

What Soft Skills Do Tanzania Employers Prefer among Graduates in the World of Work?

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Abstract

This study investigated the soft skills preferred by Tanzanian employers among graduates in the world of work. It specifically explored employers' perspectives on the top five soft skills graduates should possess. A qualitative research approach with a descriptive phenomenological design was employed. Six employers were purposively selected, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document reviews, then analysed thematically. The study's findings indicated that employers value graduates who are self-aware of workplace dynamics, effective in communication, uphold integrity, demonstrate independence, and possess problem-solving skills. These soft skills enhance graduates' employability, especially in organisations with blended and diverse cultures. The findings underscore the importance of graduates demonstrating soft skills in the workplace. The study recommends educational interventions to address soft skills mismatches and support graduates in securing both public and self-employment. Further research should explore effective teaching and learning approaches for enhancing soft skills among students.

Keywords: soft skills, world of work, employers, graduates, employment opportunities

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Introduction

What employers need for graduates to demonstrate in the world of work has been a hot topic of discussion among scholars in recent years. Some scholars argue that employers need graduates to have education qualifications (Mizell, 2010; Omar et al., 2012). Other scholars contend that employers need graduates to have both work experience and skills as qualifications for securing employment (Klaus et al., 2007; Kotar & Anbazhagan, 2012; Mann, 2012). Mizell (2010), for example, acknowledges that employers need graduates who have attained a higher level of education since they are more capable of applying their professional knowledge. Besides, Muller and Beatty (2010) and Vaughan et al. (2011) point out that many employers in job organisations need graduates to have some form of certificate

because they reduce the number of forgery cases among graduates. Mann (2012), Omar et al. (2012), and Smith and Green (2005) argue that graduates should have work experience as a need for employers as it reduces training costs among employers. However, current studies show that employers need more than good degree certificates and work experience (Rehman & Mehmood, 2014).

For years, employers have been complaining about skills mismatch and the available job opportunities among graduates (Oluyomi & Adediji, 2012; Schulz, 2008). For example, employers in Zambia, Malawi, and South Africa have reported that their education systems do not equip young people with the skills required in the labour market (Chigunta, 2002). Similarly, Enid (2012) reports employers' complaints that the education in Uganda inadequately prepares young people with the required skills. In Tanzania, Munishi (2022) reports that 60% of employers complain about soft skills mismatch with the available job requirements among graduates. Such a mismatch eventually affects the recruitment process among employers (Fulgence, 2015).

Ting and Ying (2012) argue that employers seek skilled and flexible graduates who can identify and solve problems for the organisations' benefit. They also need employees who can think creatively, solve problems independently and manage themselves (Brewer, 2013). Moreover, employers need workers who dedicate their time to the mission and vision of an organisation and live authentically (Adu-Oppong, 2014; Chuang, 2013; Doe, 2014; Kolzow, 2014; Mahajan, 2015; Ondieki et al., 2019; Qadri, 2016). Besides, employers seek specific skills that match a particular job (Hansen & Hansen, 2015). Carter et al. (2019) report that employers are looking for graduates who possess sound academic credentials and key skills. However, specific skills are nearly universal in all organisations, and graduates are unaware of whether employers need them (Hansen & Hansen, 2015). Correspondingly, studies show that during employment recruitment, employers usually use 30 seconds to review received job applications from graduates (Lurie, 2003). The authors also state that one employment post can be applied by more than 500 graduates (Brewer, 2013; Ooms, Wessel & Monge, 2013).

The literature review shows that Tanzania, like other countries, is facing an unemployment problem among graduates. Munishi (2022), for example, reports that about 61% of graduates are unemployed because of the irrelevance of the curriculum, ineffective educational policies and reforms, incompetent trainers, inadequate teaching and learning facilities and a lack of career guidance programs in academic institutions. The irrelevance of the education systems has affected the entire need to equip young people with skills essential for competing in the labour market (Chaya, 2013; United National Educational, Science and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2002). Many graduates struggle to find jobs because

of the mismatch between their skills and the labour market requirements, as the curriculum that equips these graduates does not consider soft skills right from primary to higher learning levels (Brewer, 2013; Munishi, 2022).

