

New Insights for Soft Skills Development in Vietnamese Business Schools: Defining Essential Soft Skills for Maximizing Graduates' Career Success

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Abstract—Within Vietnam's system of higher education, its schools of business play a vital role in supporting the country's economic objectives. However, the crucial contribution of soft skills for maximal success within the business sector has to date not been adequately recognized by its business schools. This being so, the development of the business school curriculum in Vietnam has not been able to 'catch up', so to say, with the burgeoning need of students for a comprehensive soft skills program designed to meet the national and global business objectives of their potential employers. The burden of the present paper is first to reveal the results of our survey in Vietnam which make explicit the extent to which major Vietnamese industrial employers' value the potential role that soft skill competencies can play in maximizing business success. Our final task will be to determine which soft skills employers discern as best serving to maximize the economic interests of Vietnam within the global marketplace. Semi-structured telephone interviews have been conducted with the 15 representative Head Employers of Vietnam's reputedly largest and most successful of the diverse business enterprises across Vietnam. The findings of the study indicate that all respondents highly value the increasing importance of soft skills in business success. Our critical analysis of respondent data reveals that 19 essential soft skills are deemed by employers as integral to business workplace efficacy and should thus be integrated into the formal business curriculum. We are confident that our study represents the first comprehensive and specific survey yet undertaken within the business sector in Vietnam which accesses and analyses the opinions of representative employers from major companies across the country in regard to the growing importance of 19 specific soft skills essential for maximizing overall business success. Our research findings also reveal that the integration into business school curriculums nationwide of the soft skills we have identified is of paramount importance to advance the national and global economic interests of Vietnam.

Keywords—Business curriculum, business graduates, employers' perception, soft skills.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE system of higher education in Vietnam, in which the schools of business play an important role in supporting the country's economic objectives, develop and provide a qualified indigenous labour force for a modern business society to advance modernization and further enhance the industrialization of the country [3], [4]. Nevertheless, a report

on the "Summary and Evaluation on the Ten-Year (1986-1996) Reform of Education and Training", (1998) by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education confirmed that 'there is a weak relationship between universities and the business sectors, indicating a long-standing 'communication hiatus' [2], that is yet to be bridged between educational providers and the business recipients they service. One consequence of this deficiency has led to the poor performance of tertiary students in general and business tertiary students in particular, especially once they become employed. Because they are not adequately equipped with the appropriate soft skills demanded in the current business environments, they are inevitably working under a handicap. This infelicitous trend is well-evidenced by statistics which show that unemployment has escalated from 50 percent in 2008 to a disconcertingly high level of 64% in 2011, despite the fact that opportunities for employment were greater in 2011 [11], [37]. Another adverse consequence is that 50% of employees had to be retrained at work, according to a survey of 234 recruiters and 3,364 graduates from 20 universities in Vietnam in 2010 [23].

Considerable research evidence has accumulated from studies conducted by [17], [18], [24] which shows that the career success of individuals, especially in the business field, worldwide, depends mainly on the level of 'employee proficiency' in soft skills. Although business schools in the western world have been addressing this issue since early 2000, it has only recently become palpably evident that Vietnam's business schools remain perilously behind the western world in recognizing the paramount importance of soft skills in business. We submit that this lacuna represents an insidious impediment to the growth of the Vietnamese economy and reflects an imbalance which badly needs to be redressed. Moreover, we shall argue that in Vietnam, it has only recently become evident that the deficiency in the provision of soft skills to students in tertiary business education institutions exists, while the demand on the part of Vietnamese employers regarding the essential soft skill competencies amongst business graduates persisted in rising, posing a threat to the growth of Vietnam's national and global economy. Appreciation of the seriousness of this problem makes clear, we believe, that there is a pressing need for employers and tertiary business institutions to work collaboratively to resolve this issue by producing a well-informed and rapid, though not hasty, pedagogic response.

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The appropriateness of such a response should be designed to improve dramatically the quality of the working skills of business graduates by introducing a far more determinative and pertinent strategic approach to soft skills curriculum development than presently exists in Vietnam. One facet of our proposed strategy involves identifying a cadre of 'explicitly relevant' soft skills adequate to satisfy the needs identified by the major Vietnamese stakeholder employers of today.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

We are now in a position to explore our topic more determinately and to do so; we need to begin by providing at least a tolerably coherent definition of the somewhat nebulous concept of a 'soft skill'. As defined by [26], the concept of "soft skills" is intended to describe an individual's leadership qualities, attributes, and communication skills which enable that person to inform and shape productively the rudimentary ideas of others into transparent and pragmatic scenarios related to the business goal at hand. For example, we suggest that the 'communicative' capacity of an individual to personalize interactions with clients in order to cultivate feelings of trust and loyalty is a critical issue. Possession of these soft skills sets him or her apart from other individuals who may have parallel technical or 'hard skills' such as 'communicative leadership competency' which serves to encourage bonding and client confidence.

