

NEW INSIGHTS FOR SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAMESE BUSINESS SCHOOLS: DEFINING ESSENTIAL SOFT SKILL PACKAGES FOR ADVANCED STUDENT LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Within Vietnam's system of higher education, its schools of business play a vital role in supporting the country's economic objectives. However, the crucial contribution of soft skills for maximal success within the business sector has to date not been adequately recognized by its business schools. This being so, the development of the business school curriculum in Vietnam has not been able to 'catch up', so to say, with the burgeoning need of students for a comprehensive soft skills program designed to meet the national and global business objectives of their potential employers (Duoc & Christopher, 2007; Ca, 2006).

The burden of the present paper is first to reveal the results of our survey in Vietnam which make explicit the extent to which major Vietnamese industrial employers' value the potential role which soft skill competencies can play in maximizing business success. Our second aim is to determine the extent to which Vietnamese employers are satisfied that graduates of Vietnamese business schools possess the soft skills competencies necessary to advance Vietnamese's ostensible goals of global business success. Based on our survey of employers' perceptions of both the soft skills needed by employees within Vietnam's primary industrial sectors, and whether graduating students are sufficiently equipped with these skills to work effectively enough to warrant their employment, our final task will be to determine what combination of soft skill packages employers discern as best serving to maximize the economic interests of Vietnam within the global marketplace.

Semi-structured telephone interviews are conducted with 15 representative employers of Vietnam's reputedly largest business enterprises across Vietnam. The methodology of Manual Analysis is utilised to accommodate the small number of participants.

The findings of the study indicate that all 15 employers highly value the increasing importance of soft skills in business success. The respondents reveal the deficiency of soft skills among business graduates that impacts on the quality of their work. Our critical analysis of respondent data reveals that 19 essential soft skills are deemed by employers as integral to business workplace efficacy and should thus be integrated into the formal business curriculum.

We are confident that our study represents the most comprehensive survey yet undertaken in Vietnam which accesses and analyses the opinions of representative employers from major companies across the country in regard to the growing importance of soft skills for overall business success. The research

findings are especially pertinent to business training programs in Vietnam, and with minor adaptation, to other Asian countries.

KEY WORDS: Soft skills, Business curriculum, Employers' perception, Business graduates

INTRODUCTION

Within Vietnam's system of higher education, its schools of business play a vital role in supporting the country's economic objectives. Aspects of the crucial contribution made by business schools to the integrity of its vested commercial interests include the development and provision of a qualified indigenous labour force in Vietnam, specifically trained to assist its burgeoning business society to advance modernization on the one hand, and the further industrialization of the country on the other (Christopher, 2009; Duoc, 2006; Ca, 2006). Despite these ambitious objectives, a number of studies have recently shown that the development of the business school curriculum has not been able to 'catch up', so to say, with the specificity and more sophisticated needs of its economy (Tuyet, 2010; Trung & Swierczek, 2009; Lich, 2009; Anh, 2009; MOET, 2008; Thang & Quang, 2005).

Historically, the report of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education on the "Summary and Evaluation on the Ten-Year Reform of Education and Training (1986-1996)" (1998) confirmed that 'there is a weak relationship between universities and business sectors'. This concern relates to the fact that there exists a long-standing 'communication hiatus', as we shall call it, between educational providers and the business recipients they service that has not yet been bridged. It has been established that one consequence of this deficiency is that tertiary students in general and business tertiary students in particular, have not been adequately equipped with the appropriate soft skills required by business firms. One egregious outcome of this deficiency is that an increasing number of graduates from business schools in Vietnam have been unable to secure jobs. Several studies reveal that an estimated 50% of business students were jobless in 2008, and that these statistics have recently escalated to a disconcertingly high level of 64% in 2011 (Giao Duc, 2012), despite the fact that opportunities for employment were greater in 2011, than in 2008 (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008).

