

TRAINEE PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTION OF THE ROLES OF SOFT SKILLS IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE COMPETENCE.

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Abstract

One way of distinguishing a professional is the ability to display competence in the field of practice. Competence is regarded as the ability to do something successfully or efficiently. One major characteristic that may be regarded as having the potential to enhance the display of competence in the field of practice is the possession of soft skills. Soft skills, which include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, time management, stress management, and so on, could play vital roles in professional practice success. For professional bodies to ensure that individuals entering the profession can display competence, they usually run them through professional qualifying examinations. The focus of this study is to find out the level of awareness of the trainee-professional regarding the existence of soft skills, their relevance to professional practice, and at what point and through what means they can acquire them. The study adopted an analytical survey research design. A simple random sampling method was adopted to select respondents from Professional Continuing Education (PCE) centres in Lagos State. A self-developed questionnaire that was validated was used to collect data. The data collected were analysed using frequency, percentages, and mean. The hypothesis was tested statistically at a 0.05 significance level with multiple linear regression. The study's outcome would help facilitators understand skills to encourage and emphasise, especially in PCE programmes. Recommendations include the integration of soft skills into the professional preparation of trainee professionals is significant in having competent professionals.

Key words: Competence; Continuing Education; Professionals; Professional Developments. Soft skills

Introduction

Extensive research has consistently demonstrated the profound impact of soft skills on professional practice. For instance, effective communication is not just a tool for client interactions and team collaborations but a cornerstone of successful professional relationships. Problem-solving skills are not merely a means to identify and resolve issues in the workplace but a catalyst for innovation and growth. Time management skills are about meeting deadlines and consistently delivering

quality work. Stress management skills are about maintaining productivity and fostering a healthy work-life balance. (Chen & Chen, 2018; Čierna, Sujová & Bambura, 2020; Debnath, Pandey, Chaplot, Gottimukkula, Tiwari & Gupta, 2011; Ramlall & Ramlall, 2014).

More importantly, possessing these soft skills equips professionals to think critically and creatively, enabling them to understand better and apply the knowledge gained in their places of work. Professional competence, which refers to the ability to apply knowledge, skills and attitudes in a professional context, is a crucial aspect of any professional setting. Soft skills play a pivotal role in this, as they enable professionals to exhibit the right attitudes at the workplace and demonstrate professional competence. This has been highlighted by several authors (Asabeh, Alzboon, Alkhalaileh, Alshurafat & Al-Amosh, 2023; Green-Weir, Anderson & Carpenter, 2022; Herrity, 2023; Shakespeare, Keleher & Moxham, 2007; Majid, Zhang, Tong & Raihana, 2012).

Soft skills are values that can be described as non-academic but are very important for success on the job. They could be described as generic skills, and there are many ranging from effective communication, problem-solving and innovation, adaptability/flexibility, creativity, work ethics, self-direction, drive, teamwork and collaboration, time management, stress management, planning, dependability, critical thinking and decision making, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, leadership, integrity, presentation, interpersonal/friendliness, etiquette, listening skills, digital literacy, cross-cultural skills, language skills and research (Green-Weir, Anderson & Carpenter, 2022; Herrity, 2023; Kermis & Kermis, 2011; Ngang, Yunus & Hashim, 2015; Pattanaik & Panda, 2018; Vasanthakumari, 2019; Wahl, Kaufmann, Eckkrammer, Mense, Gollner, Himmler, Rogner, Baierl & Slobodian, 2012).

Furthermore, soft skills are those characteristics that shape an individual's behaviour and could be used to describe their personal and social skills. Several authors have alluded that developing soft skills is vital in the workplace and helps exhibit adequate professional competence (Barakat & Shekh-Abed, 2023; Cimatti, 2016; Debnath, Pandey, Chaplot, Gottimukkula, Tiwari & Gupta, 2011). Individuals are expected to have developed and possess these soft skills to exhibit the right attitudes at the workplace and show professional competence at work.

