

Soft employability skills obtained from a nongovernmental organisation's labour market intervention



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Orientation: Employability development is needed to alleviate poverty in South Africa. This study sought to examine employability development, with specific reference to soft employability skills within a low-income community in Gauteng province of South Africa.

Research purpose: The purpose of this study was to determine whether the labour market intervention offered by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Gauteng added value to learners with specific reference to soft skills (behavioural and psychosocial) needed to become employable.

Motivation for the study: Soft employability skills are essential because they are highly demanded by employers today. It is not clear whether the learners from an NGO have obtained soft employability skills (behavioural and psychosocial) during the skills training intervention.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative constructivist approach was utilised. Using purposive sampling, 33 learners from an NGO participated in email interviews. The email interviews were analysed by using four steps prescribed by grounded theory researchers.

Main findings: The study results highlight two themes that represent soft employability skills, namely, soft employability behavioural skills and soft employability psychosocial skills.

Practical/managerial implications: The study provides government and NGOs with an understanding of soft employability skills valued by unemployed low-income workers.

Contribution/value-add: This research contributes to literature by expanding the knowledge of soft employability behavioural skills and soft employability psychosocial skills. Forgiveness seems to be a new soft employability psychosocial skill, as it was not found in the theories and frameworks used in this article.

Keywords: soft employability behavioural skills; soft employability psychosocial skills; labour market intervention; constructivist grounded theory; qualitative research; non-governmental organisation; Gauteng; South Africa.

Introduction

The effect of unemployment is distressing to the well-being of communities and the economy of countries. Unemployment can be alleviated by enhancing the employability of people especially from socio-economically challenged backgrounds (Gerryts & Maree, 2019). Labour market interventions such as skills development programmes can be used to alleviate unemployment and improve employability (Paver et al., 2019). Employability means enabling those people who are capable of working by developing their skills so that they can enter and remain in employment during their work lives (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Employability is a set of skills, understandings and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy (Yorke, 2004). Employability is not just about getting a job; it is about a broader set of skills and attributes that will enable an individual to be successful throughout his or her working life. Robinson (2000) refers to the fact that employability skills are those basic skills that are necessary for getting and keeping a job, and doing well in such a job. Employability is seen as a psychosocial construct that relates to the capacity to adjust thought processes, emotions and behaviours, which are relevant in the workplace (Coetzee, 2012).

Employability skills are also known as job readiness skills (Azmi, Hashim and Yusoff 2018). Soft employability skills are essential because these are highly demanded by employers today (Kluve

et al., 2017). According to Doyle (2020), soft employability skills are non-technical skills that relate to how work is done, and include interaction with colleagues and management of the work itself. Soft skills are defined as 'skills, abilities and traits that pertain to personality, attitude and behaviour rather than to formal or technical knowledge' (Moss & Tilly, 1996, p. 253). As mentioned by Paver et al. (2019), soft skills consist of behavioural skills and psychosocial skills. Behavioural skills are occasionally identified as interpersonal or people skills, which allow an individual to relate to others successfully (Magogwe et al., 2014). Psychological and social skills together form psychosocial skills that imply that the effect of social processes is mediated through psychological understanding (Stansfeld & Rasul, 2007).

A labour market intervention is an employment or vocational intervention such as a training programme to improve the employability of the unemployed (Paver et al., 2019). According to Chitiga-Mabugu et al. (2013), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) contribute to employability by offering job training programmes that include soft employability skills development. The NGO used in this study was established at the end of 1999 and has a holistic approach to the upliftment of underprivileged and low-income communities by offering, for example, soft employability skills development. Since 2005, this NGO has operated a full-fledged skills training and development centre to ensure independence, restoration and true upliftment of individuals through market-related and cost-effective training. Attention is given to the learners at the NGO by conducting training in hard skills and soft skills in order to enhance the employability of the learners as well as training in employment services. It is however not clear whether the learners obtained soft employability skills, specifically behavioural and psychosocial skills, during the labour market intervention at this NGO. This research gap leads to the problem statement and purpose of the study.

Problem statement and purpose

In general, research regarding programmes aimed at alleviating unemployment within low-income communities is limited (Paver et al., 2019). Van der Vaart et al. (2018) found that interventions to enhance the psychological functioning of unemployed persons in South Africa seem to be limited. In their study, Paver et al. (2019) noted a lack of programmes that focused on the psychosocial aspects of being unemployed. More research is needed on soft skills proficiency (Tsirkas, Chytiri, & Bouranta, 2020) as well as how to equip individuals with soft skills (Mutalemwa et al., 2020). As mentioned in the previous section, it is not clear whether the learners from the NGO under study have obtained soft employability skills (behavioural and psychosocial skills) during the skills training intervention. The current study sought to address these gaps in literature and in practice.

