# What employers want: The "must-have" soft skills for entering the labor market

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## Abstract

*Frame of the research:* In the contemporary labor market, it is imperative for recent graduates to possess a diverse set of non-technical competencies alongside their specialized technical proficiencies. Drawing on the existing literature on education, training, and strategic human resource management, this study seeks to fill a gap in the current literature and offer insights and practical implications, especially for universities that are considered the most responsible for the employability of young graduates.

*Purpose of the paper:* This study was set within the Italian context and focused on the perspective of employers. The aims were to identify the essential soft skills necessary for facilitating the smooth transition of young graduates to the workforce, assess employers' satisfaction levels regarding graduates' proficiency in these skills, and delineate the disparity between the perceived importance of each skill and the level of satisfaction among employers, thereby identifying the gaps in soft skills proficiency and consequently highlighting priority areas of intervention for the stakeholders involved.

*Methodology:* We administered a survey to managers from companies operating within Italy who have worked with recently onboarded personnel, specifically recent graduates. We contacted potential respondents via email to invite them to participate in the survey. Ultimately, our sample comprised 392 managers representing various industries and organizational sectors.

*Findings:* We ranked soft skills according to their importance and satisfaction. Furthermore, we highlighted the significant gaps (importance-satisfaction) for all 25 soft skills. Finally, we organized our results into a four-quadrant matrix of importance-satisfaction: 1. High-priority reinforcement (low satisfaction and high importance), 2. Consolidate as stars (high satisfaction and high importance), 3. Future investment in the job (low satisfaction and low importance), and 4. Low-priority maintenance (high satisfaction and low importance).

*Research limitations:* This study focused only on managers' perspectives and did not consider the perspectives of universities or students.

*Practical implications:* Our findings provide universities with directives concerning areas necessitating intervention and the requisite actions for enhancing graduates' soft skills, as mandated by employers. Furthermore, the study has managerial implications, guiding them in the identification of the requisite soft skills required for workforce entry and tailoring personnel selection and training processes accordingly. Additionally, this research extends support to students by aiding in their preparation to fulfill employers' requirements.

*Originality of the paper:* This study makes a substantial contribution to the literature by bridging the research gap related to the soft skills essential for recent graduates to successfully navigate into the Italian workforce. Through the identification

*of specific areas or sets of soft skills applicable across diverse industries and adaptable to multidirectional career paths in the contemporary 21st-century workspace, our research provides valuable insights for both academia and industry practitioners.*

**Key words:** *employability; young graduates; soft skills; higher education; survey.*

## 1. Introduction

Since the late 1980s, the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) in society and the economy has been the subject of increasing interest among governments and employer organizations (Clarke, 2018). The Bologna Process (1999) challenged HEIs to take responsibility for the complex process of helping young people transition from academia to the world of work. However, the current socioeconomic context, which is permeated by transformations (including digital, environmental, and demographic transformations) that have a profound impact on the employment structure and skills required for young graduates (ANPAL, 2022), does not make the tasks assigned to universities easy. In contrast, the need to pay attention to young people and their education with the aim of ensuring the economic development of nations has put more emphasis and pressure on the primary role of universities: to prepare students for the current labor market by equipping them with "job-ready" skills (Sin and Neave, 2016).

Therefore, in recent decades, there has been an exponential increase in research that provides institutions and policymakers with information about the employability of young graduates, thus highlighting the gap between the demands of the world of work and higher education (Andrew and Higson, 2008; Aasheim *et al.*, 2009; García-Aracil and Van der Velden, 2008; Succi and Canovi, 2020) and the need for further research on these issues. Among the pressures stemming from the world of work is the urgent need to train professionals who possess not only solid technical skills but also soft skills, such as the ability to solve complex problems, make important decisions under pressure, work profitably in teams, occasionally resolve conflicts, manage stress, organize work independently and efficiently, and be flexible, critical, and creative. Due to the transition from an industrial to a knowledge society, the profile of requirements for workers has changed significantly (Mitchell *et al.*, 2010).

Therefore, there seems to be no doubt regarding the importance of soft skills and the fact that many consider these skills to be more important in today's professional world (Archer and Davison, 2008; Andrews and Higson, 2008; Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Majid *et al.*, 2019). However, the particular soft skills that young recent graduates must possess to enter the workforce, *regardless* of the specific job or profession they seek, remain unclear. In fact, many studies have focused on surveying the soft skills that are required for specific industries, such as the accounting profession (Dunbar *et al.*, 2016; Chaplin, 2016) or entry-level manufacturing (Rasul *et al.*, 2013; Hamid *et al.*, 2014). Abbasi *et al.*, (2018) examined the mismatch between the skills expected of managers and the skills possessed by business graduates employed in the banking sector. All these studies have revealed

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a gap between the soft skills required for a specific profession and those actually possessed by new graduates. Few studies have aimed to identify the soft skills necessary to enter the word of work, regardless of profession or sector. For example, Majid *et al.*, (2019) explored the importance of soft skills and the level of soft skills possessed by fresh graduates in their employability and career development in Singapore, and Su and Zhang (2015) measured the employability of recent graduates in Cina by asking 300 employers. Our literature review revealed that few studies have examined this issue in Italy. In Italy, there is a significant discrepancy between the soft skills required by employers and the soft skills of graduates in different occupations at all career levels (ANPAL, 2022). The importance of focusing on a specific territory emerges from studies that have analyzed the most important soft skills for employment across industries, thereby providing a cross-national perspective (e.g., Spain, Greece, Czech Republic, France, Germany, and the UK) while simultaneously highlighting the differences in the soft skills required of graduates in different countries (Baker *et al.*, 2017) due to the cultural and contextual labor market differences among different countries (Clarke, 2018). Succi and Canovi (2019) pursued a similar objective by including Italy among the countries investigated and analyzing the most important soft skills for business graduates. To our knowledge, no one has investigated the soft skills needed *for entry* into the world of work, *regardless* of the specific job or profession, from the perspective of employers in the Italian context.