Tanzania has established an independent department, *The President's Office, Public Service Recruitment Secretariat (PSRS)*, to facilitate the recruitment process on behalf of the Government. The Amendment Act No.18 of 2007 under section 29 (6) stipulates the functions of the PSRS as follows: *register graduates and professionals for purposes of ease of reference in filling vacant posts. Advertise vacant posts occurring in the public service. Engage appropriate experts for conducting interviews. Advise employers on various matters related to recruitment and do any other act or thing which may be directed by the Minister responsible for Public Service.* Despite these good functions, there is an increasing public outcry on the limited number of graduates who secure the advertised employment posts (Chaya, 2013; Sumra & Katabaro, 2014; World Bank Report, 2014). As a result, graduates are in a dilemma on what real employers need during employment recruitment. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the top five soft skills employers prefer so that graduates and curriculum developers will benefit.

Research questions

This study was guided by one research question as follows:

What top five soft skills are preferred by employers in Tanzania?

Literature Review

Studies show that employers usually use 30 seconds to review received job applications (Lurie, 2003). The statement implies that graduates should be well-informed about the reviewed skills. Johnstone and Soares (2014), for example, explain that employers are looking at specific skills aligning with industry and academic expectations. Nikolov, Shoikova and Kovatcheva (2014) identify such skills as communication, group dynamics, work environment analysis, goal implementation and visioning (Hamisu, Salleh, Sern, Adamu & Gambo, 2017). Employers view these skills as important for students to learn because they cover up weaknesses, shape human personalities, and evaluate employees' awards, talents and uniqueness (Muller & Beatty, 2010; Vaughan, O'Neil & Cameron, 2011).

For example, Kessler and Strasburg (2005) studied companies in the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and other parts of the world to establish a set of skills employers prefer. The study revealed that employers preferred achievement orientation, initiative, impact and influence, customer service orientation, and interpersonal understanding; other skills suggested were communication, integrity, self-independent, problem-solving and numeracy (Brewer, 2013; Layoador & Ramos, 2014; Patacsil

& Tablatin, 2017; Quadri, 2016; Robles, 2012). Another study was conducted by Burnett and Jayaram (2012) on skills for employability in Africa and Asia for employers, experts, leaders, and enterprises. The study established that employers in both Asia and Africa broadly suggested the same set of skills, such as hard and soft skills, for students to learn in their schooling (Burnett & Jayaram, 2012).

Besides, Kacamakovic and Lokaj (2021) studied 101 different commercial service and manufacturing firms in Kosovo and Albania on the requirements of organisations for soft skills as an influencing factor of their success. The results showed that organisations mainly apply soft skills and consider them essential as they help to develop interaction with clients and colleagues (Kacamakovic & Lokaj, 2021). Dean and East (2019) conducted a multiple-case study on soft skills needed for the 21st century workforce in Burlington, Middlesex and Somerset. The study found that hard skills were no longer enough for graduates to compete; instead, employers highly preferred soft skills (Dean & East, 2019). Based on the reviewed literature, what top five soft skills do employers prefer?

Methodology

Research approach and design

The study employed a qualitative research approach and descriptive phenomenological design. This study uses a qualitative research approach and descriptive phenomenological design because the study problem is a lived experience and occurs in human contexts, allowing the researcher to collect multiple forms of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Study area

The study was conducted in the Dar es Salaam region, especially in Ilala Municipality. Dar es Salaam region was selected as it is the leading city with a youth unemployment rate of 35.2% (Mcha, 2012). Ilala was chosen because it hosts the important employment secretariat that functions as a recruitment institution.