Indeed, a survey of 234 recruiters and 3,364 graduates from 20 universities in Vietnam in 2010 revealed that 50% of employees had to be retrained at work, mainly due to their deficit in the soft skill capacities which are currently most sought after by recruiters (OneVietnam, 2010). Considerable research evidence has accumulated from studies conducted by Laud & Johnson (2012), Osman, Girardi & Paull (2012) and Mitchell, Skinner & White (2010) which shows that the career success of individuals, especially in the business field, worldwide, depends mainly on the level of 'employee proficiency' in soft skills. Many business schools in the western world have been addressing this issue since early 2000, but it has only recently become palpably evident that Vietnam remains perilously behind the western world in recognizing the paramount importance of soft skills in business.

We submit that the present incapacity of Vietnam's business schools to recognize sufficiently the paramount importance of soft skills for business success, within both national and international trading arenas, is serving as an insidious impediment to the growth of the Vietnamese economy. Indeed, we argue in this paper that if the deficiency of business schools in the provision of soft skills currently provided to students in tertiary business education institutions persists, while the demands for soft skill competencies which Vietnamese employers now require of graduating students increases, the threat to the growth of Vietnam's national and global economy will inevitably become critical. Appreciation of the seriousness of this problem makes clear, we believe, that there is a pressing need for employers and tertiary business institutions to work collaboratively to resolve this worrying problem by

producing a well-informed and rapid, though not hasty, pedagogic response. The appropriateness of such a response should be designed to improve dramatically the quality of the working skills of business graduates by introducing a far more determinative and pertinent strategic approach to soft skills curriculum development than presently exists in Vietnam. Our proposed strategy involves identifying a cadre of 'explicitly relevant' soft skills adequate to satisfy the needs identified by the major Vietnamese stakeholder employers of today.

To achieve this goal, the burden of the present paper is first to reveal the results of our survey in Vietnam which make explicit the extent to which major Vietnamese industrial employers' value the potential role which soft skill competencies can play in maximizing business success. Our second aim is to determine the extent to which Vietnamese employers are satisfied that graduates of Vietnamese business schools possess the soft skills competencies necessary to advance Vietnamese's ostensible goals of global business success. Based on our survey of employers' perceptions of both the soft skills needed by employees within Vietnam's primary industrial sectors, and whether graduating students are sufficiently equipped with these skills to work effectively enough to warrant their employment, our final task will be to determine what combination of soft skill packages employers discern as best serving to maximize the economic interests of Vietnam within the global marketplace.

Another serendipitous result of the study is that the information gathered can be utilized as a partial basis for the reform and development of a more pertinent tertiary business education curriculum in Vietnam which attributes to soft skills an epistemological status which has to date been neglected in the literature. We adumbrate the foundations of this epistemic reconceptualization of soft skills not simply in terms of the conventional discourse concerning their utilitarian contribution to business success, as important as we recognize that aspect of their role to be. Our proposal is that there is a much richer epistemological role which they play in terms of what we call their "preconditioned functionality" for the successful development and deployment of hard skills in the context of business and all human relationships. We make no presence that this objective is adequately achieved in this present piece, but we do make suggestions based on this epistemological dimension of our analysis whose insights we intend to develop more determinately in a future study designed to bring this ambitious goal to fruition. It becomes easier to create curriculum units and programs which specifically address the needs of employers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We are now in a position to explore our topic more determinately and to do so; we need to begin by providing at least a tolerably coherent definition of the somewhat nebulous concept of a 'soft skill'. As defined by Perrault (2004), the concept of "soft skills" is intended to describe an individual's leadership qualities, attributes, and communication skills which enable that person to inform and shape productively the rudimentary ideas of others into transparent and pragmatic scenarios related to the business goal at hand. For example, we suggest that the 'communicative' capacity of an individual to personalize interactions with clients to cultivate feelings of trust and loyalty is a skill that sets him or her apart from other individuals who may have similar technical or 'hard skills', but not the same level of communicative leadership competency which serves to encourage bonding and client confidence.