Given the importance of focusing on territory and the importance of the employer's perspective (as the demand side of the labor market) (Al Asefer and Abidin, 2021), the current study aimed to answer the following research questions: *RQ1. What are the most important soft skills that graduates (as the supply side of the labor market) need to possess to enter the labor market in Italy? RQ2. Are employers satisfied with the soft skills endowment possessed by recent graduates entering the labor market in Italy? RQ3. Which soft skills have a greater disparity between importance and satisfaction?*

We aim to answer these questions by administering a survey to assess the interests of employers operating in different sectors in Italy. The survey asks these employers to indicate the degree of importance and satisfaction of 25 soft skills derived from previous studies.

The motivation for this study is twofold: to identify the degree of employability associated with the nontechnical skills required by recent graduates, specifically in the contemporary Italian context; and to measure the skills possessed by recent graduates as perceived by employers. Finally, this research aims to identify the gap between the skills that are viewed as most important and those that are possessed by recent graduates in the context of the Italian economy with the goal of identifying possible areas for improvement.

The paper is organized as follows. The following section discusses the concepts of employability and soft skills. Section three describes the methodology used for the empirical survey. Section four presents the results. The final section provides concluding remarks and key academic and managerial implications for HEIs, institutions, and policymakers.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Graduate employability

As Sin and Amaral (2017) noted, the concept of graduate employability highlights the inherent assumption that higher education should produce "work-ready" individuals. The policy debate on the relationship between higher education and the labor market, in fact, has focused on the need to promote the employability of graduates by equipping them with appropriate skills for the labor market (Teichler, 2009).

Thus, graduate employability, which is defined as "the ability to realize one's potential through sustained employment" (Hillage and Pollard, 1998), has become a new mission for HEIs. Furthermore, graduate employability plays a key role in both the development of "employability skills" that enable young graduates to adapt proactively to the world of work and related personal and social circumstances (Suleman, 2018) as well as the provision of innovative education that aims to reduce social inequalities and adapt students' skills to the challenges of today's society and Industry 4.0.

Within this framework, HEIs face difficulties due to the complexity of the concept of employability, as there is still no universally accepted conceptualization of this term (James *et al.*, 2013; Clarke 2017; Griffiths *et al.*, 2018; McQuaid and Linsay, 2005; Al-Asefer *et al.*, 2021). Research on employability has focused on several antecedents, such as external factors related to public employment policies or the welfare system (Ernst Kossek *et al.*, 2003; Bowen *et al.*, 1995) and individual factors, such as (soft and hard) skills (Heijde and Van Der Heijden, 2006), applicant performance during the interview and placement stages (Hazer and Jacobson, 2003), and social capital (Stoloff *et al.*, 1999; Brown and Konrad, 2001; Chapple, 2002). Researchers have often offered conceptualizations that focus more on individual aspects (i.e., the labor supply side) (Hillage and Pollard, 1998) or conceptualizations that are more unbalanced in favor of labor market aspects (i.e., the labor demand side) (Peck and Theodore, 2000).

The definition of employability used in this paper was proposed by Clarke (2018), who viewed graduate employability as a construct that includes "human capital, social capital, and individual behaviors and characteristics that underlie an individual's perceived employability in a labor market context and that together influence employment outcomes". This definition "holistically" encompasses the dimensions of graduate employability and is consistent with the assertion that an individual's employability is explained by a variety of factors (Brown *et al.*, 2003; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; Tomlinson, 2012).

### 2.2 The role of soft skills in employability

Scholars have noted that changes such as increased globalization, greater job insecurity, the massification of higher education, and the transition to a knowledge economy have given rise to the need for graduates to develop

"employability skills" (Sin and Neave, 2016; Clarke, 2018; Al-Asefer *et al.*, 2021).

Thus, college graduates can no longer rely solely on their college degrees (de Weert, 2007) but instead must be flexible and adapt to changes in the labor market by developing and achieving a "positional advantage over other graduates with similar academic profiles" (Tomlinson, 2012). This advantage can be achieved by developing and acquiring transferable/soft skills in addition to hard skills (Clarke, 2018), which are now considered by employers to be the most important type of skill (Archer and Davison, 2008; Pastore *et al.*, 2023). The literature still faces the problems of defining, naming, and classifying "soft skills". These skills have also been called life skills (WHO 1993), generic skills, transversal skills, key competencies (OECD 2003, 2012), lifelong learning skills (EU 2006), generic or employability skills, etc.

All these terms contrast with "hard skills", i.e., the specific technical skills that characterize an occupation (Heckman and Kautz, 2012). This paper adopts Haselberger *et al.*, 's (2012) definition: "Soft skills are a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, interpersonal skills, intellectual skills, and practical skills. Soft skills help people adapt and behave positively so they can effectively meet the challenges of their professional and daily lives" (p. 67).

