

SOFT SKILLS: FROM CLASSROOM TO CAREER

2

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Abstract

This chapter examines the growing significance of soft skills in shaping professional success among university graduates. It focuses on non-technical competencies, including communication, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, leadership, and ethical professionalism, which are increasingly prioritised by employers over technical qualifications. Drawing on primary survey data collected from 201 students across eleven disciplines in the Delhi/NCR region (2026) and supported by existing academic literature, the chapter identifies a critical gap between students' awareness of soft skills and their actual development of those skills. The chapter classifies seven core soft skills and eight essential workplace competencies, situates them within broader frameworks of employability and outcome-based education, and provides discipline specific examples demonstrating their value across law, engineering, commerce, pharmacy, and design. Survey findings reveal that 84.6% of respondents consider soft skills important or very important to their careers, yet 86.1% have encountered difficulties in professional or academic settings owing to underdeveloped communication or confidence. The chapter argues for the deliberate and structured integration of soft skills development within higher education curricula to prepare graduates for dynamic, interdisciplinary, and socially responsible workplaces.

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Introduction

“Soft skills get little respect but will make or break your career.” - Peggy Klaus, The Hard Truth about Soft Skills

Consider the case of two graduates leaving university on the same day with identical degrees and comparable academic records. Three years later, one manages a team and advances steadily within the organisation. The other, despite equivalent or superior technical knowledge, is unable to progress beyond the initial stage of the selection process. Neither individual is more intellectually capable than the other; neither has invested less effort nor performed less creditably in academic assessments. The distinction, corroborated by decades of research and by the survey upon which this chapter is based, is attributable to a single factor: soft skills. This chapter addresses three questions that every student must consider before leaving the academic environment: What are soft skills? In what respects do they differ from hard skills? Which competencies must be cultivated, and for what reasons?

What Are Soft Skills?

Soft skills are the non-technical, people-related abilities that shape how an individual performs, interacts, and presents themselves in academic and professional settings. They are variously referred to as people’s skills, interpersonal skills, or human skills. Unlike technical skills, which are contingent upon specific tasks and fields of specialization, soft skills are universal in their application. Regardless of whether one pursues a career in law, engineering, commerce, or pharmacy, the same competencies ultimately determine the extent to which technical knowledge is effectively employed.

Soft skills are closely associated with Emotional Quotient (EQ) and Emotional Intelligence (EI) rather than with intellectual aptitude alone. It is for this reason that they cannot be acquired through textbooks; they develop instead through understanding, experience,

and sustained practice. As Schulz observes, they arise through “understanding, feeling, and intuition”, qualities that no formal examination can fully assess. The practical implication is unambiguous: hard skills may secure the interview, but soft skills secure the position and sustain the career.

Hard Skills vs. Soft Skills

Hard skills are technical abilities acquired through formal education and professional training, encompassing competencies such as coding, accounting, surgical practice, and data analysis. They are measurable, role-specific, and subject to direct assessment. Soft skills, by contrast, are interpersonal and behavioural in nature, encompassing communication, leadership, empathy, and adaptability. They are considerably more difficult to quantify and develop principally through practice and self-awareness.

The relationship between the two is one of complementarity rather than competition. If hard skills constitute the engine of professional performance, soft skills serve as the steering mechanism that determines direction and effectiveness. A medical professional who has undergone seven years of rigorous training but employs incomprehensible technical terminology, disregards patient concerns, and demonstrates impatience may be technically proficient yet remain practically ineffective. Employers may recruit hard skills; however, retention and advancement are determined by soft skills. Both categories are indispensable, yet it is soft skills that distinguish a merely competent employee from an irreplaceable one.

Why Soft Skills Matter

Employers Prioritise Them

A LinkedIn survey established that 92% of hiring managers regard soft skills as equally or more important than hard skills when evaluating candidates. The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) consistently identify communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and professionalism as the foremost attributes sought by employers in new graduates; technical qualifications rarely feature among the top four priorities. In this respect, campus placement interview function, in effect, as evaluations of soft skills.

They Can Be Learned

Soft skills are not innate traits performed for external audiences; they are competencies cultivated through deliberate practice. In the absence of experience speaking before an audience, confidence will not materialize at the point of interview. Without developing the capacity to listen effectively, leadership will remain unattainable. Every soft skill is amenable to cultivation, and every competency is capable of improvement regardless of one's starting point.

They Outlast Technical Skills

Artificial intelligence is progressively displacing roles that previously demanded years of specialised training. What artificial intelligence cannot replicate is the human capacity to communicate with clarity, inspire trust, navigate ethical complexity, or adapt to unfamiliar environments. These are precisely the capacities that soft skills provide. Investment in their development yields dividends throughout the entirety of a career, rather than exclusively in the early stages of employment.