Considerable global research material has now accumulated to show that soft skills are far more important for career success, especially in the business arena, than has previously been recognized. Some researchers claim that soft skills account for as much as 70% to 85% of an individual's success, whereas hard skills or technical knowledge contribute little more than the remaining 15% to 30% (Hommerichhousen, 2002; Klaus, 2010; Watts & Watts, 2008). Other business recruiters consider soft skill capacities to be a factor of equal importance in career success as are the possession of hard or technological competency skills (Pittenger, Miller & Mott, 2004; Wardrope, 2002; Nealy, 2005). In

addition, soft skills are recognized as being essential elements in total quality management in business today (Fotopoulos & Psomas, 2008). It is also argued that a high quality workforce who includes the effective use of soft skills, combined with hard skills, will significantly improve in varying degrees the likelihood of success within the context of the ongoing trading competitiveness for virtually all business enterprises (Payne, 2000; Grugulis, 2003; Tamkin et al., 2007). Despite these differences in the projected importance of soft skills for business success, it is incontestable that soft skills play an integral role in business success. This being so, it is also evident that Vietnam has a pedagogic responsibility to ensure that the business schools in which students enroll develop soft skill training programs for students which foster creative and innovative ways for them to gain that competitive edge they will need to conduct successful business interactions with clients and colleagues alike (David, 2010).

It was not until the turn of the new millennium that the western world became cognizant of the value of incorporating soft skills into their training programs (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Lamentably, the integration of soft skill programs for tertiary business students in Vietnam has, as we have intimated earlier, lagged behind the western world, largely because the traditional university curriculum does not afford the opportunity for students to develop an in depth exploration of soft skills strategies (Tuyet, 2013; Stephen et al., 2006). This deficiency has in turn made Vietnamese employers who are now becoming increasingly aware of the paramount importance of soft skill competencies for business success somewhat tentative about hiring recent business graduates who lack the sophisticated professional training in soft skills available to western students. The reasons for unemployment in Vietnam are multifaceted, as indeed they are elsewhere, but given current homeland financial exigencies, it is critically important that Vietnamese business schools rapidly, but informedly develop 'cutting edge' soft skills training programs to ensure that graduates will be maximally competitive, with the aim of significantly augmenting their business interactions and negotiation capacities. If the unemployment figures to which we earlier referred continue to escalate, it is predicted that a serious crisis in the Vietnamese economic community will inevitably arise (VOER).

The educational system predominantly bears the burden of inculcating the technical skills required (OECD, 2007) while the academic orientation of soft skills development is still an obscure disciplinary area in most Vietnamese universities (Trung & Swierczek, 2009). This being so, the soft skills capacities of university students are weak or in many cases missing (Huyen, 2008; Trung & Swierczek 2009). As a result, there exists an acute "skills gap" that separates interactional dimensions of academic from social and behavioral skills, a schism that often leads to poor job performance (Smith, 2002).

We have acknowledged that in the U S and elsewhere the importance of soft skills in business success was recognized decades ago, but it has only been in recent years that business schools have actually initiated comprehensive programs for the development of soft skills, thereby affording a sufficient understanding of the soft skill competencies students needed to acquire which were ideally suited to satisfy the needs of major business firms (Yucelt, 1998; Oblinger, et. al., 1998). According to Nha (2009) and Traut et al. (1993), one potentially decisive element that could positively affect the development of appropriate educational programs in response to workplace demands, depends on organizing collaborative partnerships between employers and educators. There now exists a slowly emerging trend to recognize and promote the workplace needs of employers within the higher education curriculum (Saunders & Machell, 2000). The forums that have been created for dialogue on this subject have allowed employers an opportunity to give their comments on the particular skills they are looking for from their employees, thus assisting HEIs to equip students with these skills and ensure that they are well prepared to work efficiently for their employers (Weligamag, 2011). Despite the fact that employers in different countries and different fields look for different qualities in graduates, employers consistently demand that universities produce graduates who will be equipped

for employment in a world of rapid change (Duoc & Metzger, 2007). Until our own study now, in Vietnam there has to our knowledge been no research study conducted on business employers throughout the country for identifying essential soft skills necessary in the business working context, nor has there been any published study which specifically explores the status of soft skills competencies amongst business graduates.

