

Assessment of Soft Skills Needed by Office Technology and Management Graduates for Globalized Employability in the 21st Century

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Abstract: *The study examined the soft skills needed by Office Technology and Management (OTM) graduates for globalized employability in the 21st century office. One research question guided the study and one hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance. The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study consisted of 45 office executives and 45 secretaries from chosen organizations in Aba, Abia state. A well structured questionnaire on a 4-point scale was used as instrument for data collection, while the reliability test for the instrument yielded co-efficient 0.79 using Cronbach Alpha. Out of the 90 copies of the questionnaire administered to respondents by the researcher, a total of 84 copies representing (93.3%) were correctly filled and used for the data analysis. The data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research question, and t-test for the hypothesis testing. Finding revealed that organization and time management; confidentiality and professionalism; strong communication skill; teamwork and collaboration; analytical thinking and innovation; and leadership and social influence are the major soft skills needed by OTM graduates for globalized employability in the 21st century office. The study concluded that graduates in office technology and management can increase their productivity, job performance, and contribution to the organization's success by utilizing their soft skills. Based on the findings, it was recommended among others that office technology and management graduates should endeavor to familiarize themselves with all the soft skills necessary for them to participate in the 21st global workforce.*

Keyword: Skills, Soft Skills, Office Technology and Management, Globalized Employability..

Introduction

Career in Office Technology and Management is one that begins with series of progressive trainings from secondary schools through higher education with the aim of equipping individuals with skills, knowledge and experiences required to practice in industries. Office Technology and Management (OTM) is an aspect of vocational education which equips its recipients to receive vocational skills in office education and socio-psychological work skills for gainful employment in the global market. (Aninye-Ranor, 2019). OTM is an aspect of vocational and technical education emphasizes among others job competencies, career preparation and work adjustments (Iheukwumere, Uteh & Nkemjika, 2019). Office Technology and Management according to Oyedele and Fadere (2018) is an efficient, effective, productive and functional education that leads itself to self-reliance, paid employment and consequently self-actualization.

OTM curriculum was designed to replace that of the outdated secretarial studies when the former curriculum was found inadequate for the demand of the information age. The current OTM curriculum was designed to include professional courses (core courses) which give its recipients

the theory and practical skills required to work effectively in modern offices. The current OTM curriculum is aimed at graduating students who would be able to effectively manage the technology driven offices and who would be equipped with secretarial and office work skills for self reliance and paid employment in various field of endeavour (Iredia, Oboh & Umuokoro, 2018).

Skills could be referred to as proficient capacity and competence, appropriate for a specific task, and has to do with knowledge, creativity, and expertise to the point of mastery (Ukonu & Habu, 2022). It is the set of skills, competencies, and attributes that increase an individual chances of obtaining initial worthwhile employment, maintaining and progressing in the employment, and being satisfied on the job. Such skills according to Ukonu & Habu (2022) include analytical and problem-solving skills, time management, team work, communication skills, data management skills, monitoring skills, computer literacy skills among others.

Globalization is the unrestricted exchange of ideas, information, and cultural practices among all social systems in the world. It involves extending corporate operations in order to obtain a global viewpoint (Anyigor-Ogah, 2022). To Iheukwumere & Nkoro (2023) globalized employability could be referred to as the ability of individuals to be employable in a globalized world, where markets and employment opportunities are interconnected across national borders. Globalized employability is the ability of individuals to compete in a job market that transcends national boundaries; and requires a diverse set of skills and experiences. Therefore, in the face of globalization, workplace operations cannot be operational without employees who have the necessary employability skills to succeed and comprehend the realities of today's globalized workplace. Every work requires a specific set of abilities and conduct, which are known as employability skills. According to Osmani, Weerakkody, Hindi & Eldabi (2019), employability skills—also known as soft skills—include a variety of concepts, qualities, ways of thinking, knowledge, behavior, and technical competencies that an employee uses to work effectively and efficiently in the globally connected workplace.

Soft skills, according to Fajaryati, Budiyo, Aklyar & Wiranto (2020), are desirable traits for some types of jobs that do not depend on learned information. It is a personality trait that supports situational awareness and improves one's capacity for task completion (Rouse, 2020). Soft skills are the interpersonal, social, human, and behavioral abilities required to apply managerial and informational capabilities in the workplace. The abilities and skills necessary for administrative professionals to succeed in their positions in a worldwide or multinational setting are referred to as global secretarial competencies. Atah, Bessong & Ititit (2021) assert that soft skills are the characteristics and social skills that affect how successfully an individual can work or interact with others.