Considerable global research material has now accumulated to show that soft skills are far more important for career success, especially in the business arena, than has previously been recognized. Some researchers claim that soft skills account for as much as 70% to 85% of an individual's success, whereas hard skills or technical knowledge contribute little more than the remaining 15% to 30% [9], [13], [35]. Other business recruiters consider soft skill capacities to be a factor of equal importance to possession of hard or technological competency skills, in career success [19], [27]. In addition, soft skills are recognized as being essential elements in total quality management in business today [10]. It is also argued that a high quality workforce who effectively use soft skills combined with hard skills, will significantly improve the chance of success in trading competitiveness for virtually all business enterprises [12], [25], [31]. Despite the varying degrees of differences on the perceived importance of soft skills for business success, it is incontestable that soft skills play an integral role in business success.

Currently, in Vietnam, the educational system predominantly bears the burden of inculcating the technical skills required [22] while the academic orientation of soft skills development is still an obscure disciplinary area in most Vietnamese universities [33]. Therefore, the soft skills capacities of university students are weak or in many cases missing [33], [40]. Lamentably, the integration of soft skill programs for tertiary business students in Vietnam has, as we have intimated earlier, lagged behind the western world, largely because the traditional university curriculum does not afford the opportunity for students to develop an in depth

exploration of soft skills strategies [30], [34]. As a result, there exists an acute "skills gap" that separates interactional dimensions of academic from social and behavioural skills, a schism that often leads to poor job performance [29]. This being so, it is evident that Vietnam also has a pedagogic responsibility to ensure that business schools develop 'cutting edge' soft skill training programs for students which foster them to gain that competitive edge with the aim of significantly augmenting their business interactions and negotiation capacities [6]. This deficiency has in turn made Vietnamese employers who are now becoming increasingly aware of the paramount importance of soft skill competencies for business success somewhat tentative about hiring recent business graduates who lack the sophisticated professional training in soft skills available to western students. The reasons for unemployment in Vietnam are multifaceted, as indeed they are elsewhere, but given current homeland financial exigencies, it is critically important that Vietnamese business schools respond rapidly, though no doubt, informedly to develop soft skills training programs to ensure that graduates will be maximally competitive. If the unemployment figures to which we earlier referred continue to escalate, it is predicted that a serious crisis in the Vietnamese economic community will inevitably arise [38].

It is clear from the literature in the field that although some U.S. researchers acknowledged the importance of soft skills in achieving business success two decades ago, it has only been in recent years that American business schools have actually initiated comprehensive programs for the development of soft skills. By encouraging dialogue with innovative business employers, business school researchers significantly improved their understanding of the soft skill competencies their students should acquire to satisfy the needs of major business firms [21], [39].

Despite the fact that employers in different countries and different fields look for different qualities in graduates, employers consistently demand that universities produce graduates who will be equipped for employment in a world of rapid change [5]. A slowly emerging trend for the development of appropriate educational programs in response to workplace demands, according to [20], [31] is to organize collaborative partnerships between employers and educators. This potential partnership arrangement could function as an effective strategy to recognize and promote the workplace needs of employers within the higher education curriculum [28]. The forums that have recently been created for dialogue on this subject have allowed employers an opportunity to give their comments on the particular skills they are looking for from their employees, thus assisting HEIs to shortlist these skills and train students so that they are well prepared to work efficiently for their employers [36]. To our knowledge, the study we have conducted in Vietnam represents the first research study on a select group of business employers throughout the country which actually identifies their perceptions on which particular soft skills they regard as essential. Nor has there been any published study other than our own which specifically explores employers' perceptions in

regard to the status of soft skills competencies amongst business graduates.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Sample

This paper draws on data from our study of 15 representative head employers from Vietnam's reputedly largest business enterprises. These employers come from government, non-government, and foreign development investment (FDI) sectors and have been selected for interview on the basis of income status, business property value, volume of business growth, capital, strength of their manpower, and the speed of their enterprise development throughout the country. The selection of top employers within business and industry was fairly evenly spread amongst sub-sectors ranging from automobile, real estate, mining and geology, textiles, power generation, electronics, food and beverages, and agriculture. Although the sample is not as large in number as we would have preferred, the leadership importance, status, and nationwide influence of the chief employers who have been interviewed represents, we submit, a formative sample of leadership perspective from employers who guide the top main industrial enterprises across Vietnam.

