

1-2016

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Recommended Citation

Matteson, Miriam L.; Anderson, Lorien; and Boyden, Cynthia (2016). "Soft Skills": A Phrase in Search of Meaning. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 16(1), 71-88. doi: 10.1353/pla.2016.0009 Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.kent.edu/slispubs/73>

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portal: Libraries and the Academy, Volume 16, Number 1, January 2016, pp. 71-88 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/pla.2016.0009](https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2016.0009)



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“Soft Skills”: A Phrase in Search of Meaning

Miriam L. Matteson, Lorien Anderson, and
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abstract: Soft skills are a collection of people management skills, important to many professions and job positions, including academic librarianship. Yet the concept of soft skills lacks definition, scope, instrumentation, and systematic education and training. This literature review explores the definition of *soft skills*; contrasts skills with related concepts, such as personality traits, attitudes, beliefs, and values; and compares a set of soft skill typologies. We discuss a number of conceptual issues associated with soft skills and suggest several lines of research to help clarify and strengthen librarians’ understanding of and development of soft skills.

Introduction and Problem Statement

Soft skills, *people skills*, *intangibles*—these words are frequently used to describe a set of skills that most would agree are important in any work environment. Articles on soft skills appear in a variety of disciplines as a trendy, but fuzzy, topic. We often refer to these skills when we observe them missing in someone—a colleague, a supervisor, a customer, or a service provider. There is something appealing about a set of nontechnical, domain-independent skills that underpin our behavior in the workplace. We universally recognize that soft skills are important, but when pressed to describe particular soft skills, the concept becomes murky.

In the library and information science (LIS) literature, among many other disciplines, writers address directly and indirectly the importance of developing soft skills. Professional documents, such as the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers, implicitly suggest that soft skills connected with communication and interpersonal skills are essential if librarians are to be approachable, to listen to customers, and to show interest in their information needs.¹ Articles from the LIS literature name flexibility,



initiative, empathy, planning, and leadership ability as important skills to be used in the library workplace.²

Although the usefulness of such soft skills is not new to the profession, the need to develop them has become more pressing in academic librarianship. Virtually all reports on the future of academic libraries and librarianship declare that roles are changing and requiring new and different skill sets, with an emphasis on leadership, outreach, collaboration, and the ability to communicate library value.³

Less obviously related, though equally essential, is the argument made by R. David Lankes in his 2011 book *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, in which he defines the mission

Soft skills connected with communication and interpersonal skills are essential if librarians are to be approachable, to listen to customers, and to show interest in their information needs.

of librarians as work done “to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities.”⁴ That knowledge creation happens, he argues, when librarians facilitate conversations with community members. Lankes devotes a portion of the *Atlas* to discussing the many traditional technical skills that will continue to be required for what he calls New Librarianship, such as organizing information, developing collections, seeking information, serving the public, warehousing

collections, and administering organizations. But a significant requirement not fully explored in the concept of New Librarianship is the deployment of people skills implicitly assumed to facilitate knowledge creation.

This raises some interesting questions. What important soft skills should academic librarians develop? More fundamentally, what precisely *are* soft skills? How do we

In the workplace, librarians are often evaluated on skills or abilities that fall under the concept of soft skills.

measure them? How do we train people to improve them? Because academic librarians’ roles are changing, we need to deconstruct the skills that support their redefined roles. Successful performance of these roles requires proficiency in skills long considered “soft.” Most training and preparation for librarians has focused on the technical or “hard” skills required for the field.

Yet in the workplace, librarians are often evaluated on skills or abilities that fall under the concept of soft skills. In short, strong interpersonal competencies are expected of all library professionals.

It is insufficient to hope that academic librarians naturally possess soft skills or will develop them somewhere along their professional paths. Academic librarianship centers on developing relationships with faculty, students, and administration, endeavors that require high levels of interpersonal skills. However, if those discrete skills are not clearly articulated, and if targeted training in developing them is rare, how are librarians to reach their fullest potential in offering high-quality service? We are better served as a profession if we investigate what we mean by *soft skills* by clearly identifying differences between skills, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. After doing so, we can then create meaningful methods to train and develop academic librarians in these areas.

In this literature review, we will demonstrate the inconsistent treatment of the concept of skills and argue for the importance of clarifying the idea of soft skills. We further suggest several lines of research to effectively measure soft skills and to explore the links between soft skills and organizational performance.