The current study is regarded as timely as it sought to answer whether soft employability skills, such as behavioural and psychosocial skills, were obtained during a labour market

intervention at an NGO. The purpose of this study was to determine whether the labour market intervention offered by a community centre in Gauteng province of South Africa added value to the learners with specific reference to soft skills (behavioural and psychosocial) needed to become employable. The present study contributes to the discipline of industrial psychology by exploring whether soft employability skills (behavioural and psychosocial employability skills) were gained through the intervention that was facilitated by the NGO.

Literature review

Labour market interventions

Labour market interventions are offered by NGOs that are geared towards improving the quality of life for disadvantaged people (Vakil, 1997). As mentioned before, labour market interventions or employment interventions such as skills development programmes can be used to alleviate unemployment and improve employability (Kluve et al., 2017; Paver et al., 2019). Labour market interventions or employment interventions increase the employment of the unemployed. A labour market intervention is a social expenditure that is aimed at assisting the unemployed with finding gainful employment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013). Paver et al. (2019) categorise labour market interventions as follows:

- education and expertise development: to develop cognitive or technical skills
- entrepreneurship and enterprise development: empowering the unemployed to start their own business
- employment services: services rendered to make the labour market more accessible to the unemployed, while providing them with opportunities to become more employable.

According to Kluve et al. (2017), such interventions can be clustered into four groups, namely, training and skills development, entrepreneurship promotion, employment services and subsidised employment. Paver et al. (2019) mentioned that training and skills development can consist of soft skills development such as behavioural skills (interpersonal, communication, stress management and time management) and psychosocial skills (coping, motivation, resilience and self-efficacy).

Soft employability skills

Employability skills models

Fugate et al. (2004) proposed an employability model that includes the interrelationships between career identity, personal adaptability and social and human capital. Fugate et al. (2004) also alluded to the fact that employability includes an important cognitive-affective element. The employability framework of Rothwell and Arnold (2007) includes internal labour markets, external labour markets, personal attributes and occupational attributes. Personal attributes or competencies of this framework link with the holistic

framework of employability of McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) that includes soft behaviour employability skills such as communication skills, time management, team working, business thinking, commercial awareness and enterprise skills, as well as psychosocial employability skills such as confidence, honesty, integrity, diligence and emotional skills. Yorke and Knight's (2006) USEM model of employability focuses on understanding (U), skilled practice (S), personal qualities and efficacy beliefs (E) and metacognition (M). It is clear from these models that there is a strong sense of soft employability skills.

Soft employability behavioural skills

Interpersonal skills relate to soft behavioural skills. Behavioural skills have been classified into listening skills, interpersonal skills, ethics, interviewing time management, communication, handling pressure and tension, respect, empathy and problem solving (Wilhelm et al., 2002).

Soft skills are linked to employees' behaviours and influence their ability to work effectively in the workplace, both individually and in collaboration with others (Tsirkas et al., 2020). Alvarez Sainz et al. (2019), Paver et al. (2019) and Azmi, Hashim and Yusoff (2018) found that time management is an essential skill that needs to be developed for work readiness. Tyler (2016) found that time management and punctuality are much needed employability soft skills. The management of events within a given period was emphasised by most of the participants.

Osmani et al. (2015), Azmi et al. (2018), Kenayathulla et al. (2019) and Akolgo-Azupogo et al. (2021) mention that communication skills are crucial soft employability skills. Communication is also part of Goldsmiths' soft skills inventory (Goldsmiths Research Online, 2009). Khasanzyanova (2017) stated that communication skills such as knowing how to explain, communication with members and beneficiaries of the associations should be obtained as part of job readiness. Taylor (2016) mentioned that verbal and written communication are essential soft skills. Bezuidenhout (2011) and Botha (2014) concurred that communication as a soft skill is the ability to be open to, to establish and to maintain social contacts, including using formal and informal networks for the benefit of one's career. As reflected in the findings of this study, Paver et al. (2019) also found communication skills as part of behavioural soft skills. According to Teng et al. (2019), Matli and Ngoepe (2021) and Dawson (2021), entrepreneurial skills must be developed among South African unemployed people. Akolgo-Azupogo et al. (2021) mentioned an entrepreneurial mindset to be an essential soft skill among African unemployed persons. Bezuidenhout (2011) stated that entrepreneurial orientation is to be open for innovation and creativity, taking risks, a need for achievement, and a tolerance for uncertainty and autonomy in the exploitation of opportunities within the career environment. Kenayathulla et al. (2019) also stated that entrepreneurship is an important employability skill.