B. Instrument

Given that research into soft skills education is a broad and new field in Vietnam, a semi-structured interview was employed. This type of interview strategy has been praised by Davies who says of the technique that it is: "... particularly good at enabling the researcher to learn, first hand, about people's perspectives on the subject chosen as the project focus" [7]. Another advantage of the semi-structured interview is its capacity to capture the depth and complexity of participants' experiences. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions remains flexible enough that it can probe individual participants' stories in subtle detail [8].

The interviews were conducted with an average duration of 35 minutes by phone over a period of six weeks. The rationale for this scheduling was that it would significantly reduce the time and cost involved, while also allowing for a greater flexibility in scheduling different conversations [14]. The respondents were afforded the opportunity to speak in Vietnamese, since this is the official language of the country. Audio recordings were made for all interview sessions.

C. Data Analysis

The method of analysis focusing on the 'meaning' of the employers' replies was mediated using several distinct steps. A general understanding of the individual narratives was established and the individual interviews were read separately. The transcribed interviews were condensed and summarized to reduce the amount of text to preserve interpretative authenticity; themes were constructed from the individual employer's own accounts [15]. When the relevant parts of all interviews had been thoroughly examined, the themes from the individual interviews were compared and combined in a meta-analysis. The data were analysed with a focus on

variation and distinctiveness of essential perceptions and experiences with regard to the different themes. The core themes were extrapolated and used to construct narratives at the group level. Thus, the group-level narratives were constructed from individual representations, facilitating an overview and presentation of the results through rich and nuanced descriptions. The final meta-themes were constructed from the discourse segments of the relevant data. The data collection was guided by the specific themes of the paper which focused on the role of soft skills in the business workplace and the importance of specific soft skills represented in the subheadings of the results section. The method of analysis was intended to be as flexible and dynamic as possible in an effort to tease out the most comprehensive understanding of the employers' assessments [1]. The reasonableness of the interpretations, in relation to the categorizations and themes, has been inter-subjectively validated continuously through seminar presentations and discussions with colleagues and peers.

IV. RESULTS

A. The Role of Soft Skills in Business Success

Although the concept of 'soft skills' is relatively new in Vietnam, the respondents displayed a high level of awareness and comprehension regarding the concept of soft skills and its implications in the business workplace. When asked about the role of soft skills in the workplace, the respondents almost unanimously proposed that soft skills are very important for any employee in the contemporary labour market, irrespective of any specific kind of occupation. Remarkably, most of the employers (93%) were keen to emphasize that soft skills are becoming increasingly relevant in the field of business, especially in the present context of the global integration of Vietnamese economy. Two employers who have longest years of experience in international trade reiterated this point with the following comments:

"...soft skills play an integral role in business transactions with the other countries...(Interview 9)... the global business environment now requires a very high competitiveness so that labour force who involves in this must be prudent with excellent interpersonal skills..." (Interview 14)

Similar sentiments regarding the increasingly vital role of soft skills in business were also captured in the excerpts of two other respondents who worked as employers in Vietnamese government-owned enterprises. On the basis of their experience it was incontestable that the greater the level of soft skills competency on the part of their employees, the more successful they were at facilitating strong marketing networks that in turn served to substantially improve the process of product selling. They respectively stated:

"... for an example, some years ago, the price and quality were perceived to be the most important factors to sell a product. Today, however, soft skills appear to be an important element to decide if a product can be sold ... (Interview 9) ... buying and selling products

effectively depends on how good our soft skills are.”
(Interview 10)

However, the respondents presented some radically different views regarding the contribution of soft and hard skills for business success. Some of them (28%) were disposed to the view that soft and hard skills have their own virtues and provide an equal contribution to business and career success. They explained that hard skills contribute to the growth of an individual's technical skills, while soft skills contribute to the success of an individual both in getting access to a job at which he/she performs well, and gaining success reflected by advancement in his/her career map. Nonetheless, many of them (72%) held the view that soft skills play a more integral role in achieving business success than do hard skills. As indicated by one respondent:

“In diverse business situations, a person owning good soft skills can change a problem into an opportunity and deal with the adversaries in a better and more constructive manner. The one with only hard skills cannot do the same”. (Interview 8)

In short, responses from the employers were in agreement with the overseas studies of [6], [10], [32] on this topic which establish that soft skills form an integral part of success in business.

B. Specific Essential Soft Skills in Business Workplace

Given the vital contribution of soft skill competencies in the current business workplace and the serious deficiency of these skills among Vietnamese business graduates, the respondents identified 19 soft skills which were regarded as essential in the business workplace, and should consequently play a larger part in the curriculum of business schools than they currently do. These soft skills were ranked in a descending order of their importance based on the frequency of respondents agreeing on their relevance. The soft skills rated as similar important were put and explained in the same categories. The results are presented in Table I.