Soft skills refer to a set of personal attributes, qualities, and abilities that enable individuals to interact effectively with others, navigate social situations, and perform well in their professional and personal lives (Vitasek & Brown, 2022). These talents comprise a broader range of abilities need to successfully navigate various cultures, languages, and work situations and go beyond the simple administrative duties. Some of the most important global secretarial competencies, according to Odusina, Dasaolu & Agbonna (2022), include: confidentiality and professionalism, continuous learning, problem-solving and decision-making, organization and adaptability, technology skills, time management, cultural awareness, multilingual communication, teamwork, and attention to detail, among others.

Van-Heerdan, Jelodar, Chawynski & Ellison (2023) categorized soft skills into three clusters namely: Ethics and professionalism such as integrity, work ethics, courtesy, etc; self effort

management such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, creativity and curiosity, conflict management etc; and leadership and power such as client management, team work, problem-solving, negotiation, time and self management, decision making and communication. Jobberman soft skills training manual listed emotional intelligence; creativity; problem-solving, collaboration; coordination and time management; leadership and social influence; analytical thinking and innovation; reasoning, problem solving and ideation; effective communication, presentation and storytelling; and business etiquette and workplace ethics as some of the soft skills needed for employability. To Vitasek & Brown (2022) Soft skills which could also be referred to as social skills include business ethics, communication, stakeholder management, and leadership.

Soft skills are additional traits that affect how well one operate or connect with people in a professional setting. It covers a broad range of abilities including communication, leadership, problem solving, team work, time management, interpersonal communication, decision making, critical thinking, learning, conflict resolution, confidence, positive psychology among others. When compared to hard skills such as computer skills, academic qualification, language skills, typing speed and coding, soft skills are frequently underestimated and they receive much less training. Most organizations globally recognize the need to train and retrain their employees with the technical skills they need to perform their jobs; while those hard/technical skills are fundamental to an employee's performance; Barb (2019) noted that employers more often have concerns about gaps in employees' soft skills. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to assess the soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability in the 21st century.

Problem Statement

It is becoming increasingly clear that in the nearest future that the proportion of the working tasks that are currently performed by employees with diverse hard/technical skills will either be replaced by machines or augmented by a human machine-interface. According to Gratton (2019) it has been argued that soft skills will become increasingly valuable as machines are generally poor at understanding a person's mood, at sensing the situation around them, and at developing trusting relationships. The goal of education is the development of appropriate skills, mental, physical and social abilities and competencies, to empower its recipients to live and contribute positively to the society. Hard skill proficiency standards are being lowered as internal training and needs for ongoing professional development rise. The demand for graduates with superior soft skills is higher, nevertheless. Lack of awareness of the perceptions, desires, and expectations of employers is the main source of skill shortages, not poor industry-higher education interactions (Doherty & Stephens, 2023). Thus this study sought to examine the soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability.

Research questions

1. To what extent are soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability?

Research Hypothesis

A null hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance:

- H₀₁ There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of office executives and secretaries regarding the extent soft skills are needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised of 45 office executives and 45 secretaries from selected organizations in Aba metropolis; thus the population of the study is 90. The total population was studied because of its manageable size. The instrument for data collection was a validated questionnaire titled: soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability in the 21st century. The questionnaire contained 12 items on a four-point rating scale of Highly Required (HR), Required (R), Minimal Required (MR), and Not Required (NQ) with assigned weight of 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively. Face validity of the instrument was determined by two experts from the department of office technology and management, Abia state polytechnic, Aba. The internal consistency of the instrument was determined using the Cronbach Alpha which yielded an overall reliability coefficient of 0.79. Out of the 90 copies of the questionnaire administered to respondents by the researcher, a total of 84 copies representing (93.3%) were correctly filled and used for the data analysis.

Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research question and determine the respondents' views. Decisions on the research question were based on the grand mean in relation to the real limit of numbers. Therefore, items with mean ratings of 1 – 1.49 are rated as Not Required (NR), 1.50 – 2.49 are Minimal required (MR), items with mean ratings of 2.50 – 2.99 are rated as Required (R), and those with 3.00 – 4.00 are rated Highly Required (HR). For the hypothesis, t-test was used to test the null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance, where the calculated t-value was less than the critical t-value, it meant that the variable had a significant effect on the respondents' mean ratings and the hypothesis was rejected.

Results

The result of the study are presented and analyzed in the following tables.