METHODOLOGY

Sample: This paper draws on data from 15 representative employers of Vietnam's reputedly largest business enterprises, as judged in terms of income, property value, volume of business growth, capital, strength of manpower and speed of enterprise development throughout the country. There are three modalities of enterprise: government, non-government, and foreign development investment (FDI) enterprises. The distribution within business and industry was fairly evenly spread amongst sub-sectors ranging from automobile, real estate, mining and geology, textiles, power generation, electronics, food and beverages, and agriculture. A majority of employers (73%) have degrees in Business, and the other 27% have degrees from various disciplines encompassing Civil Engineering, Labour Management, Accountancy, and Electrical Engineering.

Instrument: Given that research into soft skills education is a broad and new field in Vietnam, a semi-structured interview was employed which has been praised by Davies who says of the technique that it is: "... particularly good at enabling the researcher to learn, first hand, about people's perspectives on the subject chosen as the project focus" (Davies, 2007, p.29). Another advantage of the semi-structured interview is its capacity to capture the depth and complexity of participants' experiences. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions remains flexible enough that it can probe individual participants' stories in subtle detail (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

The questions content was designed following the protocol of Matthew and Carole (2011), consisting of demographic questions, warming-up questions and core questions, focusing on three major themes enfolded into research questions designed to illuminate : 1) the employers' perception of the importance of soft skill competences in achieving business success; 2) the employers' perception of whether recent graduates have been adequately trained in soft skills to meet the needs of employers; 3) the employers' perception of which specific soft skills should be regarded as essential in the business workplace, and should thus be taught to business tertiary students.

Due to the fact that the employers are busy executive managers in major industrial organizations located in different parts of Vietnam and that internet is not a popular form of communication in the country, the interviews were conducted with an average duration of 35 minutes by phone over a period of six weeks. The rationale for this scheduling was that it significantly reduces the time and cost and allows for a greater flexibility in scheduling different conversations (Kvale, 2009). The respondents were afforded the opportunity to speak in Vietnamese, since this is the official language of the country. Audio recordings were made for all interview sessions.

Data Analysis: The method of analysis focusing on meaning was conducted involving several distinct steps. A general understanding of the individual narratives was established and the individual interviews were read separately. The transcribed interviews were condensed and summarized to reduce the amount of text to preserve interpretative authenticity; themes were constructed from the individual employer's own accounts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). When the relevant parts of all interviews had been thoroughly examined, the themes from the individual interviews were compared and combined in a meta-analysis. The data were analyzed with a focus on variation and distinctiveness of essential perceptions and experiences with regard to the different themes. The core themes were extrapolated and used to construct narratives at the group level. Thus, the group-level narratives were constructed

from individual representations, facilitating an overview and presentation of the results through rich and nuanced descriptions. The final meta-themes were constructed from the discourse segments of the relevant data. The data collection was guided by the specific themes of the paper which focused on the role of soft skills in the business workplace and the importance of specific soft skills represented in the subheadings of the results section. The method of analysis was intended to be flexible and dynamic as possible in an effort to reach the most comprehensive understanding of the employers' assessments (Alvesson & Skooldberg, 2000). The reasonableness of the interpretations, in relation to the categorizations and themes, has been inter-subjectively validated continuously through seminar presentations and discussions with colleagues and peers.

RESULTS

The Role of Soft Skills in Business Success

Although the concept of 'soft skills' is relatively new in Vietnam (REF), the respondents displayed a high level (73%) of awareness and comprehension regarding the concept and its implications in the business workplace. When asked about the role of soft skills in the workplace, the respondents almost unanimously proposed that soft skills are very important for any employee in the contemporary labour market, irrespective of any specific kind of occupation. Remarkably, most of the employers (93%) were keen to emphasize that soft skills are becoming increasingly important in the field of business, especially in the present context of expanding the Vietnamese economy into the global context. Two employers from industrial enterprises with a long history of international trade reinforce this point with the following comments:

"...soft skills play an integral role in business transactions with the other countries...(Interview 9)... the global business environment requires a very high competitiveness so that labor force who involves this must possess a clever head with excellent interpersonal skills..." (Interview 14)

