

MANAGING SOFT SKILLS FOR AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO EMPLOYABILITY

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ABSTRACT The paper underlines the crucial importance of soft skills for improving employability in today's European labour market. For the study, extensive surveys were conducted with over 350 participants from various European organizations to identify the soft skills most valued by employers and those recognized by jobseekers. The results show that key soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, adaptability and leadership are an important complement to technical skills. However, despite their recognized value, soft skills often lack systematic development and formal validation as education and training programmes continue to prioritize hard skills. To address this imbalance, the paper proposes the development of a standardized soft skills reference framework to support more consistent recognition and assessment of these skills. This initiative aims to improve job matching and workforce allocation by enabling clearer communication of applicants' full skill sets, benefiting jobseekers, employers and career development professionals. The study calls for a paradigm shift in the way soft skills are integrated into recruitment and workforce planning. It suggests that a more structured approach could significantly improve the effectiveness, adaptability and competitiveness of the European workforce.

KEYWORDS: *Competitiveness, Employment, Innovation, Management, Soft Skills*

1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of soft skills in the modern workplace is increasingly recognized as essential for both individual careers and organisational success. The aim of this article is to understand the key aspects of these non-technical skills and emphasize their role over and above traditional hard skills. It highlights the urgent need for a standardized framework to validate and recognize soft skills in order to improve employability and efficiency in the workplace.

Soft skills, which include interpersonal relation-

ships, communication skills, problem-solving skills and adaptability, are essential to navigate the complexities of today's dynamic labour market. Despite their importance, these skills often lack formal recognition and standardized assessment methods, leading to a mismatch between individual competencies and employer expectations. This discrepancy highlights the need for a validated approach to soft skills that ensures individuals can credibly present their skills to potential employers. When examining the landscape of soft skills in different national contexts, the differences in the way these skills are perceived, valued

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and integrated into the workforce become apparent. The results of a series of surveys conducted in several European countries show that both jobseekers and employers recognize the importance of soft skills. However, the results also show that there is a lack of a standardized methodology for assessing and validating these skills, which points to the need for a standardized framework that can be applied universally. The development of a standardized framework for soft skills proves to be an important solution to this challenge. Such a framework could not only facilitate the validation of soft skills, but also align them with the evolving needs of the labour market, making the process of personnel selection more efficient and effective. This initiative will not only benefit jobseekers, who will be able to demonstrate their skills more accurately, but also employers, who will have a more reliable means of assessing potential candidates.

The paper argues in favour of integrating soft skills into the wider education and employment system, as this could significantly improve workforce development and employability. By introducing a standardized soft skills credential, the gap between educational outcomes and labour market demands can be bridged, leading to a more adaptable and competent workforce. Soft skills are not only about recognizing their value, but also about innovatively standardizing and integrating them into the structure of employment and education. In this way, it is possible to create a more dynamic and inclusive labour market that values and promotes the full range of professional skills.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Collective research underscores the central role of soft skills development in different levels of educational and professional contexts and highlights the importance of embedding these skills in curricula to equip individuals for the complexities of today's workplace and social interactions. Musa et al. (2012) highlight project-based learning (PjBL) as a crucial method for developing soft skills such as teamwork, communication and problem solving. Using a course on workplace communication, they found that PjBL effectively prepares students for the soft skills required by employers, highlighting its importance for the 21st century educational and work environment. Rasli (2020) discusses the essential role of soft skills in graduate employability and emphasise the discrepancy between educational outcomes and the soft skills required by employers. They argue in favour of integrating soft skills into higher education in order to bridge this gap and support the successful integration