Furthermore, learner participation in Professional Continuing Education programmes positively correlates with job performance and career advancement (Nishikawa, Nesbit, Robertson & Gibson,

2023). These programmes allow individuals to acquire new knowledge and skills relevant to their field. As a result, they are better equipped to handle the challenges and demands of their job, making them more likely to succeed and progress in their career.

Including soft skills in Professional Continuing Education programmes is not just a suggestion, but a significant factor that should be considered. The acquisition and application of soft skills in the workplace would promote trainee professionals as being perceived as competent professionals. Developing and maintaining soft skills are crucial for their application in the workplace and for trainee professionals to be perceived as competent professionals. Possessing soft skills enhances their professional competence and paves the way for career advancement. Therefore, it is imperative that educators and training providers incorporate soft skills development in their programmes to ensure the success and progression of their learners in their future workplace.

Statement of the Problem

One way of distinguishing a professional is the ability to display competence in the field of practice. Competence is regarded as the ability to do something successfully or efficiently. Soft skills, which include communication, teamwork, problem-solving, time management, stress management, and so on, could play vital roles in professional practice success. They have the potential to empower and motivate trainee professionals, enabling them to communicate and collaborate effectively with others, which is essential in professional practice. They also possess the ability to think critically and creatively, which allows them to better understand and apply their knowledge in the field. Professional bodies, as the gatekeepers of professional competence, should ensure that individuals entering the profession can display competence when running them through professional qualifying examinations. Most professional bodies allow Professional Continuing Education centres to prepare prospective professionals to ensure adequate preparation for the professional examinations. The focus of this study is to find out the level of awareness of the trainee-professional regarding the existence of soft skills, their relevance to professional practice, and the modes of acquiring them.

Purpose of the Study

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The purpose of the study was to determine the level of awareness of the trainee-professional regarding the existence of soft skills, their relevance to professional practice, and the modes of acquiring them. Specifically, the study examined.

1. The awareness of the trainee professionals of the existence and relevance of soft skills to their professional practice competence?
2. ways do trainee professionals believe they can acquire soft skills.
3. extent does the acquisition of soft skills enhance professional competence?

Research Questions

1. How aware are the trainee professionals of the existence and relevance of soft skills to their professional practice competence?
2. In what ways do trainee professionals believe they can acquire soft skills?
3. To what extent does the acquisition of soft skills enhance professional competence?

Research Hypothesis

Having soft skills will not significantly enhance professional practice competence in trainee professionals.

Research Methodology

The descriptive research design (survey method) was employed in the study. The study population comprised all the learners of accredited Professional Continuing Education centres of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria (ICAN) in Lagos State, Nigeria. The total number of registered learners in ICAN-accredited tuition centres in Lagos State was 1,414. Stratified random sampling technique was adopted for the study. The programmes were arranged into levels, and all the levels were involved in the study. There are three levels in ICAN: Foundation, Skills, and Professional Examination. A self-developed validated questionnaire was used to collect data. Experts in the field of Education validated the instrument. Respondents were required to select the appropriate responses to statements made in the questionnaire from a Likert response scale of To a Large Extent (TLE), To Some Extent (TSE), To a Little Extent (ALE), To a Very Little Extent (VLE) and Not at All (NAA). A Google form was created to administer the questionnaire to the learners. Responses were also received electronically through Google Forms. The data collected

were analysed using frequency, percentages, and mean. The hypothesis was tested statistically at a 5% significance level with multiple linear regression.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1a: Gender of Participants

Gender	Per cent
Male	52.8
Female	47.2
Total	100.0

Table 1a above indicates that out of the 89 total respondents to the questionnaire, 52.8% were male, while 47.2% were female.

Table 1b: Age of Participants

Age group	Per cent
18-22 years	11.2
23-27 years	40.4
28-32 years	14.6
33-37 years	13.5
38+ years	20.2
Total	100.0

Table 1b above presents the age groups of the participants sampled in the study. It shows that 11.2% were 18-22 years age group, 40.4% were 23-27 years, 14.6% were 28-32 years, 13.5% were 33-37 years and 20.2% were 38 years and above.

