

Needed Soft Skills and their Status: Self-perceptions of University Information Professionals

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The study aimed to assess the self-perceptions of university information professionals regarding the status of their soft skills. The survey method, using a questionnaire as data collection instrument, was employed to achieve the objectives of this study. The population was information professionals working in all the central libraries of the public sector general universities in Pakistan. The findings, based on 372 responses, revealed that information professional perceived themselves 'competent' in overall soft skills. The values of mean score further revealed that they considered themselves 'competent' enough in performance management skills, interpersonal skills, and political/cultural skills, while 'moderately competent' in communication/persuasion skills and self-management skills. The findings established need for training in this regard.

To improve various soft skills, Library and Information Management education at Master level should include courses on soft skills. Moreover, training on soft skills is also required for in-service information professionals.

Keywords: Soft Skills; Social Skills; University Information Professionals; Pakistan; University Librarians.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The soft skills are discussed in the literature as, "a set of skills that influence how we interact with each other including such abilities as effective

communication, creativity, analytical thinking, flexibility, change readiness, problem solving, leadership, team building and maintaining good relationship with the colleagues and customers” (Chaudhry, et.al, 2008), and have become imperative for professionals working in any organizations for a number of reasons such as: these represent an individuals’ personality, enhance job prospects or employability by harmonizing hard skills (Wye & Lim, 2009). Besides, the present job market has become increasingly competitive and only the fittest professional can survive; to be the fittest, one need to have a ‘competitive edge’ that distinguishes a candidate over the others who have a similar kind of hard skills. Where do the professionals find this ‘competitive edge’? It is by ornamenting their knowledge with positive personal traits and habits i.e. soft skills (Dharmarajan, Pachigalla & Lanka, 2012). It is recognized that a large part of soft skills relates to personal traits, qualities and habits that make someone a good employee and a compatible co-worker (Schulz, 2008; Rani, 2010).

As for as library and information management profession is concerned, libraries in general and university libraries in particular are undergoing drastic changes in their services, structure and operational dynamics therefore, university information professionals (UIPs) ought to equip themselves with the appropriate set of skills (both hard and soft skills) in the fast changing work environment (Rehman, Baker & Majid, 1998). UIPs have an important role in the facilitation of higher education by providing required information services. New technologies, new demands, new services, and the call for greater understanding of customer needs make their job even complicated. These changes have affected their roles, required competencies, set of skills, and knowledge. In order to meet the current challenges and to sustain into the era of rapid advancement, UIPs must possess certain soft skill along with hard (professional) skills.

A few studies have discussed the need for information professionals to possess the interpersonal and efficient communication skills, in addition to professional skills for effective teamwork and collaboration (Ameen, 2011; Chaudry, 2007; Soong, 2007). However, much has been written on what makes up the required overall competencies of modern day information professionals working in a library and information organizations (e.g., special library professionals, Rehman, Baker & Majid, 1998; university and college librarians, Mahmood, 2002; Mahmood, 2003; Rehman, Ansari & Yousaf, 2002; medical librarians, Ullah & Anwar, 2013; university librarians, Khan, Masrek & Nadzar, 2015a).

Then there are studies on either soft skills or their various components (e.g.,

interpersonal skills, Chaudhry, 2007; soft skills, Chaudhry, et.al. 2008; communication skills and personality development, Ameen, 2013; emotional intelligence, Khan & Ullah, 2014; leadership skills, Khan & Begum, 2015; and emotional intelligence skills, Khan, Masrek & Nadzar, 2015b).

It appeared that what lacks in the literature are exclusive studies focused on soft skills and as well as the research on how do information professionals perceive their own soft skills. The present paper is based on a part of the first author's doctoral study on perception of the UIPs, regarding their soft skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies have been carried out over the years to determine what professional skills are required for contemporary information professionals. However, investigating soft skills is a recent phenomenon. Some studies have covered job advertisement showing what skills employers seek in Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals. Others presented the views of LIS professionals to find out what skills they consider are significant for them. The literature review based on relevant studies has been presented in the following three parts:

Defining soft skills

The literature affirms that the term 'soft skill' is popularly used but non-coherently defined. According to Conrad (1999), there is uncertainty in the exact origin of the use of the term soft skill. However, an early reference of soft skill was found in military training documents from the early 1970s. In a 1972 training manual the US Army defined 'soft skills' as job related skills involving actions affecting people and paper, e.g. inspecting troops, supervising office personnel, preparing reports etc (as cited in Kemenade, 2013). There is no specific definition of soft skills but it is most commonly based on competence management. Kantrowitz (2005) in extensive study and research on 'development and validation of measure of soft skills performance' identified 107 soft skills, which were grouped with cluster analysis into 10 groups and further reduced with multidimensional scaling to the seven clusters: performance management skills; interpersonal skills; political/cultural skills; leadership/organizational skills; communication /persuasion skills; self-management skills; and counterproductive skills.