Conceptual Framework

To meaningfully define *soft skills*, we must first establish what skills are and how they differ from related concepts, such as attitudes, beliefs, dispositions and traits, and values. Tim Peterson and David Van Fleet define a skill as “the ability either to perform some specific behavioral task or the ability to perform some specific cognitive process that is functionally related to some particular task.”⁵ They suggest three distinct components of skills: (1) a domain-specific knowledge base, (2) the means to access that knowledge, and (3) the ability to take actions or thoughts using that knowledge to carry out a task. The first two components, they argue, are necessary precursors to the third component, which is what, in common practice, we think of as the “skill.” Citing Richard Boyatzis’s work on managerial competencies, Frederick Evers, James Rush, and Iris Berdrow define *skills* as sequences of observable behaviors or sets of actions that relate to reaching a goal.⁶

Scott Hurrell, Dora Scholarios, and Paul Thompson’s conception of skill echoes and expands Peterson and Van Fleet’s division between prerequisite processes and their execution, explaining skills as a complex knowledge practice involving cognition of knowledge bases, dispositional characteristics, context-specific knowledge, and prior experience.⁷ A skill, according to Hurrell and his coauthors, is something that “develops over time, with practice; involves cognitive processes and manipulation of knowledge . . . and includes an element of discretion that allows performance with economy of effort.”⁸

Paul Attewell notes that although, at the most basic level, a skill is the ability to do something well, he finds ambiguity in even that simple definition.⁹ Is a skill merely a competence or ability, or does the word *skill* also imply a level of quality, such as mastery or excellence? Attewell also raises interesting questions about the sociological nature of skills. Reviewing the concept of skill through four different lenses, he distinguishes between seeing a skill simply as an action toward a task (a positivist view) versus a “relational” idea of skill (ethnomethodologist and [Max] Weberian views). Here, skills are understood as an array of tasks for a requirement and an awareness of who carries out those tasks (that is, whether skilled or unskilled). The usefulness of this analysis lies in demonstrating that a basic concept such as skills can have larger social meanings, with much ambiguity across different contexts. Researchers, Attewell argues, should be aware of their own preconceived ideas about the nature of skills if they are to facilitate better understandings of the concept.

Among the various definitions of *skill*, the concept of execution is central in all of them. That is, *skill* implies the prerequisites of having and accessing certain knowledge, processes, or sequences of behavior leading to a specific performance. However, for something to be considered a skill, it must contain an element of action. In addition,

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Evers, Rush, and Berdrow suggest that skills fall on a competency continuum from low to high, are associated with knowledge and values, and can be developed, moving from basic to more advanced.¹⁰

Several psychological concepts are related to the definition of *skill*. At times, the distinctions among these concepts tend to blur. The relationship between skills and dispositions or traits is particularly difficult to ascertain. For example, although Irena Grugulis and Steven Vincent warn against defining personal attributes and behaviors as skills, examples in the literature show that traits, goals, motivations, and preferences have all been considered soft skills. In fact, these are personal attributes, not skills.¹¹ The terms *trait* and *disposition*—functionally synonymous—are individual qualities. Relatively stable over time, traits affect behavior.¹² Owing to that stability, they differ from skills, which inherently involve performance, action, or change. Essentially, dispositions are qualities people possess; they inform what people do using their skill sets.

Discussion of skill also takes into account the interdependent concepts of attitude, belief, and value. In the same way that skills imply action, attitudes necessarily incorporate some sort of evaluation toward an outside element. Stephen Kosslyn and Robin Rosenberg describe attitude as “an overall evaluation about some aspect of the world—people, issues, or objects.” Attitudes consist of three components: affective, that is, feelings about an object or issue; behavioral, that is, intent to act in a particular way regarding the object or issue; and cognitive, that is, beliefs or knowledge about the object or issue.¹³ Susan Fiske corroborates, defining *attitude* as a positive or negative judgment of an object or entity.¹⁴

Scott Lilienfeld, Steven Lynn, Laura Namy, and Nancy Woolf describe the intersection of belief and attitude by stating, “A belief is a conclusion regarding factual evidence, whereas an attitude is a belief that includes an emotional component.” An attitude, they add, “stems from a variety of sources including our prior experience and personalities.”¹⁵ While beliefs may be grounded in some factual evidence, the beliefs people hold are informed by their values. Defined by George Theodorson and Achilles Theodorson, values are “abstract, generalized principle[s] of behavior to which the members of a group feel a strong, emotionally toned positive commitment and which provides a standard for judging specific acts and goals.”¹⁶ Fiske emphasizes that personal values typically apply across situations, further differentiating them from attitudes and beliefs, which people hold about specific people, issues, objects, or facts.¹⁷

