

# WORKFORCE CONNECTIONS



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## Executive Summary

# KEY “SOFT SKILLS” THAT FOSTER YOUTH WORKFORCE SUCCESS:

## TOWARD A CONSENSUS ACROSS FIELDS

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“Soft skills” are centrally important for human capital development and workforce success. A growing evidence base shows that these qualities rival academic or technical skills in their ability to predict employment and earnings, among other outcomes (Kautz, Heckman, Diris, ter Weel, & Borghans, 2014). As the workplace has modernized around the world, the demand for such skills has increased over the past 20 years (Balcar, 2014; Carnevale, 2013; Eger & Grossmann, 2004; International Labour Organization, 2008). Nevertheless, a soft skills “gap” is noted by many employers around the world, who report that job candidates lack the soft skills needed to fill available positions (Manpower Group, 2013).

Unfortunately, there is not a clear consensus about which soft skills are most critical for workforce success. Developing a common understanding is hampered by a lack of comparability in the constructs, definitions, and measures used to assess youth and monitor progress. This confusion obstructs knowledge development and guidance for future investments in youth workforce development programs. This white paper helps bring clarity to the field by recommending a research-based set of key soft skills that increase the chance that youth ages 15–29 will be successful in the workforce.

These recommendations emerge from a multi-faceted study that includes an extensive review of research as well as broad stakeholder input. The authors of this report reviewed more than 380 resources from around the world, including rigorous empirical studies, employer studies, and findings of international consensus projects. These resources examined the relationship between soft skills and key workforce outcomes, including employment, performance on the job, wages, and entrepreneurial success. The relationship between the top 10 skills and each outcome for both the general adult populations and youth ages 15–29 is depicted in the table at the end of this brief. In addition to the literature review, stakeholders, including researchers, youth workforce program implementers, employers, and youth themselves provided input on the importance of these skills based on their unique experiences.

After all of the evidence was gathered, a set of criteria was used to arrive at the list of recommended skills. The criteria used include: the quantity, breadth and quality of research support, the contextual diversity of the skill (including formal and informal employment across sectors and regions), whether the skill is

Soft skills refer to a broad set of skills, competencies, behaviors, attitudes, and personal qualities that enable people to effectively navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals. These skills are broadly applicable and complement other skills such as technical, vocational, and academic skills.

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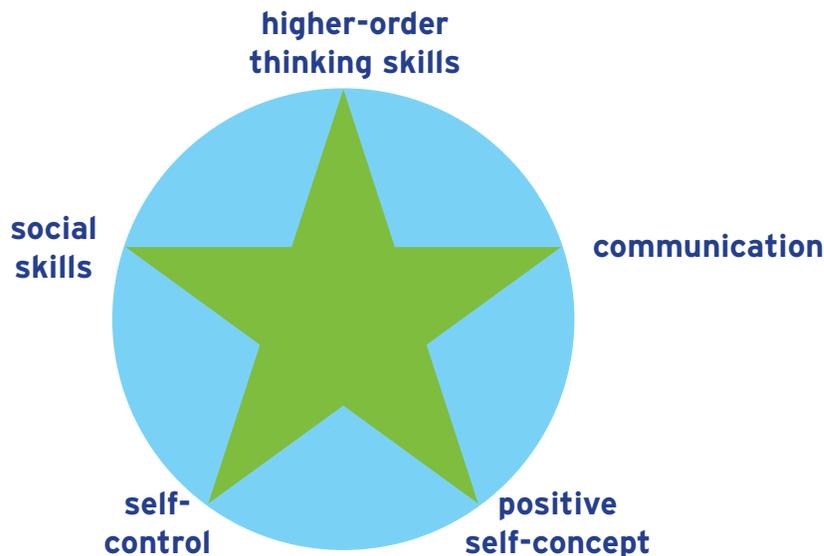


malleable (i.e., changeable or teachable among youth ages 15–29), and the developmental appropriateness of each skill.

Based on the evidence and these considerations, a set of key skills was identified that are supported by a strong research base as being important elements of all aspects of workforce success, are applicable across sectors and diverse world regions, are developmentally optimal, and are likely to be improved with youth workforce development programs.

## KEY SOFT SKILLS FOR YOUTH WORKFORCE SUCCESS

There are five critical skills most likely to increase odds of success across all outcomes and which employers expect employees to have: social skills; communication; and higher-order thinking skills (including problem solving, critical thinking, and decision-making); supported by the intrapersonal skills of self-control and positive self-concept.



**Social skills** help people get along well with others. This ability includes respecting others, using context-appropriate behavior, and resolving conflict. Social skills are universally important. They predict all four types of workforce outcomes (employment, performance, income/wages, and entrepreneurial success), are sought by employers, and are seen as critically important by experts in the field. Social skills were supported across types of evidence, in all regions of the world, and within both formal and informal employment. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a position in which social skills would not be an asset.

**Communication skills** refer to the specific types of communication used in the workplace, and include oral, written, non-verbal, and listening skills. Strong general communication skills contribute to the development of other soft skills, like social skills. However, the communication skills referred to in this paper are a distinct set, important for workplace success across sectors. There is evidence that communication skills are related to three of the workforce outcomes studied for youth, they are the most frequently sought skill among employers, and they were strongly endorsed by stakeholders in this project. The strong support for communication holds true across regions of the world, for both formal and informal positions, and for entry-level employees.



