



Boosting
the Soft Skills
of Higher Education
Students and
Graduates

WHAT ARE THE PRESENT MOST DEMANDED SOFT SKILLS?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Soft skills are gaining importance and both employers and employees agree about that. However, there is a great mismatch between the skills of young people entering the labour market and the skills sought. That's why the BEGIN project team conducted research among the target groups of the project to identify the skills of the present, as well as respondents' expectations of future changes.

According to Collin's English dictionary, soft skills are "*desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include common sense, the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude*"¹. The dictionary also demonstrates the increasing frequency of this term's usage in the last years. Although the term *soft skills* is elusive and difficult to describe, there is a common understanding that it is a combination of personal traits, behaviours, and social attitudes that tremendously affect work performance. Research has shown undoubtedly that soft skills training can boost productivity² and vice versa – their lack can affect work performance to a great extent.

Soft skills do not obey strict definitions or borderlines. They are interconnected and, in reality, we actually deal with combinations of soft skills instead of separate ones. Soft skills overlap in reality and this is natural. However, as the Collin's English dictionary definition indicates, soft skills could be roughly classified as:

- *Personal* (common sense);
- *Interpersonal* (the ability to deal with people);
- *Situational* (positive flexible attitude).³

Soft skills are broadly classified as a combination of personality traits, behaviors, and social attitudes that allow people to *communicate effectively*, collaborate, and successfully manage conflicts. People with good soft skills tend to have strong *situational awareness* and emotional intelligence to navigate difficult working environments while still producing positive results. Another benefit of soft skills in the workplace is that they help people to adapt to *changing circumstances*. Being able to communicate effectively in a time of uncertainty or collaborate with others when solutions aren't immediately obvious is hugely important when someone is in a leadership position or not. While hard skills are related to specific knowledge, soft skills are the ones that dictate our behaviour in specific and ever-changing situations.

Soft skills are also more subjective than hard skills. This means that the answers from the in-depth interviews conducted by the BEGIN team reflect also the personal experience of the respondents, as well as their expectations for the future of work.

¹ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/soft-skills>

² [Soft skills training boosts productivity | University of Michigan News \(umich.edu\)](https://www.umich.edu/news/2019/05/soft-skills-training-boosts-productivity)

³ https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Soft-Skills-classification_fig2_307692801

Although soft skills seem subjective and difficult to teach, they are also more transferable and timeless than hard skills. While hard skills are rapidly changing, soft skills will continue to be needed and it is even possible to outline the most needed ones in the foreseeable future.

1. Aims and objectives of this chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to determine and analyse the most important soft skills of the present based on research conducted among the target groups during the development of IO3 within the BEGIN project.

2. Methods and procedures

As part of the work on IO3, in-depth interviews were conducted with university lecturers, students, and business representatives. Based on this research, 40 soft skills expected by employers were identified.

The research aimed to determine the importance of identified soft skills based on the opinions of target groups. An index of the importance of the most important skills at the moment and the skills that the respondents think will be important in the future was established based on the opinions of the target groups. Thus, a hierarchy of importance of the indicated by the respondents soft skills was researched.

The importance of soft skills, which should be developed by students in order to respond to the current labour market needs was calculated using the following formula:

$$W = \frac{A1+A2+AN}{X}$$

In this formula, W is importance indicator for soft skills; A1, A2,... are indication of importance for a given competence by individual respondents, and X is a number of indications (respondents). In the in-depth interview questionnaire, the values of importance for individual soft competencies were established on a scale where:

- 1 - means high importance
- 2 - means medium importance
- 3 - means low significance
- 4 - means no meaningfulness

According to the adopted scale of importance, the lower the indicator is, the higher the importance of soft competence in a given group of respondents. The indicator allows comparing the importance of a given soft competence between the heads of the stakeholder groups, i.e. entrepreneurs, academics, and students. Moreover, it allows for the comparison of results between countries.

Based on the research conducted in all partner countries, 18 most important soft skills were identified, both currently and in the future. This chapter will analyse the most important soft skills of the present identified on the basis of the in-depth interviews with stakeholders

using the reports prepared by each partner, as well the data from the BEGIN summary from in-depth interview reports.

