



THE X FACTOR IN TODAY'S COMPETITIVE MARKETPLACE: BUSINESS AND SOFT SKILLS CERTIFICATION

Why do so many employers complain that our graduates aren't well-prepared for the rigors of today's workplace?

It's no secret that the global marketplace is undergoing significant and challenging transitions. The market conditions and economic backdrop within the world's regions are quite diverse considering the unique challenges of emerging economies, post-oil economies, geo-political conflicts, and disruptive emerging technologies. The world's citizens strive, sometime with great difficulty, to adapt to these forces. People seeking jobs against this backdrop— whether they are new to the workplace or recareering due to the elimination of some industries – face some common obstacles:

- High unemployment within lower socio-economic groups, slowing economic self-reliance.
- A large number of re-careering and underemployed skilled workers, increasing job competitiveness.
- Stagnant job growth in some sectors, furthering higher unemployment rates and stagnating incomes.
- Hard-to-fill job vacancies in emerging industries, revealing the lag in skills retraining initiatives.



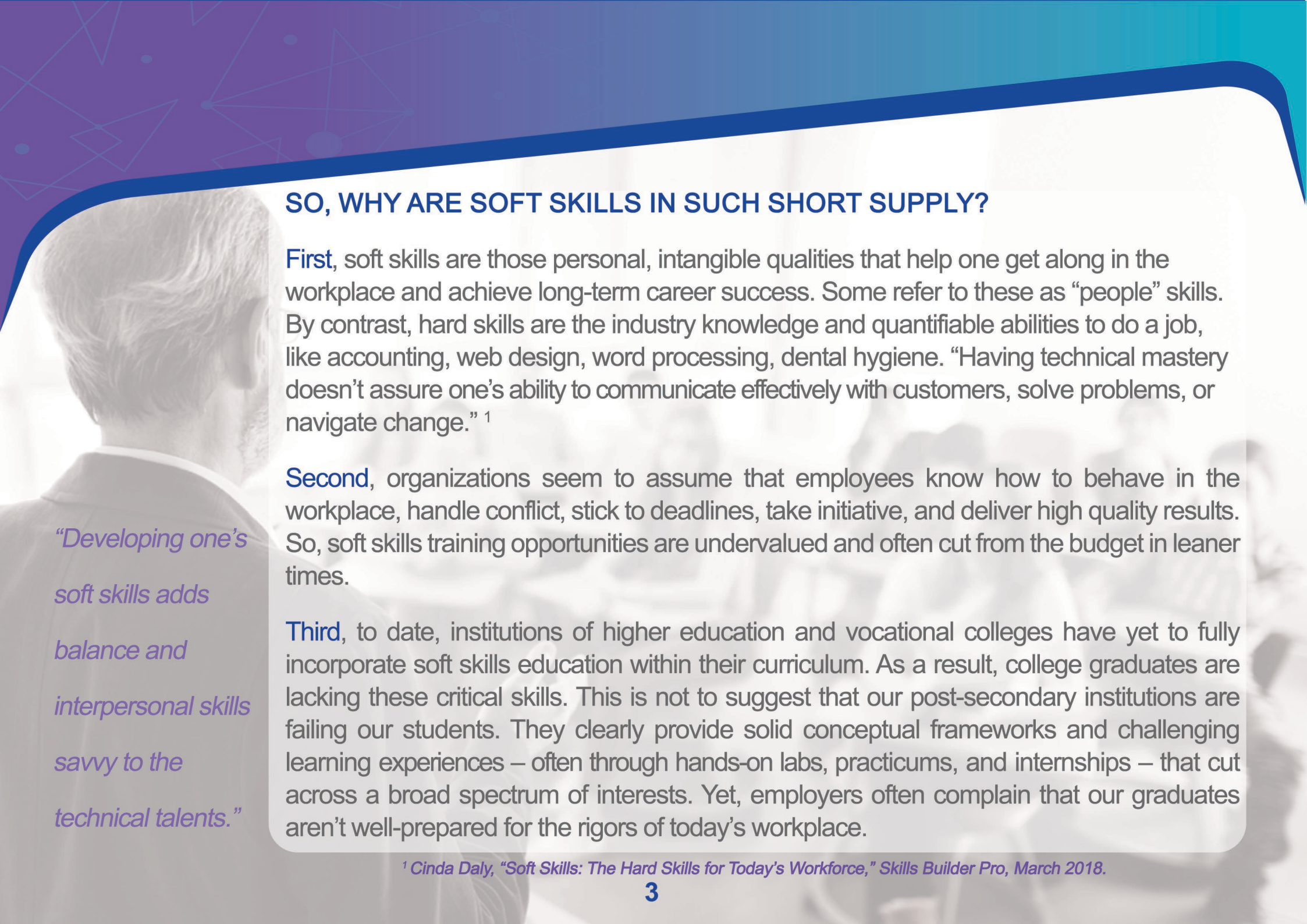
NOW, MIX IN THESE COMMON CHALLENGES:

- Low transferability of secondary and post-secondary degree knowledge into job skills and workplace competencies
- A lack of soft skills competencies necessary to get and keep jobs It can be an uphill battle, and it's time to take a different approach to how we prepare our workers for job readiness. Let's start with a look at what's been missing.

WHAT'S BEEN MISSING?

For years, the widespread belief has been that technical knowledge and technical certification contribute most to career development success. According to recent research, however, soft skills are far more important than technical skills to reach personal career goals and contribute to organizational triumph. Consider these surprising research findings from the Stanford Research Institute and Carnegie-Mellon and Harvard University:

- 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills, while only 25% on technical knowledge.
- 85% of job success comes from having well-developed soft skills and people skills.



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SO, WHY ARE SOFT SKILLS IN SUCH SHORT SUPPLY?

First, soft skills are those personal, intangible qualities that help one get along in the workplace and achieve long-term career success. Some refer to these as “people” skills. By contrast, hard skills are the industry knowledge and quantifiable abilities to do a job, like accounting, web design, word processing, dental hygiene. “Having technical mastery doesn’t assure one’s ability to communicate effectively with customers, solve problems, or navigate change.” ¹

Second, organizations seem to assume that employees know how to behave in the workplace, handle conflict, stick to deadlines, take initiative, and deliver high quality results. So, soft skills training opportunities are undervalued and often cut from the budget in leaner times.

Third, to date, institutions of higher education and vocational colleges have yet to fully incorporate soft skills education within their curriculum. As a result, college graduates are lacking these critical skills. This is not to suggest that our post-secondary institutions are failing our students. They clearly provide solid conceptual frameworks and challenging learning experiences – often through hands-on labs, practicums, and internships – that cut across a broad spectrum of interests. Yet, employers often complain that our graduates aren’t well-prepared for the rigors of today’s workplace.

¹ Cinda Daly, “Soft Skills: The Hard Skills for Today’s Workforce,” *Skills Builder Pro*, March 2018.



WHAT'S MISSING? JOB-BASED SOFT SKILLS TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION.

Job-based programs break down the more theoretical concepts into the most tangible, in-demand skills workers need to perform their jobs with confidence – based upon a job description – and then craft the learning experiences that lead to that end. Those in-demand skills include soft skills in balance with job-specific knowledge and skills, all honed with real-world practical applications, exercises, role plays and a host of interactive learning activities. Then, just as university students pass exams to earn their degree, job-based programs culminate in certifications that validate the learner's skill attainment.

Benefits of Business and Soft Skills Certification

Professional and trade certifications aren't new. Traditionally, however, these certifications focus on the technical skills of the job itself – how to program in HTML; how to repair an automobile; how to maintain networks; how to administer tests in a laboratory; how to teach a certification course. These technical certifications don't automatically translate into the ability to communicate effectively with customers who need these services, for example. Developing one's soft skills adds balance and interpersonal skills savvy to the technical talents.