of graduates into the world of work. Pereira & Raposo (2019) address the importance of soft skills in the labour market and argue that these skills are essential to complement technical knowledge and thereby improve employability and job performance. The author calls for education systems to adapt to global economic demands by incorporating soft skills training. Ariratana et al. (2015) examine the development of soft skills of leaders in educational administration and find that these skills, which are essential for effective management, are very well developed. They emphasize the need for educational leaders to improve their soft skills in order to positively impact organizational and educational outcomes. Jardim et al. (2023) evaluate the "Players of Dreams" programme in Portugal, which aims to develop soft skills and promote entrepreneurial thinking in primary school students. Their findings suggest that active learning methods are effective in cultivating essential soft skills and they argue in favour of their early integration in the classroom to promote an entrepreneurial mind-set. Novais et al. (2023) explore an educational initiative that focuses on the development of soft skills in schools. Their study concludes that structured soft skills training significantly improves students' communication, collaboration and problem-solving skills, highlighting the benefits of such training for the holistic development of students. Arbuç & Dinner (2019) examine the soft skills gap in higher education of business and IT professionals and find a notable discrepancy between students' soft skills and market needs. They recommend active training methods to match students' skills with the demands of the labour market and emphasize the growing importance of soft skills in the world of work. Costantino & Rodzinka (2022) analyze the impact of soft skills on employability in the financial sector and find that these skills are becoming increasingly important alongside technical skills. Their study notes a shift towards a broader set of skills, including soft skills, and emphasizes their role in improving productivity, employee retention and leadership skills in the financial sector. Moura & Zotes (2015) examine the relationship between soft skills and organizational performance and find that there is a market demand for soft skills that improve business performance. Their research supports the integration of soft skills training to improve financial and human performance in organizations. Paredes-Velasco et al. (2023) explore the use of educational technology to enhance soft skills development and emphasize the potential of technology to create dynamic learning environments that foster these essential skills and prepare students for future workplace challenges. Diz-Otero et al. (2023) systematically review the role of music in the development of soft skills in educa-

tional contexts and conclude that musical activities effectively improve interpersonal and methodological skills such as leadership and communication, and advocate music as a valuable tool in the teaching of soft skills. Ngang et al. (2015) analyze the integration of soft skills in teacher education and identify a gap between the skills acquired at university and those needed in the teaching profession. They call for comprehensive training programmes that include the development of soft skills to improve the quality of teaching and employability. Pardo-Garcia & Barac (2020) present a case study on improving employability through entrepreneurial skills, highlighting the "MOTIVEM" competition at the University of València. Their findings suggest that such experiential learning initiatives can significantly improve students' skills and their entrepreneurial abilities. Tanković et al. (2023) investigate the influence of soft skills and communication skills on the motivation and satisfaction of female entrepreneurs in Croatia and emphasize the crucial role of these skills for business success and the promotion of entrepreneurial efforts. Ubfal et al. (2022) focus on the impact of soft skills training on Jamaican entrepreneurs and show its significant contribution to business management and success confirming the value of such a training for entrepreneurial development. Humsona & Yuliani (2018) examine how entrepreneurship education at Olifant School promotes soft skills such as creativity and self-reliance, and point to the effectiveness of the programme in improving students' entrepreneurial skills, despite limited resources and diverse perspectives of stakeholders. Garcez et al. (2023) analyze the impact of digital transformation on the development of soft skills in digital academic entrepreneurship and propose a framework to cultivate an entrepreneurial mind-set in students that is essential for navigating the digital age. Hladkoskok et al. (2022) explore the integration of soft skills into foreign language education and emphasize the need for educational approaches that prioritize soft skills development to meet employer demands and improve employability in the global marketplace. Foerster-Pastor Foerster-Metz & Golowko (2018) address the increasing demand for digital and soft skills in the Romanian business services sector and argue in favour of aligning education with industry needs in order to develop a workforce that can support digital transformation. Tsirkas et al. (2020) examine the correlation between soft skills and business performance, and suggest that these skills are fundamental to strategic business planning and improved organizational outcomes. Dolce et al. (2020) examine the discrepancy between accounting graduates' perceptions of soft skills and employers' expectations and call for educational reforms to better integrate soft skills into

accounting curricula and align them with professional standards. Pranić et al. (2021) emphasize the critical need for soft skills in tourism and hospitality education and suggest an ongoing revision of curricula to prepare students for the dynamic demands of the sector.

It is important to point out that hard skills are measurable and demonstrable, while soft skills are more difficult to assess, as they are personality traits associated with emotional intelligence. Soft skills are personal characteristics that complement hard skills and are acquired through informal education. Employers often assess soft skills through conversation and observation during interviews, and some use psychological tests to assess them. It is important that the skills assessed are those required for a particular job. In summary, these studies advocate for the systematic integration of soft skills teaching across the educational and professional landscape, recognizing the indispensable role of these skills in addressing the challenges and opportunities of the modern workplace and economy. The main objective of this study was to investigate the current state of soft skills awareness in the selected countries and to develop a structured framework for future empirical studies. This framework, referred to as the soft skills framework, which includes social, personal, organizational, collaborative and creative skills, identifies important soft skills for further analysis. The research paper aims to support the survey findings and share the findings to raise awareness of the significance of soft skills and their perception in the selected countries. In addition, the soft skills framework is expected to facilitate more in-depth research on the management and overall importance of soft skills. It is also important to highlight that the research aimed to include more EU countries to explore European soft skills readiness, but the results for each country were also presented and explained in detail.