According to this definition, soft skills refer to a wide range of interpersonal and social qualities and abilities that are transferable to all business sectors and professions. The literature has proposed many classifications of such skills, which can be very broad. In this scenario, we opted to include the most widely used list of soft skills used in the European ModEs Project (2012) (Haselberger *et al.*, 2012), also used by Succi and Canovi (2020), which identifies 21 soft skills that are divided into three categories: personal skills (aspects related to the attitudinal component of the skill), social skills (aspects related to interpersonal relationships) and methodological skills (aspects related to the methodological aspects of the work, both in the field of management and performance and in that of innovation and change).

Given the increasing focus on sustainability, we also chose to include a fourth category: sustainability skills or green skills, i.e., the "skillful management of our (natural) environment" (Coeckelbergh, 2015). These skills are critical for companies' pursuit of sustainable development goals and green transformation (Cabral and Dhar, 2021; EC, 2023) and thus for recent graduates entering the 21st century workforce.

*Tab. 1: List of the 25 soft skills included in our survey*

| Category | Soft Skill Description |
|---|---|
| Personal | *Tolerance to Stress.* The ability to exhibit endurance in complicated or stressful situations.<br>*Life Balance.* The ability to manage conflicts between life and work, i.e., between personal and corporate goals and values.<br>*Creativity/Innovation.* The ability to contribute new ideas to generate improvements within the organization.<br>*Learning Skills.* The ability to provide a self-assessment of the necessities of knowledge (theoretical or practical) and implement measures aimed at acquiring and implementing this knowledge.<br>*Professional Ethics.* The ability to take actions while bearing in mind the principles and ethics of the profession in the context of daily activities.<br>*Self-Awareness.* The ability to grasp our real weaknesses and strengths as well as the motivations and values underlying our behavior. |
| Social | *Communication Skills in Italian.* The ability to transmit ideas, information, and opinions clearly and convincingly both verbally and in writing while listening and being receptive to the proposals of others.<br>*Communication Skills in English.* The ability to transmit ideas and share information and opinions clearly in English.<br>*Teamwork.* The ability to establish relationships of participation and cooperation with other people.<br>*Contact Network.* The ability to develop, maintain and foster contacts both within and outside the organization<br>*Negotiation.* The ability to argue clearly and coherently and reconcile different opinions to reach an agreement that satisfies everyone with the aim of achieving the proposed goals.<br>*Conflict Management.* The ability to manage conflict, which entails stimulating, regulating, or resolving conflict between two or more parties.<br>*Leadership.* The ability to motivate and guide others to encourage them to contribute effectively and adequately to the attainment of the objectives.<br>*Culture Adaptability.* The ability to carry out managerial and entrepreneurial processes in multicultural environments. |
| Methodological | *Decision Making.* The ability to make the decisions necessary to achieve the objectives quickly and proactively.<br>*Analytical Skills.* The ability to draw conclusions and make predictions regarding the future by obtaining information from different sources and establishing cause and effect relationships.<br>*Management Skills.* The ability to set goals and priorities based on the selection and distribution of the tasks and resources.<br>*Adaptability to Changes.* The ability to redirect the course of action to meet the goals in a new situation.<br>*Continuous Improvement.* The ability to pursue continuous improvement by proposing the adaptation and modernization of the process and techniques currently in use.<br>*Results Orientation.* The ability to render the organizational efforts effective while continually bearing in mind the goals being pursued.<br>*Research and Information Management Skills.* The ability to find information in the literature or on the internet and to use various research methods and evaluation techniques. |
| Sustainability/Green | *Awareness of Environmental Issues.* The ability to solve ecological problems independently expresses the actuality of the problem of finding a solution. (Dlimbetova *et al.*, 2015)<br>*Normative Competence.* The ability to map, apply, and reconcile sustainable values, principles, and goals. (Wiek *et al.*, 2011)<br>*Long-Term Orientation.* The ability to create long-term value. (Lueneburger and Goleman, 2010)<br>*Inclusion and Diversity Management.* The ability to respect diversity, understand differences and adapt one's approach to different situations. (Hind *et al.*, 2009) |

Source: Our elaboration

*2.3 Evaluation of soft skills*

In recent years, the academic literature has paid considerable attention to the evaluation of soft skills in terms of their importance and satisfaction; however, to date, these studies have offered only an incomplete and fragmented picture and show a lack of attention to the Italian context.

Empirical studies have shown that no consensus has yet been reached regarding which soft skills are most important. Employers, students, and academics assign different levels of importance to different soft skills (Succi and Canovi, 2020; Suleman, 2018; Baker *et al.*, 2017). Very often, students underestimate the importance of soft skills (Rizwan *et al.*, 2018, Succi and Canovi, 2020), which causes them to take longer to obtain work after graduation (Tushar and Sooraksa, 2023).

Most previous employability studies have analyzed skills related to specific subjects, such as accounting (Dunbar *et al.*, 2016; Chaplin, 2016), business (Jackson and Chapman, 2012), engineering (Rizwan *et al.,* 2018), manufacturing (Rasul *et al.*, 2013; Hamid *et al.*, 2014), and sports (Baker *et al.*, 2017), thereby highlighting different priorities for different soft skills. For example, thinking skills and interpersonal skills are considered the most important skills for engineers (Rizwan *et al.*, 2018), while studies focusing on the banking sector have put more emphasis on listening, problem solving, and communication skills (Abbasi *et al.*, 2018). In Italy, the perceptions of tourism professionals of the soft skills necessary for that profession have been analyzed, revealing insufficient awareness among young recent graduates (Bustreo *et al.*, 2018). In studies that aimed to research soft skills across all professions, in many cases, the skills used for relevance appear to be either limited (12 skills) (Abbasi *et al.*, 2018) or involve technical skills (e.g., Chaplin, 2016). From a human capital perspective, these evaluations do not reflect the skills that are critical for multidirectional career paths in the 21st century workspace, as shown by a recent literature review (Tushar and Sooraksa, 2023) that, moreover, confirms our choice regarding the chosen skills (see Tab. 1).