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Employee certification is also a powerful organizational advantage. With certified employees on your team, customers are assured that your organization sincerely cares about the level of service you provide and that you care about your employees’ career development. Executives are confident that their managers and staff can effectively solve issues, provide outstanding service, collaborate with co-workers, and contribute to the improvement of processes, products, and services. It’s a classic win-win-win scenario.

Individual Benefits

- ▶ Professional accomplishment and increased self-confidence
- ▶ Recognition from the industry, employers, and peers
- ▶ New employment opportunities
- ▶ Promotion and advancement opportunities
- ▶ Lifelong credentials

Organizational Benefits

- ▶ Increased credibility
- ▶ Increased customer satisfaction
- ▶ Increased productivity and ROI
- ▶ Stronger teams and leaders
- ▶ Measurable performance standards and results

Talent Development Benefits

- ▶ Screening for prospective employees
- ▶ Demonstrated knowledge and expertise to perform job responsibilities day one
- ▶ Offering of career paths, incentives, and rewards for employees

THE CONCEPTS BEHIND CAREER CERTIFICATION

How do you find job-based training and certification that includes soft skills and practical business know-how? Look for these fundamental elements and examine the content behind the certification designations.

1 - DEFINED JOB ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES TO SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Are the certifications built upon the realities of the workplace? Valid, job-based certifications begin with job descriptions – real, practical hiring documents. Hiring managers need to know what job roles they are filling to find the best qualified candidates. Employees need to know what's expected of them, and employers need the basis to hold employees accountable. Job descriptions that clearly outline job roles, responsibilities, qualifications and skills support these purposes.

2 - BUSINESS AND SOFT SKILLS COMPETENCY STANDARDS TO BUILD IN EXCELLENCE

Are the standards of performance needed to support the job relevant and attainable? With job descriptions in hand, the detailed competencies and skills that specifically support that job role define the level of expertise and performance standard required. Using Bloom's taxonomy² as a framework, the competencies and skills can be defined in objective, measurable terms to facilitate training consistency and adherence to the work standards. From that basis, look for training that connects those specific requirements and builds in performance excellence from the start.

BUSINESS AND SOFT SKILLS TRAINING CONSIDERATIONS

- ✓ Are the certifications built upon the realities of the workplace?
- ✓ Are the standards of performance needed to support the job relevant and attainable?
- ✓ Can adult learners transfer and apply what they learn on the job?
- ✓ Does the content focus on job knowledge employees use in the day-to-day work, not theory or nice-to-know facts?
- ✓ Does the content integrate those people skills that are critical to long-term career achievement?
- ✓ Can the learner demonstrate competencies and skills by passing an exam that validates attainment and awards professional certification?
- ✓ Are the certification exams valid, reliable, and secure?
- ✓ Does the offering integrate on-the-job reinforcement and support learning as a lifelong endeavor?



3 - JOB-FOCUSED, EXPERIENTIAL TRAINING TO FACILITATE SKILLS TRANSFER

Can adult learners transfer and apply what they learn on the job? Lectures are old school. Mini explanations and demonstrations followed by opportunities to apply, practice and refine skills that build confidence and competence are new school. This approach is based on adult learning principles and practices that include a wide range of techniques, incorporating pre- and post-skills testing, exercises, case studies, role plays, and self-study modules where learners can work at their own pace. Look for evidence that the adult learner is actively involved in the training experience, so they know how to fulfill the job responsibilities.

Practical Business Skills – Does the content focus on job knowledge that employees use in their day-to-day job, not theory or nice-to-know facts? The gap between what people learn in “school” is often disconnected from the tasks, projects, and routine assignments they face in the workplace. Look at the discussions, examples, and activities to confirm that they focus on job-role and workplace specific situations.

Soft Skills – Does the content integrate those people skills that are critical to long-term career achievement? Look for the most in-demand skills, such as listening and communication skills, team play, problem-solving, organizational skills, conflict management, adaptability, diversity and inclusion, accountability, and professional ethics.