To more precisely delineate these terms, we offer up these operational definitions of the central concepts associated with soft skills:

- Skills: The ability to access knowledge from a domain-specific knowledge base and use that knowledge to perform an action or carry out a task.
- Dispositions: Individual qualities, relatively stable over time, that influence behavior and actions performed as part of an individual’s skill set.
- Attitudes: A positive or negative judgment, based in part on emotion, about an outside entity.
- Beliefs: An acceptance that certain factual evidence is true, informed by an individual’s own values.
- Values: General standards or principles that guide behaviors among varying situations and to which individuals feel a strong commitment.

Soft Skills Definitions, Research, and Typologies

Definitions

The literature on soft skills is confusing. The phrase *soft skills* is catchy but ambiguous, and authors use it extensively with little agreement on meaning. In such fields as business education, management, communication, and even library and information science, articles list all kinds of soft skills derived from formal and informal research methods. Yet definitions of the term vary. No formally agreed upon, universal set of soft skills exists.¹⁸

Hurrell, Scholarios, and Thompson define *soft skills* as “nontechnical and not reliant on abstract reasoning, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts.”¹⁹ Grugulis and Vincent list “communication, problem-solving, team-working, an ability to improve personal learning and performance, motivation, judgment, leadership and initiative” as soft skills.²⁰ However, many of these tasks *do* require some form of abstract reasoning, in contradiction to the definition given earlier. Diane Parente, John Stephan, and Randy Brown define *soft skills* as people management skills. Their list includes “clear communication and meaningful feedback, resolving and/or managing conflicts, and understanding human behavior in group settings.”²¹

If definitions across the management research literature depart from and even contradict one another, overlaps among these lists of soft skills do exist: sociability, self-management, communication skills, ethics, diversity sensitivity, teamwork skills, problem-solving or critical thinking abilities, customer service competencies, emotional intelligence, and leadership skills have all been mentioned as examples.²² Drawing from a United States Department of Labor report on preparing students for workplace demands, Jungsun (Sunny) Kim, Mehmet Erdem, JeoungWoo Byun, and Hwayoung Jeong highlight three broad categories of soft skills: (1) interpersonal skills, such as teamwork skills and customer service skills; (2) thinking skills, such as decision-making and knowing how to learn; and (3) personal skills, such as sociability and self-management.²³

The library and information science literature has paid only limited attention to defining *soft skills*. Few authors have measured them or determined to what extent they predict performance. Patricia Promis looked specifically at emotional intelligence as a set of soft skills and surveyed job listings to determine what, if any, soft skills employers sought.²⁴ She found that the soft skills most commonly listed in job ads included innovation, initiative, service orientation, leveraging diversity, communication, leadership, collaboration and cooperation, and team capabilities.²⁵ Abdus Sattar Chaudhry, Christopher Khoo, Paul Wu, and Yun-Ke Chang proposed a list of soft skills for information professionals derived from a review of LIS literature on job competencies. Their list includes communication

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skills, social and community skills, analytical abilities, management and leadership competence, enterprising skills, and a set of attitudes and personal traits.²⁶ In a recent *Library Journal* column, Michael Stephens lists communication, initiative, continuous learning, sensitivity and understanding, and professional responsibility as essential soft skills for librarians. He declares, "These skills should be taught throughout our programs, from the core to electives, practicums, and culminating experiences."²⁷

Research

Research on soft skills has involved both direct investigation of soft skills in particular environments and identification of general workplace competencies in which soft skills are essential to high performance. Two research methods have prevailed within this literature. The first approach seeks to identify discrete skills considered soft skills. This method typically involves eliciting lists of soft skills from relevant stakeholders in a given domain, either through surveys, interviews, or Delphi methodology—that is, successively collating the judgments of experts.