Both graduates and universities must know what soft skills can facilitate entry into the workforce regardless of the occupation or industry in question if they are to enhance the skills that can ensure students' entry into the workforce. In fact, soft skills need to be acquired and developed throughout students' lifetimes to function effectively both in academics and to have qualities that enhance future employability (Al-Asefer *et al.*, 2021). In these periods, students may not know what their future job will be, so it is good that they possess the basic skills for each job. However, some studies have measured graduate employability regarding a range of industries (e.g. Su and Zhang, 2015, Pitan, 2017; Deming and Kahn, 2018) in countries such as China, Nigeria, the USA, and Romania, thus highlighting communication skills and managerial skills as the most important types of skills for entering the world of work. In Italy, only Lo Presti *et al.*, (2022) studied soft skills for employability across sectors; however, they did not focus specifically on recent graduates. Studies that have used a cross-national perspective to assess transversal skills have revealed differences in the skills that are required of college graduates across countries (Succi and

Canovi, 2020; Baker *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is important to consider the context of specific countries, as cultural differences and the labor market environment affect the soft skills that are required of young graduates (Clarke, 2018; Tushar and Sooraksa, 2023).

Accordingly, we aim to answer the following research questions: *RQ1. What are the most important soft skills that graduates (as the supply side of the labor market) need to possess to enter the labor market in Italy? RQ2. Are employers satisfied with the soft skills endowment possessed by recent graduates entering the labor market in Italy? RQ3. Which soft skills have a greater disparity between importance and satisfaction?* Our study aims to explore "must-have" soft skills for young graduates to successfully enter the workforce, regardless of their chosen profession, from the perspective of employers (Al-Asefer *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, we seek to assess employers' satisfaction levels regarding graduates' possession of these skills, aiming to identify any existing gaps. The primary objective of this study is to gauge the significance of and satisfaction with the soft skills of young graduates entering the labor market, thereby providing actionable insights to Italian universities, organizations, policymakers, and students themselves. These insights will inform the direction for training and developing the most crucial soft skills essential for employability (Tushar and Sooraksa, 2023).

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Data collection

Our study focused on managers working with recently graduates in Italy. Participants were recruited through email communication, and bespoke databases were used for sampling purposes. Fifteen individuals were excluded for not meeting the role criterion (screening question: "Do you work with recently graduated personnel? "), and twenty-five respondents were excluded due to failing the attention checks or due to incomplete responses. Therefore, our final sample comprised 392 valid responses, with a gender distribution of 53.6% women and 2.8% nonbinary individuals. Regarding seniority, participants included those with 1-5 years of experience (25%), 5-10 years (21.7%), 10-20 years (29.8%), or 20 or more years (23.5%). The respondents were employed in both national (33.6%) and international (66.4%) companies operating within Italy, encompassing a diverse range of sizes, from small to large. Specifically, these companies had the following distribution of employees: 1-49 employees (34.5%), 50-249 employees (16.5%), 250-499 employees (7%), 500-999 employees (8.3%), and 1000 or more employees (33.7%). Furthermore, these companies operated across various sectors, including banking, insurance, tourism, and advertising. The respondents were drawn from several organizational areas (in particular, corporate management = 23.2%; R&D = 15.1%; HR = 13.8%; logistics and distribution = 5.5%; administration and finance = 5%; marketing = 4.4%; sales = 3.9%).

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To collect the data, we designed and distributed a self-administered questionnaire with a focus on 25 soft skills.

The soft skills selected referred to four categories listed in Table 1: "Personal Soft Skills", "Social Soft Skills", "Methodological Soft Skills" and "Green Soft Skills". The "personal", "social" and "methodological" soft skills were drawn and measured from the most widely used list associated with the European ModEs Project (2012), while the "green" soft skills were identified by considering several academic studies (e.g., Hind *et al.*, 2009; Lueneburger and Goleman, 2010; Wiek *et al.*, 2011; Dlimbetova *et al.*, 2015). Specifically, we measured six personal soft skills, namely, tolerance to stress, life balance, creativity/innovation, learning skills, professional ethics, and self-awareness. Additionally, seven social soft skills, namely, communication skills in Italian and English, teamwork, contact networks, negotiation, conflict management, leadership, and cultural adaptability, were assessed. Moreover, seven competencies associated with "methodological skills" were identified: decision making, analytical skills, management skills, adaptability to change, continuous improvement, results orientation, and research and information management skills. Finally, awareness of environmental issues, normative competence, long-term orientation, and inclusion and diversity management were categorized under "green soft skills".

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. In the first section, managers were asked to indicate how important the 25 selected skills were for graduates on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "very low" to "very high". Then, in section 2, the respondents were asked to rate the degree to which the graduates possessed each soft skill on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "very dissatisfied" to "very satisfied". Finally, in the last section, we collected structural data (e.g., gender, seniority, organizational area). A similar questionnaire design was used by Ramadi *et al.*, (2016) and Abbasi *et al.*, (2018) for the simultaneous collection of data regarding the importance of and satisfaction with graduates' soft skills.