II.THE MOST IMPORTANT SOFT SKILLS OF THE PRESENT

After summary calculations based on the data presented by all partners in the project, a total of 18 most important soft skills of the present were identified as follows:

<i>organisation of own work</i>	1.27
<i>building relationships (with clients, colleagues, superiors)</i>	1.31
<i>striving for results</i>	1.32
<i>communication skills</i>	1.32
<i>teamwork</i>	1.32
<i>flexibility of thinking</i>	1.35
<i>troubleshooting</i>	1.36
<i>prioritisation</i>	1.36
<i>customer orientation</i>	1.43
<i>readiness to learn</i>	1.51
<i>decision-making</i>	1.52
<i>mindfulness</i>	1.52
<i>adaptability</i>	1.52
<i>managing myself in time</i>	1.55
<i>taking care of the good atmosphere</i>	1.56
<i>sharing knowledge and experience</i>	1.58
<i>stress management</i>	1.62
<i>network work and cooperation</i>	1.64

As mentioned above, according to the adopted scale of importance, the lower the indicator is, the higher the importance of the respective soft skill is, which means that respondents in the survey have outlined “organisation of own work” as the most important soft skill of the present. The chart above shows the importance of soft skills related to self-management (including striving for results, organisation of own work, decision-making, managing myself in time, and prioritisation) and communication (building relationships with clients, colleagues, superiors, communication skills, teamwork, network work and cooperation, taking care of good atmosphere, sharing knowledge and experience, customer orientation), that are pointed to as particularly important. This could be related to the fact that in 2020 (when the research was conducted) the pandemic forced many employers to switch to home office opportunities, which made self-management especially important quality⁴.

The remote work opportunities have affected communication (especially the one with colleagues including teamwork) tremendously. The communication is now changed compared to conversations you had with colleagues and employers before Covid, as a lot of people are working from home or having a hybrid work environment (at home and in the office). This is where strong communication skills are going to be even more important as we learn to adapt to building and maintaining relationships remotely rather than in person.

The upheavals of 2020 have pushed forward adaptability and problem-solving skills. If we could describe “hard skills” as “what someone knows, and soft skills describe the person’s willingness to learn”⁵, the pandemic situation has outlined the importance of the last in a year of uncertainty. So, the respondents in the BEGIN survey have quite naturally noted the importance of self-development and problem-solving, pushing forward skills, such as flexibility of thinking, troubleshooting, stress management, mindfulness, adaptability, and readiness to learn. It is clear that changes require different skills that the person might not possess at the moment, so up-skilling becomes one of the most important priorities.

The soft skills below are listed and commented according to their ranking in the present, starting from the most important ones. Of course, there are soft skills, that are closely related to each other, as in real work-life there are no distinct borders among them and they generally function as a whole.

1. Organisation of own work

⁴ 8 Soft Skills Employers Are Looking for in 2021
<https://www.topresume.com/career-advice/6-soft-skills-employers-are-looking-for>

⁵ <https://uptickapp.com/blog/a-soft-skills-training-plan-for-2021>

There is no doubt that having a positive attitude and the initiative to work well without around-the-clock supervision is a vital soft skill for any employee. This soft skill not only demonstrates reliability and commitment but also shows that a person can fit efficiently into an organisational structure without the need for constant supervision. The importance of this skill is even greater in the context of the 2020 pandemic situation when many employees work from home and face the challenge to organise their own work without constant supervision by superiors.

Organisation of own work has been ranked of crucial importance in the BEGIN survey held in Germany, where respondents point out that regarding a future training program “students should be presented online (project management) tools for the organisation of own work, good and bad practical examples how organisation of own work could look like and should not look like, so that they can learn from successes and failures.”⁶ However, this soft skill has been given high importance in all the other partner countries that pushed it to the top position as the most important soft skill of the present moment.

“Organisation of own work” is closely related to other soft skills in the top 18 list of the present, such as “prioritisation” and “managing myself in time”, which confirms its importance. Arranging thoughts, time, and tasks in a structured way is also a key skill for efficiently accomplishing goals relating it closely to “striving for results”, which also holds a top position.

2. Building relationships (with clients, colleagues, superiors)

A Gallup study⁷ shows that building successful relationships at the workplace is a key separator between high- and low-performing teams. According to the same study “best friend at work” transforms what the workplace represents. It enables us to move forward into the future workplace - from a past workplace desire merely for a job to a future workplace mindset that, “It's not just my job, it's my life.”

Undoubtedly, the importance of turning good communication into a kind of relationship has profound psychological implications. The need for lasting human relationships has gathered strength with the acceleration of computer technologies and has become even greater in times of pandemic crisis. The important aspect here is recognising the fact that relationships are not limited to private life. Indeed, they play a vital role in career development and are an important element of work performance.

Italian students in the BEGIN study have ranked “building relationships” among the 4 most important soft skills, proposing that a training course on this should teach them how to “identify and initiate working relationships and to develop and maintain them in a way that is

⁶ Experts come up with a lot of ways for developing organizational skills. The most common and easy to apply are making to-do lists, using a calendar, keeping an organized work space, ect. <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/organizational-skills-525748>

⁷ <https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/249605/having-best-friend-work-transforms-workplace.aspx>

of mutual benefit to both a person and the other party.” According to them “Good relationships have to be the goals and the effective key to getting things done and are essential when people’s success is dependent on others.”