Campbell (1990) stated that *performance management skills* include articulating goals, organizing people and resources, monitoring progress and resolving problems. According to Kantrowitz (2005), *interpersonal skills* include but

are not limited to teamwork, stress management, coping, motivation, flexibility, adaptability and etiquettes. *Political/cultural skills* involve demonstrating competence with respect to functioning in the culture and climate of an organization. *Leadership/organizational skills* include proficiency in the supervisory components, including all behaviors directed at influencing the performance of subordinates through interaction and influence. *Counterproductive skills* include the behaviors associated with negatively impacting organizational performance that includes making inappropriate comments and undermining others. Gonzalez, Abu Kasim and Naimie (2013) stated that *communication/persuasion skills* are required to communicate effectively with others, through imparting or exchanging information by speaking, writing or using some other medium in convincing the team members to take a right action. *Self-management skills* include all the strategies to exert control over aspects of career decision-making and behavior (Frayne & Geringer, 2000).

Importance of soft skills in information profession

The studies have revealed that employers give much importance to soft skills such as: initiative, interpersonal skills, teamwork, independence, and ability to work under pressure (Goulding, et.al, 1999). According to Khoo (2005a), information professionals of the new era should have superior oral and written communication skills. They also need good interpersonal and networking skills to better connect with the users and colleagues.

Hamblin and Stephens (2007) determined the employability skills of information professionals and found that soft skills have emerged as needed skills for the successful customer care services. Jones (2010) stated that communication skills and understanding users' needs have been central to information professionals' services. Similarly, Soong (2007) commented that good communication and organizational skills are always desirable for information professionals to participate in a variety of activities in today's library work environment. Chaudhry (2007) emphasized on developing the social skills among modern information professionals. Khoo (2005b) stated that information professionals have to be effective in soft skills that are generic, especially skills in communication, management, leadership, and teamwork, as well as the ability to value users and understand their information needs.

Kolle and Parmeshwar (2014) stated that for today's library professionals' hard skills are not enough unlike in the past, rather there is a demand for library

professionals to have multidimensional skills for carrying day-to-day work. They mentioned that some of the soft skills which are required by library professionals are listening skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, presentation skills, and leadership skills.

According to Matteson, Anderson and Boyden (2016) LIS literature suggest that soft skills associated with communication and interpersonal skills are essential, if information professionals are to be approachable, to listen to customers, and to show interest in their information needs. Like any other profession, soft skills are required for information professionals in their routine jobs for executing day-to-day work and dealing with the colleagues more efficiently.

Studies on soft skills

Weber, Crawford, and Dennison (2012) assessed the soft skills of entry level managers in hospitality management. They used soft skills measurement scale of Kantrowitz (2005), with a plea that management competencies are also applicable in the area of hospitality management. They found that the skills with greatest mean included interpersonal skills (8.78), showing honesty and commitment (8.58), performance management (8.73), political/cultural skills (8.58), leadership skills (8.35), and communication and persuasion (7.96).

Weber, Crawford and Dennison (2012) mentioned that the human resource professionals placed a high emphasis on the performance management with an average mean of 4.39, followed by communication/persuasion with an average mean of 4.14 while, the counterproductive category led with the greatest number of lower means with an average mean of 3.3 (reverse coded).

Junrat, Jenphop, Suravee, and Kanokorn, (2014) reported that for providing, collecting and storing information, the UIPs apart from professional skills should also possess personal interactive skills (soft skills), because it is widely accepted as a major component for working in a library. They mentioned that good interpersonal skills lead to better understanding of customer needs, which turns into the development of quality service to meet the customer's demand. Similarly, effective communication offers multiple ways to acknowledge customers and generates a worthwhile usage of library resources. Their findings showed that the behavioral level of soft skills of the library staff was moderate. Regarding the specific skills, it was found that the innovation development was the skill that showed the least behavioral level, followed by communication skills, and leadership skills.

