Soft Skills On Demand: How Higher Education Can PrepareStudents To Succeed In The Marketplace

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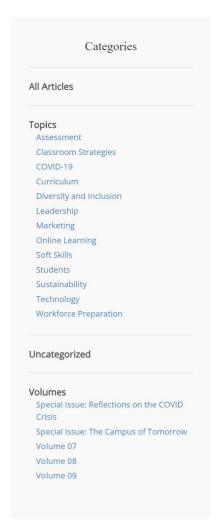
Abstract

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, business organizations have quickly adapted so that employees can work remotely, which has in turn accelerated the value employers place on particular soft skills employees exhibit – namely Agency, Adaptability, and Curiosity. This study explores how these three soft skills show up in the workplace so that instructors within higher education can implement teaching methodologies for students to foster these skills before they enter the workforce. Additionally, we provide examples of effective teaching methodologies including role modeling, team charters, student accountability, team projects, student feedback, and instructor reinforcement.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the catalyst that sparked immense change in both the marketplace and higher education. Almost overnight, employees had to adapt how work was accomplished and how to cultivate the necessary skills to prepare students for a shifting workforce. According to Pew Research Center, 71% of adults who can perform their work responsibilities from home, are now working remotely. Industry standards shifted as employees navigated business meetings through online platforms and learned on-the-job how to produce deliverables while also managing the home environment. Higher education faced similar shifts as many classrooms transitioned into online or hybrid learning models, and students who were physically present in classrooms were required to wear masks. Much like the corporate world, students experienced changes in how they interacted in the classroom, and in turn have experienced more fatigue and burnout (White, 2021).

As a result of the hybrid environment driven by the pandemic, workplaces have had to alter the standards used to select new job candidates. Previously, employers placed a high importance on 'hard skills' such as high academic achievement, certifications, and technical knowledge. These skills were once the primary differentiator to choose which job candidate received an offer (Binsaeed et al., 2017). In today's workplace, organizations are more often selecting employees based on 'soft skills' or those that pertain to interpersonal skills aligned with the organization's goals and further its competitive advantage (Jones et al., 2016; Krishnaveni & Deepa, 2011; Singh, 2013). Businesses have found that these soft skills are pertinent for employees to navigate daily business operations and successfully partake in business negotiations (Raj, 2008). Furthermore, employers now expect students to have gained these valuable interpersonal skills through their higher education training (Binsaeed et al., 2017). However, there remains a skills gap between the soft skills the industry expects and what entry-level employees actually possess (Stewart et al., 2016). Some of the basic skills employers desire include the ability to work in teams, to navigate conflict, and to manage work to meet deadlines (Deepa & Seth, 2013). Soft skills have become increasingly important as the business world continues to evolve.

In the present study, there are three soft skills that are of particular interest, specifically Agency, Adaptability, and Curiosity. Prior studies have showcased the substantial benefits for employees who exhibit these soft skills in the workplace (Muceldili et al., 2020; Veleva, 2020). When employees are autonomously motivated, or demonstrate Agency, they are typically more motivated, reliable, and productive (Deci et al., 2017). Due to the constant changes in the business environment, Adaptability has become a highly coveted skill as employees work to meet ever-changing demands from the marketplace (Hilder, 2021; Veleva, 2020). Finally, Muceldili et al. (2020) found that employees who exhibit Curiosity have a higher agility performance at work because they proactively gather the information needed to adapt through uncertainty and demonstrate resilience. Curious employees are also known to be more creative and develop novel solutions (Abukhait et al., 2019). Given the shifting work environment, these three soft skills have

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become increasingly important in the marketplace.

Through understanding how these three soft skills are exhibited in everyday work practices, higher education instructors can adapt classroom instruction to incorporate teaching these valuable skills by either embedding these principles into course content or integrating them into classroom interactions.

Method

The purpose of this study is to investigate how Agency, Adaptability, and Curiosity are practiced in the workforce so they can be effectively taught in the higher education classroom. The current study investigates these soft skills by asking business professionals to share real-life stories about how these constructs show up in the workplace.

Procedure

The researchers asked 50 students in their spring 2022 business classes to participate in data collection by each submitting four email addresses of business professionals who would be willing to complete a survey. The questionnaire asked participants to provide a workplace example of when they experienced Agency, Adaptability, and Curiosity. Each behavior was defined in the survey to create commonly shared definitions.

Participants

Participants of the survey had to meet three study requirements: 1) are over 18 years of age, 2) live in the United States, and 3) have a minimum of five years of professional experience. Participants represented eight industries (i.e., Business and Information, Health Care, Retail and Manufacturing, Education, Entertainment and Hospitality, Non-Profit and Religious, Government, and Finance, Legal Services, and Insurance).