Figure 1. Perceived Importance of Soft Skills (N=201)

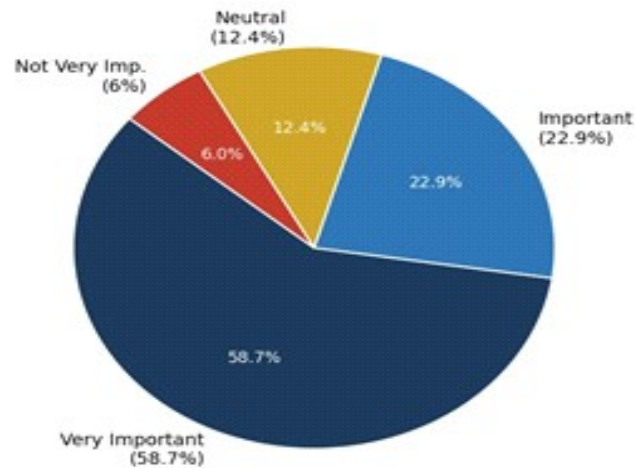


Figure 1. How 201 students across 11 disciplines rated the importance of soft skills

The Seven Core Soft Skills

Research conducted across institutions and employer groups has identified seven soft skills that all students are required to develop. These skills are deeply interconnected: a student who communicates effectively becomes a more productive team member; a critical thinker becomes a more ethically grounded professional; a leader with entrepreneurial awareness operates with greater effectiveness in dynamic environments.

1. **Communication Skills:** The capacity to express ideas with clarity, listen actively, and respond effectively across verbal, written, and digital channels. Among respondents surveyed, 61.7% identified communication as the most critical soft skill for their career, irrespective of discipline. As one second-year MCA student observed, “You can have the best ideas, but if you cannot communicate them effectively, they remain invisible.”
2. **Critical Thinking and Problem Solving:** The capacity to analyse situations systematically, interrogate assumptions, and arrive at logical solutions under pressure. Consider the case of a B.Tech student whose application fails mid-demonstration. Rather than becoming flustered, she isolates the problem methodically, concluding it may be “a memory leak or a network timeout,” and identifies the error within three minutes.
3. **Teamwork and Collaboration:** The ability to work constructively with individuals from diverse backgrounds, respect differing perspectives, and contribute to shared objectives without permitting individual interests to obstruct collective progress. In a BBA group in which all four members seek to present, the productive response is to leverage individual strengths: the most accomplished speaker presents, the data-oriented member undertakes analysis, the designer manages visuals, and the fourth member coordinates scheduling.
4. **Life-Long Learning and Information Management:** The disposition to seek knowledge autonomously, evaluate information critically, and sustain intellectual curiosity as a professional habit rather than an academic obligation. A

B.Tech student who identifies a new artificial intelligence framework appearing across all current job descriptions, notwithstanding its absence from the curriculum, dedicates two weekends to mastering it through online resources. By the time the topic is formally addressed in the classroom months later, she has already achieved proficiency. This constitutes professional self-management: the world advances at a pace that curricula cannot always match.

5. **Entrepreneurship:** The capacity to identify opportunities, assume calculated risks, and demonstrate initiative, whether in establishing a commercial venture, leading a project, or proactively resolving a problem. A second-year B.Des student who observes that local small businesses lack coherent social media presence approaches three of them, designs their brand identities for a modest fee, collects testimonials, and constructs a freelance portfolio prior to completing her degree.
6. **Ethics, Morality, and Professionalism:** The capacity to uphold principles and assume responsibility for one's conduct even under pressure to compromise them. A law intern who declines a senior colleague's request to alter figures in a client's affidavit, and does so with clarity and composure, demonstrates this competency in its most authentic form. She explains that she is unable to attest anything inaccurate; the refusal costs her no professional goodwill. The senior colleague, in fact, regards her more highly as a result. Ethics in professional practice does not consist in confrontation; it consists of clarity regarding what one will and will not do, communicated with equanimity.
7. **Leadership:** The capacity to guide and motivate others towards a shared goal with empathy, clarity, and accountability. Leadership is not predicated upon positional authority; it is constructed through organisation, trust, and genuine concern for those ones is leading. A BSc student assigned to lead a laboratory group characterised by uneven skill levels and conflicting schedules maps each member's

strengths, assigns responsibilities, accordingly, establishes a shared timeline, and consults privately with each member prior to the presentation. The group achieves the most distinguished results in the cohort.