Ameen (2013) assessed the effectiveness of 'personality development and communication skills' course in LIS education at the University of the Punjab,

Lahore. She reported that among the social skills of LIS students, the significant impact of the course appeared on skills like learning to respect others' emotions; cooperative; ability to work in teams; understand other's feelings. As far as the course impact on the improvement of communication skills is concerned, it was moderate. She mentioned that professional education at various LIS schools generally focus on developing professional competencies; whereas the emerging competitive environment had increased the need for equally developing the soft skills during regular education.

Khan, Masrek and Nadzar (2015b) assessed the training needs on emotional intelligence of university librarians in Pakistan. Their findings revealed that librarians have insufficiency in self-assessment skills, team work and collaboration skills. Therefore, there is a need of training in skills related to emotional intelligence. They recommended that university authorities in the country should organize training programs to enhance librarians' current level of emotional intelligence.

Hussain (2017) conducted a study on the CPD of university librarians to highlight the soft skills and hard skills areas in which the university librarians feel to improve their skills/knowledge. He reported that regarding soft skills area 58% of university librarians highly preferred communication skills, 52.3% leadership skills, 51% each self-management and team working skills as preferred areas for their CPD.

The review of the relevant literature establishes that there is a scarcity of literature on soft skills' status among UIPs in Pakistan while, the experts have placed a high emphasis on the possession of soft skills along with the hard (professional) skills. Therefore, the present study aimed to fill the gap in the professional literature by assessing the existing status of UIPs' soft kills through their own perceptions.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To investigate the information professionals' overall status of soft skills.
- To study the information professionals' cluster-wise status of soft skills.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research design based on survey method was used to investigate the overall and cluster-wise status of soft skills among the UIPs in Pakistan. The survey was used because it is considered as most appropriate for getting up to date data from a geographically dispersed and large population

(Powell & Connaway, 2004).

The population included all the information professionals working at various managerial positions in the central libraries of public sector general universities of Pakistan. According to the list of HEC recognized 'public sector general universities' (HEC Pakistan, 2014), there were 33 universities in the four provinces and capital territory Islamabad that were included in the data collection. Approximately, 560 informational professionals were working in these university libraries (Asad Khan, Personal communication, Nov, 2014). The instrument was distributed to the whole population.

Instrument

A comprehensive instrument of measuring soft skills devised by Kantrowitz (2005) was adapted to collect the data. It contained 107 statements distributed into seven clusters of soft skills. As this instrument was developed to use on the American population therefore, certain changes were made for the present study after expert review by selected experts (one from psychology, one from management sciences, one from the library and information science, and one language expert) for reviewing the contents of the tool to increase its content validity in local perspective. Five point Likert type scale with the following labels was used to measure overall and seven clusters of soft skills based on the mean score: 1= 'severe lack of soft skills'; 2= 'lack of soft skills'; 3= 'moderately competent in soft skills'; 4= 'competent in soft skills'; and 5= 'fully competent in soft skills').

A pilot test was administered upon 12 retired volunteered information professionals in order to evaluate the instrument for its reliability, validity, and time required to fill. During the pilot test, only three respondents suggested a few changes in the instrument. They were interviewed for understanding their feedback and getting details behind their comments /suggestions. After incorporating feedback by the pilot test participants in terms of structure and contents of the questionnaire, the instrument was finalized.

Reliability analysis

Cronbach's Alpha (CA) value was calculated by using a 20th version of the SPSS for reliability check. Nunnally (1978) recommended reliabilities of 0.70 or better for basic research. With an overall value of 0.95 the instrument showed excellent internal consistency (Table 1). The Cronbach's values reported for the clusters of soft skills were ranged in between .85 to .53 for counterproductive skills category.