For example, Marcel Robles asked a sample of business executives to list the ten most important soft skills they wanted new employees to possess.²⁸ The results yielded a list of 517 skills, some mentioned more than once. Robles coded and merged the skills, resulting in twenty-six discrete skills, which he then ranked in order of frequency. The top ten ranked skills from the list of twenty-six were then sent to another sample of business executives, who provided measures of importance. The soft skills, ranked from most to least important, were integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, interpersonal skills, professionalism, positive attitude, teamwork skills, flexibility, and work ethic.

Ethnographic methods have also been used to elicit lists of particular soft skills. Kasey Windels, Karen Mallia, and Sheri Broyles used field observations, formal interviews, and informal conversations from six advertising firms to explore soft skills important in the advertising industry.²⁹ They found that the four most useful skills were critical thinking, interpersonal communication, presentation, and persuasion skills. This grouping treats soft skills at a broader categorical level as opposed to a list of discrete abilities, but it does not seem to confound traits with skills.

The other research approach commonly seen in the literature starts with an existing list of soft skills and tests them in some capacity, such as determining which are most likely to predict performance, or testing the agreement of importance across different participant groups. For example, college students and recent graduates from business studies ranked the relative importance of twenty-four competencies (hard and soft skills) compiled from previous research and thought to be associated with superior performance in the workplace.³⁰ The results showed that, although the order differed, both students and graduates listed the same skills in their top five most important: computer literacy, customer service orientation, teamwork and cooperation, self-confidence, and willingness to learn. Overall, the recent graduates rated both the hard and soft skills as more important than did the group of current students, but the mean score for each of the skills was above four on a seven-point scale for both groups, suggesting that both groups valued hard and soft skills.

Information technology (IT) managers and faculty teaching IT courses ranked thirty-two entry-level hard and soft skills derived from the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) IT curriculum and prior research.³¹ The thirty-two traits were categorized into: (1) technical skills, (2) organizational and managerial knowledge or skills, (3) personal skills or traits, (4) interpersonal skills or traits, and (5) experience or grade point average (GPA). The three middle categories most closely map to other conceptualizations of soft skills and included such abilities as project management skills, knowledge of the company, knowledge of industry, mastery of business functions, leadership skills, interpersonal communication skills, ability to work in teams, honesty or integrity, analytical ability, flexibility or adaptability, motivation, creative thinking, organizational skills, and entrepreneurship or risk taking. The faculty and managers both ranked interpersonal and personal skills highest, followed by technical skills, organizational and managerial skills, and experience and GPA.

Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, Adriane Arteché, Andrew J. Bremner, Corina Greven, and Adrian Furnham created an inventory of fifteen soft skills based on previous literature: self-management, communicational, interpersonal, teamworking, the ability to work under pressure, imagination or creativity, critical thinking, willingness to learn, attention to detail, taking responsibility, planning and organizing, insight, maturity, professionalism, and emotional intelligence.³² In several studies with university students, they explored associations between soft skills and personality, self-assessed intelligence, and academic performance. They found that, over and above personality traits, soft skills were significant predictors of academic performance. They also explored associations between belief of the importance of soft skills and IQ and found that IQ was negatively associated with soft skills ratings. Individuals with higher cognitive ability were less likely to believe soft skills important for academic achievement.

In another study of soft skills in the workplace, Melvin Weber, Dori A. Finley, Alleah Crawford, and David Rivera Jr. created a list of 107 competencies based on previous research and asked human resources professionals to rate each skill on a five-point scale of importance.³³ Competencies with the highest means (4.9 to 4.6) include “undermines others” (reverse scored), “acts with integrity,” “makes inappropriate remarks” (reverse scored), “acts honestly,” “follows through on commitment,” “shows enthusiasm,” “follows up with others,” “inspires trust through others,” and “responds professionally to guests.”

Interestingly, many items included in each of the lists of soft skills cited in these studies are not actually skills. Particularly in the studies with longer lists, such as that of Weber and his coauthors, the conceptualization of soft skills becomes diluted with traits or dispositions, behaviors, and knowledge sets. This treatment highlights the need for better construct clarity in soft skills research.

Over and above personality traits, soft skills were significant predictors of academic performance.



Taxonomies

Although some empirical research has applied scientific methods toward clarifying the concept of soft skills, little traction has been gained within a single field, and certainly none across different fields of study. In this section, we first explore a seminal work by Robert Katz, an early attempt to categorize workplace skills. Then we present two research studies that formally investigated a set of soft skills.