Sample and sampling procedures

Based on the purpose of the study, study approach and design, the study involved six (6) employers. The sample was deemed appropriate for the study as it allowed sufficient in-depth and detailed engagement of each respondent. The study used purposive sampling procedures. Purposive sampling was primarily used in this study because it involved respondents who virtually had resourceful and unique knowledge about the study problem. The researcher determined the information needed for the research objective during the sampling procedure. After that, the researcher defined the criteria the respondents should have. Based on the established

requirements, the researcher selected six (6) employers by virtue of their positions and responsibilities in their institutions. Employers were directors or human resource managers who were responsible for the recruitment of graduates. They were aware of the soft skills and other employment requirements needed in the world of work. Therefore, it was easier for them to identify the soft skills that are preferred in the world of work.

Data collection methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentary reviews. Six semi-structured interview sessions that took an average of half an hour were administered to employers to obtain an in-depth understanding of their experiences on the top five soft skills graduates should demonstrate in the world of work. Using a semi-structured interview allowed the interviewer to pursue a series of less structured questions and permitted in-depth exploration of spontaneous issues raised by the interviewee (Frances, Patricia & Coughlan, 2009). From the documents, background information and insights, supplementary research data, and pieces of evidence that were not gathered through semi-structured interview methods of data collection, including employment announcements and their related skills, were obtained. Before the data collection, the researcher received a permit from the respective authorities, including the University of Dar es Salaam and Ilala Municipal. During data collection, respondents were informed about their roles and rights to participate or withdraw from the study if they did not feel free to continue. The privacy of respondents was ensured by identifying them by alphabetical letters. A researcher had prolonged visits to the sites to establish trust. The researcher also established a member check of information and provided clear descriptions of the study. The researcher examined previous findings to assess their congruence with the current research.

Data analysis

Data were thematically analysed by starting with transcribing them, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing reports. The researcher translated and transcribed all collected data from interviews and documentary reviews. During this phase, the researcher read and re-read the transcripts, listened to audio-recording, and wrote and underlined potential items and comments in a notebook later in electronic files to have an overall view of the data. The researcher simultaneously coded every text segment that seemed relevant to the research questions, compared them, discussed them and searched themes before moving on to the rest of the transcripts. After that, the themes were reviewed and arranged using the cut-and-paste functions across all the transcripts. The review and arrangement were done to identify coherence,

distinctions, and overlapping themes and create new themes. These themes were then defined and named in relation to how they related to each other. Finally, the manuscript was produced by writing final analysis extracts with relevant narrations and examples relating to the research questions and the literature reviewed.

Results and Discussion

In light of the soft skills employers preferred, the study revealed the following soft skills: self-awareness, communication, integrity, self-independence and problem-solving. All six employers pointed out that graduates were suggested to be familiar with how the world of work operates because the advancement of science and technology has impacted employment principles. Employers explained that most posts are advertised on various internet engines, newspapers, and social media. Consequently, graduates must know the need to search for relevant information on computers, mobile phones, and other information-sharing sources to act upon specific details correctly. Awareness seemed important because some employment advertisements have particular application procedures that applicants must comply with. Procedures may include handwriting an application letter and sending the application by registered mail or express mail service courier. In this case, applications that are typed in the computers, printed, scanned, and electronically sent are not considered. Based on this, employers believe that graduates need to be aware of how to search for employment opportunities, the requirements of employment advertisements, how to apply for the advertised employment opportunities, and tips to attend written and oral interviews. One employer, for example, asserted that:

You know what! We are daily dealing with recruitment processes. While serving here for eight years, I have discovered that many graduates apply for jobs. However, they are unaware of small issues such as what documents to attach and how to attach them during job applications (Interview with Employer F).

Another employer had the following to say:

Our website advertises several employment opportunities such as cleaner, security guard, driver, communication manager, receptionist, and storekeeper. These positions have different qualifications, procedures, requirements and deadlines. Nevertheless, you get surprised while shortlisting the graduates for the interview. Some of them, in their cover letter, write the heading *application for the job*; some do not attach the required certificates; some do not meet the required number of referees, and some do not know the modality of applications (Interview with Employer C).