3. THE METHODOLOGY

The survey was created after reviewing national regulations, with the aim to gain more knowledge about the awareness and importance of soft skills in each country, and to establish the framework of soft skills for future research and applications. For the survey, a quantitative research design was used to assess the awareness and significance of soft skills across five European countries: Slovenia, Italy, the Netherlands, Cyprus, and Croatia. The aim of the research was to develop a standardized soft skills framework based on empirical data. Data was collected through structured online surveys designed to gather insights

TABLE 1. Distribution of the soft skills survey

	Slovenia	Italy	The Netherlands	Cyprus	Croatia	TOTAL
Survey – jobseekers (Female/Male respondents)	21 (11/10)	20 (12/8)	19 (13/6)	24 (14/10)	31 (22/9)	115 (72/43)
Survey – employers	40	50	10	51	51	202
Total sent	75	70	70	70	80	365
Total	61	70	29	75	82	317

SOURCE Author’s own work)

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from two key respondent groups: (1) jobseekers and employed individuals, and (2) employers, human resources personnel, and other recruitment professionals. The first survey targeted a minimum of 20 participants per country, including 10 migrant jobseekers and 10 nationals, while the second survey aimed to collect at least 50 responses from employers or HR representatives. The survey was sent to at least 70 to 80 entities in each country, aiming for at least 50 responses in total for each country. The questionnaire comprised 15 questions, which included a combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to define the most important soft skills and to explore methods for verifying, assessing, and recognizing these skills in the labour market. The response rate across all participating countries was 86%, ensuring a robust dataset for the analysis, which is shown in Table 1.

The collected data was analyzed to identify commonalities and discrepancies in the perception and evaluation of soft skills among the different stakeholder groups. Based on these findings, the soft skills framework—encompassing social, personal, organizational, collaborative and creative skills—was developed as a structured reference for further research and practical applications in employability assessment and workforce development.

4. EXPLORATION OF NATIONAL STRATEGIES

The following presents the main findings of the study, which analysed the national strategies, including soft skills, for all five of the countries surveyed - Slovenia, Italy, the Netherlands, Cyprus and Croatia - including

the sources for the analysis of national strategies.

Slovenia: In Slovenia, the European Reference Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning is used as basis for defining competences. The framework identifies eight basic skills or key competences that are transferable and essential for lifelong learning. The framework was revised in 2018, with some areas being transformed, renamed, and merged with some key competencies. Soft skills are also included in the key competencies and are divided into 18 groups of competences. The Employment Service of Slovenia has developed an e-portal that offers tools for assessing key competences, including 14 soft skills such as planning and organization, interpersonal skills, and teamwork. For each soft skill, assessment tools have been developed in the form of an e-questionnaire covering also three levels of competence development. The Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE) also has different definitions and interpretations of the basic skills of adults. Basic skills appear together with literacy development in all national development documents. The Operational Development Programme for Human Resources 2007 defines the increase in linguistic literacy, learning foreign languages, access to ICT, reducing the educational deficit of adults, especially those with only basic or lower vocational education and low level of literacy, and training to develop new competences. The programme also brings together all eight basic skills as defined in the European Recommendations on Key Competences.

Italy: In Italy, soft skills are included in the programmes of local educational institutions, especially in those of secondary education, but there is currently no standardized methodology for their training and validation. While hard skills are measurable and

job-oriented, soft skills are more personal and behavioural and therefore difficult to measure. Moreover, the term “soft skills” can refer to a group of skills rather than a single one, and there is no universally accepted definition or subdivision of soft skills in Italy. The talent gap phenomenon affects all areas of business in Italy, and the fear that hard skills could become becoming redundant leads to staff turnover. Soft skills are more pronounced than hard skills in this respect, and Italian organizations are increasingly seeking professionals with experience in customer-centricity and a passion for learning, as these are important characteristics of a well-trained professional. Several projects involving Italian partners are currently underway to define a clear framework for soft skills and promote their recognition as an added value in professional curricula. Soft skills training related to digital skills and lifelong learning is being addressed by both private and public organizations.