Table 2a: Participants' Employment Status

Level	Per cent
Employed	85.4
Unemployed	14.6
Total	100.0

Table 2a above shows that 85.4% of the survey participants were employed, while 14.6% were unemployed at the time of the survey.

Table 2b: Level at PCE or Tuition Centre

Level	Per cent
Foundation	10.1
Skills	11.2
Professional	78.7
Total	100.0

Table 2b above indicates that 10.1% of respondents were at the ICAN Foundation level, 11.2% were at the Skills level, and 78.7% were at the Professional level.

Table 3: Participants' Level at Work

Level at Work	Per cent
Entry Level	40.4
Middle Level	42.7
Management Level	10.1
Not Employed	6.7
Total	100.0

Table 3 above indicates that 40.4% of respondents were entry-level workers, 42.7% were middle-level workers, 10.1% were management-level workers, and 6.7% were unemployed.

Research Question One: How aware are the trainee professionals of the existence and relevance of soft skills to their professional practice competence?

Table 4: Awareness of the existence and relevance of soft skills

Questionnaire Item	TLE (%)	TSE (%)	ALE (%)	VLE (%)	NAA (%)	Wt. Mean
1. I have a good idea of what soft skills are.	66.3	27.0	2.2	4.5	0.0	3.6
2. I correctly understand the meaning of soft skills.	69.7	25.8	2.2	2.2	0.0	3.6
3. There is a relationship between professional practice and soft skills.	66.3	25.8	4.5	3.4	0.0	3.6
4. I am aware that there are many soft skills.	69.7	21.3	5.6	3.4	0.0	3.6
5. There is a relationship between soft skills and professional competence.	53.9	29.2	12.4	4.5	0.0	3.3
6. Professional practice does require soft skills.	55.1	29.2	7.9	5.6	2.2	3.3
Grand Mean	63.5	26.4	5.8	3.9	0.4	3.5

Table 4 above is data from the questionnaire on trainee professionals' awareness of the existence and relevance of soft skills to their professional practice competency. The table shows that a mean of 63.5% of respondents are aware of the existence and relevance of soft skills to their professional practice competency 26.4% are mostly aware to some extent, 5.8% to a little extent, 3.9% to a very little extent and 0.4% are not aware. With a weighted mean of 3.5, it is concluded that trainee professionals are aware of the existence and relevance of soft skills to their professional practice competency to a large extent.

Research Question Two: In what ways do trainee professionals believe they can acquire soft skills?

Table 5: Ways Trainee Professionals Believe Soft Skills Can Be Acquired

#	Questionnaire Item	TLE (%)	TSE (%)	ALE (%)	VLE (%)	NAA (%)	Wt. Mean	Rank
1.	Soft skills can be taught.	59.6	27.0	7.9	5.6	0.0	3.4	1
2.	Soft skills can be acquired through reading.	33.7	42.7	16.9	6.7	0.0	3.0	2
3.	It is only experienced that can expose you to soft skills.	18.0	32.6	34.8	6.7	7.9	2.5	4
4.	Soft skills training has been integrated into the work at your Tuition Centre.	27.0	23.6	30.3	12.4	6.7	2.5	5
5.	Soft skills are supposed to be acquired during professional practice.	24.7	42.7	28.1	4.5	0.0	2.9	3
6.	There had yet to be any mention of anything about soft skills at your Tuition Centre.	19.1	21.3	37.1	12.4	10.1	2.3	6
7.	Soft skills are part of what is taught in the secondary school.	12.4	19.1	36.0	22.5	10.1	2.0	7
Grand Mean		27.8	29.9	27.3	10.1	5.0	2.7	