The above remarks denote the idea that graduates should be vibrant in searching for the appropriate information about the advertised posts to survive in the world of work, which is increasingly becoming complex. Thus, school foundation and orientation programmes are needed to increase students' confidence and awareness of recruitment processes. The programmes would reduce costs, confusion, and disappointments for parents, graduates, and employers since students would have prior access to information on the concept of employment itself, its procedures, and its principles.

Moreover, all employers have exposed that students are supposed to have communication skills when applying for jobs. Communication was mentioned because employers were looking for graduates who were ready and capable in terms of verbal, written and non-verbal communication. They believed that graduates who hold soft skills such as communication could express their capabilities in a blended culture and market the organisation. Again, they were able to inspire teamwork and show interaction aspects to achieve common goals. Employers, for example, explained that graduates should communicate their capability using correct grammar. One employer echoed that:

Communication is more relevant in nearly every organisation; therefore, graduates should be able to convey ideas, thoughts and knowledge through verbal and non-verbal forms. These forms of communication clearly reflect the behaviour of the particular graduate and add value in the eyes of employers (Interview with employer B).

The statements can be interpreted as follows: graduates are required to learn good forms of verbal, written, and non-verbal communication to symbolise their authority of understanding, potential, determinations, and abilities. Therefore, teaching and learning processes are to be designed and implemented to guide students to listen, speak, and read the information precisely and concisely. Also, teaching and learning should aim to facilitate students' capability to write project reports and messages through ICT devices in an appropriate language structure. Employers' preference for communication skills signifies the value of engaging students in teaching and learning activities that prepare them to communicate effectively in the world of work.

Furthermore, the study revealed that self-independence was among the soft skills preferred by employers. Employers explained that the role of schools is to expose students to self-independence in doing their work—every employer, for example, prefers self-independent graduates to attain the organisation's goals. One employer said:

Being self-independent means you can do things by yourself, have the energy to attend to numerous issues, and are committed to making

things happen. Students should be given activities that would expose them to self-directed learning. They need to be engaged in classroom presentations and individual assignments that are meant to develop self-independence (Interview with employer A).

These quotes entail that graduates who were self-independent at school seemed to have relevant skills in the available employment opportunities. Once they graduate, those students become punctual, active, confident, self-controlled and motivated to perform their duties. They also become creative, innovative, and achievement-oriented leaders. To impart self-independence, teaching and learning approaches in schools should involve self-directed activities, assignments and exercises that make students inventors and self-reliant. Practising self-independence assures students that once they graduate, they can perform various employment activities in the world of work confidently and freely.

Integrity for the majority of employers seemed to add value to graduates. Employers, for example, claimed that integrity was all about being trustworthy, modest and generous. A person with integrity holds strong morals and avoids falsehoods and cheating in production. Employers echoed that most graduates were lying by forging their certificates. They basically explained that these certificates were used to evaluate graduates' awards, talents, skills, and uniqueness. Certificates gave graduates confidence in being hired and provided credit for a specified position. However, one employer, for example, complained:

Sometimes, it happens during shortlisting! You will find the application document with contradicting years of school completion and the real names of the applicants. The names on the application letter, CV, and certificates differ. Also, the skills acquired by graduates are quite different from the actual performance (Interview with employer E)

Another employer commented as follows:

Employment opportunities are available! Unfortunately, few of our graduates employed in bricklaying, carrying soft drinks, wood, cement, clays, and metals in road and plumber constructions, masonry, carpentry, and architect projects are thieves of the products (Interview with employer A).

It would appear that being deceptive negatively impacted the employment process. The world of work wanted graduates to attach their true certificates in their applications to identify, assess and weigh up the skills acquired for the particular job already advertised. Certificates act as assurance, a foundation, and a baseline for employers to confidently think of shortlisting and employ the graduates. Living with a set of lies in a fake certificate affects someone's loyalty in terms of

performance and credibility. Thus, teaching and learning must stick to exposing students to subjects and activities demonstrating diverse aspects of morals. Learner-centred approaches in subjects such as General Studies should guide students on the disadvantages of being fibbers, rude, thieves and corrupt in the world of work. Integrity would bring credibility and opportunities among graduates to secure both formal and self-employment.

