



The Integral Role Played by Soft Skills in Advancing Business Management Success

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Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of this study is two twofold. Our first task is investigate the perception of major Vietnamese industrial employers and business educators to determine the extent to which they value the potential role which soft skill competencies can play in maximizing business success. Our second concern is to determine what particular soft skills employers and educators discern as best serving to maximize the economic interests of Vietnam within the global marketplace.

Methodology – A Sequential Exploratory Mixed-methods Approach was deployed in which semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 15 representative employers of Vietnam's reputedly largest business enterprises across Vietnam. To this end a questionnaire survey was conducted with 577 business educators from three major universities of Business across Vietnam.

Findings –The findings of the study indicate that all respondents highly value the increasing importance of soft skills in business success. Our critical analysis of respondent data reveals that 19 essential soft skills are deemed by both employers and educators as integral to business workplace efficacy and should thus be integrated into the formal business curriculum.

Implications -We are confident that our study represents the first comprehensive and specific soft skills survey yet undertaken within the business sector in Vietnam. Our study accesses and analyses the opinions of both representative employers from major companies, along with business educators from major educational institutions of business across the country. The specific analysis concerned the growing importance of 19 specific soft skills essential for maximizing overall business success. Our research findings also reveal that the integration into business school curriculums nationwide of the specific soft skills we have identified is of paramount importance to ensuring the growth of Vietnam 's economy.

Key Word: Soft skills, Business curriculum, Employers' perception, Educators' perception, Business graduates, growth of Vietnam 's economy

INTRODUCTION

A Report on the “Summary and Evaluation on the Ten-Year (1986-1996) Reform of Education and Training”, (1998) by the Vietnamese Ministry of

Education confirmed that ‘there is a weak relationship between universities and the business sectors, indicating a long-standing 'communication hiatus' that is yet to be bridged between educational providers and the business recipients



they service. One consequence of this deficiency has led to the poor performance of tertiary students in general and business tertiary students in particular, especially once they become employed. Because they are not adequately equipped with the appropriate soft skills demanded in the current business environments, they are inevitably working under a handicap. This infelicitous trend is well-evidenced by statistics which show that unemployment has escalated from 50 percent in 2008 to a disconcertingly high level of 64% in 2011, despite the fact that opportunities for employment were greater in 2011 (Valley & Wilkinson, 2008, Giao Duc Vietnam, 2012). Another adverse consequence is that 50% of employees had to be retrained at work, according to a survey of 234 recruiters and 3,364 graduates from 20 universities in Vietnam in 2010 (One Vietnam, 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. Although business schools in the western world have been addressing this issue since early 2000, it has only recently become palpably evident that Vietnam's business schools remain perilously behind the western world in recognizing the salient importance of soft skills in business. We submit that this lacuna represents a determinate impediment to the growth of the Vietnamese economy and reflects an imbalance which badly needs to be redressed.

Moreover, we shall argue that in Vietnam, it has only recently become evident that there exists a serious deficiency in the provision of soft skills to

students in tertiary business education institutions. Because the demand continues to increase on the part of Vietnamese employers who explicitly affirm that business graduates should possess a much higher level of competency in the essential soft skills than they currently have, the integral role which soft skills play in achieving business success is now at least being acknowledged, as is the fact that the impoverished state of soft skills tertiary training is posing a threat to the growth of Vietnam's national and global economy. Appreciation of the gravity 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 issue 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 well-informed, articulate and far more pertinent strategic approach to soft skills curriculum development than presently exists in Vietnam.

One facet of our proposed strategy involves elucidating a cadre of 'explicitly relevant' soft skills adequate to satisfy the demands presently being expressed by major Vietnamese stakeholder employers, some of which have been captured in our own survey. To achieve this goal, the burden of the present paper is first to reveal the results of our survey undertaken in Vietnam which make explicit the extent to which major Vietnamese industrial employers and business educators value the potential role which soft skill competencies can play in maximizing business success. Our second task will be to determine what soft skills employers and educators discern as best serving to maximize the economic interests of Vietnam within the global marketplace.