1. Communication

All employers rated the ability to communicate effectively as the most vital soft skill and people who are successful at work are most often good communicators. Some of them opined that poor communication can lead to a loss of business, which, in turn, can lead to a loss in revenue. Some of the respondents were also concerned that many graduate employees with good hard skills could not communicate well with customers and colleagues. This finding indicates that the foremost priority should be given to the goal of imparting strong communication skills for business students.

2. Group-Work

60 percent of the respondents valued group activities as the second most revered of all soft skills, which they perceive to be unduly weak in business graduates. Employees were criticized for being selfish and self-promoting in team work like situations. Some respondents explained that the effective combined efforts of individuals in a team can realize better products; and will enhance team spirit, and ultimately, the

efficacy of the organization as a whole. Combining various soft skill capacities possessed by different team members could also lead to increased creativity at the individual level, and can realize a better product that will benefit the team and the organization as a whole. This strategy also ensures that work is finished at a faster pace, with fewer mistakes and enhanced efficacy. This being so, imparting group-work skills for business students should also be a priority as it facilitates business in a variety of contexts.

TABLE I
THE SOFT SKILLS RATED AS IMPORTANT BY EMPLOYERS

| Rank | Essential Soft Skills | Frequency |
|------|------------------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Communication | 86.6% |
| 2 | Group-work/team work | 60% |
| 3 | Flexibility Customer Service | 46.6% |
| 4 | Interpersonal Skills | 40% |
| 5 | Marketing | 33.3% |
| 5 | Positive Attitudes | |
| 5 | Responsibility | |
| 5 | Negotiation | |
| 6 | Business ethics | 26.6% |
| 6 | Critical Thinking | |
| 6 | Market Research and Analysis | |
| 7 | Time-management | 20% |
| 7 | Problem-solving | |
| 7 | Interpersonal Relationship | |
| 7 | Professionalism | |
| 8 | Self-management Leadership | 13.3% |
| 9 | Technological Competence | 6.6% |

3. Customer Service and Flexibility

Customer service skills were regarded as the third most important soft skill category. According to some of the respondents, ‘Customer Service skills’ become increasingly relevant in the context of present competitive market, as every customer is considered to be the king and so their needs and preferences hold the priority for companies. Customer service and satisfaction has therefore become an essential component of any field of business and is the most decisive factor in the success or failure of any business organization. Thus, the acquisition by employees of customer service skills should represent a priority of paramount importance for companies, the present market, customer service skills, and should thus be regarded as an essential component within any field of business education designed to ensure that a company's business success is effectively advanced through customer satisfaction. It was recommended by 47% of the respondents that these skills are of vital importance, and should be integrated into the formal business curriculum within Vietnam. Flexibility Skills were also ranked as being equally important and were perceived to be a necessary skill for any employee to adapt and adjust effectively to a new job environment. The capacity to adapt effectively to the ongoing and ever challenging changes which inevitably occur within the workplace were highly valued.

4. Interpersonal Skills

Selected by 40 percent of respondents, interpersonal traits such as being amicable, personable, having a good sense of humour, being nurturing, empathetic, patient, warm and

sociable were ranked in the 4th position on the overall importance table. Such skills are now recognized as being a pre-requisite for virtually any position in a business organization. These qualities were thus also recommended by employers and thus that the soft skills mentioned in this category should definitely be introduced into the curriculum of Vietnamese business schools to equip graduates to work effectively in an organization.

5. Marketing, Positive Attitudes and Responsibility

About 33 percent of the respondents supported these skills as necessary for business staff to perform their work effectively. As applauded by one respondent, 'responsibility' is the most important soft skill required for completing a task at the right time as planned and with the level of quality required. Another respondent attributed the lack of positive attitudes such as confidence and optimism amongst Vietnamese employees to be a root cause of creating a negative workplace environment and emphasized the necessity of introducing training programs to teach these skills to business students. Some of the respondents also observed inefficient marketing skills among the sales staff so that they also recommended including these skills in training.

6. Negotiation, Business Ethics and Critical Thinking

These skills were considered as important by four employers (26.6%), and thus ranked in 6th position. In business, particularly, one respondent emphasized that Business Ethics skills are very necessary to attract loyalty, and retain customers for longer periods. From another perspective, 'Negotiation' is a key to gaining contracts for enterprises and is an offshoot of communication skills. Interestingly, one respondent ranked Critical Thinking in the highest position of importance, and he explained that with globalization, the increased speed of business and rapidly changing work settings, employees at every level are facing an increasingly complex flow of information. This being so, it is imperative that they need to possess critical thinking skills to make informed decisions by themselves and the graduates need to be trained on these.