The Netherlands: At a policy level, the focus in the Netherlands is on the development of “21st-century skills”, which include both hard and soft skills, particularly in primary and secondary education. This policy aims to prepare learners for a rapidly changing future in which new professions may emerge. The identified soft skills include cooperation, problem-solving, creativity, planning and reflection. Hard skills are more measurable and technical, such as numeracy, writing, typing, and bookkeeping, as well as specific job-related knowledge such as human anatomy or Chinese economy. Soft skills, on the other hand, are less measurable and more personal in nature, such as teamwork and leadership. In the Netherlands, however, there is no formal and generally recognised definition and subdivision of soft skills in the Netherlands. While some training programmes may focus on specific soft skills for managers, not all soft skills are of general importance.

Cyprus: The importance of soft skills in the labour market and the need for continuous training and development of these skills have been identified. The survey conducted by MMC Management Center Ltd. in the framework of the European project “Gaining and strengthening ‘soft skills’ for employment through models of supporting methods (peer coaching and mentoring)-SoS” found that good communication skills, self-confidence, self-awareness, social skills and emotional intelligence are important for employability. Employers in Cyprus tend to select candidates on the basis of their CVs, inviting them for an interview and in some cases a written test. Behaviours that would deter an employer from hiring a candidate include communication difficulties, overconfidence, lack of respect, anxiety, aggressiveness, negative attitude, recommendations, lack of

critical thinking and lack of team spirit. The research also found that all age groups need to continuously develop their soft skills and that there are adult education programmes that teach basic knowledge and soft skills. Another study by the Eurydice Network, entitled “Adult Education and Training in Europe: Programmes to Develop Achievements in Basic Skills”, found that although there is no institutional framework for adult education and basic skills in Cyprus, there are evening schools and public and private education programmes that offer courses on ICT skills, basic skills and soft skills such as communication, organization, life skills, problem solving and teamwork. In addition, there are operational soft skills validation programmes in Cyprus, including training seminars, in-house seminars, courses and workshops. A continuous training and development of soft skills is important for employability and career advancement in the rapidly changing labour market.

Croatia: In Croatia, there is currently no national strategy or policy for the validation of soft skills. While there are some courses and papers discussing the importance of soft skills in the workplace, there is no visible department or programme to validate these skills at a national level. The Croatian Chamber of Economy organised a training on soft skills in 2017 to raise awareness and showcase examples of soft skills in business practices, but soft skills are not widely accepted or formally taught. Currently, there are no operational soft skills validation programmes in Croatia and there is no clear definition or distinction of soft skills. The research findings and the competency framework could be a possible solution for defining and validating the soft skills needed in the Croatian business world.

5. SURVEY FINDINGS

The survey included five countries: Slovenia, Italy, the Netherlands, Cyprus, and Croatia. Two questionnaires were used to collect data from different target groups. The first questionnaire was addressed to both employed individuals and jobseekers, and the second questionnaire was sent to employers, human resources departments or other departments involved in the recruitment process, aiming for at least 50 responses in total for each country.

Slovenia:

Questionnaire for job seekers — The results of a questionnaire presented to jobseekers and employers were analyzed. The majority of respondents (85.7%) identified job interviews as the most important tool for determining soft skills, while 47.6% identified written tests. Communication skills were identified

as the most researched soft skill (100%), followed by teamwork (81%), responsibility (81%) and organizational skills (71.4%). The most important factors in the recruitment process were education (90%), IT skills (76%) and soft skills (57%). The most important soft skills identified were responsibility, flexibility and communication skills. Diploma and job search were the most frequently used job search services. More than half of the respondents (52.4%) stated that soft skills are not easy to prove, but 90% agreed that employers require both soft and hard skills from their employees.

Questionnaire for employers — The questionnaire was also completed by 40 employers, including 16 micro, 16 small and 8 medium-sized companies. 55% of the directors involved in the survey responded. The most important factors for the recruitment process were references (51%), hard skills (46%) and education (44%), closely followed by soft skills (41%). The soft skills that were tested prior to hiring were communication skills, teamwork, flexibility and problem solving. The majority of employers (85%) believe that soft skills testing tools would be useful.