Experts comment that mastering this key soft skill is crucial for good teamwork, as the more comfortable co-workers are around one other, the more confident they'll feel voicing opinions, brainstorming, and going along with new ideas⁸. The level of teamwork is essential to embrace change, create, and innovate. And when people see the successes of working together in this way, it also affects productivity.

3. *Striving for results*

Striving for results is in the four most important soft skills of the present in two of the partner countries involved in the project – Germany and Portugal. The Portuguese respondents have indicated the importance of the knowledge “how to measure the goals to achieve the expected results” and the German ones share that “Companies and organisations must work economically and deliver results. It is not about perfectionism, it’s about producing results. Mistakes are allowed, they help to improve products and results. We learn from mistakes. Working life is not about an academic paper. It is about feasibility. About being “good enough for the moment”. A basis of the course could be, for example: “Fail fast, fail cheap”. Another German respondent states that students should “learn to produce results step by step, get to know agile-approaches (sprints)” and understand that “80 % is enough, don’t go for 100% or more”.

The opinions cited above show that the stakeholders of the project clearly identify the increasing importance of a person’s ability to recognise that delivering results is of great importance for any company. Indeed, it is also pivotal for an employee to consider which results are of first importance for the exact moment, as well as to be able to plan the steps for reaching them. This relates “striving for results” soft skill to other ones in the situational group of soft skills, such as prioritisation and time-management.

The opinions shared by the survey respondents refer to the fact that having a clear objective at the start does not mean that intermediate objectives should not be revised at each step, which actually connects the “striving for results” soft skill with “flexibility of thinking”.

4. *Communication skills*



Being a foundation for a great deal of the other soft skills, communication ones are of vital importance for almost every work position nowadays. In this respect, quire naturally communication comes as one of the most important soft skills, which was outlined by the respondents during the in-depth interviews. It is ranked in the top 4 soft skills of the

⁸ <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/good-relationships.htm>

present according to the survey among Portugal entrepreneurs.

picture: <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/>

Broadly formulated in the BEGIN survey questionnaires, communication soft skills have many different aspects. They include verbal and non-verbal behavior, the ability to explain complex issues to colleagues and clients, to comprehend and act efficiently on instructions, as well as to cultivate established relationships up, down, and across the organizational chain. Having the ability to communicate effectively can affect a number of experiences in the workplace.⁹

Although communication skills may look like innate and quite natural human abilities, they are ranked as one of the top 5 to be sought after by employers in 2021 according to Udemy's 2020 Workplace Learning Report.¹⁰

Emphasising the importance of communication skills is part of a trend connected to the rapid development of computer technologies and turning them into a part of everyday work life. However, this trend has been intensified by the need for physical distance as result of the pandemic in 2020. Computer-mediated communication has specifics that should be learned and that has been mentioned by participants in the BEGIN survey. Respondents in the in-depth interviews from Bulgaria have mentioned that students should be introduced to the principles of virtual cooperation, codes of conduct in a virtual environment, methods, and tools. A German respondent has also pointed out the importance of optimization of virtual collaboration through IT tools, emphasizing the importance of the “ability to handle new media/ virtual collaboration”. Even before the pandemic a lot of business communication was played out by email, which makes knowing good email etiquette and giving instructions clearly and concisely one of the most needed skills of the present. Verbal skills, on the other side, are key to fostering relationships that are collaborative and respectful, and ultimately, productive.

Another participant in the survey from Germany has stated the importance of assertiveness, proposing that argumentation training, body language training, and communication skills training should be included in the learning materials developed under the BEGIN project. According to the interviews including students in “on the job training is most important for this (internships, project learning, etc.)”.

Communication skills are a broad category taking central position among the interpersonal skills and are closely related to building and maintaining relationships and teamwork. They also include giving and receiving constructive criticism, being tolerant and respectful regarding others' opinions, and empathizing with them, which makes communication soft skills especially important.

5. Teamwork

⁹ <https://www.themuse.com/advice/soft-skills-definition-examples>

¹⁰ <https://business.udemy.com/resources/5-workplace-learning-trends-2020/>

As a German respondent in the BEGIN survey has formulated it "If you want to be fast, work alone. If you want to get far, work in a team". Teamwork is one of the most important soft skills in the present¹¹, which is confirmed by its high ranking in the partner countries and its presence in the top 4 soft skills according to the respondents from Bulgaria. The great importance teamwork gains in the present are related to the fact that projects grow increasingly more complex and global in the age of AI. Thus, effective collaboration only grows more important. Establishing high-performing teams unleashes the immense potential within the organisations.¹²

Most employees are part of a team/department/division, and even those who are not on an official team need to collaborate with other employees. Even people who prefer working alone should learn how to demonstrate understanding and appreciating the value of joining forces and working in partnership with others to accomplish the company's goals.