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 in order to cultivate feelings of trust and loyalty is a critical issue. Possession of these soft skills such as 'communicative leadership competency' which serves to encourage bonding and client confidence. sets him or her apart from other individuals who may have parallel technical or IT 'hard skills'. 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% (Hommerichhausen, 2002; Klaus, 2010; Watts & Watts, 2008). Other business recruiters consider soft skill capacities to be a factor of at least equal importance in career success to the possession of hard or technological competency skills. (Pittenger, Miller & Mott, 2004; 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 of individuals who effectively deploy a balance of soft skills combined with hard skills, will significantly improve the chance of success in trading competitiveness for virtually all business enterprises (Payne, 2000; Grugulis, 2003; Tamkin et al., 2007). Despite the varying degrees of differences on the perceived importance of soft skills for business success, it is agreed and thus incontestable that soft skills are now seen to play an integral role in business success.

Currently, in Vietnam, the educational system ironically bears the predominant burden of inculcating the technical skills business employers require (OECD, 2007), despite the fact that the academic orientation of soft skills development is still an obscure disciplinary area in most Vietnamese universities (Trung & Swierczek, 2009). As a consequence, , the soft skills capacities of university students are weak or in many cases completely absent (Huyen, 2008; Trung & Swierczek 2009). 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). As a result, there exists what we believe to be an acute "skills gap" that separates interactional dimensions of academic from social and behavioural skills;lamentably, this is a schism that often leads to poor job performance (Smith, 2002). This being so, it is evident that Vietnam also has a pedagogic responsibility to ensure that business schools develop 'cutting edge' soft skill training programs for students which foster them to gain that competitive edge with the aim of significantly augmenting their business



interactions and negotiation capacities (David, 2010).

This deficiency has in turn made because they are now becoming increasingly aware of the paramount importance of soft skill competencies for business success, Vietnamese employers are somewhat tentative about hiring 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 respond rapidly, though no doubt, informedly to develop soft skills training programs to ensure that graduates will become maximally competent. 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).

We have acknowledged that in the US and elsewhere the importance of soft skills in business success was recognized decades ago, but it has only been in recent years that western 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).

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). A slowly emerging trend for the development of appropriate educational programs in response to workplace

demands, according to Nha (2009) and Traut et al. (1993) is to organize collaborative partnerships between employers and educators. This potential partnership arrangement could function as an effective strategy to recognize and promote the workplace needs of employers within the higher education curriculum (Saunders&Machell, 2000). The forums that have recently 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 shortlist these skills and train students so that they are well prepared to work efficiently for their employers (Weligamage, 2009). *To our knowledge, the study we have conducted in Vietnam represents the first research study on two selected groups of business employers and business educators throughout the country who actually reveal unequivocally their perceptions on the importance of soft skills as a key factor for achieving business career success. Nor has there been any published study other than our own which specifically explores employers and educators' perceptions in regard to which particular soft skills they regard as essential.*

METHODOLOGY

Research design:

The research design of this study comprises two stages. In the first stage the methodology of Sequential Exploratory Mixed-methods was deployed. Consistent with our goals, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with representative business employers to explore the importance of soft skills and the particular essential soft skills for business success. The outcomes from the first stage were in turn used to develop the instrument into a questionnaire survey



on business educators as the second stage of the study.

Sampling:

Samples used in this study were drawn from two different groups: employers and educators:

[1] *As for employers:* 15 representative employers of Vietnam's reputedly largest business enterprises were target-selected by judging in their 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.

[2] *As for educators:* 577 educators, who currently teach one or more subjects for business students from main disciplines such as Banking, Finance and Related Fields, Economics, Accounting, Business and Management, Sales and Marketing, and International Business, were randomly selected. A combination of criteria were utilised including strategies such as stratified sampling, and cluster and multistage purposeful random sampling, as outlined by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007). The sample comprised the three largest universities of business and economics, randomly selected for the survey, and each of which is located in the main university regions throughout the country: Ha Noi Capital; Ho Chi Minh City; and Thai Nguyen City.

Instrument:

Corresponding to two different types of sample groups, the instrument deploy was divided into

two types: Semi-structure telephone Interview and Questionnaire:

[1] *Semi-structure telephone Interview:* It was employed because this instrument has the capacity to capture the depth and complexity of participants' experiences. It concludes/combines with open-ended questions which remain flexible enough that it can probe individual participants' stories in subtle detail (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The questions content was designed in accordance with the protocol of Matthew and Carole (2011), consisting of demographic questions, warming-up questions and core questions. The interviews were conducted by phone for pragmatic reasons, given the fact that the employers are busy executive managers in major industrial organizations located in different parts of the country.