Soft employability psychosocial skills

Social skills refer to general factors at the level of human society concerned with social structure and social processes that affect the individual (Rosengren et al., 1993). Psychological factors refer to individual-level processes and meanings that influence mental states (Cacioppo et al., 2002). Sometimes, these terms are combined as 'psychosocial', combining 'psychological' and 'social.' The new term "psychosocial" therefore implies that the effect of social processes is mediated through psychological understanding (Stansfeld & Rasul, 2007). Bean et al. (2016) found that social skills are part of interpersonal skills.

Bezuidenhout (2011), Botha (2014) and Taylor (2016) found that unemployed people need self-confidence in order to prepare for the workplace. Several participants in the current study reflected upon being professional and having an understanding of the value of professionalism in the workplace.

Akolgo-Azupogo et al. (2021), Wesley et al. (2017) and Taylor (2016) mentioned that professionalism is an essential soft skill. Professionalism is also part of Goldsmiths' soft skills inventory (Goldsmiths Research Online, 2009). Kenayathulla et al. (2019) argued that professional skills such as developing a professional image, maintaining effective work habits and providing excellence are crucial soft skills.

Bezuidenhout (2011) proposed self-efficacy – the estimate an individual makes about his or her ability to cope, perform and thrive – as core employability attribute that is crucial for being employable. Botha (2014) found self-efficacy as a core employability attribute that is crucial for being employable.

Taylor (2016) and Peláez-Fernández et al. (2019) found emotional intelligence to be an important soft skill that needs to be obtained by unemployed people. Emotional intelligence is also part of Goldsmiths' soft skills inventory (Goldsmiths Research Online, 2009). Bean et al. (2016) discovered that emotional regulation is part of intrapersonal skills. Bezuidenhout (2011) stated that emotional literacy is the ability to use emotions adaptively, and to read, understand and control one's own emotions and those of others. According to Teng et al. (2019), in Goldsmith's (2009) soft skills inventory, emotional intelligence is indicated as very important. The ability to use emotions adaptively and to read, understand and control one's own emotions and those of others is of the essence according to Botha (2014). The participants in the current study also mentioned that they needed to understand and control their own emotions. They were challenged on an emotional level, and they now realised that to bottle up their emotions was not effective.

Akolgo-Azupogo et al. (2021) and Singh and Jaykumar (2019) mentioned that work ethics is an essential soft skill. Taylor (2016) found that work ethic and integrity are much needed soft employability skills. Kenayathulla et al. (2019) and Majid

et al. (2019) stated that good ethics is a critical soft skill. Bean et al. (2016) found respect as a valuable interpersonal soft skill.

Research design

Research approach and strategy

A qualitative, constructivist approach was used in this study, as recommended by Bryant and Charmaz (2007). Grounded theory methodology comprises orderly, inductive, consistent and fair approaches to undertake investigations with the primary objective of contributing to theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). From an epistemological perspective, constructivists emphasise 'the subjective interrelationship between the researcher and participant, and the construction of meaning' (Mills et al., 2006, p. 2). The constructivist approach to grounded theory recognises that the study data and analyses are shaped from the collective experiences of participants and researchers (Charmaz, 2006). Soft employability skills among low-income unemployed members of the community comprise an under-researched area that needs further investigation (Paver et al., 2019). The use of the constructivist grounded theory approach to investigate employability soft skills perfectly suited the aim of this study, which was to determine whether the labour market intervention offered by an NGO in Gauteng added value to learners with specific reference to soft skills (behavioural and psychosocial) needed to become employable. Neither the researchers nor the learners at the NGO were untouched by the world in which they live.

Research method

Research setting

This research was undertaken with unemployed members from a community in Gauteng province. These members underwent a labour market intervention at an NGO in Gauteng. This labour market intervention consisted of life skills and employment readiness training. Prior to entering a skills programme, learners attended a 20-day life skills programme which consists of 'Foundation for Life' programme (15 days) and the 'Crafting My Future' programme (5 days). The purpose of the two programmes was to equip learners with various skills and to let them know that their lives have a purpose. The aim of this NGO's training intervention was to train the learners to enter society as changed people who can make a difference in their communities, among family and friends and a future working environment.

Establishing the researcher's role

Several roles were fulfilled by the researcher, including the planner of the research study, the data collector, transcriber and analyser of data and the writer of the report. Once permission was granted, the research participants were contacted. Participants were reassured of confidentiality and were issued a consent form and it was made clear that being part of the study was voluntary and participants could withdraw from the study at any given time. The researcher analysed the data that were collected. The analysed data were checked by the co-coder to ensure that the findings are a true reflection of the

data collected. All interviews were handled by the researcher of the study. In this manner, consistency and trust building were enhanced. The researcher had the responsibility of dealing with all communications with the participants.