Figure 2. Students Who Faced Difficulty Due to Soft Skills Deficiency (N=201)

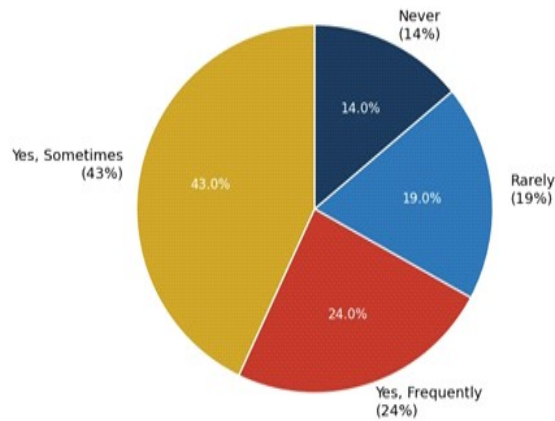


Figure 2. Frequency with which students faced difficulty due to soft skills deficiency.

Eight Essential Soft Skills for Workplace Entry

Beyond the seven-skill framework outlined above, eight competencies are considered particularly critical at the point of transition from academic study to professional employment. These skills shape first impressions during campus interviews, initial team interactions, client engagements, and early performance appraisals.

1. **Communication Skills:** The ability to convey the appropriate message to the appropriate recipient in the appropriate tone and format; this constitutes the foundation of every professional interaction.
2. **Body Language:** Non-verbal indicators of confidence and professionalism. Research indicates that first impressions are formed within the initial seven seconds of an encounter.
3. **Etiquette:** Social and professional norms encompassing punctuality, communication protocols, and the graceful

reception of critique, all of which signal professional maturity to colleagues and supervisors.

4. **Group Discussion Skills:** The capacity to participate constructively, articulate views concisely, remain receptive to alternative perspectives, and manage disagreement in a productive manner.
5. **Presentation Skills:** The ability to structure information clearly, modulate tone effectively, deploy supporting visual materials, and engage the audience, capacities applicable across courtrooms, boardrooms, and academic settings alike.
6. **Interview Skills:** The capacity for authentic self-presentation, substantive responses grounded in genuine experience, attentive listening, and the maintenance of composure under evaluative pressure.
7. **Emotional Intelligence (EI):** The capacity to recognise, understand, regulate, and constructively direct one's own emotions and those of others within professional interactions.
8. **Time Management:** The deliberate planning, organisation, and execution of tasks so as to meet deadlines and manage competing demands effectively. This is a cultivated professional habit, not an innate disposition.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents According to Academic Discipline (N=201)

S.No.	Course/Discipline	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
1	B.A. LL.B.	28	13.93
2	BBA	20	9.95
3	B.Com.	22	10.95
4	B.Tech. CSE	25	12.44
5	BCA	15	7.46
6	B.Pharm.	18	8.96
7	B.Sc.	17	8.46
8	B.Des.	14	6.97
9	B.Arch.	12	5.97
10	MCA	16	7.96
11	MBA	14	6.97
Total	-	201	100.00

Source: Primary Survey Conducted by the Author, 2026.

Survey Insights: What Students Actually Experience

The survey upon which this chapter draws was conducted in 2026 among 201 students enrolled across eleven programs, namely Law, Engineering, Commerce, Management, Sciences, Pharmacy, Design, and Architecture, at institutions situated in the NCR-Delhi region. Participants included students from the first through the fourth year of their respective programs. Primary survey data is supplemented throughout by secondary academic sources.

The Awareness Gap

A total of 84.6% of participants rated soft skills as Important or Very Important to their professional careers, irrespective of their field of study. Nevertheless, more than one in four students reported that they never or rarely engaged in deliberate efforts to develop these skills. Awareness of the problem is widespread; active commitment to addressing it is considerably less so.

The Confidence Crisis

Only 13.9% of respondents reported that they had never encountered difficulties attributable to poor communication or insufficient confidence. This indicates that 86.1% have, at some point, been constrained by the gap between what they know and their capacity to articulate it effectively. A second-year BBA student summarised this experience with particular precision: “I know what I want to say, but when I have to say it in front of others, everything goes blank.” A first-year BSc student added that reading about confidence cannot serve as a substitute for the practice of it.

Communication as a Universal Priority

A total of 61.7% of all respondents identified communication as the single most important soft skill relevant to their professional fields. Students from engineering, pharmacy, architecture, commerce, and law reached unanimous agreement: technical expertise is only as valuable as one’s capacity to convey it. As one B.Des student observed, “Unless you can explain your design, even the best design loses its value.”