Table 1

Reliability Score for Soft Skills Measure (Overall Soft Skills and Clusters)

| S. N. | Sub-Cluster | No. of items | Cronbach's Alpha (CA) |
|-------|---------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | Communication/Persuasion Skills | 13 | .66 |
| 2 | Self-management Skills | 12 | .63 |
| 3 | Performance management skills | 21 | .85 |
| 4 | Interpersonal skills | 22 | .82 |
| 5 | Leadership/Organization skills | 20 | .85 |
| 6 | Political/Cultural skills, | 13 | .71 |
| 7 | Counterproductive skills | 6 | .53 |
| -- | Overall soft skills | 107 | .95 |

DATA ANALYSIS

The data collection instrument along with the covering letter was administered both personally and by post to the information professionals working in the university libraries. In order to increase the response rate, telephonic contacts and personal visits to different university libraries were made. The data analysis was completed by applying descriptive statistics using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0. Descriptive statistics have been used for description of data such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores.

Results

A total of 391 questionnaires were received; out of these, 372 provided complete and correct data for whole questionnaire including demographic information. This resulted in 19 cases with incomplete and incorrect (two or more options marked for one statement) information. These questionnaires were, therefore, excluded from analysis and three-hundred and seventy-two (372) cases were considered for final analysis with a response rate of 66.42%.

Demographics

The data in Table 2 revealed that three fourth among the respondents were males. A large proportion of the respondents were with Master Degree, while 9% (n=34) with M.Phil, and only three with Ph.D in Library and Information Science. Similarly, a majority of the respondents (68%; n=253) were working as Assistant Librarians, while 19% (n=72) as Deputy Librarians, and 13% (n=47) as (Chief/Principal) Librarians.

The data also shows that most of the respondents (n=133) had 6-10 years of working experience, followed by 25% (n=93) respondents with 16 + years working experience. Only, 16.4% (n=61) had 1-5 years working experience. These figures revealed that nearly half of the respondents i.e. 48% (n=178) had more than 10 years' work experience.

Status of overall soft skills

This study was conducted to determine the status of UIPs' soft skills quantitatively on the basis of Kantrowitz (2005) measure. Based on their self-perception descriptive statistics of the scores of overall soft skills related to information professionals are presented in Table 3.

The findings revealed an overall soft skills status for 372 UIPs with a mean score of 3.68 (SD= 0.36). The mean score of the overall soft skills is close to 4, which is high value on the soft skills measure. Thus it can be inferred that information professionals perceived themselves 'competent' in overall soft skills.

Table 2

Frequency Distribution of the Respondents (N= 372) based on demographic profile

| Demographic Group | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 281 | 75.5 |
| Female | 91 | 24.5 |
| Qualification | | |
| MLISc | 335 | 90.1 |
| M.Phil | 34 | 9.1 |
| Ph.D | 03 | 0.8 |
| Designation | | |
| Librarians | 47 | 12.6 |
| Deputy Librarians | 72 | 19.4 |
| Assistant Librarians | 253 | 68.0 |
| Experience (in years) | | |
| 1-5 | 61 | 16.4 |
| 6-10 | 133 | 35.8 |
| 11-15 | 85 | 22.8 |
| 16-above | 93 | 25.0 |

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Overall Soft Skills Score (N=372)

| Statistics | |
|----------------|------|
| Mean | 3.68 |
| Std. Deviation | 0.36 |
| Minimum | 2.67 |
| Maximum | 4.65 |

Scale: 1=Severe lack of soft skill to 5= Fully competent in soft skill

Status of various soft skills clusters

It was important to investigate the various kinds of soft skills among UIPs also. The Kantrowitz (2005) divided the overall soft skills into seven clusters. The descriptive statistics based on the self-perceptions of information professionals for these seven clusters of soft skills, ranked on the basis of their mean scores are given

in Table 4. The highest mean scores are for performance management skills (3.88) and interpersonal skills (3.87), followed by political/cultural skills and leadership/organizational skills with the mean scores of 3.76 and 3.71 respectively. The mean values for these four clusters of soft skills are close to 4. Thus, it is interpreted that information professionals considered themselves 'competent' in these skills. Nevertheless, two important clusters, communication/persuasion skills have the mean value of 3.36 and self-management skills have 3.27. These values are a little higher than 3 and show that information professionals considered themselves 'moderately competent' in these skills.