Research participants and sampling methods

The functional literacy and numeracy levels of the learners at the NGO are assessed by the NGO in order for them to be admitted into the different courses. For this study, only participants who were unemployed and had already undergone life skills and employability training course at the NGO for 6 months were asked to participate in the study. There were 90 such learners at the time of the study, and only 33 learners volunteered to partake in the study. The inclusion criteria to select the participants in this study were as follows: the learners needed to be unemployed, must have completed the life skills and employability training course at the NGO and voluntary participation. Purposive sampling was therefore used. The age range of the participants varied between 18 and 42 years. Both men and women participated in this study, with 5 men and 28 women. Their educational levels were not known but overall they were on a grade 10–12 level. Data saturation was taken into consideration. It is important to note that some of the learners had previous experience of employment but not all of them, and these experiences or non-experiences may have influenced their views.

Data collection method

Ratislavova and Ratislav (2014, p. 453) argued that the email interview, as a form of computer-mediated communication in today's digital environment, is gaining prominence as a data collection method in qualitative research. The participants are at liberty to write as often as they like, when they like and where they like, for example, from the comfort of their own homes (Ison, 2009, p. 168). A pilot study, consisting of email interviews with three learners from the NGO, was conducted, and the changes were incorporated to develop the final email interview guide.

Two open-ended questions were posed as part of the email interview to ensure that the learners at the NGO were not guided in any way:

- Write about your overall experiences at this community development centre (NGO).
- In your view, how did the services at this centre (NGO) assist with your employability?

The participants had access to computers and Internet at the NGO's laboratories where they completed the interview on their own time.

Data recording

All interviews were sent via email in a Word document to the researcher, and transcribing the data as a Word document was therefore not necessary.

Establishing trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided several criteria for establishing trustworthiness in a qualitative study, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The current researchers were cognisant of this, and throughout the research process, due consideration was given to addressing these criteria. For example, a detailed record of the entire research process was kept in the form of an audit trail in addition to the independent corroboration of the interview transcripts as well as the data coding and derivation of themes or subthemes.

Reflexivity

At the outset, the researcher acknowledged the fact that her previous experiences and knowledge of employability soft skills might influence her approach to the coding of the interview data. To mitigate potential bias, the researcher kept copious notes in a journal, which clearly identified instances where there might have been researcher interference, and the steps taken to avoid it. Introspection by the researcher was necessary to identify and deal with any subjective views during the email interview process as well as data analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used in this study. The email interview data were coded by using the following steps as used by Williamson and Perumal (2020).

Step 1: Initial open coding

The email interviews were scrutinised a few times to ensure a clear understanding of the participants' views. Pertinent views from the participants were highlighted and open-coded. A number of open codes were identified.

Step 2: Refining the open coding

To identify themes and subthemes, a detailed inspection of the above-mentioned open codes was done to pinpoint theoretically related views of the participants. The number of codes was therefore reduced.

Step 3: Axial coding

Themes and subthemes were examined to confirm the accuracy of the interpreted data. Axial coding was performed to ensure that the outcomes of the coding were a true reflection of the raw data.

Step 4: Theoretical coding

The last step consisted of the consolidation of the literature review, the email interview data as well as all the coding steps to portray the employability soft skills as experienced by the learners of the NGO truthfully.

Reporting style

The email interview data were hand-coded on Microsoft Word documents. Each subtheme was substantiated by various quotations from the relevant participants. The description of the findings was organised into two major themes and essential subthemes that emerged (see the 'Results' section). Only the selected extracts attributable to specific participants were used to support the subthemes because not every remark made by all the participants could be mentioned because of the high volume of data that were gathered. To ensure the identity and anonymity of all participants, numbers were utilised (e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.). The email interviews were conducted in English, and translation was therefore not needed.

Ethical considerations

The Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) gave ethical permission for this study (reference number: FCRE2019/FR/07/006-MS). Participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage should they wish so. All participants signed informed consent forms before they engaged in the email interview. An overview of the study was provided to all the potential participants so that they could decide about their voluntary participation. Throughout the research process, high ethical standards were followed. Participants were provided with a copy of their interview transcripts on request.

The *Protection of Personal Information Act, Act No. 4 of 2013* or POPI Act, was adhered to in the sense that all the participants were de-identified by masking their identity by allocating a number for each participant. As little as possible personal information was collected by only asking for their gender and age. The researcher was transparent by informing the participants about the purpose of the research and how their personal information would be used. The interview transcripts were safely stored with restricted access.