Teamwork is closely related to collaboration and is a foundation for other key soft skills of the present, such as taking care of a good atmosphere, network work and cooperation, and sharing knowledge and experience. The ability to work effectively in team environments ensures that everyone is contributing something of value to the table in a way that promotes healthy relationships in the workplace. Teamwork is a key characteristic of successful enterprises, so it's not only an individual quality to be developed but also a way of combining individualities. However, teamwork requires strong communication skills as its foundation.

Regarding the development of this soft skill a Bulgarian respondent proposes trainings with "teams with different roles assigned to the participants, as well as teaching students how to lead a team and how to effectively distribute tasks."

6. *Flexibility of thinking*

This soft skill is classified in one of the top 4 by Italian entrepreneurs and highly ranked in the other countries participating in the project. It has been defined by a participant in the survey as "a critical thinking process that is exhibited when the learner remains open to multiple possibilities, ideas, or hypotheses, particularly early during a critical thinking problem when information and evidence are being gathered. Also exhibited when learners incorporate the thinking of others into their own during collaborative critical thinking activities." This statement relates closely flexibility of thinking to teamwork and communication skills. It is also close to problem-solving. The difference is that flexibility relies on the ability to think over problems in a new way, imposing a fresh perspective. Some authors even talk about "elastic thinking", which is a cognitive style providing us with a way to react to the fast changes in many aspects of our lives: "We have to be willing to rise above conventional mindsets, to reframe the questions we ask, to be open to new paradigms. We have to rely as much on our imagination as on logic, and have the ability to generate and integrate a wide variety of ideas, to welcome experiment, and be tolerant of failure. I call that

¹¹ <https://www.gofluent.com/blog/top-7-soft-skills-2020/>

¹² <https://tiqgroup.com/soft-skills-development/>

manner of thought elastic thinking, in contrast to rational or logical thought.¹³ Closely related to creativity, the flexibility of thinking is exactly what is completely human in contrast to the algorithms computers follow in solving problems.

Of course, there are ways to support flexibility of thinking in the company, such as creating an atmosphere of relaxation and good team communication, which refer to other soft skills in the list.

7. Troubleshooting

Troubleshooting has been pointed to as one of the most important soft skills by Italian entrepreneurs who took part in the BEGIN survey. They define it as the “ability to adopt a systematic approach towards identifying and then solving a problem or issue at hand”. The same respondents add that the way to develop this soft skill is to “create the occasion to simulate troubleshooting skills giving people concrete problem-solving abilities.”

Troubleshooting is the activity or process of solving major problems or difficulties that occur in a company or government.¹⁴ It is described as the ability to adopt a systematic approach towards identifying and then solving a problem or issue at hand and requires a system of thoughts and actions to overcome challenges.¹⁵ Troubleshooting starts with gathering maximum information to define the actual problem and provide the best possible solution by evaluating them, so it refers closely to a person’s analytical skills. In general, troubleshooting is the identification or diagnosis of "trouble" in the management flow of a system caused by a failure of some kind. The problem is initially described as symptoms of malfunction, and troubleshooting is the process of determining and remedying the causes of these symptoms.

Experts identify 6 steps in troubleshooting:¹⁶

1. Identify the problem.
2. Establish a theory of probable cause.
3. Test probable cause theory to determine actual cause.
4. Establish an action plan and execute the plan.
5. Verify full system functionality.
6. Document the process.

Troubleshooting does not just require analytical, creative, and critical skills, but a particular mindset; those who can approach a problem with a cool and level head will often reach a solution more efficiently than those who cannot. This is a soft skill that often relies on strong teamwork, too. Problems need not always be solved alone, so the ability to know who can help one to reach a solution, and how they can do it, can be of great advantage.

¹³ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-power-of-flexible-thinking/>

¹⁴ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/problem-solving>

¹⁵ <https://www.cleverism.com/skills-and-tools/troubleshooting/>

¹⁶ The following video explains each of the steps in details: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulIQB6i4GmY>

In the face of the pandemic crisis, researchers consider troubleshooting skills as especially important since many companies have to deal with a lot of unexpected problems.¹⁷ After all, companies hire employees to solve problems and this is part of the job. Trouble-shooting is related to communication and teamwork. Discussing mistakes and what could be learned from them is an important part of building this soft skill. This relates the troubleshooting soft skills to the flexibility of thinking and readiness to learn that are also discussed in this paper.

8. Prioritisation

With more tasks to do, non-stop emails, and higher expectations, deciding what to do first is becoming one of the most important qualities nowadays, so it quite naturally is one of the top soft skills highlighted during the BEGIN in-depth interviews taking one of the top four positions according to German respondents.

Prioritisation is important because it allows giving attention to tasks that are important and urgent so that a person can later focus on lower priority tasks. Mastering prioritisation is closely connected to time-management, productivity, and organisation of own work and can tremendously reduce stress. This top skill can be supported by using to-do lists and separating urgent from important tasks, setting daily goals, etc.¹⁸ However, the ability to attribute the right importance to a task remains subjective and cannot be taught by mastering a simple technique.