Katz's work is a precursor to the idea of soft skills.³⁴ Writing more generally about sets of abilities executives needed to be effective administrators, Katz offered up a three-part skill set that included technical, human, and conceptual skills. Technical skills consisted of specialized knowledge of tools and techniques, and abilities to execute processes and procedures relative to a particular discipline. Human skills meant primarily the ability to cooperate with others. Conceptual skills included the ability to think strategically, to understand the big picture, and to carry out decisions to advance the overall goals of the organization. Katz argued that, in practice, all these skill sets intertwine, but dividing them into three categories can be useful to develop clearer understandings of each discrete skill.

Katz further suggested that different skill sets had greater relative importance at different phases of an employee's development. Technical abilities, he reasoned, were most valuable in employees at lower levels of the organization, where much of the physical operations of the company are carried out. Conceptual skill becomes more important as employees move up the ranks in the organization, becoming more responsible for providing strategic direction. Human skills, Katz acknowledged, are critical at every level of the organization, although as an employee rises in position, greater conceptual skills are needed and can compensate for subpar human skills. An important element in Katz's approach to mapping out managerial competencies is the argument that employees can develop skills of any kind. Rather than believing that abilities are innate, Katz argued that people could learn and develop the skill sets needed to be high performers. Although Katz's model did not attempt to create a taxonomy of skills classified within each category, his three-pronged model has undergirded much research and has thus been instrumental to the concept of soft skills.

Evers, Rush, and Berdrow carried out a multistage research project that investigated gaps between university graduates' skill sets and employers' needs in Canada.³⁵ During Phase One, the researchers interviewed U.S. and Canadian managers and recent graduates in high-technology manufacturing companies who sought to develop workplace skills, either for themselves or in their recent hires. Results showed that both recent university graduates and managers assessed that new hires were well prepared in technical ability but lacked managerial and interpersonal skills. Based on the Phase One results and additional skills gleaned from literature searches, the researchers developed a list of thirteen workplace skills. They then carried out a follow-up study, surveying recent university graduates and managers who rated the adequacy of those thirteen skills, either self-assessed (by the recent graduates) or evaluated by managers in their new employees. Results from the survey showed that adequate performance in quantitative and mathematics skills, technical ability, working independently, and problem-solving were scored the highest for both graduates and managers. The least adequate skills were

Table 1.

Frederick Evers, James Rush, and Iris Berdrow's four base competencies

Base competency	Description*	Skills
Managing self	The ability to develop practices and routines for dealing with uncertainty in a changing environment	Learning Personal organization and time management Personal strengths Problem solving and analytic
Communicating	The ability to interact effectively with others to gather, integrate, and convey verbal and written information	Interpersonal Listening Oral communication Written communication
Managing people and tasks	The ability to accomplish work through planning, organizing, and controlling organizational resources	Coordinating Decision-making Leadership and influence Managing conflict Planning and organizing
Mobilizing innovation and change	The ability to conceptualize, initiate, and manage significant change in the organization	Ability to conceptualize Creativity, innovation, change Risk taking Visioning

*Definitions adapted from Frederick T. Evers, James C. Rush, and Iris Berdrow, *The Bases of Competence: Skills for Lifelong Learning and Employability* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

oral and written communication, leadership skills, ability to be creative and innovative, and administrative competence—essential abilities considered soft skills.

In Phase Two, the three authors expanded the list of skills to eighteen discrete skills. A new sample of current students and recent graduates self-rated their adequacy on the eighteen skills, and a new sample of managers scored the adequacy of recent employees once a year for three years. Based on factor analysis on the different data sets, the



researchers merged the eighteen skills into four base competencies, shown in Table 1. Although Evers, Rush, and Berdrow did not set out to identify soft skills specifically, their findings show that both new employees and their managers considered skills typically thought of as soft skills to be important.

Cameron Klein, Renee DeRouin, and Eduardo Salas set out to clarify one of the most-often named soft skills, “interpersonal skills.”³⁶ The researchers reviewed articles, book chapters, websites, and other sources for existing taxonomies and frameworks of interpersonal skills, resulting in fifty-eight distinct lists, totaling more than 400 abilities. After identical skills were merged across lists, frequency counts boiled down a set of twelve discrete skills, each of which was cited at least ten times in the literature reviewed. The investigators grouped those twelve skills into two categories: communication skills and relationship-building skills. Table 2 lists them.