Results and discussion

Themes and subthemes

The two themes that emerged from the data were grouped under 'soft employability behavioural skills' and 'soft employability psychosocial skills.' Several subthemes fell under the heading of each theme. Table 1 provides a summary of the various themes and subthemes that emerged from the email interview data.

Theme 1: Soft employability behavioural skills

A general impression reflected by the participants was that they wanted to show a good character through their behaviour in their future workplace. Their ability to maintain positive work relationships, management time, having good communication skills and an entrepreneurial orientation were subthemes under soft employability skills. All participants' responses are reproduced verbatim and unedited.

TABLE 1: Themes and subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
Soft employability behavioural skills	Work relationships
	Time management
	Communication skills
	Entrepreneurial orientation
Soft psychosocial skills	Self-confidence
	Professionalism
	Self-efficacy
	Emotional intelligence
	Ethics
	Respect
	Forgiveness

Subtheme 1.1: Work relationships: It was important for most of the participants to possess interpersonal skills in order to deal successfully with different people at work. This was accurately portrayed by Participant 9:

‘It helped me to work with different races, culture, gender which are skills that I didn’t have.’ (Participant 9, male, 42 years)

For some of the participants, to work well with people involved the ability to be humble and helping others:

‘I now know the importance of working well with other people, always being humble and the importance of helping others where I am capable.’ (Participant 14, female, 24 years)

Tsirkas et al. (2020) also found that the ability to work effectively in the workplace is an essential soft skill. In order for unemployed participants at the NGO to be ready for work, they need to be exposed to dealing with people from different backgrounds. This will assist them to improve their ability to appreciate others, and understand others a bit better in order to have positive work relationships in the future. The researcher is therefore of the opinion that labour market interventions such as the one offered by the NGO under study must therefore ensure that the training sessions allow the participants as far as possible to deal with people who are different than they are. Good work relationships are essential for teams, organisations and individuals to succeed. An individual can form connections with co-workers, colleagues and managers in the organisation. It is therefore important to note that an organisation will benefit from an individual who already has the ability to effectively deal with work relationships. These professional work relationships will assist the individual to get the work done.

Subtheme 1.2: Time management: Most of the participants mentioned time management as managing their tasks duties within 24 h and not really managing time per se:

‘I am able to manage my time and I am able to execute my plans within 24 hours.’ (Participant 4, female, 19 years)

The ability to manage all one’s activities within a given time was a well-considered skill that many participants mentioned:

‘To manage my time and activities given.’ (Participant 2, female, 23 years)

This finding of time management as an essential soft skill is confirmed by Alvarez Sainz et al. (2019), Azmi et al. (2018) and Tyler (2016). It is important that such a soft skills intervention should allow participants to prioritise their tasks, schedule assignments with deadlines and use technology to help them with accountability so that their time management skills can be improved. Without such proper preparation and exercises, the participants may not realise the importance of time management and also then not obtain this skill. Employees who manage their time well are more productive, more efficient and more likely to meet deadlines. They focus on the most important and time-sensitive tasks and limit the amount of time wasted on non-essential duties. To maximise productivity, individuals need to efficiently use and deliberately control the time they spend. They, therefore, need to get more work done in less time. To ensure productivity in an organisation, effective time management will require that employees to analyse their workload, assign priorities and maintain focus on productive endeavours. If employees do not properly manage their time, it may affect their performance and productivity in the workplace negatively.

Subtheme 1.3: Communication skills: Communication, verbal and non-verbal, at work was mentioned by all the participants as an essential skill that they had obtained:

‘It has taught me how to communicate at work.’ (Participant 15, male, 18 years)

‘My communication skills are much better than before.’ (Participant 30, female, 19 years)

Bezuidenhout (2011), Botha (2014), Osmani et al. (2015), Taylor (2016), Khasanzyanova (2017), Azmi et al. (2018), Paver et al. (2019), Teng et al. (2019) and Kenayathulla et al. (2019) also found that communication skills as a critical soft skill that should be obtained as part of job readiness. This skill represents the ability to express one’s goals, plans and needs in verbal and written forms, which is much needed for job readiness. Well-developed communication skills allow the development of efficient schedules and plans. Verbal and non-verbal communications are essential dimensions to be taught. It is important to note that workplace communication is much more than conversations. It is about the exchange of information through multiple different mediums such as verbal communication, written communication and electronic communication. An employee must therefore be able to use such mediums to ensure optimal performance in an organisation. Thus, communicating effectively is a critical aspect of getting any job done, whether it occurs in-person or virtually and is part of the internal communications efforts within an organisation.

