

## SOFT SKILLS: EVOLUTION, AMBIGUITIES AND THE LIMITS OF THE CONCEPT

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### Abstract

*This article searches for basics and evolution of the concept of „soft skills” in the literature. From the first formulations of the term to the contemporary definitions used in economic research and in studies on the labor market the main relevant contributions in theory are traced. The approach is guided by the definitory question: which soft skills are recurrently identified and defined in the literature and how they have been conceptualized over time (?).*

*The paper highlights both the diversity of conceptual approaches and the persistent ambiguities associated with this term, including its uneven use, its overlaps with other categories of skills and the risks accompanying its normative application in some management contexts. At the same time, the measurement limits and the difficulties of making soft skills work are discussed.*

*At the same, our analysis proposes a clear delimitation between soft skills and hard skills, by referring to criteria such as the nature of the knowledge involved, the ways of acquisition, the degree of transferability and the possibilities of evaluation. It will be in the terms of such undertaking that the "soft skills" notion could be ready to meet at least the processes of education, labour market and work performance.*

**Keywords:** soft skills, labour market, human capital, European Union

**JEL Classification:** J01, J24, O15

### 1. Introduction

The professional skills we are developing here below, in this paper, are of the following types: (1) *hard* - technical or specific to an activity - and (2) *soft* - we could call them common, transitional, etc. The previous are linked, at least, to two major benchmarks, which are the technical level of each activity and the corresponding specific training in each specialty. The latter belong to all activities, they are also called "non-technical", they appear as less quantifiable, but none the less some of them can also lean towards one activity or another and can also be obtained based on specific preparation and training (Stanikzai, 2023; Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). All these skills are part of the labour market - i.e. in which the bearers of supply are potential employees, and the bearers of demand are employers, i.e. their options, under the influence of a complexity of factors that are particularly relevant today (Cedefop, 2023). It is about a complexity that thus proves able (methodologically) to reduce the declared object of our approach to the second component of the area of "soft" skills, to be developed in the following.

Exemplary - from the point of view of factors we are talking about - would be the components of the "double transition" we are experiencing, both "green" and "digital", for which there are studies indicating the increasing importance of soft skills, with which the concern of European institutions is also growing (EU,2020; EU,2019a, WEF,2023). A concern revising the older prejudice according to which we would have been dealing here with simple "personal qualities" possibly differentiated by the individual employee towards the image of a true strategic resource proven flexible, adapted to change (WEF, 2023; OECD, 2019).

Overall, this study aims to analyze the evolution of the concept of soft skills in the literature, highlighting the main theoretical interpretations, conceptual ambiguities and limits of its use in the analysis of professional skills.

## 2. Methodology

This article will use a conceptual analysis and narrative review of the literature, in order to clarify basics and evolution of the notion of soft skills. Main relevant academic and institutional contributions, classic works on human capital and non-technical skills, recent empirical studies, as well as European public policy documents are here considered on thematic relevance, citation frequency and impact in the literature. About the same regarding there will be different disciplinary perspectives (economics, management, education, organizational psychology). Materials are supposed to be systematized chronologically and thematically, in order to highlight the evolution of definitions, conceptual variations and the main directions of use of the term.

Comparing and synthesizing existing definitions, identifying ambiguities and terminological overlaps, as well as delimiting the theoretical criteria that differentiate soft skills from hard skills make together our analysis. Our approach requires an interpretative and critical nature like between descriptions of the literature and the limits and risks associated all over with the practical use of the concept.

## 3. The origin and evolution of the concept of soft competence in literature

The term "competence" comes from the Latin "*cum-petere*", which means "to converge towards the same goal", and this suggesting the harmonization of knowledge, skills and attitudes into a coherent whole. In such a sense, transversal competences already include cognitive, emotional and relational dimensions, which allow individuals to adapt effectively to the demands of everyday life (ETN Magazine, 2025).

The concept of soft skills is not new and interest in these skills has grown over the years. Carnegie (1936) in his book "How to Win Friends and Influence People" (1936), although he does not use the term "soft skills" directly, he emphasizes their importance as early as 1936, long before this day in which the term is openly recognized. The concept of interpersonal skills, such as the ability to inspire and motivate, yet stays unclearly formulated, but Carnegie emphasizes that human relationships stay fundamental to success in professional and personal life. These skills, later seen as "soft skills," are essential for building strong relationships and achieving performance, and this author so proves a true precursor to such idea.

The starting point, more often found in the literature regarding a clear distinction between the concepts of soft and hard skills, is considered a US Army training manual dating back to 1972 to refer to interpersonal skills rather than the skills needed the use of weapons (Donovan,2024). Although the army excelled in technically training troops on the use of equipment, military commanders gradually noticed that a group's performance depended substantially on the quality of leadership. The officers' leadership skills - the ability to coordinate, motivate, and manage team dynamics - were as important to the success of missions as physical fitness or operational skills (Forbes,2024).