One of the strengths of the taxonomy used by Klein and his coauthors is its conceptual clarity: all twelve skills are indeed skills. The authors distinguish the twelve skills from personal qualities by describing them as *manifestations* of personal traits, which individuals can increase their capacity to perform. Helpfully, the authors position these skills in a larger framework that names antecedents of the skills: life experience, personality traits, situational characteristics, task type, goals, motivation, roles, and rules and norms. The interpersonal skills they identify can evolve out of these antecedent conditions. When employees deploy those interpersonal skills, the outcomes carry implications for individuals, for groups and teams, and for the organization. Situating soft skills in a larger framework like this is a useful way to develop a more universal understanding of soft skills, their antecedent conditions, and the impact they have.

As this review suggests, the concept of soft skills resonates with researchers and practitioners interested in management and workplace issues. However, the absence of

The absence of clear definitions or taxonomies of discrete soft skills makes it challenging for the idea of soft skills to truly gain traction in research or in practice.

clear definitions or taxonomies of discrete soft skills makes it challenging for the idea of soft skills to truly gain traction in research or in practice. The term has become the management equivalent of the famous definition of obscenity provided by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in 1964: “I know it when I see it.”³⁷ Although it is tempting to simply live with the ambiguity of the phrase

soft skills, confident in our ability to recognize soft skills when we see them, the concept is too important to individual and organizational performance to let it remain a trite and vague expression of workplace skills that are so critical to success.

Discussion

Both conceptual and practical issues regarding soft skills must be resolved. The biggest conceptual problem is the confounding of soft skills with values, beliefs, traits, and behaviors. Typically, when researchers have created their own lists, they have combined skills with other ambiguously defined concepts. In practice, organizations commonly merge skills with other traits they deem most important, based on their organizational

Table 2.

Cameron Klein, Renee DeRouin, and Eduardo Salas's interpersonal skills*

Category	Skill
Communication	Active listening Oral communication Written communication Assertive communication Nonverbal communication
Relationship-building	Cooperation and coordination Trust Intercultural sensitivity Service orientation Self-presentation Social influence Conflict resolution and negotiation

*Source: Cameron Klein, Renee E. DeRouin, and Eduardo Salas, "Uncovering Workplace Interpersonal Skills: A Review, Framework, and Research Agenda," chap. 3 in *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, eds. Gerard P. Hodgkinson and J. Kevin Ford (West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley, 2006), 79–126.

values.³⁸ Most conceptualizations of soft skills describe traits and skills and define them in ways that are virtually interchangeable. This is problematic for several reasons. First, the lack of construct clarity hinders the development of a solid knowledge base on soft skills. Without clear and consistent application of the concept of soft skills, including measurement reliability and validity, it is impossible to accurately connect research findings across studies. Practitioners and managers also find themselves at a disadvantage with a fuzzy concept of soft skills. Soft skills need to be clearly articulated and defined for librarians to develop them and to effectively link them to roles and job functions. Further, including dispositions in soft skills shifts the focus from *what* someone can do to *how* someone is, which can lead to problems with accurately evaluating an employee's performance.

Even if traits are taken out of the conversation, a question remains: Should cognitive and reasoning ability, such as Katz's conceptual skills, be considered soft skills? Is the ability to analyze situations, to think strategically about them, and to make effective decisions a hard or a soft skill? Must skills associated with the affective domain of the



brain be considered soft skills, and the cognitive domain be associated with hard skills? Or can soft skills include cognitive and affective skills alike?

It is our belief that analytical ability may usefully be included in a set of soft skills because it meets the definition of a skill, is domain independent, and is important to workplace performance. But as most studies and practices have demonstrated, any number of concepts *can* be included in soft skills, including cognitive and analytical ability, affective skills, organizational competence, interpersonal skills, and personal skills. Anyone working with soft skills—researchers or practitioners—should have a clear concept of what constitutes a soft skill and should be able to provide a meaningfully constructed definition of the concept. Any attempt at scientific classification should result in clear expectations of the properties under classification, the relationships among them, and the terminology used to describe them.