Finally, data analysis was conducted utilizing descriptive statistics to rank the most and least important competencies for managers based on mean scores (see Table 2) and to rank the most and least satisfying competencies for managers according to mean satisfaction scores (see Table 3). Additionally, paired samples t tests were performed to compare the importance and satisfaction levels for each soft skill. One-sample t tests were also conducted to investigate whether the mean importance score of each soft skill significantly differed from the average of the mean importance scores and whether the mean satisfaction score of each soft skill significantly differed from the average of the mean satisfaction scores (refer to the Appendix, Table 5). These analyses were performed using SPSS software (version 28).

## 4. Findings

To find the most and least important competencies for managers, the soft skills were ranked according to their mean scores (Table 2). Regarding graduates' ability to accomplish goals successfully in different areas, managers assigned the greatest importance to "communication skills in Italian" (M = 6.48), "teamwork" (M = 6.42), and "learning skills" (M = 6.40). However, respondents rated "decision making" (M = 5.30), "normative competencies" (M = 5.24), and "leadership" (M = 4.95) as less important. Concerning satisfaction (Table 3), "Inclusion and diversity management" (M = 5.30), "awareness of environmental issues" (M = 5.16), and "learning skills" (M = 5.08) were the most highly rated skills, while the lowest level of satisfaction was observed in the context of "negotiation" (M = 4.02), "decision making" (M = 3.99) and "leadership" (M = 3.92) skills.

*Tab. 2: Rankings and ratings of the importance of the soft skills possessed by young graduates*

| Rank | Importance of soft skills | Mean |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Communication Skills in Italian | 6.48 |
| 2 | Teamwork | 6.42 |
| 3 | Learning Skills | 6.40 |
| 4 | Professional Ethics | 6.29 |
| 5 | Continuous Improvement | 6.24 |
| 6 | Research and Information Manag. Skills | 6.19 |
| 7 | Analytical Skills | 6.15 |
| 8 | Adaptability to Changes | 6.11 |
| 9 | Management Skills | 6.06 |
| 10 | Results Orientation | 6.00 |
| 11 | Creativity/Innovation | 5.94 |
| 12 | Awareness of Environmental Issues | 5.84 |
| 13 | Contact Network | 5.75 |
| 14 | Communication Skills in English | 5.74 |
| 15 | Conflict Management | 5.74 |
| 16 | Self-Awareness | 5.69 |
| 17 | Inclusion and Diversity Management | 5.68 |
| 18 | Culture Adaptability | 5.66 |
| 19 | Tolerance to Stress | 5.61 |
| 20 | Long-Term Orientation | 5.58 |
| 21 | Life balance | 5.32 |
| 22 | Negotiation | 5.32 |
| 23 | Decision Making | 5.30 |
| 24 | Normative Competence | 5.24 |
| 25 | Leadership | 4.95 |

Source: Our elaboration

*Tab. 3: Rankings and ratings of satisfaction with the soft skills possessed by young graduates*

| Rank | Satisfaction of soft skills | Mean |
|------|------------------------------|------|
| 1 | Inclusion and Diversity Management | 5.30 |
| 2 | Awareness of Environmental Issues | 5.16 |
| 3 | Learning Skills | 5.08 |
| 4 | Professional Ethics | 4.97 |
| 5 | Culture Adaptability | 4.89 |
| 6 | Teamwork | 4.89 |
| 7 | Continuous Improvement | 4.87 |
| 8 | Communication Skills in Italian | 4.86 |
| 9 | Life Balance | 4.67 |
| 10 | Results Orientation | 4.61 |
| 11 | Analytical Skills | 4.60 |
| 12 | Contact Network | 4.59 |
| 13 | Adaptability to Changes | 4.57 |
| 14 | Communication Skills in English | 4.56 |
| 15 | Creativity/Innovation | 4.47 |
| 16 | Long-Term Orientation | 4.45 |
| 17 | Normative Competence | 4.44 |
| 18 | Research and Information Manag. Skills | 4.43 |
| 19 | Tolerance to Stress | 4.34 |
| 20 | Self-Awareness | 4.16 |
| 21 | Conflict Management | 4.07 |
| 22 | Management Skills | 4.04 |
| 23 | Negotiation | 4.02 |
| 24 | Decision Making | 3.99 |
| 25 | Leadership | 3.92 |

Source: Our elaboration

Moreover, we performed a series of paired samples t tests on the mean scores to compare the importance of and satisfaction with soft skills. Table 4 shows the mean differences in descending order. Specifically, our findings highlight significant gaps across all 25 soft skills (i.e., the mean score for satisfaction is significantly lower than the mean score for importance). The greatest differences pertain to "research and information management skills" ($\Delta = 2.023$), "management skills" ($\Delta = 1.765$), and "conflict management" ($\Delta = 1.671$), while the smallest differences pertain to "awareness of environmental issues" ($\Delta = 0.689$), "life balance" ($\Delta = 0.653$), and "inclusion and diversity management" ($\Delta = 0.383$).

