Source: USAID, Child Trends & fhi360 - Key “Soft Skills” that Foster Youth Workforce Success: Towards a Consensus across Fields

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Insight & Learning Question(s) Answered:

- What skills will be required to transition jobseekers and entrepreneurs (particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds) to experience sustained Skills to Succeed outcomes at scale in the 21st century?
- What are the critical soft skills that specific groups lack to access employment and/or entrepreneurial opportunities?

Insight Byte:

Context:

- “Soft skills”\(^1\) are centrally important for human capital development and workforce success. A growing evidence base shows that these qualities rival academic or technical skills in their ability to predict employment and earnings, among other outcomes (Kautz, Heckman, Diris, ter Weel, & Borghans, 2014). As the workplace has modernised around the world, the demand for such skills has increased over the past 20 years. Nevertheless, a soft skills “gap” is noted by many employers around the world, who report that job candidates lack the soft skills needed to fill available positions (Manpower Group, 2013).
- Unfortunately, there is not a clear consensus about which soft skills are most critical for workforce success. Developing a common understanding is hampered by a lack of comparability in the constructs, definitions, and measures used to assess youth and monitor progress. This confusion obstructs knowledge development and guidance for future investments in youth workforce development programs.
- This study helps bring clarity to the field by recommending a research-based set of key soft skills that increase the chance that youth ages 15–29 will be successful in the workforce.

Findings:

- The study identified a set of key skills (see diagram below) that are supported by a strong research base as being important elements of all aspects of workforce success, are applicable across sectors and diverse world regions, are developmentally optimal, and are likely to be improved with youth workforce development programs

\(^1\) “Soft Skills” refer to a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviours, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals. These goals are broadly applicable and complement other skills such as technical, vocational and academic skills.
There are **five critical skills** most likely to increase odds of success across all outcomes and which employers expect employees to have: **social skills, communication and higher-order thinking skills** (including problem solving, critical thinking and decision-making); supported by interpersonal skills of **self-control** and **positive concept** (for full description of each, please see appendix)

**Actionable Insights:**

- This research has broad implications for youth workforce development and training programs, as well as youth development more generally. For those workforce development practitioners interested in using a standard soft-skill training framework, it provides the terminology and synthesis of research necessary to make major strides in prepare youth for real, lasting success in the workforce. Youth who are competent in these soft skills are effective in their job searches and interviews and thus are more likely to be hired. They are more likely to be productive, retained on the job, and promoted, and thus they tend to earn more than those less competent in soft skills. Youth competent in these soft skills contribute to the collective efficacy, productivity, and growth of their employers, and, when they start their own businesses, they are more likely to be successful.

**Taking Action: What can you do next with this knowledge?**

1) Actions for Global CC Team
   - As a result of lack of a general consensus on a set of standard soft skills, different tools, approaches and soft-skill training curricula have been adopted by our **Skills to Succeed** partners in their programs. Now that we are heading towards an agreement on priority skills, help our partners understand the importance of using a standard, research-driven soft skill framework that is strongly correlated with workforce success.
   
   N.B.: **Save the Children is currently developing a self-assessment tool aligned to this framework. The tool consists of a series of tests that show young beneficiaries how they are progressing through training. The tool will be finalized in May 2016 and will not be proprietary. Liaise with Save the Children to identify opportunities of adoption of the tool by other Skills to Succeed partners.**

2) Actions for S2S practitioners
   - Assess how well your program helps beneficiaries acquire and build soft skills; support the inclusion of this set of skills in your **Skills to Succeed** program(s) to ensure that your training curricula is aligned to a set of priority skills that have been identified by compelling research as key ingredients to workforce success
Appendix

**Social Skills** help people get along well with others. This ability includes respecting others, using context-appropriate behaviour, and resolving conflict. Social skills are universally important. They predict all four types of workforce outcomes (employment, performance, income/wages, and entrepreneurial success), are sought by employers, and are seen as critically important by experts in the field. Social skills were supported across types of evidence, in all regions of the world, and within both formal and informal employment. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a position in which social skills would not be an asset.

**Communication skills** refer to the specific types of communication used in the workplace and include oral, written, non-verbal, and listening skills. Strong general communication skills contribute to the development of other soft skills, like social skills. However, the communication skills referred to in this paper are a distinct set, important for workplace success across sectors. There is evidence that communication skills are related to three of the workforce outcomes studies for youth, they are the most frequently sought skill among employers, and they were strongly endorsed by stakeholders in this project. The strong support for communication holds true across regions of the world, for both formal and informal positions, and for entry-level employees.

**Higher-order thinking** consists of *problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making*. At a basic level, this includes an ability to identify an issue and take in information from multiple sources to evaluate options in order to reach a reasonable conclusion. Higher-order thinking is very much sought by employers and is critical for all four workforce outcomes in all regions of the world. Because these skills are complex to measure in a survey, less empirical research has been conducted on how these skills relate directly to successful employment.

**Self-control** refers to one’s ability to delay gratification, control impulses, direct and focus attention, manage emotions, and regulate behaviors. Self-control is an intrapersonal skill, foundational to many others: it enables successful decision-making, resolution of conflict, and coherent communication. Self-control is highly supported by a rigorous literature as related to all four workforce outcomes, especially in literature specific to youth ages 15–29.

**A positive self-concept** includes self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-awareness and beliefs, as well as self-esteem and a sense of well-being and pride. Positive self-concept is another intrapersonal skill that is important for workforce success. It is related to success across all four workforce outcomes and is especially supported in youth-specific literature.

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