Research Question

1. To what extent are soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability?

Data collected in respect to this research question were analyzed and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of respondents on the extent soft skills are needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability. N = 84

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Remarks
1	Strong verbal and written communication skills	3.33	0.84	Highly Required
2	Organization and time management	3.40	0.81	Highly Required
3	Attention to detail	2.78	0.73	Required
4	Problem solving abilities	3.19	0.77	Highly Required
5	Interpersonal skills	2.64	0.71	Required
6	Confidentiality and professionalism	3.25	0.75	Highly Required
7	Flexibility and adaptability	2.87	0.69	Required
8	Teamwork and collaboration	3.20	0.79	Highly Required
9	Analytical thinking and innovation	3.12	0.76	Highly Required
10	Conflict management	2.64	0.68	Required
11	Leadership and social influence	3.11	0.76	Highly Required
12	Emotional intelligence	2.95	0.75	Required

Decision rule = 2.50, Cluster mean = 3.04 (Highly Required)

Data in table 1 shows the twelve items achieved real limit number of 2.50 and above. The cluster mean of 3.04 indicates that the respondents agreed soft skills are highly required by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability. The standard deviations of all the items are within the same range (0.68 to 0.84) showing that the respondents are not wide apart in their ratings.

Hypothesis Testing

H₀₁ There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of office executives and secretaries regarding the extent soft skills are needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability.

This null hypothesis was tested using t-test at 0.05 level of significance and the results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: t-test analysis of respondents mean ratings on the extent soft skills are needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	df	t-cal	t-crit.	Decision
Office executives	45	3.02	0.71	82	0.29	1.96	Not significant
Secretaries	39	3.24	0.78				

Data on table 2 indicate that the calculated t-value of 0.29 at 82 degree of freedom is less than the critical t-value of 1.96. Thus the null hypothesis is accepted; this shows that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of office executives and secretaries on soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability in the 21st century.

Discussion

In relation to the demographic details of the respondents; the gender of respondents 33 (39.3%) of the respondents were male while 51 (60.7%) respondents were female indicating that both male and female experts in office and information management participated in the study. The ages of the respondents were categorized as follows: 20-29 years were (28) 33.3%, between 30 and 39 years old were 30 (35.7%), between 40 and 49 years old were 17 (20.2%), while between 50 and above years old were 9(10.7%). This shows that the ages of the respondents support the credibility of the data collected. On the aspect of the qualifications of the participants, the educational level of respondents were classified into the following categories: OND/NCE 20 (23.8%), HND/B.Sc 50 (59.5%) , while M.Sc/Ph.D was 14(16.6%). This implies that the respondents have different qualifications, which therefore supports the credibility of the data. In relation to respondents' awareness to soft skills, the study reveals that all the respondents are aware of the soft skills needed for globalized employability in the 21st century.

The result in Table 1 showed that organization and time management, strong verbal and written communication skills, confidentiality and professionalism, teamwork and collaboration, analytical thinking and innovation, and leadership and social influence are rated as highly required soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability. While emotional intelligence, flexibility and adaptability, interpersonal skills, and conflict management are rated by respondents as required soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability in the 21st century. The respondents' responses on the extent are soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for

globalized employability implies that all the items as regards soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability were accepted. The findings buttressed the discovery of Odusina, Dasaolu & Agbonna (2022) found that confidentiality and professionalism, problem solving and decision making, organization and adaptability, as well as team work as some of the most global secretarial competencies. The finding is also in line with Van-Heerdan, *et al* (2023) and Atah, *et al* (2021) who asserted that soft skills are the characteristics and social skills that affect how successfully an individual can work or interact with others. Further findings reveal that there is no significant difference in the mean responses of office executives and secretaries on the soft skills needed by office technology and management graduates for globalized employability. This implies that office executives and secretaries agreed that the listed soft skills are needed by office Technology and management graduates for globalized employability.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that the presence of strong soft skills enables office technology and management graduates to flourish in their positions. Effective communication, effective task management, positive relationships, problem-solving, adaptability, and customer service are all enhanced by these abilities. Graduates in office technology and management can increase their productivity, job performance, and contribution to the organization's success by utilizing their soft skills.

Recommendations

On the basis of the result of the findings, these recommendations are made:

1. Office Technology graduates should endeavor to familiarize themselves with all the soft skills necessary for them to participate in the 21st global workforce.
2. Skill exercises should be conducted occasionally in a classroom setting for the students in order to develop their critical thinking.
3. The management of the school should create a very enabling learning environment by providing the necessary facilities, equipment, and materials for effective teaching and learning.

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