Italy:

Questionnaire for job seekers — 85% of respondents identified job interviews as the most important tool for determining soft skills. The second most popular option, chosen by 45% of respondents, was internships or trial periods. The three most searched for soft skills were flexibility (90%), communication skills (80%) and problem-solving skills (75%). In terms of the factors considered most important in the employment process, hard skills were cited by 85% of respondents, while education and foreign language skills were rated highly by 80% of respondents. However, soft skills were considered less important than hard skills by 55% of jobseekers. The most important soft skills included dealing with stress, flexibility and communication skills. The most commonly used job search services were diplomas and certificates, followed by job search. In addition, 70% of jobseekers found it difficult to prove their soft skills and 55% agreed that employers require both soft and hard skills from their employees.

Questionnaire for employers — In a survey of 50 employers (23 micro, 17 small and 10 medium-sized companies), 65.5% of the responses were obtained from managing directors. The most important factors in the recruitment process, according to employers, were references (51%), hard skills (46%) and education (44%). Soft skills were also considered important by 41% of employers (which is in line on a par with the results from Slovenia). The most frequently tested pre-employment soft skills were flexibility (92%), problem solving (82%), dealing with stress (82%) and

customer-oriented service (78%). It is worth noting that 77% of respondents believe that it would be useful to have tools to test soft skills.

The Netherlands:

Questionnaire for job seekers — 84% of respondents stated that the job interview is the most important tool for identifying soft skills, with 32% citing the probationary period as the answer. The most frequently requested soft skills (i.e., top skills required by employers) were communication skills (84%), flexibility (74%), and customer focus (58%). The most important factors during the recruitment process are communication skills (84%), flexibility (37%) and problem solving (37%). The respondents cited the interview as the most important tool for identifying soft skills, as well as training. They identified communication skills, customer focus, flexibility and adaptability as the most frequently investigated soft skills. The most important factors in the recruitment process are educational background (84%), soft skills (79%) and hard skills (63%). A high percentage of 74% stated that they are interested in soft skills training. In this country, it was not possible to obtain 20 responses within the timeframe at the time the survey was conducted; however, the responses collected provided valuable insights.

Questionnaire for employers — They have selected the most important factors for the recruitment process: soft skills (80%) and hard skills (50%). The soft skills most commonly tested before the recruitment process are: responsibility (80%), cooperation (70%), communication skills, motivation (60%). 80% of respondents believe that it would be useful to have tools for testing soft skills.

Cyprus:

Questionnaire for job seekers — The respondents cited trial period/internship as the most important tool/method for identifying soft skills in potential employees. They identified adaptability, teamwork, and communication skills as the most researched soft skills. The most important factors in the recruitment process are hard skills (37.5%), soft skills (33%) and educational background. The most important soft skills mentioned were responsibility/teamwork and communication skills/organisational skills. A high percentage of respondents - 70.8% - indicated that they would be interested in soft skills training. 84.6% of respondents agreed that employers require both soft skills and hard skills from their employees.

Questionnaire for employers — Two thirds of the answers were given by general managers. The interview is the most commonly used method used for assessing the soft skills of potential employees. They selected the following as the most important factors during the recruitment process: soft skills (84.3%), hard

skills and foreign languages. Soft skills that are tested before hiring are adaptability, and creative thinking. It is significant that all respondents (100%) believe that it would be useful to have tools to test soft skills.

Croatia:

Questionnaire for job seekers — A total of 83.8% of respondents cited the job interview as the most important tool for assessing soft skills. They identified communication skills, problem solving and a sense of responsibility as the soft skills most commonly evaluated during the recruitment process. The most important factors during the recruitment process are foreign language skills, soft skills and education - followed by IT skills. The most important soft skills (based on previous work experience) cited were problem-solving ability, sense of responsibility and adaptability. The most commonly used job search service is job search, the least used is a diploma/certificate. 81% of respondents would like to participate in soft skills training. 77% agreed that employers require both soft skills and hard skills from their employees.

Questionnaire for employers — 78% of respondents represented micro and small enterprises, 8% medium-sized and 14% large organizations. 84.3% of respondents were managing directors or company owners. They identified soft skills and education as the most important skills/factors for the recruitment process. The most frequently assessed skills before hiring are: teamwork, communication skills and a sense of responsibility. The most important soft skills (in order of importance) are teamwork, communication skills and a sense of responsibility. 86% of respondents believe soft skills assessment tools would be useful, which is consistent with responses from all other countries.