The study also revealed problem-solving as a soft skill that employers preferred. Employers argued that being a problem solver for whatever challenges increases the chances of securing employment opportunities. Employers prefer problem-solving because problem-solving graduates are termed those who can define, analyse, evaluate the issues and measure the results. Such skill adds value to the graduate once securing employment opportunities. These views denote the need to expose problem-solving skills among school students so as to make them capable of handling numerous difficulties in simple and multifaceted circumstances. The findings indicate that students need to be guided in self-directed learning projects and activities that are attached to making them think critically, understand the problem and provide solutions. In this way, students would become competent in addressing tough and complicated concerns while employed.

The researcher was also interested in finding out if the suggested soft skills were recognised in government documents. It was revealed that the Tanzanian secondary school curriculum mentioned skills such as critical and creative thinking, communication, numeracy, independent learning, personal and social values, and technological literacy (MoEVT, 2007). Self-awareness is not documented as a soft skill that is to be developed among students based on the current study findings. The findings advocate that curriculum developers have to update their curricular documents to comply with skills and other requirements that are to be learnt by students for the benefit of securing available employment opportunities. Teachers and students should be conversant with varied teaching and learning approaches so as to enhance learning by doing. Teachers should be creative in using varied teaching and learning pedagogical approaches to foster skills demonstration, innovation and discovery learning in extracurricular activities.

The findings revealed that employers preferred graduates to be aware of the world of work, able to communicate and have integrity, self-independence, and problem-solving skills. For employers, these skills are relevant in the world of work because self-awareness of how to search for employment posts, how to apply for the advertised posts and what to attach, for example, reduces confusion among graduates and employers. Also, communication distinguished graduates' qualities and capabilities. Self-independence, integrity, and problem-solving also increase the credibility of solving problems among graduates. Comparable findings

are reported by Gefell and McGraw (2014), who state that self-awareness of the work encouraged graduates to write good application letters and curriculum vitae that briefly highlighted points preferred by employers. Similar findings show that employers need graduates who can both softly communicate their power of understanding confidently and interact in a multilingual context (Walsh, 2011; Patacsil & Tablatin, 2017). They needed graduates who were able to solve numerous problems and meet responsibilities on time without support from other people (Ting & Ying, 2012; Laugador & Ramos, 2014). Moreover, Deming (2017), Khanna (2015), Lavy and Yadin (2013) report that because of globalisation, virtual offices, technology and increasing societal diversity, employers need job applicants who can truly compete to acquire the position and be able to work in the rough and tumble workplace. Graduates who are able to establish trust among members of the organisation are the most preferred by employers (Ondieki et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2019; Okoye & Isacck, 2015).

Conversely, the findings contradict those of Mizell (2010) and Omar et al. (2012), who report that employers need graduates to have higher level education qualifications, both work experience and certificates (Klaus et al., 2007; Kotar & Anbazhagan, 2012; Mann, 2012; Muller & Beatty 2010; Vaughan et al., 2011). These qualifications enable graduates to apply their relevant professional fields and reduce training costs among employers (Mizell, 2010; Mann, 2012; Omar et al., 2012; Smith & Green, 2005). However, it should be noted that soft skills are personal qualities, habits, attitudes, social graces, friendliness, facility with language and optimism that allow a person to use hard skills more effectively (Klaus et al., 2007; Schulz, 2008). And, because schools have intensively invested in facilitating hard skills, it is high time for students to be equipped with soft skills so as to distinguish their capabilities in terms of working styles and problem-solving mechanisms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In light of the findings, it is concluded that employers need graduates to have a set of soft skills such as awareness of the world of work, communication, integrity, self-independence, and problem-solving. However, most of the graduates lack soft skills, including awareness of the world of work, which makes them fail to compete in the labour market. The findings advocate teaching and learning interventions to address the soft skills mismatch. Implications of this study indicate the need for further research on the teaching and learning approaches that enhance soft skills among students. The approaches will eventually contribute to performing numerous employment activities that will confidently help students acquire all the skills needed by employers.

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