Given the various types of business transactions in which the employers were involved, the belief in the increasingly vital role of soft skills in business was also reflected by two other respondents who came from government-owned enterprises. Their experience was that soft skills competency on the part of their employees served to facilitate successful marketing networks that in turn beneficially affected the process of product selling. They stated:

"... for an example, some years ago, the price and quality were perceived to be the most important factors to sell a product. Today, however, soft skills appear to be an important element to decide if a product can be sold ... (Interview 9) ... buying and selling products effectively depends on how good our soft skills are." (Interview 10)

Regarding the measurement of soft and hard skills contribution for business success, the respondents presented some radically different views. Some of them (28%) were disposed to the view that there is an equal contribution to business and career success made by soft and hard skills. They explained that both soft and hard skills have their own virtues: hard skills contribute to the growth of an individual's technical skills, while soft skills contribute to the success of an individual both in getting access to a job at which he/she performs well, while also gaining success reflected by advancement in his/her career map. Nonetheless, many of them (72%) held the view that soft skills play a more integral role in achieving business success than do hard skills. As indicated by a respondent:

“In many business situations, a person owning good soft skills can change a problem into an opportunity and deal with the adversaries in a better and more constructive manner. The one with only hard skills cannot do the same”. (Interview 8)

In short, respondents supported several studies of Hommerichhausen (2002), Klaus (2010), and Watts & Watts (2008) that soft skills became an imperative part for success in business.

The Status of Graduates’ Soft Skills Quality

Although the contribution of soft skills was perceived to be increasingly significant in the business workplace, the respondents almost unanimously agreed that the status of graduates’ soft skills capacities were extremely poor.

Most of the employers (93%) surveyed were of the opinion that the quality of recent graduates is very low and does not meet the needs dictated by business and industry. They complained that there is a tremendous difference between what graduates had learned and what they are expected to know and do in the workplace. According to one respondent, although recent graduates are hard-working and some of them are enthusiastic in acquiring knowledge, they have very little comprehension about the kind of skills or knowledge they need for getting employed. Another respondent revealed his disappointed estimate that only around 30% of graduates can meet the requirements of work, another 70% of them lack a soft skills work orientation and cannot even effectively apply the hard skills and knowledge gained from their university experience in the workplace. Although many graduates achieved good academic reports, a growing percentage of them cannot satisfy the requirement of the work in which they are engaged. An employer coming from non-government enterprise explained why his recruitment policies have to be very rigorous.

“...there have been existed several vacancies in our company for a long time because we cannot find right candidates who can meet our requirement ... Some candidates, who got recruited due to exigencies of man power shortage, make us disappointed after some time as they lack efficiency and fail to respond to real-world situations, then need to be retrained at work even for basic skills ...” (Interview 11)

When questioned about specific inefficiencies among graduates, generally, a majority of respondents (87%) complained about the decidedly inefficient quality of recent graduates’ actual working soft skills. “They lack a number of necessary soft skills”, a manager of a government-owned enterprise confirmed. Another employer lamented that most graduates are weak at practical skills. Another employer expressed the view that only those graduates who acquire their degrees from overseas universities can be expected to be adequately prepared to contribute effectively in the workplace. This may partly explain why many Vietnamese students tend to look for educational opportunities outside Vietnam, especially within developed countries, to assure they become sufficiently competent, and thus more likely to be successful in getting employment and in maintaining it.

Nearly a quarter of respondents (27%) attributed the influence of Vietnamese culture to explain why the soft skills of Vietnamese people are so poor and are traditionally difficult to train. According to one respondent, cultural conservatism and the Vietnamese disposition to selfishness, for example, lead to poor team-work skills:

“One intelligent person can finish a task well in time, but when three intelligent people are assigned the same task together, they fail to complete it well ahead of time as expected”. (Interview 2)

Another one added that the 'closed' Vietnamese culture, along with the traditional style of teacher-centred learning have served mainly to disempower students and create passiveness and dependence amongst them. These same students lack a deep sense of responsibility and dedication to their study, and they are also devoid of creativity at work. Moreover, they also have limited capacity to network within the professional business context. One employer pointed out:

“Vietnamese people are often shy and closed in socializing and passive in interacting with others. They don't appreciate much on some acceptable forms of diplomacy conforming to western culture such as dancing, which has a good potential to gain business agreement... They are not often confident to raise their own ideas, but like to follow the others”. (Interview 5)

In general, the evaluation of respondents towards the quality of Vietnamese business graduates is blatantly negative. In particular, the level of soft skills possessed by Vietnamese graduates' is too low to satisfy the expectations of their actual and potential employers. Many respondents deemed that the problem was due to the inadequacy of the Vietnamese higher education system. Indeed, a clear majority of respondents (73%) believed that the Vietnamese university curriculum does not provide students the soft skills required by employers and that this problem is due partly from the fact that the voice of employers about what they need from graduates is given no formal context in which to be heard. The need for better communication between employers and the tertiary business education sector was unambiguously affirmed by employers. Moreover, the need to upgrade the current curriculum with a strategy for integrating the right combinations of soft skills was acutely apparent and regarded by the employers as a critical issue here.

Specific Essential Soft Skills in Business Workplace

Given the integral roles of soft skills contribution in the current business workplace and the serious deficiency of required working skills among Vietnamese business graduates, the respondents identified 19 soft skill packages which were regarded as essential in the business workplace, and should consequently play a larger part in the curriculum of business schools than they currently do. To facilitate this objective we have in this piece endeavored to rank these 19 soft skills packages in a descending order of priority into 9 categories, based on the order of their importance as determined by the frequency of respondents agreeing on their relevance. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The Soft Skills Rated as Important by Employers

Rank	Soft Skill Packages	Frequency
1	Communication	86.6%
2	Group-work/team work	60%
3	Flexibility Customer Service	46.6%
4	Interpersonal Skills	40%
5	Marketing Positive Attitudes Responsibility	33.3%

6	Negotiation Business ethics Critical Thinking	26.6%
7	Market Research and Analysis Time-management Problem-solving Interpersonal Relationship Professionalism	20%
8	Self-management Leadership	13.3%
9	Technological Competence	6.6%

These soft skills packages are explained in 9 categories below:

1. **Communication:** All employers rated the ability to communicate effectively as being the most important of all soft skills. Some of them detailed that poor communication can lead to a loss of business, which, in turn, can lead to a loss in revenue. As evidenced, people who are successful at work are often good communicators. However, it was also clear from the interview replies that many graduate employees with good hard skills could not communicate well with customers and colleagues. With these points in mind, it is clear that the foremost priority should be given to the goal of equipping Vietnamese business students with strong communication skills.
2. **Group-work:** 60% of the respondents valued group activities as very important, so they stand as the second most revered of all soft skills, and again, this skill capacity among graduates was perceived to be unduly weak. Employees were criticized for acting selfishly and for being self-promoting in team situations. Some respondents explained that the combined effort of individuals working effectively in a team can realize better products; and will enhance team spirit, and ultimately, the efficacy of the organization as a whole. Combining various soft skill capacities possessed by different team members could also lead to increased creativity, at the individual level, and for the team as a well-functioning unit. Good teamwork capacities are believed to ensure that work is finished at a faster pace, with fewer mistakes and enhanced efficiency.
3. **Customer Service and Flexibility:**

Customer service skills were regarded as the third most important soft skill category. It was recommended by 47% of the respondents that these skills are of vital importance, and should be integrated into the formal business curriculum within Vietnam. According to some of the respondents, 'Customer Service skills' become increasingly relevant as the present market becomes more competitive. Since every customer wishes to be pampered, every company must get better at conveying the impression that their company can better attend to their needs and preferences than their competitors. Thus, the acquisition by employees of customer service skills should represent a priority of paramount importance for companies, as customer satisfaction is the most decisive factor in the success or failure of any business organization. In the present market, customer service skills should thus be regarded as an essential component

within any field of business education designed to ensure that a company's business success is effectively advanced through customer satisfaction.