*Tab. 4: Paired samples t test to compare the importance of and satisfaction with skills*

| | Importance | | Satisfaction | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean Diff. | Sig. |
| Research and Information Manag, Skills | 6.06 | 1.05 | 4.04 | 1.45 | 2.023 | 0 |
| Management Skills | 6.19 | 1.12 | 4.43 | 1.44 | 1.765 | 0 |
| Conflict Management | 5.74 | 1.25 | 4.07 | 1.48 | 1.671 | 0 |
| Communication Skills in Italian | 6.48 | 0.89 | 4.86 | 1.44 | 1.622 | 0 |
| Analytical Skills | 6.15 | 0.92 | 4.6 | 1.31 | 1.554 | 0 |
| Adaptability to Changes | 6.11 | 0.99 | 4.57 | 1.29 | 1.546 | 0 |
| Self-Awareness | 5.69 | 1.28 | 4.16 | 1.45 | 1.538 | 0 |
| Teamwork | 6.42 | 0.9 | 4.89 | 1.36 | 1.531 | 0 |
| Creativity/Innovation | 5.94 | 1.14 | 4.47 | 1.45 | 1.464 | 0 |
| Results Orientation | 6 | 1.13 | 4.61 | 1.35 | 1.385 | 0 |
| Continuous Improvement | 6.24 | 0.97 | 4.87 | 1.29 | 1.367 | 0 |
| Learning Skills | 6.4 | 0.89 | 5.08 | 1.4 | 1.324 | 0 |
| Professional Ethics | 6.29 | 1.12 | 4.97 | 1.44 | 1.311 | 0 |
| Decision Making | 5.3 | 1.31 | 3.99 | 1.34 | 1.309 | 0 |
| Negotiation | 5.32 | 1.3 | 4.02 | 1.42 | 1.301 | 0 |
| Communication Skills in English | 5.74 | 1.21 | 4.56 | 1.4 | 1.181 | 0 |
| Contact Network | 5.75 | 1.15 | 4.59 | 1.3 | 1.166 | 0 |
| Long-Term Orientation | 5.58 | 1.25 | 4.45 | 1.4 | 1.135 | 0 |
| Leadership | 4.95 | 1.29 | 3.92 | 1.29 | 1.031 | 0 |
| Tolerance to Stress | 5.61 | 1.17 | 4.34 | 1.45 | 1.268 | 0 |
| Normative Competence | 5.24 | 1.38 | 4.44 | 1.47 | 0.806 | 0 |
| Culture Adaptability | 5.66 | 1.22 | 4.89 | 1.47 | 0.768 | 0 |
| Awareness of Environmental Issues | 5.84 | 1.25 | 5.16 | 1.31 | 0.686 | 0 |
| Life Balance | 5.32 | 1.31 | 4.67 | 1.34 | 0.653 | 0 |
| Inclusion and Diversity Management | 5.68 | 1.36 | 5.3 | 1.36 | 0.383 | 0 |

Note: All differences are statistically significant at the p<0.001 level.

Source: Our elaboration

To provide a comprehensive overview, we organized the achieved findings to produce an importance-satisfaction matrix (Figure 1). Specifically, the matrix was based on statistical processing (Appendix, Table 5, and Table 6); the averages of the mean importance-satisfaction scores represent the origin of the axes, while the lower and upper extremes were identified by subtracting or adding one standard deviation (i.e., lower extreme = -1SD + M, upper extreme = M + 1SD). Furthermore, we performed a series of one-sample t tests to investigate whether the mean importance score of each soft skill differed significantly from the average of the mean importance scores and whether the mean satisfaction score of each soft skill differed significantly from the average of the mean satisfaction scores (Appendix, Table 5). In this way, we obtained a four-quadrant matrix: 1. *High-priority reinforcement* (low satisfaction and high importance), 2. *Consolidate as stars* (high satisfaction and high importance), 3. *Future investment in the job* (low satisfaction and low importance), and 4. *Low-priority maintenance* (high satisfaction and low importance). Each quadrant is a conduit for specific managerial actions, which are discussed in depth in the corresponding section of the manuscript (i.e.,

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5.2 Managerial Implications). Figure 1 shows that "communication skills in Italian", "learning skills", "teamwork", "professional ethics" and "continuous improvements" should be viewed as soft skills that must be consolidated as stars, while "research and information management skills", "management skills", "analytical skills", and "creativity/innovation" require high-priority reinforcement. Finally, "inclusion and diversity management", "contact network", "cultural adaptability", "communication skills in English", and "life balance" are associated with low-priority maintenance, and soft skills such as "leadership", "decision making", "negotiation", and "normative competencies" could be considered for future investment in the job.

*Fig. 1: Soft skills matrix for intervention areas*
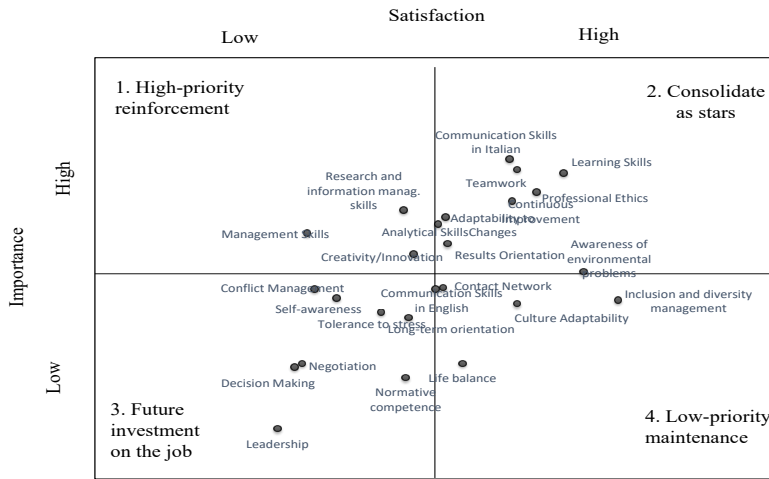


Source: Our elaboration

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Discussion and academic implications

This study aims to assess the importance of and satisfaction with 25 soft skills necessary for entering the workforce in Italy by focusing on the perspective of employers. Specifically, we ranked the soft skills according to their importance and satisfaction. In addition, we highlighted the significant gaps (importance-satisfaction) associated with all 25 soft skills. Finally, we classified our results into a four-quadrant importance-satisfaction matrix and labeled the soft skills according to the actions that should be pursued in each case.