This obvious distinction between "soft" and "hard" skills in military training quickly gained legitimacy, so much so that, a year later, the military even organized a "Soft Skills Training Conference" to formalize and integrate these skills into training processes. As organized by the Continental Army Command in 1973, participants analyzed how various military schools defined the term "soft skills" at that moment. Related to a questionnaire administered to U.S. Army training institutions, it became apparent that the terminology was considered problematic from the beginning in terms of meaning and conceptual delimitation (Neeley, 2021). Besides, it was highlighted that the terms "hard skills" and "soft skills" are not fundamentally opposed or fully separate categories. Actually, one can see that rigid divisions between "hard" and "soft" can induce confusion and lead to misinterpretations on the real nature and role of professional skills (Goulet, 2023).

Social and behavioral scientists involved in military research proposed a first formal definition for "soft skills" viewed as essential qualities in workplaces that involve low or no interaction with machines (e.g. radar, used in military systems) and this applies in a wide range of professional contexts. *Soft skills are defined as important job-related skills that involve little or no interaction with machines and whose application on the job is quite generalized* (Whitmore, 1972)” But the author-contributors to this first definition could equally note the vague nature of the term. While "hard" skills were well-defined and easy to measure, „soft” skills proved much more difficult to define and study, which contributed to the ambiguity of the concept.

Then, the concept of soft skills did start taking some shape in the 1980s and 1990s, starting with the criterion of *transferability* between fields of activity (Cimatti, 2016). The author says: “Transferable skills” are those skills that can be used in a variety of jobs and industries and or even because not tied to a specific field or activity, but useful in multiple contexts.

An example of transferable soft skill is effective communication. Whether working in sales, education, or IT, the ability to communicate clearly and collaborate effectively with colleagues or customers is important. This skill is transferable from one job to another and is valued in almost any professional field. Another example would be critical thinking: having learned to analyze problems in a rational way and so having made informed decisions, these skills can be used in any career, from management to research and to consulting» (see also Donovan,2024).

Then, Neeley (2021) contrasts the new hard-soft duality with the previous “technical – non-technical” one. In the following line, it is worth noting on the notion's developing compared to that beginning of studies on the notion undertaken by the American army, of course, together with its subsequent “liberation”, which the educational system then was to successfully take advantage of, although for now we remain on the territory of the United States. In 1997 the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) Decision adopting “Engineering Criteria 2000” (EC2000) was published, naturally to be implemented in the year 2000.

At that moment some (American) universities were starting major changes in the way they evaluated engineering programmes – e.g. the emphasis was shifted from the content of the subject taught to what students were actually able to assimilate. Overall, universities benefited from clear programme evaluation objectives and solid evaluation methods, and in detail students and graduates were equally provided with technical knowledge as well as communication, collaboration, leadership and creativity skills to face the challenges of the 21st century, which was then to come (Burchfield and Kedrowicz, 2023).

Then, in the last decade newly-added studies show that there is still no consensus on the definition and delimitation of soft skills. Many authors use the term “non-cognitive skills” to emphasize the fact that these skills do not appear in formal education programmes and assessment systems (Brunello and Schlotter, 2011; Kautz et al 2014; Joie-La Marle ,2022). They make clear distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive skills and explain their roles in professional success. Heckman and Kautz (2012) show that soft skills (understood as personality traits) accurately predict not only academic success but also professional performance, long-term health, and even social behaviours. In many cases, their influence is comparable to or even greater than that of cognitive skills measured by intelligence tests or other aptitude tests. In other papers, "soft" skills are called "social and emotional competencies" with reference to the ability to manage emotions (Welsh et al., 2011; Joie-La Marle, 2022), or a set of skills, behaviors, attitudes and personal qualities that help collaborate with others, work effectively and achieve goals (Lippman et al., 2015). Last, but not least, soft skills, competences are called "people skills", highlighting the interpersonal dimension and their role in collaboration and communication (Robles, 2012; Borghans et al. 2014; Matteson et al., 2016). The link between soft skills and the personality traits of individuals and their habits also appears in Schulz (2008).

Furthermore, recent literature often uses terms such as “transferable skills”, “core skills” or “key skills” to refer to a broader set called “transversal competencies”, of which “soft skills” represent an important subset (Goggin et al., 2019; Suarta et al., 2017).