Table 5 above is data from the questionnaire on trainee professionals' awareness of how they can acquire soft skills for their professional practice competency. The table shows that 27.8% of respondents are aware of the ways to acquire soft skills to a large extent, 29.9% are aware to some extent, 27.3% are aware to a little extent, 10.1% to a very little extent, and 5.0% are not. With a weighted average of 2.7, it is concluded that trainee professionals are aware of the ways they can acquire soft skills for their professional practice competency to some extent. Additionally, the top 5 ways, by weighted mean, respondents indicated that trainee professionals believed they could acquire soft skills for professional practice competency are teaching with a weighted mean of 3.4, reading with a mean of 3.0, acquisition during professional practice with a mean of 2.9, acquisition through experience with a mean of 2.5 and integration of soft skills into work at the PCE or tuition centres with a mean of 2.5.

Research Question Three: To what extent does the acquisition of soft skills enhance professional competence?

Table 6: Enhancing Professional Competency with Soft Skills

Questionnaire Item	TLE (%)	TSE (%)	ALE (%)	VLE (%)	NAA (%)	Wt. Mean
1. Competence in professional practice depends on one's possession of soft skills.	57.3	29.2	12.4	1.1	0.0	3.4
2. Soft skills can be regarded as the tool that promotes competence during professional practice.	65.2	29.2	3.4	2.2	0.0	3.6
3. Special training in soft skills can prepare professionals in training for adequate professional practice.	68.5	25.8	5.6	0.0	0.0	3.6
4. Good knowledge of your professional field of practice is what you need to be a competent professional.	56.2	31.5	10.1	2.2	0.0	3.4
Grand Mean	61.8	28.9	7.9	1.4	0.0	3.5

Table 6 above shows data from the questionnaire on the enhancement of professional competence of trainee professionals through soft skills acquisition. The table shows that a mean of 61.8% of respondents' acquisition of soft skills enhances professional practice competency to a large extent, 28.9% to some extent, 7.9% to a little extent, and 1.4% to a very little extent. With a weighted average of 3.5, it is concluded that the acquisition of soft skills by trainee professionals mostly enhances professional competence.

Research Hypothesis

Soft skills will not significantly enhance professional practice competence in trainee professionals. This was analysed with multiple linear regression at a 5% significance level, and the result is shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Multiple Linear Regression Result of Hypothesis

Independent Variables – Soft Skills	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Remarks
1. Intercept or Model constant	18.3377	9.5319	1.9238	0.05812	
2. Research	0.3295	0.0642	5.1324	0.00000	Significant
3. Leadership	-0.3447	0.0718	-4.8000	0.00001	Significant
4. Time Management	0.4184	0.0883	4.7355	0.00001	Significant
5. Self-Direction	0.3614	0.0866	4.1731	0.00008	Significant
6. Interpersonal/Friendliness	0.4004	0.1041	3.8461	0.00025	Significant
7. Drive	-0.2315	0.0790	-2.9294	0.00448	Significant
8. Work Ethic	-0.2525	0.0953	-2.6489	0.00982	Significant

9.	Problem-solving and Innovation	-0.1677	0.0990	-1.6946	0.09425	Not Sig.
10.	Planning	0.1450	0.0929	1.5607	0.12275	Not Sig.
11.	Effective Communication	0.1619	0.1039	1.5581	0.12337	Not Sig.
12.	Digital Literacy	-0.1210	0.0905	-1.3367	0.18532	Not Sig.
13.	Integrity	0.0782	0.0985	0.7940	0.42969	Not Sig.

- a. Dependent Variable: Professional competence
- b. Predictors: Regression model constant, Research, Leadership, Time Management, Self-Direction, Interpersonal/Friendliness, Drive, Work Ethic, Problem-solving and Innovation, Planning, Effective Communication, Digital Literacy, and Integrity.
- c. Regression Statistics: Correlation coefficient = 0.831; R square = 0.691; Standard error = 7.788; Observations = 89.
- d. Regression model significance: F Stat = 14.160; p-Value = 0.000