Our results, in line with those of previous studies, show that soft skills are considered important in the workplace by employers (Archer and Davison, 2008; Andrews and Higson, 2008; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). However, our results indicate the presence of widespread employer dissatisfaction with the soft skills of recent graduates in Italy, in line with the trend found in other countries (Tushar and Sooraksa, 2023). Thus, it appears that interventions aimed at addressing these gaps are necessary.

The soft skills that are considered most important by employers in all business sectors and corporate functions are communication skills and the ability to work within a team. These skills have also been found by other studies to be the most desirable (Dundar *et al.*, 2016; Chaplin, 2016; Rasul *et al.*, 2013; Succi and Canovi, 2020). Our study highlights the fact that the ability to communicate in the native language of the context in question (i.e., Italian) is more important than the ability to communicate in foreign languages, which has a much lower value in our ranking (see Table 2). "Learning skills" are also considered very important in a context in which companies increasingly resemble the learning organization model (Segne, 1990, 2006). Professional ethics, i.e., daily actions that account for the principles and ethics of the profession in question, is also considered very important by Italian managers, a finding that conflicts with those reported by studies that have adopted a cross-national perspective (i.e., Succi and Canovi, 2020).

Soft skills such as "decision making" and "leadership" are not, on the other hand, considered a priority for the entry of young recent graduates into the world of work according to managers. They are, in fact, skills that gain importance at higher levels of expertise.

Given the increasing attention given to corporate sustainability (economic, social, and environmental), "green skills" are becoming increasingly important for companies. Our results indicate high managerial satisfaction with the possession of these skills by young graduates, such as "inclusion and diversity management" and "awareness of environmental issues". Previous studies have not considered sustainability skills (Tushar and Sooraksa, 2023); however, our results are in line with studies that have shown that members of later generations (Millennials and Generation Z) are particularly sensitive to sustainability issues (Gomes *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, according to EY Foundation Onlus in its report "Digital Sustainability Index Young, 2023", young Italian people are among the "most digitally sustainable" groups in Europe.

The largest gaps between importance and satisfaction are seen in the context of "methodological" and "social" skills such as "research and information management", "management skills", "conflict management", and "communication skills". Interventions in these areas must be prioritized.

The study confirms that an analysis of the skills required by the world of work in Italy was necessary and, in addition to filling a gap in the literature, provides a foundation for future developments. For example, the results confirm the need for specific interventions to improve the soft skills that are considered important by employers. Higher education institutions could introduce specific events (e.g., workshops, seminars, laboratories) led by professionals from the world of work or introduce teaching methods that promote these skills into institutional courses (Crebert *et al.*, 2004; Chamorro-Premuzic *et al.*, 2010). Universities can also encourage extracurricular activities that are deemed useful for acquiring such skills, such as internships, periods of study abroad, collaborations to promote the implementation of guidance and tutoring services, the establishment of offices related to student representation in university governance, volunteer and sports activities, and participation in specific projects

promoted by university colleges (Ciappei and Cinque, 2014). To encourage student participation in such activities, it is necessary to certify the skills that students can acquire through such participation as valuable for the labor market. A virtuous example of this approach is the *open badge,* which allows the experiences/skills that can be acquired through a variety of activities to be recognized easily in a way that is sufficiently broad and shared throughout the European context.

Importantly, universities are not alone regarding their responsibility for the employability of young recent graduates; governments, industry organizations, and individual employers are also responsible for promoting employability skills (Tasker and Packham, 1994; Sin and Amaral, 2016), and these actors can possibly work synergistically.

In summary, our study offers valuable insights into the essential employability skills crucial for success in 21st-century workplaces in Italy. By shedding light on these skills, our findings can assist employers, educators, and policymakers in better preparing young individuals for success in the contemporary workforce landscape.

## 5.2 Managerial implications

Market-oriented employability skills are necessary for recent graduates to enter the world of work (Mahajan *et al.*, 2022; Tymon, 2013). Moreover, these skills change over time (Tushar and Sooraksa, 2023) and are context-country specific (Tushar and Sooraksa, 2023; Clarke, 2018). Therefore, employability skills should be developed based on managers' expectations (Tymon, 2013). In fact, students/graduates do not have accurate expectations regarding their professional skills and therefore do not recognize the level of competency that is required for them to enter the workforce (Lim *et al.*, 2016). In this regard, this study provides graduates with guidance regarding what they must learn and how they must "be" to increase their chances of being hired for their preferred job.

The skill gaps identified in this study can help universities revise and improve curricula and additional training, strengthening the effectiveness of placement and career service offices. Individual teachers should also encourage the development of the necessary soft skills and adapt them to their own fields by helping students apply their knowledge in practice based on simulations of real-world contexts. Similarly, ad hoc extracurricular or curricular training should be provided at universities to encourage students to develop specific skills. By identifying the specific skills most in demand by employers in Italy, higher education institutions can ensure that their students are well prepared for the modern world of work and have the best chance of finding a job after graduation. In fact, more attention should be given to "high-priority reinforcement", i.e., the soft skills that managers consider most important for career entry but that young people do not possess to a sufficient degree, such as "information research and management skills" or "creativity/innovation skills". Ongoing monitoring in the context of continuous development programs must be devoted to skills in the "consolidate as stars" quadrant, such as "learning skills" and

"continuous improvement". Specific programs should be dedicated to these two quadrants of the matrix as needed.