Subtheme 1.4: Entrepreneurial orientation: For some of the participants, an entrepreneurial orientation was evident. They made reference to the fact that, before attending the training at the NGO, they did not really pay much attention to becoming an entrepreneur. A readiness to become an entrepreneur was however evident among some of the participants:

'I am now ready to be employed or rather to employ other people by starting my own business.' (Participant 16, female, 24 years)

Participant 21 also referred to opportunities made available at the NGO that enabled her to start her own business:

'It gave me opportunities so that I can be able to have my own business.' (Participant 21, female, 27 years)

Matli and Ngoepe (2021), Dawson (2021), Akolgo-Azupogo et al. (2021) and Bezuidenhout (2011) found that entrepreneurial skills must be developed among South African unemployed people. Kenayathulla et al. (2019) also found that entrepreneurship is an important employability skill. The ability to develop a solid business plan and to obtain a good business sense as well as manage cash properly is all or part of the preparation of managing one's own business. Being open to innovation and creativity, taking risks, having a need for achievement and having a tolerance for uncertainty and autonomy are also part of possessing a healthy entrepreneurial orientation. Entrepreneurial orientation is a key concept when management is crafting strategies in the hopes of doing something new and exploiting opportunities that other organisations cannot exploit. These strategies may refer to the processes, practices and decision-making styles of organisations that act entrepreneurially. When an employee with an entrepreneurial orientation is appointed, it will immediately assist management to successfully execute their strategies.

Theme 2: Soft psychosocial skills

Many of the study participants indicated that they were underdeveloped on a psychological level as well as on an emotional level before they attended the employability intervention. The psychological wholeness of unemployed low-income workers is essential. Soft skills are therefore essential to address this process of becoming whole in order to be ready for work.

Subtheme 2.1: Self-confidence: Having self-confidence as a soft skill was crucial for almost all of the participants. Low self-esteem was evident in many of the transcripts, and it was clear that the interventions at the NGO assisted the participants to consider themselves to feel more worthy:

'It changed me in a good way. I even get compliments from my family and people in my community even my boyfriend is impressed with the new me.' (Participant 24, female, 24 years)

Many of the participants were fearful of speaking up but have now gained the ability to express their views and opinions openly:

'It taught me how to react to problems and to have confidence. I won't even be afraid to express my views or opinions if something doesn't suit me well but in a nice good manner. So, I think this community centre gave me the missing key of my future. Now I'm complete.' (Participant 27, female, 33 years)

It used to be difficult for some of the participants to speak in front of others but they reported that they had gained the ability to present themselves confidently in public:

'Before I came here I was messed up. I was not close with my family. Most of the time I was spending time on my own, I wasn't sharing my problems and I had many of them. But now I know to speak up if I have a problem with something. I used to have low self-confidence but now I have full confidence.' (Participant 22, female, 28 years)

Bezuidenhout (2011), Botha (2014) and Taylor (2016) also found that unemployed people need self-confidence in order to prepare for the workplace. Many participants mentioned that they had low self-esteem before they attended this labour market intervention at the NGO. Fear of public speaking and expressing their views was also dealt with as part of this intervention. The participants now had the ability and confidence to speak in front of others and to express themselves in a proper manner. Exposing participants to public speaking during a labour market intervention to develop soft skills is of utmost importance. Individual self-confidence is defined as always doing the right thing, despite what others might think of you, as well as having the confidence to leave behind what makes you comfortable to try new challenges. It is, therefore, important that an individual needs to identify his or her weaknesses and implement ways to overcome them.

Subtheme 2.2: Professionalism: Several participants mentioned that they had been taught the value of professionalism in the workplace, something they did not know before attending the employability training at the NGO:

'It has taught me so much about professionalism when it comes to the workplace.' (Participant 19, female, 19 years)

Being professional and acting professional were important to the participants:

'This centre taught me about professionalism and to always do things in a professional manner.' (Participant 21, female, 21 years)

Akolgo-Azupogo et al. (2021), Kenayathulla et al. (2019) and Wesley et al. (2017) also found professional skills to be a crucial soft employability skill. In order to be professional, it is essential for one to develop a professional image, maintain effective work habits and provide excellence. As part of a job interview, professionalism will give an applicant a competitive advantage. Professionalism is an individual's conduct at work. In an organisation, professionalism encompasses the way employees carry themselves, their attitudes and the ways they communicate with each other. Being professional can ensure a positive first impression, successful interpersonal relationships and a lasting reputation within the organisation and industry. A professional work attitude and appearance will allow employees to take pride in their work and improve their performance.