This terminological diversity is extensively analyzed by Joie-La Marle (2022), who shows that the fragmentation of the concept contributes to the difficulty of rigorously defining soft skills in given literature. Her doctoral study, conducted at Université Paris Cité, focuses on the complex issue of the term “soft skills”: literature remains fragmented in terms of both defining and delimiting these skills, especially in relation to technical ones. Number of taxonomies are constructed independently of each other, without relying on previous models. Literature reviews are unsystematic and do not use clear criteria to decide what falls within the scope of soft skills and that amplifies conceptual ambiguity (Joie-La Marle, 2022). Based on these findings, the study proposes an updated definition of soft skills as: “*non-technical, transversal, intra- and interpersonal skills, essential for performance or excellence*” emphasizing their *transversal, interpersonal character* and their *role in performance*. The study's conclusions show that the distinction between soft and hard skills is not a fixed one, but depends on the context in which they are used. Once more, the two types of competences should not be seen as opposites, but as skills that complement each other and often overlap in practice (Joie-La Marle, 2022). In particular, Joie-La Marle contributes to a systematic review of soft skills taxonomies, certainly carried out together with other authors.

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Overall, studies confirm the persistent difficulties in the literature in reaching a common definition, despite the consensus on the importance of these competencies for professional performance. The authors show that soft skills are poorly represented in formal curricula and traditional assessment systems develops about only through experience and social interaction.

#### **4. Ambiguities and risks in applying the concept of soft skills**

Continuing from above, the literature highlights that the use of the concept of soft skills involves a series of theoretical and practical risks, especially due to conceptual ambiguity. A first problematic aspect is that *a very wide range of skills may or may not be included in the soft skills category, depending on the preferences of the authors, the academic tradition or the professional discipline analyzed* (Joie-La Marle, 2022). The inclusion of a skill in a certain category may depend on the context, a skill may be considered “soft” in one domain and “hard” in another, which further complicates the definition of the term (Schulz, 2008).

Then, the literature mentions the risk that excessive emphasis on soft skills may lead to an overestimation of their role, to the detriment of technical skills. Although indispensable in many situations, soft skills cannot substitute for specific professional knowledge, nor can they compensate for the lack of technical expertise required for a job. Thus, a disproportionate focus on interpersonal skills may lead to the ignoring of areas of major relevance, such as analytical, numerical or digital skills.

Another major risk is the *normative* nature that the concept can acquire. Due to vague definitions and unclear boundaries, soft skills risk being misused to impose rigid behavioral standards on employees (Joie-La Marle, 2022). Thus, skills such as “positivity”, “empathy” or “motivation” can become mandatory norms rather than naturally developed competencies, and employees can end up being evaluated not on the basis of their work, but on their *compliance with a behavioral ideal*. Employees may be pressured to constantly demonstrate adaptability, enthusiasm, or collaboration, even in difficult working conditions, in the absence of necessary resources, or in contexts of excessive workload (Hurrell, 2016; Lafer, 2004). Thus, soft skills can become a tool through which *responsibility for organizational difficulties is transferred to individuals*.

At least these are criticisms showing that, beyond their positive role in professional performance, soft skills can also be used as subtle mechanisms of organizational control, when they are imprecisely defined or applied without taking into account the real conditions of work.

Another set of criticisms concerns the very way the term soft skills was constructed. In many works, these skills are defined "in a negative sense", in opposition to technical skills considered "hard", which automatically gives them a secondary or less important status. Some authors also point out that the very name „soft” can create the impression that these skills are easy to acquire or even optional. In reality, the irony or paradox is that many of the skills included in the soft category are among the most difficult to develop and manage in practice (Tang 2018). In the volume “The Leader’s Guide to Mindfulness: How to Use Soft Skills to Get Hard Results” the author shows that skills such as empathy, managing emotions or effective communication are often the most challenging for professionals.

## 5. Fundamental distinctions between Soft Skills and Hard Skills

In *Encyclopedia Britannica* - known as the oldest encyclopedia ever written in English -, soft skills are presented as non-technical abilities, not specific to a particular industry, but applicable to a wide range of tasks, roles and professions - these include: critical thinking, emotional intelligence, collaboration, creativity, problems solving, time management, flexibility, conscientiousness and various communication skills (Donovan, 2024). On the other hand, hard skills are, of course, those skills specific to professions, activities and roles, individual industries. Official classifications, developed for labor market analysis, also reflect the demarcation between these two types of skills in European context.

A relevant example is the European Commission's *ESCO*<sup>1</sup> classification. ESCO includes 3,039 occupations and 13,939 related skills, translated into 28 languages. The objective of ESCO is to support job mobility in Europe and a more integrated and efficient labor market, based on a "common language" on occupations and skills. ESCO is continuously updated to reflect changes in the European labor market and developments in education and training. Such adjustments appear in successive versions of the ESCO classification (EC,2024b).