[2] *Questionnaire:* It was developed based upon the results of the first stage. The dependent variables – the importance of soft skills and the importance of specific soft skills – are measured with a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1= strong disagree to 6=strong degree. Three issues have been highlighted as being important in designing the questionnaire: question wording, categorization and coding of the variables, and general appearance (Sekaran, 2003).

Data Analysis:

Qualitative and Quantitative analysis was conducted in separate phases:

[1] *Qualitative:* The manual method was applied due to the small number of participants. The 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). The results were presented in descriptive and narrative form.

[2] Quantitative: Prior to the analysis, the data was screened and cleaned to ensure accuracy and also to identify missing and incomplete data. The Likert-type scale items missing responses were random, and no more than 3% from any single questionnaire or any single item were detected. This small cluster of missing and incomplete data were treated by using a median option. The 'sanitised data' was then transferred and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The Data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive analysis involved frequencies, percentages and means whereas inferential analysis involved analysis of variance (Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2010).

RESULTS

Employers' Perception:

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 the endeavour to expand the Vietnamese economy into the

global context. Regarding the measurement of soft and hard skills contribution for business success, the respondents presented a few 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. In short, the majority of respondents explicitly confirmed their belief that soft skills function as an imperative component in achieving success in business, a view which is reinforced and supported by several studies: Hommerichhausen (2002), Klaus (2010), and Watts & Watts (2008). Most of the employers (93%) were of the opinion that the professional quality/competence of recent graduates is very low and does not meet the needs dictated by business and industry. A majority of them (87%) complained also about the decidedly inefficient quality of the actual working soft skills of recent graduates.

Given the integral roles played by soft skills in the current business workplace and the serious deficiency of required working skills among Vietnamese business graduates, the respondents identified 19 soft skills which were regarded as essential in the business workplace, and accordingly should consequently play a larger part in the curriculum of business schools than they currently do. These soft skills were ranked in a descending order of their importance based on the frequency of respondents agreeing on their



relevance. The soft skills rated as making a similarly important contribution were clustered together, and explicated in the same categories. 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	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 almost invariably 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 possessed with outstanding competence in hard skills were in fact not able to 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 product outcomes, 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 was identified as also leading to increased creativity, not only at the individual level, but in the context of ensuring that the team bonded 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, according to one respondent, 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, supportive, empathetic, patient, warm and sociable were ranked in the 4th position on the overall importance table. The acquisition of such skills was recognized by one respondent as being a pre-requisite for virtually any position in a business organization.

[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 one respondent, '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 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 the business arena, particularly, one respondent emphasized that Business Ethics skills are very necessary to build trust and attract loyalty, thus retaining customers for longer periods. From another perspective, 'Negotiation' is was identified as a key to gaining contracts for enterprises and is an offshoot of communication skills. Interestingly, another respondent ranked Critical Thinking in the highest position of importance, and he explained that with the advent of globalization, and the increased speed of business transactions and rapidly changing work settings, employees at every level are facing an increasingly complex flow of information, requiring a significant capacity for adaptation. This being so, it is imperative that employees also 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 hastily 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 one respondent 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 to be essential, 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 was presumed to be important in business transactions and especially in the IT and manufacturing industry. This respondent predicted that technological competence would be more important in the future.

Educators' Perception:

Although the business educators are from different parts of Vietnam, all of them concurred that soft skills pedagogy in business tertiary education should be regarded as an essential component of the syllabus. Most educators (72%) rated soft skills at a very important level, and 27% of them regarded soft skills as being important. However, a majority of them indicated that soft skills are not generally taught in their programs (between 20% and 40%). Up to 21% of lecturers did not even know, or were unsure, whether soft skills are currently being taught in their universities. We believe that this lack of awareness reflects that there is still considerable

ignorance about what soft skills are, and about their vital importance in soft skills education in Vietnamese Business schools. There were 26 soft skills which were found to be currently taught in different universities, suggesting that there is a difference in the working environments in the three different regions in Vietnam, each of which required different soft skills to address the relevant conditions of the nature of the specific business enterprise.