Subtheme 2.3: Self-efficacy: To have self-efficacy, self-discovery and a better understanding of oneself seemed to be of utmost importance to the participants:

'This programme has helped me to discover myself (strengths, weaknesses) and it has also helped me to discover my talents and to set up my goals (long term and short term).' (Participant 14, female, 24 years)

Many participants used to believe that they had failed because of many challenges but after the intervention, they were able to be a success in life:

'Today I'm able to face the challenges. Before I came to the community centre I was afraid to come forward but now I'm not. I've found myself and I know what I want in my life.' (Participant 21, female, 27 years)

Purpose was also an essential part of being self-efficacious:

'I have been able to connect with myself on a deeper level in order to find my purpose in life so I am still working on that.' (Participant 3, female, 21 years)

'I know myself better and I believe I have a purpose in life.' (Participant 4, female, 19 years)

Bezuidenhout (2011) and Botha (2014) found that self-efficacy is a core employability attribute that is crucial for being employable. Many participants also mentioned the fact that they lacked self-efficacy before attending the intervention at the NGO but they now could face challenges because they believed in themselves and had a clear purpose. Moderately difficult tasks must therefore be part of a training intervention so that participants can learn how to start to believe in their abilities to execute these tasks. Frequent and focused feedback by facilitators may enhance the acquiring of self-efficacy. An individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainment is of utmost importance in an organisation. Self-efficacy reflects in an employee's belief to get things done, feel motivated and to make decisions that will positively impact performance.

Subtheme 2.4: Emotional intelligence: Emotional intelligence was a strong theme in this study. Participants came to see that it was not worthwhile to bottle up their emotions:

'I learned to open up even more and not to bottle my emotions, as it can/could affect me in the long run.' (Participant 24, female, 19 years)

It was clear that the participants were challenged on an emotional level:

'During the life skills programme, that's where the community centre really helped me because it challenges you about your feelings, it builds you spiritually and you realise that the things that bothered you really do not matter.' (Participant 25, female, 24 years)

The participants learned to take control of their thoughts and emotions, which is an essential part of becoming emotionally intelligent:

'I have learned about being in control over my thoughts and emotions and having a good relationship with others no matter what is going on.' (Participant 26, male, 20 years)

Understanding one's emotions was also an important part of becoming emotionally intelligent:

'Teaching me how to understand my emotions.' (Participant 29, female, 20 years)

Bezuidenhout (2011), Taylor (2016), Bean et al. (2016) and Peláez-Fernández et al. (2019) also found the importance of emotional intelligence as an employability skill. Emotional intelligence assists with having good relationships with other people, which is an essential part of being ready for work. The participants at this NGO had the opportunity to observe others' reactions during the training sessions, deal with it accordingly and do self-evaluation that assisted them with the improvement of their perceived emotional intelligence. Having a high level of emotional intelligence may benefit an individual in a workplace setting as well as in his or her personal aspects of life. Being able to understand and manage emotions can lead to an overall better outlook on life and leave a positive feeling about oneself and situations. Emotional intelligence is an important aspect of thriving in the workplace because it may open up new opportunities and let employees connect with others in a positive manner.

Subtheme 2.5: Ethics: Most of the participants mentioned that they now had the necessary knowledge about being ethical in the workplace:

'It has helped me to get ready for the workplace environment. It has also helped me to know some of the workplace ethics.' (Participant 6, female, 25 years)

It was important for many of the participants to acknowledge the importance of ethical behaviour so that they could survive and thrive in the workplace:

'I am now aware of the ethics I need to have in order to survive in a workplace.' (Participant 1, female, 19 years)

Akolgo-Azupogo et al. (2021), Singh and Jaykumar (2019), Taylor (2016), Kenayathulla et al. (2019) and Majid et al. (2019) concurred that good ethics is an essential soft skill. 'Ethics' refers to a morally good character, and this was an important skill to most of the participants. Most of the participants in this study emphasised that they now understood ethics better and that being ethical would allow them to survive and thrive within the workplace. Developing a code of conduct for ethical behaviour is a good practice as taught to the participants. A moral code in the workplace to guide the behaviour of employees with respect to what is right and wrong with regard to conduct and decision-making is essential. Ethical decision-making in the workplace takes into account the individual employee's best interest and also takes into account the best interest of those impacted. Ethical behaviour does not only apply to individual employees; the organisation itself should exemplify standards of ethical conduct. It is important to understand that ethical behaviour in the workplace can stimulate positive employee behaviours that lead to organisational growth, just as unethical behaviour in the workplace can inspire damaging headlines that lead to organisational demise.