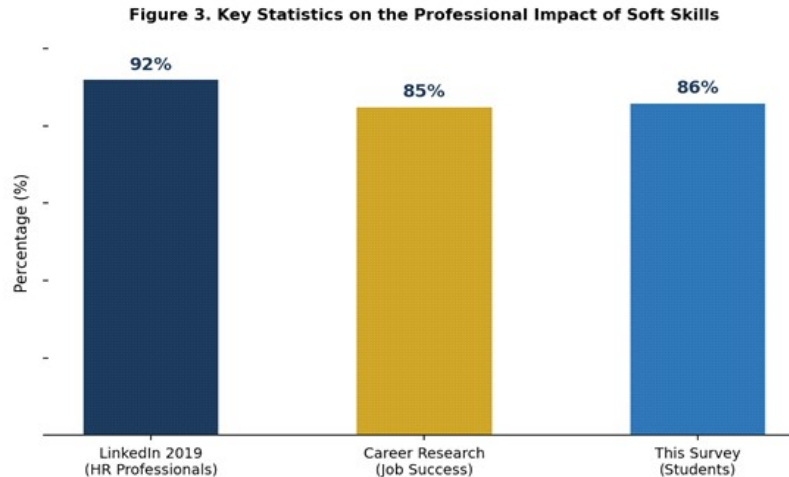


Figure 3. Key statistics on the professional impact of soft skills across three sources.

Building Soft Skills: A Practical Guide

For Communication

Students are encouraged to contribute verbally at least once in every class session. Recording two minutes of personal speech on any subject and reviewing the footage critically provides a productive form of feedback, as the discomfort this exercise generates is itself informative. Participation in moot courts, formal debates, or any activity requiring sustained oral expression under pressure is strongly recommended.

For Confidence

Students are encouraged to use what is known as the three-second rule: take a moment to gather your thoughts and begin speaking before hesitation sets in. Keeping a written record of times when one has performed well is just as important; confidence is built on evidence, not just on optimism.

For Teamwork and Leadership

Students are encouraged to take on roles beyond their usual comfort zones. Individuals who regularly take on leadership roles are

encouraged to practice working as a valuable team member. When group conflicts arise, the best course of action is to mediate rather than to escalate. It is strongly encouraged to regularly give and receive constructive feedback.

For Adaptability and Life-Long Learning

Students are encouraged in each academic semester to complete at least one assignment that falls completely outside their usual range of activities. Switches in instructor, software platform, or delivery method should be seen as chances to build adaptability rather than as causes of hassle.

Conclusion

Soft skills do not supplement education; they complete it. The capacity to communicate coherently, collaborate effectively under pressure, think critically, adapt to change, and lead with integrity are not ancillary accompaniments to professional qualifications. In the absence of these competencies, qualifications denote only technical ability. In their presence, a graduate becomes a complete professional.

These competencies bridge the gap between the technically qualified graduate and the professionally effective practitioner. They are developed deliberately, through sustained daily effort, and they continue to evolve throughout the course of a career. As one first-year survey respondent articulated with considerable insight: “Soft skills do not develop just once. They change as you meet new people and encounter different situations in your life, learn to deal with them, and accumulate experience. These skills are not the destination; they are the journey itself.”

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Appendix

Survey Instrument for Assessing Student Perceptions of Soft Skills

** Note: Fields marked with an asterisk (*) were mandatory for respondents.*

S.No.	Question	Response Options / Format
1	Name (optional)	
2	Course *	
3	Year of Study *	• 1st • 2nd • 3rd • 4th • 5th
4	How familiar are you with the concept of soft skills? *	• Very familiar • Somewhat familiar • Slightly familiar • Not familiar

5	In your opinion, how important are soft skills in a student's life? *	• Very Important
		• Important
		• Neutral
		• Not very important
6	Which of the following do you consider most important for success? *	• Academic knowledge
		• Soft skills
		• Both equally
7	How often do you participate in classroom discussions or activities? *	• Always
		• Often
		• Sometimes
		• Rarely
		• Never
8	How effectively do you manage your time for assignments and studies? *	• Very effectively
		• Effectively
		• Moderately
		• Poorly
9	How confident do you feel while speaking in front of a group? *	• Very confident
		• Confident
		• Neutral
		• Not confident at all
10	How would you rate your communication skills? *	• Excellent
		• Good
		• Average
		• Poor
11	How would you rate your ability to work in a team? *	• Excellent
		• Good
		• Average
		• Poor
12	How well do you handle academic pressure or stress? *	• Very well
		• Well
		• Moderately
		• Poorly

The Human Dimension of Success: Skills and Employability

13	To what extent do you think soft skills influence interview performance? *	• To a great extent
		• To some extent
		• Very little
		• Not at all
14	Have you ever faced difficulty due to lack of confidence or communication skills? *	• Yes, frequently
		• Yes, sometimes
		• Rarely
		• Never
15	How easily do you adapt to new learning methods or environments (e.g., online learning)? *	• Very easily
		• Easily
		• Neutral
		• Very difficult
16	How often do you actively work on improving your soft skills? *	• Always
		• Often
		• Sometimes
		• Rarely
		• Never
17	Which soft skill do you believe is most important for your future career, and why? *	