The 78 business professionals who completed the survey had an average of 17.5 years of work experience and an average of 7.1 years of management experience. Participants were 38% male, 61% female, and 1% preferred not to say. Their age range was almost evenly dispersed between 20-29 (23%), 30-39 (14%), 40-49 (28%), and 50-59 (29%) age brackets with 5% of participants aged 60 or above. Participants were racially diverse with 56% identifying as White/European American, 6% Black/African American, 10% Ethnically of Hispanic/Latino origin, 25% Asian, 1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian/Alaska Native.

Results

Agency

There was a total of 74 examples shared about how Agency shows up in the workplace, and of those stories, the top three categories each received a minimum of 19% of responses respectively (all other categories represented fewer than 10% of responses). The first category focused on experiences of employees 'owning up to a mistake and making amends' (noted by 17 participants, 23%). Examples include stories about how employees admitted mistakes, sought ways to rectify errors, and took ownership to correct an issue. Many participants noted how errors were common yet could be overcome such as correcting an accounting entry mistake or re-doing a process to meet quality control standards. Other times mistakes were more costly as their outcomes had higher stakes. For example, two participants from the healthcare field noted that taking ownership of a mistake is critical and "can be lifesaving." Another participant spoke about a leader who took responsibility for losing a multi-million-dollar project that represented 70% of their sales volume. However, the team was able to rebound and "thrive" because the leader took ownership of how they misread the situation and made a poor decision that led to the loss of sales. These stories reinforce the importance of admitting mistakes and making amends. The second category, 'building trust with others,' was demonstrated through actions such as delegating or overcoming obstacles as a team (noted by 21, 28%). Participants shared stories of volunteers successfully constructing gardens with a leader who provided a vision and allowed team

members to choose tasks that fit their skills and abilities. Five participants specifically mentioned how this behavior was the opposite of being "micromanaged." Teams that demonstrated these trust-building behaviors allowed its members to act with agency. The third category revolved around individuals 'feeling responsible for the outcomes of work products' (noted by 14, 19%). One participant mentioned how it is important for project managers to "take responsibility for the success of their project and work ahead to make sure they get the resources they need to tackle problems or prevent them." By focusing on preventative work, project managers are less likely to face surprises that will often derail a project.

Table 1. How Agency shows up in the workplace

Percentage	Response Count	Category
23%	17	Owning up to a mistake and making amends
28%	21	Building trust with others
19%	14	Feeling responsible for the outcomes of work products
30%	22	Other
100%	74	Total

Adaptability

There were 71 examples shared about Adaptability, and there were two distinct categories of how this soft skill shows up in the workplace. A large majority, at 47 participants (66%), discussed 'being open to new approaches to complete a task' which included stories of employees adjusting to new procedures due to COVID-19, such as wearing masks and sanitizing surfaces or learning new technology in order to navigate remote work. Participants also mentioned shifting work priorities due to an urgent project or adjusting workflow to meet higher or lower customer demand. The other distinct category mentioned is employees 'being willing to lend a helping hand' especially during times when there is a staff shortage (mentioned by 15 participants, 21%). Many participants mentioned working longer hours, taking extra shifts and working in different departments in order to complete a project or task. This willingness to be flexible with schedules signaled to other employees that "they had each other's backs."

Table 2. How Adaptability shows up in the workplace

Percentage	Response Count	Category
66%	47	Being open to new approaches to complete a task
21%	15	Being willing to lend a helping hand
13%	9	Other
100%	71	Total

Curiosity

There were 61 examples shared about Curiosity and two main categories emerged from the data. The first was 'building trust with others,' which was mentioned 36 times (59%). Participants mentioned that curiosity was the antidote to pride or an individual appearing as a "know-it-all." Curiosity was viewed as trust-building as it takes humility to reflect on one's own performance and consider how one's performance can be improved for the next time. Additionally, employees who were curious were also "entrusted" with special projects because of their ability to pay attention to potential obstacles and ask questions. Understanding root causes, asking clarifying questions and preemptively solving problems are all aspects of curiosity that enable employees to achieve superior performance. The other distinct category is 'viewing new experiences as an opportunity for growth,' mentioned by 18 participants (30%). One participant explained that their curiosity as a sales representative to learn about their company's ancillary equipment opened an opportunity for this individual to sell larger projects and allowed them to move up the corporate ladder. Several participants mentioned the difference between an average performer and a high performer was their ability to ask questions, learn, and ultimately, grow.