To determine the cadre of important soft skills which will be used in all schools of business in the country, business educators from three different sites were asked to rate on a Six-point Likert scale the importance of 19 specific soft skills which were identified by employers. Table 2 shows mean scores of the soft skills ranking in a descending order of importance

Table 2: The Essential Soft Skills (n=577)

No.	Essential Soft Skills	Mean	SD
1.	Communication	5.55	.64
2.	Responsibility	5.44	.65
3.	Team-work	5.32	.60
4.	Time-management	5.31	.69
5.	Self-management	5.28	.66
6.	Business Ethics	5.27	.63
7.	Critical Thinking	5.27	.62
8.	Positive Attitudes	5.27	.71
9.	Negotiation	5.24	.66
10.	Networking	5.23	.73
11.	Interpersonal Skills	5.21	.65



12.	Problem-solving	5.20	.64
13.	Professionalism	5.15	.81
14.	Flexibility	5.09	.72
15.	Technological Competence	5.05	.77
16.	Market Research and Analysis	5.01	.80
17.	Marketing	4.96	.79
18.	Leadership	4.91	.76
19.	Customer Service	4.90	.86

Likert-type scale for each category under degree of agreement: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 6 = Strongly Agree. Mean score of soft skills importance is put in in a descending order.

The results were significantly positive overall, with all means falling between ‘Somewhat Agree’ and ‘Strongly’ (>3.5). The agreement was significantly stronger for Communication (mean=5.55) and Responsibility (mean=5.44), and followed by Team-work, Time-management, Self-discipline, Presentation, Critical Thinking, and Positive Attitudes in slight difference with the means falling between 5.32 and 5.27. Marketing, Leadership and Customer Service were less agreed with the means being between 4.96 and 4.90. The positive results imply that all of these skills should be integrated into the formal business curriculum. However, it may be more practical to focus on the top skills.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Soft skills are perceived as important even by employers coming from diverse industries,

thereby reinforcing the point that soft skills function as a vital component in the pecuniary success of virtually all business and industries. Employers also rated soft skills as more important in most business careers than hard skills. Simultaneously, business educators coming from the different parts of the country strongly acknowledged the vital importance of soft skills in business education. They considered that soft skills should be regarded as an essential component of the syllabus. However, the responses from educators indicate that soft skills education have only figured as a peripheral subject area in business educational institutions. Indeed, it was pointed out that a number of business educators do not even know whether soft skills are currently taught in their own institutions, and if they know this, a majority of them have no idea of the extent to which soft skills are taught in their universities. This level of ignorance within business schools explains in part why employers are so dissatisfied with the quality of business graduates, as their lack of competency in skill deployment makes them unable to meet the current demands within the Vietnamese workplace.

All respondents agreed that 19 soft skills are essential in the current business workplace. There was not uniformity in the order of importance in specific soft skills between employers and educators. Employers regarded Communication, Flexibility, Customer Service, and Interpersonal Skills to be more necessary than the others, while educators considered Communication, Responsibility, Time-management and Self-discipline to be more important. Noticeably, Communication and Team-work were perceived as the most important soft skills in current Vietnamese business workplace by both employers and educators. Given that our study



has established that the level of soft skills development provided by universities has clearly not matched employers' needs, we submit that much more attention should be paid to the development of soft skills programs within the business school sectors. It is our view that the information we have provided about which soft skills are regarded as most important by employers represents a significant advance in facilitating the curriculum development of such programs.

Given the recognition now given by employers and educators to the paramount importance of soft skills, particularly in terms of these soft skills, 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 on a partial basis for the reform and development of a more pertinent tertiary business education curriculum in Vietnam which attributes an epistemological status to soft skills which has to date been neglected in the literature. We believe it is possible to adumbrate the foundations of an epistemology for the 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 claim 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. This facilitates the development of curriculum units and programs which specifically address the needs of employers and perspectives of educators.

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 and educators' 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 demands of business workplaces. Without this information and the praxis pedagogy to sustain it, the gap to which we have referred cannot be closed. Given that our study is the first interview on soft skills undertaken with the heads of 15 of the most successful businesses in Vietnam and the second survey taken on business employers, it represents a significant first step forward in encouraging a collaborative alliance between industry and university, aimed at developing business education that improves economic growth in Vietnam.

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