9. Customer orientation



Image by Kelly Miller. © The Balance 2018

¹⁷ <https://ingenio-global.com/6-sought-after-soft-skills-youll-benefit-in-2021/>

¹⁸ The following articles summarises a lot of useful prioritization techniques:
<https://blog.rescuetime.com/how-to-prioritize/>;
<https://appfluence.com/productivity/prioritization-what-is-prioritization-and-why-its-important/>

Customer orientation is part of the interpersonal soft skills and is closely related to other soft skills that have been considered important in the BEGIN survey, such as communication skills and building relationships (with clients, colleagues, superiors).

Customer service could be interpreted both as a type of job and as a set of soft skills. As a job, customer service professionals are responsible for addressing customer needs and ensuring they have a good experience. As a skill set, customer orientation is a kind of umbrella term including a number of soft skills, such as clear communication, listening skills, self-control, positive attitude, assertiveness, conflict resolution, empathy, taking responsibility, a sense of humor, etc.¹⁹ The final purpose of using all these interconnected skills is to make the customer feel that they are interacting with someone who genuinely cares and wants to solve their problem. Thus, the customer orientation soft skill makes visible the human need for communication that becomes even greater in the times of rapid development of technologies.

Statistics show unambiguously that the customer orientation has clear financial aspects.²⁰ However, improving customer orientation skills involves working on every single aspect they include, but also setting clear company goals, providing guidelines, as well as a good working atmosphere.²¹

10. *Readiness to learn*

Readiness to learn is especially important nowadays for anyone in the workforce and it is in the top 4 soft skills of the present according to the BEGIN survey in Germany. The need to actively grow and learn is a natural consequence of the fact that according to experts five years from now, over one-third of technical skills considered important today will have changed.²² Indeed, no one can predict how much more hard skills will become obsolete in ten years. It's clear that workplaces are constantly changing (the COVID-19 pandemic just made this tendency more visible) and employees have to learn to face the new challenges of the present. This is why professionals should take the time to learn in order to improve and add to their skill sets. In the constantly changing situation of the present, certainly, those motivated to reach higher achievements by learning new skills that can't be replicated by technology are much more likely to succeed.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development "Future of Education and Skills 2030" report highlighted that to remain competitive, workers will need to acquire new skills continually, which requires flexibility, a positive attitude towards lifelong learning and curiosity.²³

The "readiness to learn" makes clear the advantage of soft skills over hard ones. Even though they are difficult to measure and assess, soft skills being a kind of personal attitude towards work seem much more stable in the face of the fast changes we face nowadays.

¹⁹ <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/top-soft-skills-for-customer-service-jobs-2063746>

²⁰ <https://www.helpscout.com/75-customer-service-facts-quotes-statistics/>

²¹ <https://www.helpscout.com/blog/customer-service-skills/>

²² <https://www.gofluent.com/blog/top-7-soft-skills-2020/>

²³ <https://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project/>

As a German respondent in the BEGIN study has put it “Students must understand that in their studies they learn to work / how to work. And that they have to learn continuously in their working life - until the end of their working life and even until the end of their life. They must learn to listen well and actively and be open to new things. They must understand that circumstances change quickly and that we must constantly adapt. Therefore we have a constant need for new knowledge. People who think they know everything will not get ahead in working life.” Another participant from Germany has underlined the importance of learning as much as possible apart from the chosen studies and also “how to get ‘out of the box knowledge”.

11. *Decision-making*

The importance of this soft skill has been emphasised by Italian students during the BEGIN survey. They understand it as “the ability to choose the best course of action after carefully analyzing and examining the available options and the given circumstances. Therefore, decision-making skills require being involved in a thought process where the pros and cons of each alternative are weighed and the outcome of each option is forecasted based on the available information.”

Decisiveness is characterised by the ability to make quick and effective decisions. It does not mean recklessness or impulsiveness. Like other soft skills, decisiveness is a combination of several different abilities. It relies on a person’s ability to put things into perspective, weigh up the options, assess all relevant information, and anticipate any consequences, good and bad. A decisive employee will take effective and considered action quickly, especially when under pressure, so it is related to stress-management. This ensures that opportunities aren't missed by lengthy analysis or debate. Decision-making includes as its last step taking responsibility for the consequences of a respective decision and the ability to adapt when mistakes are made.

Studies have proved that developing decision-making skills, especially by children, can have a tremendous effect on their future study and work life.²⁴ However, like any of the soft skills, this one can be developed throughout a person’s life.