5. COMPARATIVE SUMMARY AND SOFT SKILLS FRAMEWORK

All countries, with the exception of the Netherlands and Slovenia were able to collect the required number of responses for the questionnaire aimed at employers and jobseekers. The Netherlands and Slovenia were able to collect fewer responses due to unexpected difficulties in collecting and gathering collating the required number of responses within the given timeframe. However, other partners managed to collect more responses, resulting in a total of 317 responses and a high percentage of survey completion (shown in Table 1.).

Summary of the survey of job seekers: According to the survey, job interviews were the most important tool for identifying soft skills for all partners, except for Cyprus, where internships or trial periods were preferred. Employers from Croatia and

Slovenia identified communication skills as the most important skills they looked for in applicants, while adaptability was considered most important in Cyprus and flexibility in the Netherlands and Italy. When it comes to the most important factors during the recruitment process, education was seen as the most important factor in Slovenia, hard skills in Italy and Cyprus, communication skills in the Netherlands and foreign language skills in Croatia. Soft skills were the second most important factor for Croatia and Cyprus and the third most important for Slovenia. According to the survey results, the most important soft skills for the employment process varied across each partner country. In Slovenia, a sense of responsibility ranked first, while in Italy, dealing with stress was the most important factor. In the Netherlands, communication skills were most important, while in Cyprus responsibility and teamwork were identified as key skills. In Croatia, problem solving was the top choice. As for the second most important soft skills, flexibility was highlighted in Italy and Slovenia, while customer focus was emphasized in the Netherlands. In Cyprus, communication and organization skills were important. The majority of respondents in all partner countries expressed their interest in participating in soft skills training, with the highest proportion of respondents in Cyprus (100%) and Croatia (81%). Furthermore, most respondents felt that soft skills and hard skills are equally important to employers. In terms of job search, the most frequently used service were diplomas/certificates, except in Croatia where job search portals were the most frequently used.

Employers Survey Summary: The survey conducted among small and medium-sized enterprises showed that most responses came from managing directors, general managers or company owners. In the Netherlands, Cyprus and Croatia, soft skills were identified as the most important factor during the recruitment process, while in Slovenia and Italy references were seen as the most important factor. Soft skills were also tested during the recruitment process, with teamwork in Croatia, adaptability in Cyprus, responsibility in the Netherlands, flexibility in Italy and communication skills in Slovenia being the most frequently tested. It is worth noting that more than two-thirds of employers expressed a desire for soft skills assessment tools and more than two-thirds of jobseekers expressed a desire to participate in soft skills training. These survey results served as the basis for the creation of the Soft Skills Competency Framework, abbreviated as the SPOCC framework. The soft skills framework is a comprehensive framework for developing and assessing soft skills in individuals. The results of the survey provide a comparative analysis of soft skills awareness and their perceived importance in five European countries: Slo-

TABLE 2. Key Similarities and Differences between Selected Countries Regarding Soft Skills

Key Similarities	Key Differences
<p>Recognition of Soft Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o In all countries, both employers and jobseekers recognised the importance of soft skills in the employment process, highlighting a growing awareness of their role in workplace success. <p>Interview as the Primary Tool</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Job interviews were the predominant method for assessing soft skills in all countries, with the exception of Cyprus, where trial periods and internships were favoured. <p>Interest in Soft Skills Training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o A significant proportion of jobseekers in all countries expressed interest in soft skills training, with the highest demand observed in Cyprus (100%) and Croatia (81%). <p>Employer Demand for a Soft Skills Tool</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o More than two-thirds of employers across the surveyed countries indicated the need for tools to verify and assess soft skills in recruitment and selection processes. 	<p>Top Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Communication skills were most valued by employers in Croatia and Slovenia. o Adaptability was rated highest in Cyprus, while flexibility was most valued in Italy and the Netherlands. o A sense of responsibility was the most important soft skill in Slovenia, while dealing with people was the most important one in Italy o Problem-solving was considered the most important soft skill in Croatia. <p>Importance of Employment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o In Slovenia, education was the most important factor in employment decisions. o In Italy and Cyprus, hard skills were favoured and prioritized, while in the Netherlands communication skills played the most important role, while in Croatia foreign language skills were ranked as the most important. <p>Assessment Methods for Soft Skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o In Cyprus, trial periods/internships were an important method for assessing soft skills, in contrast to the interview-focused approach seen in other countries. o For employers in Croatia, Slovenia and Cyprus, soft skills were among the most important recruitment factors, while in Slovenia and Italy references were considered the most important.