Table 4

Descriptive statistics of Soft Skills Clusters Ranked on the basis of Mean Scores (N=372)

| Clusters of Soft Skills | Mean | Std. Deviation | Min. | Max. |
|----------------------------------|------|----------------|------|------|
| Performance management skills | 3.88 | .47 | 2.52 | 4.90 |
| Interpersonal skills | 3.87 | .43 | 2.59 | 4.73 |
| Political /Cultural skills | 3.76 | .43 | 2.38 | 4.85 |
| Leadership/Organizational skills | 3.71 | .42 | 2.35 | 4.65 |
| Communication /Persuasion skills | 3.36 | .41 | 2.15 | 4.46 |
| Self-management skills | 3.27 | .49 | 2.17 | 4.58 |
| Counterproductive skills | 2.21 | .40 | 1.17 | 3.67 |

Scale: 1=Severe lack of soft skill to 5= Fully competent in soft skill

The counterproductive skills appeared with the lowest mean of 2.21. This shows that information professionals reported a 'lack' in these skills since; they do not consider these constructive in their work environment. This establishes that UIPs do not like to have negative attitude toward their co-workers and to pessimistically presenting their organization.

DISCUSSION

The importance of soft skills in the effective performance of information professionals cannot be ignored. Therefore, the perception of UIPs towards the status of their soft skills was important to investigate to fill some gap in the literature. The findings of this study showed that overall information professionals considered themselves 'competent' in soft skills. The findings of this study are close to Junrat, et.al. (2014), which reported the 'moderate level' of soft skills of the library staff working in 15 libraries of the Khon Kean University. This self-perceived expression of possessing soft skills by the UIPs may be rightly indicative of their soft skills status and the result of factors such as their experience and education. As stated by Junrat, et.al. (2014) that information professionals working in large

libraries already learn and practice soft skills, through experience and training or education. Therefore, research is suggested for further investigation to study the effects of 'qualification', and 'designation' on soft skills of information professionals, as reaching higher designations requires considerable work experience. We recommend for follow up studies on the information professionals working in public and college libraries in Pakistan.

The findings further revealed that the information professionals perceived themselves 'competent' in performance management skills, interpersonal skills, political/cultural skills and leadership/organizational skills. However, the mean values for two important clusters of soft skills communication/persuasion skills were 3.36 and self-management skills 3.27. It shows that information professionals perceived themselves 'moderately competent' in these skills. These findings are in line with Soong (2007), who reported that information professionals must possess the interpersonal and management skills along with necessary communication skills. These findings also supported the findings of Junrat, et.al (2014), who reported that the three primary skills that required further development for the university library staff consisted of communication skills, thinking & problem solving skills, and life-long learning & information management skills. These findings partially supported Weber, Crawford and Dennison (2012) findings, who mentioned the soft skills status of managers in the area of human resource management using the Kantrowitz (2005) soft skills measure. According to their findings human resource professionals placed a high emphasis on performance management skills with an average mean of 4.39, followed by communication and persuasion skills with a mean value of 4.14, while the counterproductive skills got the lowest mean with an average mean value of 3.3 (reverse coded). The counterproductive category in this study (for information professionals) as well as in the study of Weber, Crawford and Dennison (2012), for HR professionals, led with the lowest mean scores of 2.21 and 3.3 (reverse coded) respectively. This may stem from the fact that generally employees do not like to work with those employees who appear to have negative attitude. It means that information professionals and human resource professionals do not want to use these counterproductive skills in their organizations.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Soft skills have become important in many professions and so is the case with information and library professionals. Therefore, they must equip themselves

with these skills in order to increase their worth in the organizations and to create the desired work environment. The results of this study established the need to further improve the status of information professionals' overall soft skills and its various clusters, specifically communication/persuasion skills and self-management skills. The study provides good guidelines in the following ways: first, the prospective information professionals must work on developing their various soft skills to become more desirable candidates. Second, the educators should consider including soft skills in Library and Information Management education (teaching) programs. The curriculum at Master level should include courses on soft skills as the Department of Information Management, University of the Punjab has done. Educators may develop these skills among the LIS graduates through role-playing, expert speaking, and role modeling (Block, 2003). Third, leaders in information profession, such as head of the teaching departments, presidents of the library associations and administrators of various training institutions (who impart trainings to information professionals) should include soft skills in their training programs. Moreover, regular in-service trainings on soft skills should also be planned for in-service information professionals to improve their soft skills.

Soft skills are learned on the work place also and are the result of experience and education as well (Hasbullah & Sulaiman, 2002; Junrat, et.al. 2014). Therefore, opinions from the employers should also be sought to know the quality of information professionals and their requirements of soft skills.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The possible limitation of this study may be the bias of the respondents towards their self-judgment.

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