Decision making involves both logical thinking and instincts²⁵, which connects it to “flexibility of thinking” soft skill. This kind of “not logical” part explains the fact that decision-making skills can be improved in unusual ways, such as taking time for art, talking to people of different ages, or doing exercise.²⁶

12. *Mindfulness*

²⁴ Hard evidence on soft skills. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w18121>

²⁵ <https://blog.capterra.com/simple-steps-to-develop-good-decision-making-skills/>

²⁶ <https://www.topuniversities.com/blog/7-unusual-ways-improve-your-decision-making-skills>

Coming from the Buddhist philosophy²⁷, mindfulness has become an especially important feature of the modern corporate workplace. Employees' self-awareness is essential for the continued success of the company and mindfulness is one of the techniques that can achieve it. Experts point out that some of the world's most prestigious brands such as Apple, McKinsey, and Deutsche Bank utilise this soft skill to promote wellbeing among employees.²⁸

As with other soft skills, mindfulness is a skill that we naturally possess but it can also be developed on a daily basis. It could be described as the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us²⁹, so developing this skill is particularly important in overcoming high levels of stress, which has been shown to take its toll on productivity, hampering prospects for career development by impacting good performance. Working on mindfulness is closely connected to stress management, which is also in the BEGIN project top 18 soft skills of the present.

Mindfulness has positives on mental health but it is important for professional development, too. Studies have shown that increased mindfulness can help to foster greater self-confidence, which can have benefits ranging from improved client relations to enhanced leadership skills. Empathy is also said to be developed by mindfulness, which is a key soft skill for future business leaders.³⁰ Mindfulness fosters characteristics that are useful in the workplace, such as greater self-confidence or improved client relations. This complexity and important role in connecting private and work-life turn mindfulness into a key skill for the BEGIN project.

Experts propose different ways for developing mindfulness, among which is taking ten minutes a day to focus in a way similar to a meditation that involves concentrating all your attention on the breath flowing in and out of the body. It can improve mood and, it is claimed, keep depression at bay.

13. *Adaptability*

Adaptability can be described as taking on new challenges. It is an important soft skill since it demonstrates an ability and willingness to embrace new tasks and new challenges. According to some experts, adaptability is a top survival soft skill of 2020 and 2021 since everyone was forced to work and live in new conditions.³¹ 2020 has clearly shown that adaptability to change is vital for business survival. A positive attitude and open-minded professionalism, especially in stressful situations, are of great importance. Adaptability is closely connected to employees' engagement, job satisfaction, and retention.

Flexible employees are willing to help out where needed, take on extra responsibilities, and can adapt quickly when plans change. In the last years, companies need to make rapid changes to remain competitive, so they want workers who can also change direction as needed. The increasing importance of adaptability is connected to the fact that organizations

²⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness>

²⁸ <https://www.markssattin.co.uk/career-advice/2016-4/the-soft-skills-series-part-1-mindfulness-51391912194>

²⁹ <https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/>

³⁰ <https://www.markssattin.co.uk/career-advice/2016-4/the-soft-skills-series-part-1-mindfulness-51391912194>

³¹ <https://uptickapp.com/blog/a-soft-skills-training-plan-for-2021>

have become less hierarchical and agile over the last decade and it has become more important for employees to be able to handle many different tasks and demonstrate a willingness to take on responsibilities that might lay outside their area of expertise.

The BEGIN survey respondents have pointed to adaptability as a soft skill of the future, too, adding “acceptance of changes”, which is close to it. Regarding the development of this skill they have proposed including “training units for fluid intelligence (memory training through learning poetry, do things as a right-handed person with the left hand, and taking on new tasks (e.g.: through job rotation)”.

14. *Managing myself in time*

Time-management is one of the task-oriented soft skills, that have been given priority by the BEGIN survey participants. Time-management could be defined as the ability to work productively and efficiently while using wisely one’s time. It is closely related to the ability to work under pressure, as well as within tight deadlines. Employees who manage their time well can efficiently prioritise tasks while adopting an attitude that allows them to take on new tasks and deadlines. This soft skill is closely related to prioritisation and organisation of own work.

In the context of the COVID crisis, time-management skills became especially valuable. Moving to home-office was a big step for many employers, who were not initially sure about the productivity of their employees away from the routine office day and around-the-clock supervision. In this situation, the employees who saved time were the ones who were able to manage themselves effectively and stay away from the many distractors at home. Effective time-management can reduce the level of stress at work and support a good work-life balance. Experts provide a lot of advice for improving time-management skills. As expected, a good working calendar can be pretty useful. Setting clear short- and long-term goals, as well as prioritizing tasks is also of great importance.³²

15. *Taking care of the good atmosphere*

There are a lot of work reports and studies showing that a company’s success depends on the happiness of its employees.³³ This is a trend that is understood by managers who try to make workplaces and working hours more flexible in the competition for talented employees. An article in Harvard business review³⁴ shows that positive work cultures are much more productive. The study states that a positive working environment and employees feeling valued, respected, secure, and supported lead to long-term engagement in work. Some of the steps that promote a good atmosphere at work are supporting social connections among employees, listening to their problems, and showing empathy.

