

### RESEARCH MEMO:

#### SOFT SKILLS: PRESENT AND FUTURE IN THE WORKFIRST SYSTEM

##### □ **Introduction**

What does it take to help a parent from a WorkFirst program to being ready for a successful career with potential for growth? The most obvious answer to establishing career readiness is to get people into sector-based education programs linked to careers with opportunity for wage and position advancement. However, in looking at the qualifications for entering many sector-based education programs, many WorkFirst parents have barriers that prevent enrollment. If parents are not deemed ready for sector-based education programs, they need something that can help them become better candidates for both sector-based education programs and subsequent careers. Soft skills emerged from secondary research as heavily linked to success both in education attainment<sup>1</sup> and career advancement<sup>2</sup>, making it a natural set of competencies for parents to develop to complete the education for a career and the skills to advance in it.

Unfortunately, soft skills are seen by Western Washington employers as both lacking in entry-level employees and essential for job retention and career advancement. A recent Seattle Jobs Initiative report<sup>3</sup> surveyed employers in Western Washington about the need for soft skills in entry-level employment and the deficit of soft skills in entry-level workers. While they found that certain soft skills were more emphasized by employment sector, there was a common core of problem solving, communication, and collaboration needed across sectors. There are many proposed theories linking skill deficits to poverty. However, one thing is clear in all of them. Soft skills are entrenched at the level of habits and behaviors, deeply seated patterns of response and action.

##### □ **Experience in the field**

Our research team met with frontline staff and administrators in the WorkFirst system as well as experts in the field. We contacted representatives from WorkFirst community based organizations in five counties around the state of Washington to learn how their clients received life skills. Most pointed to a formal life skills course. As this was a common answer, we met with

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<sup>1</sup> Almlund, M., Duckworth, A., Heckman, J. & Kautz, T. (2011). Personality psychology and economics.

<sup>2</sup> Heckman, J.J., & Kautz, T.(2012). Hard evidence on soft skills.

<sup>3</sup> Pritchard, J. (2013). The importance of soft skills in entry-level employment and postsecondary success: Employment and postsecondary success.



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providers of life skills and observed life skills training courses. These courses were inconsistently offered, short term, and varied in content and focus. We have also heard from social service staff that soft skills are developed in an incidental fashion, with clients picking up soft skills at transitional job sites, in case management, and in job search and life skills activities.

This raised a basic, yet important, question: what does “soft skills” mean? Soft skills refers to a cluster of personal qualities, habits, attitudes and social abilities that make a worker into a productive and welcome employee in the workforce. The WorkFirst system conflates soft skills under the umbrella heading “life skills,” but are these two sets of skills the same? We asked a prominent soft skills researcher to describe the difference between life skills and soft skills. She used the example of an oft cited career-based skill, appropriate dress and grooming. In this domain, a life skill would be gaining the understanding of when clothing is dirty, how to sort it by color, and how to operate a washing machine. A soft skill, the type associated with gains in career advancement and mobility, would be a person developing the intuitive ability to select appropriate clothing for appropriate social situations. This distinction gives two helpful insights: 1) the two sets of skills are related but distinct, and 2) education can provide life skills but fall short of helping people develop soft skills, which are transferrable to multiple life contexts.

### **Available soft skills training programs**

Looking at the best ways to increase soft skills also yields an inconclusive picture. Most soft skills programs are from for-profit enterprises, and they are mated with assessments linked to the various skills trained in the program. While some of these programs offer evidence that their training programs increase scores on their own assessments, few offer evidence of impact on career and employment outcomes. These programs are expensive to administer and assess, and they offer little concrete evidence that the programs increase the employment outcomes that actually matter. This is because true soft skills are entrenched in mindsets and patterns of response; they may be largely unconscious and instinctual.

### **Addressing the gap**

Drawing together all that we have learned, it becomes apparent that there is a gap in soft skills training. Soft skills are often taught like hard skills, with the expectation that information about skills will be magically integrated to replace engrained patterns of thinking and behaving in social situations. At best, this can work in limited domains (i.e., how to answer an interview question), but it does not reach the level of intuition necessary to change responses in novel, pressurized



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situations. The shortcoming of many skills curricula is that they assume that soft skills deficits are primarily due to a factual knowledge deficit.

As one researcher put it, soft skills “have more to do with who one is than what one knows.”<sup>4</sup> While this is a rule of thumb, it points to the shortcoming of addressing soft skills with curricula designed to develop knowledge. Soft skills have to do with patterns of ingrained responses to social and occupational situations. These patterns have to do with the environment and experiences of an individual’s background. Most recently, research on executive functions and from the field of behavioral economics have begun to shed light on the social psychological and neurobiological bases of how people interact with their surroundings. Patterns of avoidance, conflict, short-sightedness, and lack of resilience and persistence have all been tied to traumatic events (often endemic to conditions of poverty) and stress, and how these can limit access to executive functions. To understand present soft skills and to influence soft skill change, interventions must account for possible traumatic experiences, historical social and familial contexts, and the potential for impaired access to executive function skills due to present and past stressors. Notably, conditions of poverty are typically rife with many of these elements that can impact a person’s soft skills.

### □ **Future direction**

Researchers have begun to focus on the links between poverty and decision making, particularly focusing on the role that executive functions play. Our understanding is that executive functions and trauma heavily influence soft skills, and any promising soft skill development program must be informed by executive function and trauma perspectives. Also, information does not equal integration. Courses that provide information, tips, and strategies are helpful, but integration requires opportunities for problem-based practice and acknowledgment of trauma behind life barriers. To address the ingrained nature of soft skills, repetition and pressure of real-world interactions are imperative for newly taught skills to replace old habits. Finally, assessments must be developed that track the impact of soft skills training on long term career and employment outcomes. Soft skill development is not an end in itself, but its value is found through increased interpersonal and financial success.

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<sup>4</sup> Payne, N. (2011). Soft skills- what are they and why are they important?