Flexibility Skills were also ranked in the same category and perceived by employers to be necessary for any employee to adapt and adjust to a new job environment and the potential changes likely to take place within it.

4. **Interpersonal Skills:** Selected by 40% of respondents, interpersonal traits such as being amicable, personable, having a good sense of humour, being nurturing, empathetic, patient, warm and sociable were ranked in the 4th position on the overall importance table. Such skills are now recognized as being a pre-requisite for virtually any position in a business organization. These qualities were thus strongly recommended by employers and thus that the soft skills mentioned in this category should definitely be introduced into the curriculum of Vietnamese business schools.
5. **Marketing, Positive Attitudes and Responsibility:** About 33.3% of the respondents supported these skills as necessary for business staff to perform their work effectively. As applauded by respondent (No.13), 'responsibility' is the most important soft skill required for completing a task at the right time and with the level of quality required. Another respondent (No.9) attributed the lack of positive attitudes such as confidence and optimism amongst Vietnamese employees to be a root cause of creating a negative workplace environment. Marketing skills were also observed by some respondents as inefficient among sales staff, while these skills were measured as imperative in relation to product selling.
6. **Negotiation, Business Ethics and Critical Thinking:** These skills were considered as important by 4 employers (26.6%), and thus ranked in 6th position. In business, particularly, respondent (No.4) emphasized that Business Ethics skills are very necessary to attract loyalty, and retain customers for longer periods. From another perspective, 'Negotiation' is a key to gaining contracts for enterprises and is an offshoot of communication skills. Interestingly, respondent (No.7) ranked Critical Thinking in the highest position of importance, and he explained that with globalization, the increased speed of business and rapidly changing work settings, employees at every level are facing an increasingly complex flow of information. This being so, it is imperative that they need to possess critical thinking skills to make informed decisions by themselves.
7. **Market Research and Analysis, Time-management, Problem-solving, Interpersonal Relationships and Professionalism:** These skill clusters were endorsed by 3 employers (20%) and stand in the 7th position. All 3 respondents were of the view that time-management skills are equally important to complete work effectively and efficiently with an aim to meeting deadlines. These skills are especially necessary for Vietnamese employees who have a bad habit of procrastination and rushing to complete their tasks at the last moment. The other skills in this category were observed as having been inefficient among employees for a long time in Vietnam, so they were also recommended to be included in the curriculum.
8. **Self-management and Leadership:** Although self-management falls into 8th position of importance within the ranking hierarchy, with only 13.3% of respondents preferring it, it was valued highly by the respondent (No.9) as what he called a 'foundation skill', in the sense that it serves as a skill which is capable of generating a number of other soft skill traits such as positive attitude, self-confidence, and optimism .etc. Moreover, both respondents regard Leadership skills as necessary, thereby enabling the individual to assume integral professional

roles such as leading an organization, including marketing its products, liaison, and customer service .etc.

- 9. Technological Competence:** Only one respondent (6.6%) coming from the manufacturing industry judged that this skill should be integrated into the formal business curriculum. It was presumed to be important in business transactions and especially in the IT and manufacturing industry and the respondent assumed that it would be more important in the future.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Soft skills were perceived as important even by employers coming from very different industries, thereby reinforcing the point that soft skills function are a vital component in the pecuniary success of virtually all industries. Whether soft skills are more important than hard skills depends on the type of career (Lei Han, 2015). Soft skills were valued as more important in most business careers than hard skills. However, both types of skills were regarded to have their own special roles to play which in turn jointly contribute to business goal oriented outcomes. It is salutary to remind ourselves that the process of gaining achievements for a business company does require having hard skills such as accounting, programming, financing .etc. Nevertheless, to implement these jobs effectively, employees need to possess soft skills such as group-work, problem-solving, creativity .etc. What is being brought to bold relief here is that there is a delicate balance that needs to be preserved between soft and hard skills, but with regard to having a deeper understanding of that relationship, we propose that a more comprehensive perspective is required here. We would argue that soft skills have a more comprehensive role to play in business than has conventionally been appreciated.