4 - CERTIFICATION TESTING TO VALIDATE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Can the learner demonstrate competencies and skills by passing an exam that validates attainment and awards professional certification? Are the exams valid, reliable, and secure? The certification process is the culminating experience that launches an employee into a new career. Like graduation, it is only the beginning, but a solid beginning it is.

5 - INTEGRATED ON-THE-JOB REINFORCEMENT TO SUPPORT LIFELONG LEARNING

Does the offering integrate on-the-job reinforcement and support learning as a lifelong endeavor? Ultimately, learners are responsible for applying their acquired skills in the workplace and accountable for their performance. Employers are responsible for reinforcing learning, monitoring and coaching employee development, and remediating as needed to assure that they realize their training ROI. It's not a one-and-done experience. The combination of job descriptions, competency standards, experiential training, pre - and post-assessments, and enterprise audits will support a closed-loop approach to skills mastery, transferability, and lifelong learning.



A growing awareness and a willingness to invest in employee soft skills training and certification make it possible for organizations – any industry, any geography, any size – to improve workforce effectiveness, improve co-worker and client relationships, increase competitiveness, and realize a positive training ROI.



CONCLUSION

Why You Want to Train Your Employees with Knowledge Workers Pro

KWP learners acquire the essential business and soft skills they need to succeed in the workplace, not theory or nice-to-know concepts. During the learning experience – in the classroom, through eLearning courses and audiobook learning systems – learners practice real skills, tools, and techniques they need every day to be productive and effective on the job. The exercises, activities, case studies, and role plays represent common, and often challenging workplace situations, so they can apply what they learn immediately on the job.

The KWP library covers six career certification tracks: Small Business, Customer Service, Marketing, Sales, Talent Development, and Administrative Support. Career tracks begin with entry-level certifications and progress through the CareerStep curriculum to advanced and management level competences.

The Lifelong Curriculum™ library of topic-centric courses complement and extend the concentrated career track training programs to reinforce key concepts and support continuous learning.



Each KWP career track is based upon the KWP International Career Competency Standard set by the KWP International Certification Standards Board. The Board's intent is to recognize the breadth of knowledge required, document the needed skills, categories, topics, competencies and the range of knowledge that needs to be covered to deliver job-ready workers. Those standards are the pillars in building professional career certification programs.

Our unique virtual ecosystem, KWP Connect, is an integrated, socially engaging environment that offers course access through the proprietary learning management system, skill attainment verifiability through the proprietary Skilled Matrix™ testing service, online classrooms and theaters, community networks, events, and collaboration with all the stakeholders in the workplace ecosystem – learners, trainers, employers, recruiters, and service providers.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cinda has a long-standing career record for leading profitable business units, growing new business initiatives, and pushing the mark by creating-a-new-box approach to business challenges. She is the creator of “The Daly Interview,” a popular series featuring interviews with industry luminaries and authors, including Steve Wozniak, Marcus Buckingham, Guy Kawasaki, and Geoffrey Moore. Bringing more than 30 years of experience leading teams to high performance and training adults, Cinda is the chief operating officer of Skilled Now and chair of the KWP International Certification Standards Board. She holds B.A. and Masters degrees with high honors from the University of South Florida, USA, and Georgia State University, USA.

ABOUT KNOWLEDGE WORKERS PRO

Knowledge Workers Pro provides comprehensive career track training and certification programs that prepare job-ready individuals for success in their career of choice, across a variety of disciplines. Developed and governed by the KWP International Certification Standards Board, the certification standards begin with job descriptions, then define the competencies, knowledge, and skills necessary to fulfill those job responsibilities. KWP includes unlimited access to KWP Connect, an online portal that connects all stakeholders in the workforce ecosystem to generate the highest rate of recruitment, retention, workforce productivity and quality of work. It’s also the hub for job fairs, events, resources, virtual tradeshow, and networking 365 days a year.

KWP is a division of Skilled Now, an integrated solutions provider of workplace training, testing, professional services, and state-of-the-art technology platforms. Skilled Now serves business, industry, government and academic institutions worldwide through its global headquarters in Washington DC, USA.

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