The result from Table 7 revealed that the regression model has a high correlation coefficient of 83.1% (or R square of 69.1%), indicating a strong positive relationship between soft skills and professional competence. It also showed that all the predictor variables, except problem-solving, planning, communication, digital literacy, and integrity, were statistically significant enhancers of professional competency. Research (t-Stat=5.13, p-Value=0.000<0.05) was the most significant to enhance or influence professional competency, while Work Ethic (t-Stat=-2.65, p-Value=0.010<0.05) was the least of the significant variables. Other variables with significant enhancement to the dependent variable include Leadership (t-Stat=-4.80, p-Value=0.000<0.05), Time management (t-Stat=4.74, p-Value=0.000<0.05), Self-direction (t-Stat=-4.17, p-Value=0.000<0.05), Interpersonal (t-Stat=3.85, p-Value=0.000<0.05), and Drive (t-Stat=-2.93, p-Value=0.004<0.05). Problem solving/innovation (t-Stat=-1.69, p-Value=0.094>0.05), Planning (t-Stat=1.56, p-Value=0.123>0.05), Effective communication (t-Stat=1.56, p-Value=0.123>0.05), Digital literacy (t-Stat=-1.34, p-Value=0.185>0.05) and Integrity (t-Stat=0.79, p-Value=0.430>0.05) did not result in statistically significant impact on professional competency. The result, therefore, indicates that soft skills such as research, leadership, time management, self-direction, interpersonal/friendliness, drive, and work ethic can significantly enhance professional competency; hence, we reject the null hypothesis.

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings have shown that trainee professionals are cognizant of the existence and relevance of soft skills to their professional practice competency to a large extent. This is a welcome finding in that soft skills are critical to professional development, and the awareness of soft skills will enhance competence in professional practice and career. Many authors have emphasized the need for soft skills in professional practice. This is supported by scholars, who have shown from various studies that soft skills enhance workplace connections, on-the-job performance, and robust future career developments. Research has shown that the acquisition of soft skills should begin during the student training period, and this is a welcome development for trainee professionals undergoing professional development at various tuition centers (Pattanaik & Panda, 2018; Vasanthakumari, 2019). This is supported by findings that possessing soft skills is attributable to success in the workplace (Chabus, 2021; Green-Weir, Anderson & Carpenter, 2022).

Furthermore, the study found that most trainee professionals are aware of how they can acquire soft skills for their professional practice competency to some extent. The top five ways from the study result that trainee professionals indicated that they could acquire soft skills for professional practice competency are teaching, reading, acquisition during professional practice, acquisition through experience and integration of soft skills into classes at tuition centres. The findings are supported by authors who indicated that the acquisition of soft skills should earnestly begin when trainees are at school and be incorporated into their training (Ngang, Yunus & Hashim, 2015; Ramlall & Ramlall, 2014).

The findings from the study showed that the acquisition of soft skills by trainee professionals mostly enhances professional competence. The findings indicated that soft skills such as research, leadership, time management, self-direction, interpersonal/friendliness, drive, and work ethic significantly enhance professional competency. Examining the fact that research is an essential soft skill to improve their value and behaviours at work is supported by the assertion of some authors that it helps to deliver a competent workforce. (Chai, 2022; Mydin, Radin-Rahman & Wan-Mohammad, 2021).

Conclusion

The study has shown that trainee professionals know the importance of possessing soft skills to succeed at work and be relevant in their chosen careers. Soft skills can be acquired in varied ways, ranging from being taught at institutions to acquiring them on their own and learning on the job. Thus, the training centres play a crucial role in incorporating the teaching of soft skills into the curriculum at the tuition centres to prepare a future-ready professional. Lastly, the trainee professionals understand the importance of acquiring soft skills to be competent professionals who will be helpful in the industry and beyond.

Recommendation

The following recommendations are made from the findings of this study:

1. There is a need to create awareness in the tuition centres of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria on the need to incorporate the teaching of soft skills into the classes at the tuition centres.
2. The integration of soft skills into the professional preparation of trainee professionals is significant in having competent professionals.

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