Subtheme 2.6: Respect: Respect for all people was vital to most of the participants regardless of the individual differences:

'To respect everyone at work without looking at his/her colour or nationality.' (Participant 8, female, 36 years)

Adhering to being punctual was also a sign of respect for some of them:

'Never to be late is a sign of respect.' (Participant 27, female, 33 years)

Bean et al. (2016) found respect to be a valuable interpersonal soft skill. The participants in the current study also found respect to be important in the sense that all people should be respected and that being punctual is a sign of respect for others. Exposure to different ethnic cultures and dealing with one's own stereotypes assist with having respect for other people. Respect is one of the most important traits in the workplace because it creates a positive work culture to accomplish organisational goals. A respectful attitude should be standard in the workplace regardless of personal feelings. An employee should respect his or her co-workers and managers by giving them the attention they need, listening to their opinions and speaking with kindness.

Subtheme 2.7: Forgiveness: For many of the participants, forgiveness was an important part of their personal development, and it was seen as a skill that could be used in their future world of work:

'The life skills programme has assisted me with my personal development in a positive way. I am now able to do things I was not able to do. I am able to smile and be happy because they have helped me in the journey of forgiveness and personal discovery.' (Participant 13, female, 22 years)

Most of the participants alluded to the importance of forgiveness in order to move forward in their personal and work life:

'I couldn't forgive my father for not taking care of me. He has passed away in 2018. The community centre helped me to forgive and to heal during life skills. They were teaching us about forgiveness. I was able to forgive my father and remove this burden.' (Participant 20, female, 19 years)

Forgiveness involves a shift from negative thoughts, emotions and behaviours to positive ones after a misdemeanour, and it is a character strength that benefits both individuals and contexts following a misdemeanour (Tirrell, 2021). Forgiveness is an important skill in life (Dahiya, 2021; Dickson-Deane, 2020; Stuntzner et al., 2019). Previous studies about forgiveness as a soft skill could not be found. Forgiveness is therefore a contribution to the body of knowledge concerning soft employability psychosocial skills. It is important to note that an individual needs to deliberately and consciously decide to let go of or release, feelings of resentment towards a person, a group or a situation. It is a process of letting go of the hurt and anger, whether or not forgiveness is deserved. Forgiveness can improve workplace performance by freeing one's mind of emotional constraints

that allow for greater concentration and focus on the task at hand. Forgiveness can also increase the quality of work relationships and bind teams together in honest discourse which will ultimately benefit an organisation.

Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insights to trade unions, banks, economic development agencies, universities, research entities, government, civil society organisations (such as NGOs) and the private sector to focus on the development of soft employability skills with specific reference to behavioural and psychosocial skills. In order to prepare low-income workers appropriately for work readiness, it is of the utmost importance to pay attention to these two soft skills. The implication of not obtaining these skills may result in not being work-ready and ultimately not being employed or self-employed. As mentioned above, soft employability skills are essential because it is highly demanded by employers today (Kluve et al., 2017) and job seekers can therefore not afford to not obtain these skills. Another implication of the findings of this study is that NGOs and other relevant stakeholders should take note of the importance of behavioural and psychosocial skills. If not, their labour market interventions may lack the proper preparation of unemployed persons to become work ready.

Limitations and recommendations

The participants' abilities to express themselves elaborately via email interviews comprised a limitation. Where English as a first language is not evident, face-to-face interviews and/or focus groups might perhaps be more effective. The coding and development of themes and subthemes were conducted by the researchers in the way they comprehended it to be. A different group of coders might have coded this data in another manner, which might have led to different themes or subthemes. Future research should improve on the corroboration of the coding and resulting themes or subthemes by ensuring that more independent checking is performed by researchers experienced in qualitative data analysis.

It is recommended that the NGO under study should give attention to other behavioural skills, such as stress management, and psychosocial skills, such as coping, motivation and resilience, so that learners may also see these as being valuable. Furthermore, other NGOs should take cognisance of the importance of behavioural and psychosocial skills in order to prepare low-income workers properly for the workplace.

For future research, it is recommended that this study should be extended to other national and also international NGOs which offer labour market interventions. This will assist to obtain rich data about behavioural and psychosocial skills of low-income workers. A comparative study could then be conducted to determine whether soft skills are possible predictors of other workplace skills.

Conclusion

Employability development is needed to alleviate poverty in South Africa. Drawing on the views of learners who participated in a labour market intervention at an NGO, the current study facilitated a better understanding of which soft skills had been obtained and were valued. The soft employability behavioural skills obtained were skills in terms of work relationships and time management, communication skills and entrepreneurial orientation. The soft employability psychosocial skills found in this study are related to self-confidence, professionalism, self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, ethics and forgiveness. Forgiveness was a contribution to the body of knowledge concerning soft employability psychosocial skills. In conclusion, the participants in this study valued soft employability behavioural skills and soft employability psychosocial skills because it assisted them to become ready for work.

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Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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