Table 3. How Curiosity shows up in the workplace

Percentage	Response Count	Category
59%	36	Building trust with others
30%	18	Viewing new experiences as an opportunity for growth
11%	7	Other
100%	61	Total

Discussion

The distinct categories of how each of these soft skills show up in the workplace provide insight into how they might be integrated into the classroom experience. The three distinct categories for how Agency showed up in the workplace were 'owning up to mistakes and making amends,' 'building trust with others,' and 'being responsible for the outcome of work products'. Role modeling could be an effective method for instructors to demonstrate owning up to a mistake and taking steps to correct the error. When a professor mis-grades a paper, they could share the error with the class and the steps taken to correct the oversight. From our own teaching experience, when we have missed a stated deadline to return graded papers, we have offered an extension for the next paper, so students have time to incorporate the feedback. When professors demonstrate humility and model how to make amends, students can tacitly learn the benefits of healthy interpersonal repair and incorporate this practice into their own interactions. To help reinforce the second aspect of Agency, building trust with others, instructors can integrate team charters into group assignments. In our own classroom experience, we have asked students to take personality and behavioral assessments, and from what they discover about themselves, create a video they share with their teammates about their strengths and weaknesses. Then, collectively, after viewing the videos, the team develops a team charter that articulates their collective expectations for the project. This class assignment helps students learn how to build trust amongst team members by disclosing personal preferences and providing adequate clarity to foster trust within a group dynamic. It also helps students learn more about the third aspect of Agency wherein they are responsible for their work product. When students hit a crossroad, the professor can redirect them to their team charter to determine how they can first address an issue based on their mutually agreed expectations. While there may be situations where the professor needs to step in, we have learned the growth for students is far greater when they take ownership of the team dynamic. Professors can hold students accountable and reinforce the idea that students are ultimately responsible for their work product by treating students as agents of change and having them navigate interpersonal conflict. Role modeling, team charters, and practicing accountability may be three classroom methods to reinforce the soft skill of Agency in the classroom.

 The two distinct categories for how Adaptability showed up in the workplace were 'being open to new approaches to complete a task' and 'being willing to lend a helping hand'. Both outcomes could be developed through incorporating student feedback or through students working on team projects. Incorporating student feedback is one way a professor can demonstrate Adaptability in the classroom. In one of the courses that we teach, students were solicited for input to improve the course structure and resources, and several of their ideas were implemented. The instructor was intentional to share which updates they incorporated and which ones they declined to role model and reinforce the idea that all participants in the classroom, including the instructor, can be open to completing tasks through new approaches, and highlight the importance of Adaptability. Another way to integrate Adaptability into the classroom is through incorporating team projects. Whenever groups work together there are diverse perspectives and work styles that members must navigate. The more practice students have working in teams, the better they will be at knowing when to adapt to other's preferences and when to voice their own convictions. Similar to the workforce, team projects also provide ample opportunities for students to lend a helping hand as team members inevitably get sick or need additional support. In these situations, another team member can choose to contribute more effort in order for the team to meet the deadline. Both of these teaching tactics can help students foster a sense of Adaptability and become prepared for exemplifying this behavior in their future careers.

The main categories for how Curiosity showed up in the workplace were 'building trust with others' and 'viewing new experiences as an opportunity for growth'. Team projects may be a method to reinforce the trust-building characteristic of Curiosity as it is difficult for teams to function without establishing trust. It is through asking questions and being vulnerable that trust is established. However, 'viewing new experiences as opportunities for growth' may be best integrated into the classroom through the instructor explaining how course content applies to the workplace and framing assignments as growth opportunities. For example, students may grumble at the introduction of a new project or when asked to learn new software, and in the midst of the student's frustration, the instructor could facilitate a conversation about a mindset shift from "having to" learn something new to "getting to" learn something new. The instructor can take this moment to explain how this positive attitude will serve them well in the workplace as they will be continually introduced to new technology and processes that are unfamiliar. Instructors could explain that in the workforce it is through being curious and taking on new challenges that high performers showcase they are willing to grow and ready for the next workplace promotion. Team projects and instructor reinforcement could be two teaching methods to reinforce Curiosity in the classroom.

Future research could examine specific assignments that could be used within the classroom to evoke Agency, Adaptability, and Curiosity to help students more effectively engage in the workplace. The more successfully that soft skills can be appropriately integrated into the classroom experience, the more beneficial the learning experience is for the students to equip them for their first job when they graduate.

Conclusion

The workplace has shifted and so too must today's classroom. Instructors must integrate crucial soft skills into the classroom so that students are adequately prepared for the workforce. While the workplace has changed significantly throughout the pandemic, higher education institutions should follow suit by integrating soft skill training through role modeling behaviors, initiating team charters, holding students accountable, involving them in team projects, incorporating student feedback, and reinforcing these behaviors through how they frame classroom assignments. By inviting students to be active contributors to their learning experience, and integrating Agency, Adaptability, and Curiosity into the classroom through these teaching methods, students will be more adequately prepared to successfully enter the workforce.

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