³²<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/time-management-skills>;
<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/time-management-tips-for-professionals>

³³ <https://3475418.hs-sites.com/content-2019-workplace-trends-report>

³⁴ <https://hbr.org/2015/12/proof-that-positive-work-cultures-are-more-productive>

However, a good working atmosphere is connected to one's communication skills and ability to build relationships, which are also highly appreciated by BEGIN survey respondents and listed in the top 18 soft skills of the present.

16. Sharing knowledge and experience

Effective knowledge and experience sharing are of preliminary importance in today's knowledge-based economy. This could prevent the waste of time and efforts and is a prerequisite for reaching the company's sustainability.

Knowledge sharing could be reached either through mutual communication of employees or through some kind of collective communication, for example, seminars. Sharing knowledge increases the productivity of teams and enables them to work faster and smarter by getting easier access to the internal resources and expertise within the organization. However, sharing knowledge and experience is not just their multiplication but a process, in which new knowledge emerges.

Both knowledge and experience are personal and in this respect, it's useful to make the difference between knowledge and information. As David Gurteen has put it: "A more useful definition of knowledge is that it is about know-how and know-why. A metaphor is that of a cake. An analysis of its molecular constituents is data – for most purposes not very useful – you may not even be able to tell it were a cake. A list of ingredients is information – more useful – an experienced cook could probably make the cake – the data has been given context. The recipe though would be knowledge – written knowledge - explicit knowledge – it tells you how-to make the cake. An inexperienced cook however, even with the recipe might not make a good cake. A person, though, with relevant knowledge, experience, and skill – knowledge in their heads - not easily written down - tacit knowledge – would almost certainly make an excellent cake from the recipe."³⁵ So, knowledge is information that is contextualized by personal experience, intuition, and creativity, so sharing knowledge and experience possess that intangible "human" aspect characterising all soft skills.

The process of sharing knowledge and experience is not limited to face-to-face interaction. It can be even facilitated by new technologies that can be a useful tool for sharing, capture, and reuse of knowledge and experience.³⁶

17. Stress management

Stress management has been ranked among the top 4 soft skills of the present according to the Portuguese BEGIN survey. The respondents point out the importance of teaching students "how to face unexpected and stressful situations", which closely relates this soft skill to adaptability.

³⁵ <http://www.gurteen.com/gurteen/gurteen.nsf/id/ksculture>

³⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/47870144_Knowledge_and_experience_sharing_in_projects-based_building_maintenance_community_of_practice

2020, when the survey was conducted, provided high levels of stress. As an article in Forbes states, stress management skills are of great importance for remote workers.³⁷

Stress arises at inappropriate levels of pressure: it may, for example, be triggered by not having enough to do, as well as having too much to do. It is closely connected to other soft skills. On the one side, stress can be triggered by the lack or unsatisfactory levels of some of them (for example bad communication, lack of good working atmosphere, prioritisation, time-management, etc.) and on the other, stress can greatly affect other soft skills.

Although sometimes it seems that there is nothing to be done and that the responsibilities will be always more and more demanding, stress factors can be kept under control. In this respect, experts' advice includes identifying the sources of stress, learning to say "no", and techniques for better communication.³⁸

As a German respondent in the BEGIN survey has proposed, stress management skills can be successfully upgraded by implementing a stress diary (including points, such as: what was the stress factor, how did I react, how did I feel), exchanging with an expert, etc. Another participant from the same country has pointed out compiling and evaluating a list of stressors, as well as assigning a list of stressors and perceiving stress behavior.

18. *Network work and cooperation*

Networking skills are the competencies you need to have to maintain professional or social contacts. Networking and cooperation are equally important for individuals (being a key to better career opportunities and professional growth) and for companies. Important networking skills include communication skills, active listening, social skills, public speaking skills, nonverbal communication, interpersonal skills, empathy, positivity, humor, focus, etc.³⁹ Being a rather complex soft skill network work and cooperation serves as an avenue to creating long-term relationships with mutual benefit.⁴⁰ Networking is important for sharing information and receiving new ideas, it makes a person noticeable and creates new professional opportunities.