For instance, important changes were brought by the ESCO version 1.2.0, released in May 2024. Major updates include the creation of new content, semantic revisions and adjustments to the data model. Basically, this version introduces new ESCO concepts - both skills and occupations especially in emerging areas such as digital, AI, sustainability, green energy, cybersecurity, modernized social services, etc. See also in Table 1, as part of our study, the summarized differences between the two categories of skills in several relevant dimensions, such as their nature, mode of acquisition, possibility of measurement and degree of transferability between professional fields.

**Table 1. Fundamental distinctions**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Hard Skills</b>	<b>Soft Skills</b>
Definition	Specific knowledge required to perform a task.	Personality traits and social skills.
Acquisition	Formal education, courses, certifications.	Life experience, interactions, introspection.
Measurement	Quantifiable through tests, diplomas, or portfolios.	Subjective, difficult to quantify.
Transferability	Specific to a field (e.g., programming, accounting).	Universal; useful in any role or industry.

<sup>1</sup> *European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations.*

Nature	Based on constant rules and processes.	Dependent on context and emotional intelligence.
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Source Author's compilation based on the literature review (2025).

*Features* will be followed further on. As for (i) **definition** - besides all the descriptions above-, technical skills (i.e. hard skills) are abilities that are acquired through learning and practice and that allow the performance of specific tasks in a certain field of activities. These include, for example, the use of tools, the application of methods, or the use of procedures specific to the profession. Technical skills are essential in most professions as they enable the performance of the basic activities of a job. No task specific to a professional role effectively performed task without the necessary technical knowledge. In addition, these skills contribute to carrying out activities in a correct and efficient manner and can be an important advantage in fields that require a high level of specialization (Prathyusha, 2025). In contrast, soft skills refer to personal and social skills that influence how a person interacts with others and performs his/her professional activities, e.g. communication, teamwork, problem-solving skills, adaptability, or emotional intelligence (Cimatti 2016). Unlike technical skills, soft skills are not related to the use of specific tools or knowledge, but to behaviours, attitudes and the way a person relates to others in the professional environment. A paradigm shift is observed in the contemporary organizational environment, where success is no longer attributed exclusively to hard skills, but also to *transversal* skills (Cimatti 2016). A team made up only of technically very well-trained people, but who fail to collaborate effectively, may encounter difficulties in developing projects, innovating, or in maintaining relationships with partners and customers (Prathyusha, 2025).

Then, (ii) **acquisition** makes another important difference between hard and soft skills. Hard skills are generally developed through formal education processes, vocational training programs, specialized courses or recognized certifications. They involve the accumulation of technical and procedural knowledge specific to a field of activity (Prathyusha, 2025). In contrast, soft skills are formed to a greater extent through personal and professional experience, social interactions, and individual reflection processes. Their development claims the influence of the social environment, life experiences, and of the way individuals handle complex relationships and situations.

Then about (iii) **measurement** of these skills: hard skills can usually be measured objectively through standardized tests, exams, diplomas or professional portfolios that certify the level of training in a certain field. In contrast, soft skills are more difficult to quantify, as they involve behavioral traits, attitudes and social interaction capabilities. Their assessment is often done through indirect methods, such as behavioral observation, peer feedback, or assessments conducted within organizations. An interesting detail from economic labour market research: economists have observed that it is precisely the hard-to-measure skills that often explain the differences in performance between people with similar technical training. Two people can have the same degree, but their professional results will differ radically if one communicates effectively, collaborates well, and adapts quickly to change. This is where the fascinating universe of soft skills comes in, that subtle layer that makes the professional mechanism really work.

For (iv) **transferability** hard skills are generally specific to a particular professional field or occupation. In contrast, soft skills are cross-cutting, being relevant in a wide variety of professional contexts - such as effective communication, teamwork, or adaptability can be valued in almost any role or industry.

Finally, in terms of their (v) **nature**, hard skills base on relatively stable rules, procedures and processes that can be learned and applied in a standardized way. They are associated with technical knowledge and methods specific to a profession. On the other hand, soft skills are more strongly influenced by the social and organizational context in which they are used. They involve elements such as emotional intelligence, adaptability and the way individuals interact with others in various situations.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The literature highlights the fact that, despite their frequency in use by the educational and organizational contexts, a certain conceptual ambiguity does survive for the concept of soft skills. The differences between soft and hard skills can be observed in terms of their nature, the way of acquisition, the possibilities of assessment and the degree of transferability.

However, the literature emphasizes that the two types of skills are not mutually exclusive, but complement each other, contributing together to the development of professional performance and

the adaptation of individuals to the current demands of the labor market. More broadly, it is precisely this combination of technical skills and social skills that seems to become the key to the functioning of modern organizations.

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