Source: Author's own work

venia, Italy, the Netherlands, Cyprus and Croatia. While responses were successfully collected from jobseekers, there were disparities in the number of responses from employers, with Slovenia and the Netherlands struggling to meet the target. The following table shows the most important similarities and differences between the countries.

The findings confirm that soft skills are equally recognized in all countries, which underlines their increasing importance alongside hard skills in the labour market. The high demand for soft skills training among jobseekers and the need for assessment tools among employers indicate a gap in standardized assessment methods, underlining the importance of the soft skills framework. While communication, adaptability, flexibility and responsibility were consistently valued, their relative importance varied, indicating different labour market expectations and cultural influences on the recognition of soft skills. Overall, the study shows a strong consensus on the importance of soft skills for employability, although there are national differences in how these skills are

prioritized and valued. The findings underline the need for a standardized framework, such as the soft skills framework model, to harmonize the validation and training of soft skills to ensure consistency in employers' expectations and jobseekers' preparation for the European labour market.

6. SOFT SKILLS FRAMEWORK - SOFT SKILLS COMPETENCE FRAMEWORK

The survey findings highlight the significance of soft skills, identifying social skills, personal skills, organizational skills, cooperation, and creativity skills as essential for employability and professional success. The developed framework comprises five core soft skills domains, each encompassing five specific competencies aligned with the corresponding levels of knowledge. These skills are systematically structured into learning modules and can be acquired as micro-credentials, facilitating their recognition and application in the job-seeking process and professional development.

Below is the draft design of Soft Skills framework.

TABLE 3. Soft Skills Framework

SOFT SKILLS FRAMEWORK		
SKILL FIELD	SKILLS	KNOWLEDGE LEVEL / OUTCOMES
SOCIAL SKILLS	Conflict Management	Solving conflicts Analysing conflicts Predicting conflicts
	Communication Skills	Business etiquette Face-to-face meetings Web-based communication
	Accountability	Responsibilities and roles in an organization Identifying risks Creating a positive communication atmosphere
	Intercultural Skills	Social awareness Fighting prejudices, stereotypes and negative personal beliefs Effective cross-cultural communication
	Public Presentation	Self-confidence Face-to-face rhetoric Audience engagement in web-based presentations
PERSONAL SKILLS	Handling Stress	Resilience Coping with difficult situations Relaxation techniques in the workplace
	Self-Awareness	Awareness of personal strengths/weaknesses Self-concept Awareness of personal limits and understanding how to adapt
	Personal Development	Vision of personal development and self-motivation Skill self-assessment Planning and development of new skills
	Self-Management	Work-life balance Management techniques for improving personal effectiveness Improving self-management
	Emotional Intelligence	Integrity Self-regulation Empathy
ORGANISATIONAL SKILLS	Strategic Planning	Defining long-term goals and indicators Decision-making Problem-solving (with SWOT analysis)
	Leadership	Task delegation Responsibility and risk-taking Negotiation
	Customer Orientation	Activity planning Task division Responsible decision-making
	Critical Thinking	Objective analysis Issue evaluation Logical reasoning
	Time management	Goal setting Prioritization Keeping a To-Do List

SKILL FIELD	SKILLS	KNOWLEDGE LEVEL / OUTCOMES
COOPERATIVE SKILLS	Teamwork management	Creating teams based on their skills Adequate task division between members of team and creating action plan Monitoring of teamwork
	Team building	Team building importance Team building techniques Fostering positive working atmosphere (trust building)
	Flexibility and adaptability	Respectfulness in teamwork Reliability in teamwork, support and helping others Adjusting to changes
	Working styles	Assessment of working styles Tasks adjustment to working styles Creating action plan
	Collaboration and networking	Efficient communication with partners Efficient internal communication Networking importance in company development
CREATIVE THINKING SKILLS	Innovativeness	Producing new ideas and Brainstorming Convergent and Divergent Thinking Phases of creative thinking
	Constant Improvement	Importance of quality in creative thinking Implementing the Deming circle (PCDA) at work; developing an action plan Willingness to gain new skills
	Analytical Thinking	Data collection Analysis of information using critical thinking (different points of view) Applying new knowledge (or new ideas) in problem-solving
	Implementing Changes	Awareness of importance of implementation changes Self-initiative Creative strategies within the process of implementing changes
	Fostering Creativity	Using creativity to increase competitiveness Fostering creativity in teamwork Fostering creativity in individual work

