however we know that it is very risky this stuff? Our ambition here is also to affect behavior. In the sense, when you have to design a process, when you have to operate o. Machine, but are you able to understand? The behavior, the most environmentally sustainable choices? Because this is a competency that WILL be required? Then we could extend it to those to social sustainability. What will be the next step? Even now? It struggles on the environmental part. In the sense that yes, whatever, it's still about. The manager. But it will also change this stuff here, though.

Interviewer

Finally, the. Speaking a little bit about the of the specific figures for training, you have the Academy of the learning designer, how did it come about a little bit and what led you AA to even create one?

Interviewee

Basically there is a conceptual map of the issues we are strongest on, let's say. But I was telling you, though, we are generalists, but not all-rounders. Because it doesn't mean that on the topics of factory, people management, sustainability, safety and others a little bit smaller we. We have a business model there. They are a little bit different than other training companies, in the sense that the we are hired by companies on real, real, measurable issues. So the theme is. We need to be able to. A need to. Ground a measurable intervention strategy to impact a real need, a real situation and then to put all the cognitive tools in place. You call a consultancy you call it training consultancy, you call it facilitation, you call it I'll send you a real trainee, however we bring it all back to unity. Then to do this it's obvious that our fake 2500 faculty is not enough, but you need to have the skills inside because all these things call 1 1. Constant contamination between different areas of activity. Of work. So post manager who is in charge of designing who is in charge of managing the activities. So we refused to internalize this figure, too bad it didn't exist in the market so we came up with the academy. Where we placed three people, this chrome that are still with us. One person in the meantime is taking care of the whole world of energy efficiency and energy transition. One person dealing with the psychology narratives, dealing with Diversity and gender equality certification, but diversity today the uniqueness. Equality certification there are the others and then evaluates it on management systems, organizational models and so on. Another person also no, sociologist she who specializes precisely on transformative processes related to those dynamics I was telling you so Bellaria. Manager these people are pivotal figures, because then when it comes to set up, to innovate products, to set up new projects, we talk a little bit from there, because they are the people who read the need in depth, who accompany the company throughout the process, who collect and manage and distribute feedback, who also give us a little bit of a return on the effectiveness of the models that we put on the ground. We internalized them and, again, years later they are still with us and we started in 2020. It was a huge struggle to find the right people. Say a nabbing even those who can then acquire these skills is not trivial. Solving put everything however if the person is not as well as in all ditches. So yes, now. Is there an experience we are thinking about, how to extend it and how to replicate this model to other areas of business?