The study also has implications for managers who can consider the skills that are required for entry into the workforce and for calibrating their personnel selection and training tools for different career stages. For example, they can provide induction programs featuring training activities with a focus on "management skills" and offer courses on "leadership" and "decision making" at later stages.

For policy makers, this study provides information that can be used to direct public finances to support universities in developing soft skills training courses and helping companies train their young employees. Soft skills are necessary for employability, which in turn ensures an improvement of the entire Italian economic system.

### 5.3 Limitations and directions for future research

The first limitation of the study is the narrow perspective from which the skills gap of recent graduates was measured, i.e., solely from the perspective of employers, thus ignoring the perspectives of academics and students. In addition, this study investigated only soft skills, thereby ignoring other variables such as the traits, knowledge, and attitudes of recent graduates.

Future studies can be designed to examine skills gaps from different perspectives and by accounting for other factors, such as graduates' characteristics, knowledge, and attitudes. In addition, future studies should examine the specific soft skills associated with different sectors and business functions with the goal of providing universities with concrete evidence that they can use as a foundation for individual curricula with the soft skills that are required in the professional world.

Future researchers could focus on longitudinal samples to measure the employability of graduates at different points in their careers with the goal of identifying the most effective types of soft skills training and development programs.

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## Appendix

*Tab. 5: One-sample t test IMPORTANCE*

| | test value = 5.828 | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | SD | p |
| Tolerance To Stress | 5.61 | 1.174 | 0.000 |
| Creativity / Innovation | 5.94 | 1.144 | 0.062 |
| Professional ethics | 6.29 | 1.119 | 0.000 |
| Learning Skills | 6.40 | 0.891 | 0.000 |
| Life Balance | 5.32 | 1.308 | 0.000 |
| Self-awareness | 5.69 | 1.275 | 0.038 |
| Communication skills In Italian | 6.48 | 0.885 | 0.000 |
| Communication skills in English | 5.74 | 1.207 | ***0.149 |
| Contact Network | 5.75 | 1.145 | ***0.193 |
| Culture adaptability | 5.66 | 1.224 | 0.007 |
| Leadership | 4.95 | 1.292 | 0.000 |
| Teamwork | 6.42 | 0.901 | 0.000 |
| Negotiation | 5.32 | 1.303 | 0.000 |
| Conflict management | 5.74 | 1.251 | ***0.152 |
| Analytical skills | 6.15 | 0.923 | 0.000 |
| Continuous improvement | 6.24 | 0.967 | 0.000 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Results orientation | 6.00 | 1.133 | 0.003 |
| Adaptability To Changes | 6.11 | 0.987 | 0.000 |
| Decision Making | 5.30 | 1.307 | 0.000 |
| Research and Information Management Skills | 6.06 | 1.046 | 0.000 |
| Management skills | 6.19 | 1.121 | 0.000 |
| Inclusion and diversity management | 5.68 | 1.362 | 0.030 |
| Long-term orientation | 5.58 | 1.248 | 0.000 |
| Awareness of environmental issues | 5.84 | 1.251 | ***0.795 |
| Normative Competence | 5.24 | 1.379 | 0.000 |

Note: ***not significant

*Tab. 6: One-sample t test SATISFACTION*

| | test value = 5.828 | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | SD | p |
| Tolerance To Stress | 4.34 | 1.445 | 0.004 |
| Creativity / Innovation | 4.47 | 1.451 | ***0.241 |
| Professional ethics | 4.97 | 1.436 | 0.000 |
| Learning Skills | *5.08* | 1.397 | 0.000 |
| Life Balance | 4.67 | 1.343 | ***0.113 |
| Self-awareness | 4.16 | 1.449 | 0.000 |
| Communication skills In Italian | 4.86 | 1.442 | 0.000 |
| Communication skills in English | 4.56 | 1.402 | ***0.992 |
| Contact Network | 4.59 | 1.296 | ***0.661 |
| Culture adaptability | 4.89 | 1.307 | 0.000 |
| Leadership | 3.92 | 1.293 | 0.000 |
| Teamwork | 4.89 | 1.360 | 0.000 |
| Negotiation | 4.02 | 1.423 | 0.000 |
| Conflict management | 4.07 | 1.483 | 0.000 |
| Analytical skills | 4.60 | 1.305 | 0.529 |
| Continuous improvement | 4.87 | 1.279 | 0.000 |
| Results orientation | 4.61 | 1.354 | ***0.407 |
| Adaptability To Changes | 4.57 | 1.290 | ***0.898 |
| Decision Making | 3.99 | 1.336 | 0.000 |
| Research and Information Management Skills | 4.04 | 1.449 | 0.000 |
| Management skills | 4.43 | 1.439 | 0.076 |
| Inclusion and diversity management | 5.30 | 1.355 | 0.000 |
| Long-term orientation | 4.45 | 1.404 | ***0.125 |
| Awareness of environmental issues | 5.16 | 1.311 | 0.000 |
| Normative Competence | 4.44 | 1.471 | ***0.102 |

Note: ***not significant