Source: Author's own work

The main objective of the research was to identify the most relevant soft skills within the competences defined in the Europass tool and then to develop a standardised soft skills reference framework that could serve as a validation tool for these soft skills competences and for further dissemination of the project results. The impact will be visible for jobseekers, who will be able to credibly present their competences, for employers, who will be able to simplify the selection process or help allocate current employees to suitable jobs more efficiently, and for career counsellors, who will be able to recognise the competences better and more easily, thereby making counselling more efficient.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study underline the crucial role that soft skills play in the employment process in various European countries. As the modern labour market continues to evolve, soft skills have become increasingly important. They complement technical expertise and shape the way individuals navigate the professional environment. The study highlights common challenges faced by both employers and jobseekers, particularly in areas such as communication, adaptability, problem solving and managing expectations. These challenges point to the need for structured interventions, such as targeted training programmes, standardized assessment tools and integrated educational curricula, to support the development and

measurement of soft skills.

One of the key contributions of this study is the identification of core soft skills modules — social, personal, organizational, collaborative and creative skills — that provide a structured framework for further training initiatives. By categorizing these skills into specific sub-themes based on cross-national survey data, the study provides a practical basis for the development of pre-recruitment assessment strategies. These findings can help policymakers, educators and employers develop targeted programmes that address the most pressing skills gaps in the workforce. Furthermore, the study highlights that soft skills are not only transferable across different industries, but are also essential for fostering a dynamic, responsive and inclusive labour market. Furthermore, the comparative approach of this study — covering Slovenia, Italy, the Netherlands, Cyprus and Croatia — provides valuable insights into the way soft skills are perceived and developed across different labour markets. The similarities of the challenges across countries underline the universal importance of soft skills, while the differences point to the need for culturally and contextually adapted training approaches. Future studies could build on this comparative framework by examining cross-cultural differences in soft skills acquisi-

tion and application, as well as the long-term impact of structured soft skills development on employability and career advancement.

In addition, the study highlights the need for multi-stakeholder engagement in addressing soft skills deficits. Employers, educational institutions and policy makers need to work together to integrate soft skills training into formal education, vocational training and workplace development programmes. The introduction of standardized pre-employment assessments and continuous professional development initiatives can further improve job readiness and career mobility.

Ultimately, integrating soft skills training into education and workplace development programmes is critical to bridging the gap between jobseekers' skills and employers' expectations. By addressing identified skills gaps, stakeholders can contribute to a more resilient and competitive labour market that ensures sustainable employment and career growth. This paper establishes a fundamental basis for future comparative research on soft skills development and its influence on innovative workforce management and employability, not only within the target countries but also in broader international contexts.

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UPRAVLJANJE MEKIM VJEŠTINAMA ZA INOVATIVAN PRISTUP ZAPOS LJIVOSTI

SAŽETAK

Rad ističe ključnu važnost mekih vještina za poboljšanje zapošljivosti na današnjem europskom tržištu rada. U okviru istraživanja provedene su opsežne ankete s više od 350 sudionika iz različitih europskih organizacija kako bi se identificirale meke vještine koje poslodavci najviše cijene, kao i one koje prepoznaju tražitelji zaposlenja. Rezultati pokazuju da su ključne meke vještine poput komunikacije, timskog rada, rješavanja problema, prilagodljivosti i vodstva važan dodatak tehničkim vještinama. Međutim, unatoč njihovoj priznatoj vrijednosti, meke vještine često nemaju sustavan razvoj niti formalnu validaciju, jer obrazovni i osposobljavajući programi i dalje daju prednost tvrdim vještinama. Kako bi se ispravila ta neravnoteža, rad predlaže razvoj standardiziranog referentnog okvira za meke vještine koji bi podržao dosljednije prepoznavanje i vrednovanje tih vještina. Ova inicijativa ima za cilj poboljšanje usklađivanja ponude i potražnje na tržištu rada omogućujući jasniju komunikaciju o kompletnom skupu vještina kandidata, što bi koristilo tražiteljima posla, poslodavcima i stručnjacima za razvoj karijere. Studija poziva na promjenu paradigme u načinu na koji se meke vještine integriraju u procese zapošljavanja i planiranja radne snage. Predlaže se da bi strukturiraniji pristup mogao značajno poboljšati učinkovitost, prilagodljivost i konkurentnost europske radne snage.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: konkurentnost, zapošljavanje, inovacija, upravljanje, meke vještine