Another conceptual issue with soft skills relates to the question of whether they are expressly interpersonal—existing strictly between individuals—or whether soft skills can be intrapersonal—existing purely within an individual. Again turning to the definition of a *skill*—the ability to access knowledge from a domain-specific knowledge base and use that knowledge to perform an action or carry out a task—it seems that some soft skills could be exercised within oneself. For example, knowing ourselves and why we tend to interpret certain situations in certain ways, or why particular events tend to affect us in certain ways, forms a knowledge base that then enables us to act accordingly. Because tapping into that self-knowledge and then taking action may not involve any other individual, this could be considered an intraindividual soft skill. In fact, this example is similar to identifying emotions in oneself and others and using emotions to facilitate thinking—two of the four branches of emotional intelligence, which often appears in lists of soft skills.³⁹

Another issue with soft skills is that they are difficult to measure. Even if researchers or practitioners arrive at a set of skills important to individual and organizational performance, the methods of assessing those skills are imperfect. Researchers typically use self-report surveys to capture to what extent a respondent “has” a skill. This method, of course, is potentially flawed by social desirability, or simply people’s inaccurate awareness of their own abilities. A better method for measuring soft skills is to triangulate data points with self-reported and peer- or supervisor-reported data. Though more complicated to carry out, the results will likely more accurately reflect actual soft skills. It may also be useful to borrow methods from other instruments.

The primary instrument for measuring emotional intelligence is the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), developed by the psychologists John Mayer, Peter Salovey, and David Caruso. The MSCEIT is an ability-based instrument that asks participants to respond to questions based on short hypothetical situations or images, rather than asking them to rate their own level of abilities.⁴⁰ This method of collecting data more closely mirrors a *demonstration* of ability, as opposed to collecting self-perceptions of ability. With better construct clarity and careful instrument development, an instrument to measure soft skills could be created that would be useful for researchers and practitioners.

A final consideration about soft skills relevant to library practitioners is whether people can develop such skills. That is, can individuals improve their ability to perform

any of the discrete functions that might be considered a soft skill? This point again shows why it is important to include skills and not dispositions in our understanding of soft skills. Whereas dispositions are, in large part, hardwired in individuals and therefore much less pliable, skills are actions we take based on knowledge we possess.⁴¹ Developing skills merely requires the right knowledge set, the opportunity to practice the actions, and feedback on those actions. While this may not be as easy as it sounds, it is undeniably possible. Here one need only think back to other already mastered skills (such as cooking, playing piano, writing, or knitting) to recognize the potential to grow and develop new abilities.

For development of soft skills to occur, an important first step is to clearly define the desired skills. Knitting or piano playing is a distinct construct with a particular knowledge base and action repertoire. On the other hand, “good communication skills”—a phrase seen in almost every librarian job description—is not a clear concept. Klein, DeRouin, and Salas suggest formal and informal strategies for training soft skills, such as role-playing, behavior modeling, computer-based simulation, goal setting, coaching, and providing feedback.⁴² Critical to any of these methods is supplying employees with the requisite knowledge base, the opportunity for meaningful practice, and feedback on their performance. Involving employees in setting those expectations and creating training exercises may increase the sense of relevance in mastering the soft skills. Ultimately, if soft skills are important to organizational performance and success, then everyone from senior management to entry-level employees benefits when procedures are enacted in the workplace for defining, identifying, training, and rewarding successful demonstration of those skills.

For development of soft skills to occur, an important first step is to clearly define the desired skills.

Future Research

A first area of research is to elicit the relevant skills needed for academic librarianship. Researchers can tap into the insights of librarians at different types and sizes of institutions to articulate the relevant and expected soft skills in their positions. The Delphi method—an iterative, evaluative research method in which a purposive sample of stakeholders are given information relevant to the research question and asked to provide their expert opinion—may be a particularly useful approach to generate a ranked list of soft skills. In this method, the opinions are shared with the group after each round, and the stakeholders are allowed to adjust their opinions in subsequent rounds until they reach consensus. The results of that elicitation phase of research could be converted to a survey for a wider audience of librarians. Qualitative measures, similar to those employed by Windels and her coauthors, could be used to collect data on the perceived utility and value of soft skills in specific library environments.⁴³

In addition to identifying relevant soft skills, research must also focus on appropriate measures to assess soft skills in individual librarians.

In addition to identifying relevant soft skills, research must also focus on appropriate measures to assess soft skills in individual librarians. Instruments in the fields of psychology, educational psychology, sociology, and communication, among others, measure discrete abilities that are frequently named as examples of soft skills. Future research should collect and analyze existing instruments to assess their appropriateness for librarianship. These instruments should be evaluated on their psychometric properties: Do they measure what they purport to measure across populations? The result of this analysis may point to the need to develop and test an instrument that measures a set of soft skills important to academic librarianship.