The study we have undertaken makes incontestably clear that although the term of 'soft skills' is well-known and now regarded by employers as an essential component in successful business, soft skills remain an obscured subject with Vietnamese universities (Trung & Swierczek, 2009). Our study thus represents a highly pragmatic initiative which takes a bold step forward to invite an informed dialogue between employers, and tertiary institutions, with the common goal of advancing Vietnam's economic position globally. With a deeper understanding of employers' perceptions of the essential role played by soft skills in business success, it becomes easier to create curriculum units and programs which specifically address the needs of employers. Without this information and the praxis pedagogy to sustain it, the gap to which we have referred cannot be closed, and therefore the study we have undertaken is an imperative first step forward in encouraging a collaborative alliance between industry and university, aimed at improving economic growth in Vietnam.

Although our study reveals that employers consider that soft skills are essential in the business workplace, Vietnamese graduates are not yet adequately equipped with soft skill competencies. Moreover, one reason for the poor soft skills competencies of graduates was found to result partially from the 'closed' sociocultural traditional of teaching and learning methods, each of which shapes the persona of Vietnamese people. Lamentably, these dispositions are defining characteristics which are sociocultural entrenched and not likely to be changed easily or quickly, if at all, even with good education. Therefore, the agenda to initiate a soft skills curriculum will thus take a longer time than expected, as the transition from the academy to the workplace and then on to the labour market is socioculturally embedded (Tuyet, 2012). The employers have perhaps been justified in their condemnation of the priority given to outdated knowledge skills traditionally provided by universities, thereby creating an even bigger gap between the demand side and supply side in the labour market. Our findings establish that universities have not focused on the needs of employers and that the time has come for innovative curriculum changes to satisfy those needs for the benefit of both employers and graduates. This claim sits unambiguously with the proclamation of Michael (1998) who suggests

that the ever changing needs associated with the constant development of new knowledge requires continuous curriculum renewal and reform.

All respondents agreed that 19 soft skill clusters can be identified and connected with their operational functions in the current business workplace though they came from different fields of business and different areas. We have also seen that the employers strongly agree, as we urged in our earlier work that there are many reasons why soft skills deserve to be integrated into the general business curriculum. Communication, Group-work, Flexibility, Customer Service, Interpersonal Skills, Marketing, Positive Attitudes and Responsibility should be considered to be more important than ever in the Vietnamese business workplace. Given the recognition now given by employers to the paramount importance of soft skills, particularly in terms of the nine soft skill clusters, we shall persist in our proposal that the tertiary business curriculum should be significantly upgraded so that tertiary business students can be adequately equipped with soft skill competencies to make a real difference in the Vietnamese workplace.

Another serendipitous result of the study is that the information gathered can be utilised as a partial basis for the reform and development of a more pertinent tertiary business education curriculum in Vietnam which attributes to soft skills an epistemological status which has to date been neglected in the literature. We adumbrate the foundations of this epistemic reconceptualization of soft skills not simply in terms of the conventional discourse concerning their utilitarian contribution to business success, as important as we recognise that aspect of their role to be. Our proposal is rather that there is a much richer epistemological role which they play in terms of what we call their "preconditional functionality" for the successful development and deployment of hard skills in the context of business and all human relationships. We make no pretence that this claim is a consideration adequately developed in this present piece, but we allude to this insight to suggest that there exists an epistemological dimension to the relationship between hard and soft skills that will need to be explored more determinately in a future study before the curriculum goals proposed to maximise their utilisation can be brought to fruition.

Nonetheless, our study represents a highly pragmatic initiative which takes a bold step forward to invite a more systematic and informed dialogue between employers, and tertiary institutions, with the common goal of advancing Vietnam's economic position globally. With a deeper understanding of employers' perceptions of the essential role played by soft skills in business success, it becomes easier to create curriculum units and programs which specifically address the needs of employers. Without this information and the praxis pedagogy to sustain it, the gap to which we have referred cannot be closed, and therefore the study we have undertaken is an imperative first step forward in encouraging a collaborative alliance between industry and university, aimed at improving economic growth in Vietnam.

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