Regarding this soft skill, a German respondent in the BEGIN survey has mentioned the importance of teambuilding measures through Weekly Updates or Brownbag Meetings for mutual exchange, increased participation in networking events (e.g.: Entrepreneurs Organisation Network), and mentoring within the own company. As with other soft skills, improving network and cooperation requires practice, for example attending networking events, and improving other connected interpersonal soft skills, such as communication skills, active listening, building relationships, and sharing knowledge and experience.⁴¹

³⁷<https://www.forbes.com/sites/markcperna/2021/01/12/the-top-25-soft-skills-remote-workers-need-in-2021-and-3-ways-to-get-them/?sh=7c49dcafd78b>

³⁸ <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm>

³⁹ <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-cover-letters/networking-skills-on-resume>

⁴⁰ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/biancamillercole/2019/03/20/why-networking-should-be-at-the-core-of-your-career/?sh=757adc5b1300>

⁴¹ <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/resumes-cover-letters/networking-skills-on-resume>

III.CONCLUSIONS

The survey among stakeholders was conducted in 2020 and probably the COVID crisis has played an essential role in identifying the most important soft skills of the present and has affected the expectations of respondents for the soft skills of the future. However, in a Deloitte study on the future of work, the COVID crisis is seen as an accelerator of already existing processes:

“What’s clear is that thriving in the future will not mean the absence of challenges and disruptions. Rather, it means adapting, adjusting, prioritizing, and creating resilience to manage through instability. Thriving means not only planning for the return to work in the future of work but embracing the new insights and capabilities that COVID-19 has accelerated to reimagine the future altogether.”⁴²

In times of rapid development of ICT, the social, cultural and communication aspects of work are gaining importance. That means an increasing need for the development of competencies in fields, in which computers are not good. The fact that people do not always work next to each other encourages businesses to respond by increasing the demand for soft skills that employees should develop. This could be an uncomfortable process because it requires self-reflection.⁴³ However, this is a needed prerequisite since personal change always comes as a part of mastering particular soft skills.

Our personality and skills develop throughout our lives and it’s never too late to start working on them. Because they’re not based on specific knowledge like hard skills, soft skills are often considered more difficult to learn or strengthen. The good news is that they are usually interconnected and working on some of them affects positively the others. Experts point out that a person can learn a lot by simply observing other people within a company who excel in some areas. Offering to take on more responsibilities at work (serving on committees, planning events, etc.) can help to gain valuable experience. Of course, considering taking soft-skills courses could be of great use but the best way to acquire soft skills is to practice them. As a German respondent has stated: “The contents cannot be taught exclusively in a course. It must be the university's ambition to offer a holistic approach to teaching and to teach students a holistic way of working and approach to work. The problem is that many students have a too academic working style after their studies and lack the connection to the world of work. A good approach is the dual study (studying at university and working in a company at the same time - half and half, we have very good experiences with this approach in Germany). If a dual degree programme is not possible, or does not fit in with the degree programme, then it is just as feasible to do several internships - even longer internships where students already take on responsibility.”

Most of the soft skills that are considered to be important for the present moment in the BEGIN survey keep their positions as vital ones in the future as well. The new soft skills in the BEGIN list of top 18 skills of the future include acceptance of changes, conflict resolution, presentation and self-presentation, negotiation, virtual collaboration, and creativity.

⁴² [From survive to thrive: the future of work in a post-pandemic world: \(deloitte.com\)](https://www.deloitte.com/insights/industry/future-of-work)

⁴³ <https://www.talentlms.com/blog/developing-soft-skills-workplace-why-how/>

This list shows the increasing importance of interpersonal skills, which become crucial for both individual and companies' success.

IV. SELF-TEST QUESTIONS

The following self-test aims to assess your level of understanding of the current chapter. Sometimes more than one answer could be correct.

1. Which skill is classified as the most important soft skill of the present according to the in-depth interview results within the BEGIN project?:
 - € Teamwork
 - € Adaptability
 - € Communication
 - € Organisation of own work
 - € Stress management
2. Which of the following skills can be associated with the so called “elastic thinking”?:
 - € Mindfulness
 - € Flexibility of thinking
 - € Adaptability
 - € Managing myself in time
 - € Readiness to learn
3. Is mindfulness a “basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us”?:
 - € True
 - € False
4. What can increased mindfulness contribute to?:
 - € Better mental health
 - € Greater self-confidence
 - € Improved client relations
 - € Better concentration
 - € Enhanced leadership skills
5. Which of the following techniques is effective for developing mindfulness?
 - € Imagination
 - € Creativity
 - € Meditation
 - € Communication
 - € Self-explanation
6. Which of the following techniques can help people manage stress?:

- € Identify stress triggers
- € Be true to oneself
- € Buy oneself some time
- € Learn to say “no”
- € Learn to communicate better

7. Stress management skills cannot be successfully upgraded by implementing a stress diary?:

- € True
- € False

8. What does sharing knowledge and experience could lead to in an organization?:

- € Improved teamwork
- € Increased productivity
- € Increased innovation
- € Smarter work
- € Lower staff turnover

9. A good atmosphere at work can be promoted through:

- € Developing communication skills
- € Fostering social connections among employees
- € Being responsive to employees' problems
- € Paying bonuses to employees
- € Showing gratitude toward employees

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