These lines of inquiry are important preliminary work toward clarifying the soft skills construct in librarianship and toward creating robust, accurate instruments to measure those skills. Research must also investigate the potential outcomes of soft skill application in practice. Does the execution of soft skills improve customer service? Does

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it benefit coworker or supervisor-subordinate relationships in the workplace? Does it facilitate outreach to students, faculty, and administrators? Does organizational performance improve with increased emphasis on soft skills? As in most social science research, direct, causal relationships between soft skills and performance are difficult to demonstrate, so research should also consider what mediating and moderating variables interact with soft skills to predict performance. Qualitative methods, such as prolonged and persistent

case study, offer a unique way for researchers to understand how soft skills are used in academic librarianship. For example, a researcher could be embedded in an academic library unit for an extended observation. Through interview and observation, the researcher could collect data on the soft skills librarians use and the effects those skills have on colleagues and customers.

Another line of research could apply a critical feminist approach: exploring how perceptions of soft skills may be gendered, on personal, organizational, and societal levels alike. Like any dichotomy, the relationship between "hard" and "soft" is fraught with implications; what, after all, makes hard skills "hard" and soft skills "soft"? The social construction of gender often relies on parallels between the male or female binary. The hard or soft binary is often related, consciously or unconsciously, to the relationship between the concepts of male and female or masculinity and femininity, creating a perception wherein softness is viewed as inherently feminine and hardness as innately masculine. In a 2010 study, Michael Slepian, Max Weisbuch, Nicholas Rule, and Nalini Ambady determined that "soft" actions, such as squeezing a soft rather than a hard ball or pressing softly while writing, made subjects more likely to categorize faces as female. "Hard" actions, on the other hand, biased gender categorization in favor of the masculine.⁴⁴ Such research suggests that the hard-soft or male-female connection is not simply conjecture or a hangover from 1950s gender essentialism but rather a concept so deeply ingrained that it can be invoked wordlessly and unconsciously.

How does this binary logic factor into the question of hard and soft skills in the workplace? Grugulis and Vincent note that soft skills “[aid] the acknowledgment of women’s skills, but [do] nothing to increase their value.”⁴⁵ Society as a whole has tended to devalue the feminine. This tendency is compounded in the already highly feminized field of library and information science. Soft skills are generally thought of as being related to interpersonal communication and as containing aspects of nurturing and emotional intelligence, which are viewed as inherently feminine traits. All this adds up to soft skills in librarianship being extremely feminized, which is not in itself bad. However, it makes such skills likely to be viewed as less valuable than, for example, “hard” or “masculine” expertise in technology and management. If we are to work toward a new conception of soft skills that allows us to emphasize them as integral to the profession, we must be aware of the gendered nature of the hard-soft divide and how it might affect the ways in which soft skills are taught, learned, and valued.

Moving away from research to application, we identify a strong need for instructional materials to develop soft skills both in LIS coursework and in continuing education. One option could be to create a modular course that would introduce, diagnose, and provide training on developing soft skills in librarians. Modules could be delivered across a variety of platforms, such as through a course management system, by a series of webinars, or as printed material delivered through face-to-face meetings. The structure of each module could include lessons that introduce and describe discrete soft skills, materials for participants to self-assess their own abilities, case narratives of the skills as they play out in a library setting, exercises to practice building each ability, and opportunities to reflect on the skill development process.

Conclusion

The practice of academic librarianship requires more than technical knowledge and skills. Librarians are much more than caretakers of information: they interact with community members and colleagues to facilitate knowledge creation. Obviously, technical competence is important and should be refreshed regularly, but an array of people-based, emotionally aware, perceptive, and interactive skills is equally important. As a field, LIS tends to elevate technical knowledge and skills in professional education and training, while merely wishing to see improvement in soft skills. We have argued in this paper that any progress in refining soft skills must start with thoughtful construct clarification. As this literature review shows, soft skills have been treated as a vague, catchall category that

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includes a heterodox range of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values, too amorphous to be meaningfully applied in education or practice. As the roles and responsibilities of academic librarians change, demanding increased emphasis on interaction and outreach, it is essential to clarify which skills are most necessary and how librarians can develop and improve them.

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