**Higher-order thinking** consists of problem solving, critical thinking, and decision-making. At a basic level, this includes an ability to identify an issue and take in information from multiple sources to evaluate options in order to reach a reasonable conclusion. Higher-order thinking is very much sought by employers and is critical for all four workforce outcomes in all regions of the world. Because these skills are complex to measure in a survey, less empirical research has been conducted on how these skills relate directly to successful employment.

**Self-control** refers to one's ability to delay gratification, control impulses, direct and focus attention, manage emotions, and regulate behaviors. Self-control is an intrapersonal skill, foundational to many others: it enables successful decision-making, resolution of conflict, and coherent communication. Self-control is highly supported by rigorous literature as related to all four workforce outcomes, especially in literature specific to youth ages 15–29.



A **positive self-concept** includes self-confidence, self-efficacy, self-awareness and beliefs, as well as self-esteem and a sense of well-being and pride. Positive self-concept is another intrapersonal skill that is important for workforce success. It is related to success across all four workforce outcomes and is especially supported in youth-specific literature.

Hard work and dependability, responsibility, and self-motivation are also highly valued by employers and supported by a strong base of research evidence, placing them in the top ten supported skills. However, the evidence, specifically for youth, is not quite as strong across all criteria as that for the skills recommended above. The field is building more evidence that these can be improved through interventions among youth and young adults, and it is expected that, in time, they may emerge with as much support as those above enjoy. Teamwork involves proficiency in these as well as other skills, so while it appears among the top ten supported skills, the recommendations focus on some of the components of teamwork, rather than on the overarching set of skills that it represents.

Youth who are competent in these soft skills are effective in their job searches and interviews and thus are more likely to be hired. They are more likely to be productive, retained on the job, and promoted, and thus they tend to earn more than those less competent in soft skills. Youth competent in these soft skills contribute to the collective efficacy, productivity, and growth of their employers, and, when they start their own businesses, they are more likely to be successful.

This research has broad implications for youth workforce development and training programs, secondary and tertiary education, nonformal education and civic engagement, youth policy, and positive youth development more generally. It supports the inclusion of these skills in workforce programs and provides the terminology and synthesis of research and stakeholder input necessary to make major strides forward in building consensus across these fields on the best bets for investment.

New research is needed to further the field, and over time, augment these results. In particular, there are several priority areas that would contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between soft skills and workforce success. These areas for research include:

1. How soft skills lead to workforce outcomes (understanding the causal mechanisms);
2. How soft skills, independently and together, relate to academic and technical skills, and how they might be integrated into general and technical education;
3. How individual factors such as gender and socioeconomic status, and contextual factors such as industry and job sector, culture, regional differences, and the presence of conflict, all influence the importance of specific soft skills for workforce success;



4. How soft skills can be improved specifically among youth and young adults, and developed across earlier life stages; and
5. How soft skills can be measured using common definitions and scales, and included along with workforce outcomes in longitudinal studies and program evaluations for youth across cultures, genders, and regions of the world, and how might they be augmented with objective measures and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) platforms.

This research agenda will extend current knowledge of the importance of soft skills to effective applications in developing youth for the workforce. While this research agenda is needed, the current evidence base and agreement on priority skills across research disciplines and stakeholders is compelling. This evidence can inform the systems that prepare youth for real, lasting success in the workforce. Youth who develop these key soft skills will be better able to effectively identify, use, and communicate their strengths, relate to others, make decisions to achieve their own goals, as well as contribute to their workplaces and communities.

**Most Supported Skills by Outcome from the Literature Review, for Both General and Youth Populations in Order of Strength of Youth-Specific Literature**

SOFT SKILLS	Specific Workforce Outcomes							
	EMPLOYMENT		PERFORMANCE		INCOME		ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS	
	General Adult Population	Youth 15-29 and Entry Level Workers	General Adult Population	Youth 15-29 and Entry Level Workers	General Adult Population	Youth 15-29 and Entry Level Workers	General Adult Population	Youth 15-29 and Entry Level Workers
Social skills	A	Y	A	Y	A	Y	A	Y
Higher-order thinking skills	A	Y	A	Y	A			Y
Self-control		Y	A	Y	A	Y	A	Y
Positive self-concept	A	Y	A		A	Y		Y
Communication	A	Y	A				A	Y
Hardworking and dependable	A	Y	A	Y	A	Y	A	
Self-motivation			A	Y	A	Y	A	Y
Teamwork	A	Y	A	Y				Y
Positive attitude	A	Y	A		A	Y	A	
Responsibility					A	Y		
Integrity/ethics	A		A	Y		Y	A	

The three colors denote the number of positive findings supporting each skill among youth and entry-level workers. The number of findings for the general population can be found in Appendix E, Chart 5. Skills in **blue** had 30 findings or more for youth and entry-level workers. Skills in **green** had between 20–29 findings for youth and entry-level workers. Skills in **red** had between 10–19 findings for youth and entry-level workers.

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