7. Market Research and Analysis, Time-management, Problem-solving, Interpersonal Relationships and Professionalism

These skill clusters were endorsed by three employers (20%) and ranked in the 7th position of importance. All these respondents were of the view that time-management skills are equally important to complete work effectively and efficiently with an aim to meeting deadlines. These skills are especially necessary for Vietnamese employees who have a bad habit of procrastination and rushing to complete their tasks at the last moment. The other skills were also recommended to be included in the business school curriculum as their essentials in the business workplace.

8. Self-Management and Leadership

Although Self-Management falls into 8th position of importance within the ranking hierarchy, with only two

respondents (13.3%) preferring it, it was valued so highly by one respondent that he described it as a 'foundation skill'. What he meant by this was that knowing how to manage oneself effectively was a prerequisite for cultivating other soft skill traits such as self-esteem, confidence, initiative and a positive leadership attitude. Moreover, both respondents regarded Leadership as a necessary skill, thereby enabling an individual to assume integral professional roles such as leading an organization and multitasking, including marketing products, liaison, and customer service etc.

9. Technological Competence

Only one respondent (6.6%) coming from the manufacturing industry judged that this skill should be integrated into the formal business curriculum. On his view Technical Competence was presumed to be especially important in IT business transactions and within the context of the manufacturing industry. The respondent predicted that the more technical business became in the future, the more important it would be to have the technical skills to manage it.

V.DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Soft skills are perceived as important even by employers coming from diverse industries, thereby reinforcing the point that soft skills function as a vital component in the pecuniary success of virtually all business and industries. Soft skills were valued as more important in most business careers than hard skills. We cannot underestimate the relevance of hard skills, and the extent to which this is so depends primarily on the nature of organization [16]. However, both types of skills were regarded to have their own special roles to play which in turn jointly contribute to successful business goal-oriented outcomes. It is salutary to remind ourselves that the process of gaining achievements for a business company does require having hard skills such as accounting, programming, financing etc. Nevertheless, to implement these jobs effectively, employees need to possess soft skills such as group-work, problem-solving, creativity etc. We acknowledge that there is a delicate balance that needs to be preserved between soft and hard skills, but with regard to having a deeper understanding of that relationship, we propose that a more comprehensive perspective is required here. We would argue that soft skills have a more comprehensive role to play in business than has conventionally been appreciated.

All respondents agreed that 19 soft skills are essential in the current business workplace though they came from different fields of business and different areas. Communication, Group-work, Flexibility, Customer Service, Interpersonal Skills, Marketing, Positive Attitudes and Responsibility were considered to be more important than ever in the Vietnamese business workplace. Given the recognition now given by employers to the paramount importance of soft skills, particularly in terms of these soft skills, we shall persist in our proposal that the tertiary business curriculum should be significantly upgraded so that tertiary business students can be adequately equipped with soft skill competencies to make a real difference in the Vietnamese workplace.

Another serendipitous result of the study is that the information gathered can be utilised on a partial basis for the reform and development of a more pertinent tertiary business education curriculum in Vietnam which attributes an epistemological status to soft skills which has to date been neglected in the literature. We adumbrate the foundations of this epistemic reconceptualization of soft skills not simply in terms of the conventional discourse concerning their utilitarian contribution to business success, as important as we recognise that aspect of their role to be. Our proposal is rather that there is a much richer epistemological role which they play in terms of what we call their "preconditional functionality" for the successful development and deployment of hard skills in the context of business and all human relationships. We make no claim that this objective is adequately achieved in this present piece, but we do make suggestions based on this epistemological dimension of our analysis whose insights we intend to develop more determinately in a future study designed to bring this ambitious goal to fruition. This facilitates the development of curriculum units and programs which specifically address the needs of employers.

Our study thus represents a highly pragmatic initiative, which takes a bold step forward to invite an informed dialogue between employers and tertiary institutions, with the common goal of advancing Vietnam's economic position globally. With a deeper understanding of employers' perceptions of the essential role played by soft skills in business success, it becomes easier to create curriculum units and programs which specifically address the needs of employers. Without this information and the praxis pedagogy to sustain it, the gap to which we have referred cannot be closed. Given that our study is the first interview on soft skills undertaken with the heads of 15 of the most successful businesses in Vietnam, it represents a significant first step forward in encouraging a collaborative alliance between industry and university, aimed at improving economic growth in Vietnam.

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