



STUDY ON PRACTICE OF SOFT SKILLS AMONG THE WORKFORCE: A CASE FROM READY MADE GARMENT (RMG) INDUSTRY OF BANGLADESH



Laila Zaman¹



Md. Atiqur
Rahman Sarker^{2*}
Nargis Akhter³

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, East West University, Bangladesh

Email: lz@ewubd.edu Tel: +8801733503949

²Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration, East West University; Ph.D Student, Kulliyah of Economics and Management Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia

Email: sarker.limon@gmail.com Tel: +60147341702

³Professor, School of Business Studies, Southeast University, Bangladesh

Email: nargis_252@yahoo.com Tel: +01711807133



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

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The aim of this research is to identify the practice of soft skills in the workforce in the RMG sector. Data has been collected using a structured questionnaire. Stratified random sampling was used to determine the sample. Findings reveal that reliability is the most practiced skill whereas networking is the least practiced among the other given variables. In addition, the study showed that family and self-motivation are the sources of developing soft skills. The results indicate that the practice of soft skills are comparatively low in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. The findings of the research will assist the managers of RMG to review and incorporate the desired soft skills in their practice.

JEL Classification

M12, M54, M59.

Contribution/ Originality: This paper identifies that the practice of soft skills is comparatively low at RMG sector in Bangladesh. It highlights the use of soft skills which is beneficiary for both employee and organization. The findings will help to understand the importance of practicing soft skills for greater success of the organization.

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of globalization lies in the growth and sustainability (Pereira, 2013) of organizations. Business organizations face both domestic and international competition for which employees must be highly intellectual and skillful (Taylor *et al.*, 2012) as it creates a challenge for business executives to maintain good employee relations and sustain economic growth. Considering the situation, more emphasis is now given on soft skills along with technical skills. Soft skills include personal accountability, strong work ethics, positive attitudes, self-motivation, the degree of collaboration, interpersonal skill, conflict resolution, negotiation skill, people's adaptability and flexibility, the clarity of communication, creative thinking, and the ability of coaching and mentoring etc (Groves *et al.*, 2008; Schulz, 2008).

Several studies have been conducted on various factors of soft skill such as Communication Skill (Zolnieriek and DiMatteo, 2009; Auer, 2010; Kinman, 2010; Reynolds, 2010; Horner, 2011; Leser and Francis, 2014; Clochesy *et al.*, 2015; McGreavy *et al.*, 2015) Critical Thinking (Innabi and Sheikh, 2007; Marigliano and Russo, 2011; Butera *et al.*, 2014; Shaw, 2014) Team Work (Goleman *et al.*, 2002; Sorbero *et al.*, 2008; Kalleberg *et al.*, 2009; Criss, 2010; Farley *et al.*, 2010; Weinstein *et al.*, 2013) Professionalism (Sullivan, 2004; Hamilton and Brabbit, 2007; Swann *et al.*, 2010; Peytcheva and Warren, 2011) Strong Work Ethic (Gustavson, 2011; Petrick *et al.*, 2011; Beeri *et al.*, 2013; Holland and Albrecht, 2013) Attitude and Enthusiasm (Reisch, 2010; Best *et al.*, 2012; Kilgore, 2013) Creativity/Innovation (Kachelmeier *et al.*, 2008; Williams and McGuire, 2010; Weinzimmer *et al.*, 2011; Hoegl *et al.*, 2012; Ahlin *et al.*, 2014) Reliability (Blatt *et al.*, 2006; Sanders and Cuneo, 2010) Research Skill (Feliú and Helen, 2012) Networking (Verkoren, 2006; Linehan and Scullion, 2008; Scaffidi and Berman, 2011; Ersoy and Güneyli, 2016) Agreeableness (Kleef *et al.*, 2010; Boyce and Wood, 2011) Adjustment (McDonald and Vrana, 2007; Lansford, 2009; Eggleston *et al.*, 2012; Khaleque *et al.*, 2013) Adaptability (Deverell and Olsson, 2010; Rocha, 2012; Stewart *et al.*, 2012); Leadership Skill (Murphy *et al.*, 1983; Peabody, 1984; Cunningham, 1985; Cera, 2013; Hicks and Given, 2013; Hamstra *et al.*, 2014; Allen and Wanna, 2016). However, these soft skills can shape individual personality by complementing technical skills, thereby generating better performance.

Increasing globalization and internationalization has heightened the need for soft skills among business executives which can help them to affect the bottom line, influence effectiveness, and affect personal success (Schulz, 2008; Azim *et al.*, 2010). Soft skills are not only necessary for a person's professional career but are even more contributing to one's social competence (Nwokah and Ahiauzu, 2009; Dharmarajan *et al.*, 2012). It can be a significant factor in helping people to become more effective leaders; managing activities, resources and information (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997) by providing a way to get the highest return on investment regarding human capital. Soft Skills like leadership, decision-making, conflict resolution, negotiation, communication, creativity, and presentation skills are essential for entrepreneurial success and maximizing human capital (Garbee *et al.*, 2002). As a personal attribute, it enhances an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospect, and hard skills which tend to be specific to a certain type of task or activity (Cooper and Sawaf, 1997). Employers at present emphasize more on soft skills than the technical skill for better efficiency.

The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh has higher growth prospect and its contribution to the national economy is significant. However, in spite of this significant contribution from this sector, labor market is facing many challenges. Specially employers are looking for the best effort from their employees and they are expecting more from their workers than the technical skills (Hossan *et al.*, 2012). As a result, organizations are more emphasizing on soft skills that make difference in offering services to the clients (Schulz, 2008; Nwokah and Ahiauzu, 2009) and considered as a key to the success. Organizations have realized that their success largely depends on its internal stakeholder's awareness and extent of practices of soft skills. Although literature review reveals that a number of studies have been conducted in the area but very few researches talked about the practice of soft skills i.e. which factors is practiced the most and the least and the view of staff about the elements they think is really important, over and above opinion of employee with reference to the party who is playing the vital role in developing these skills. With such a research gap, this study tries to identify the practice of soft skill among the workforce in Ready Made Garment (RMG) sector who are the main contributor to Bangladesh export earnings.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Nowadays researchers, practitioners as well as employers show a great interest in the topic of soft skill. Enormous researches have been conducted regarding the subject matter. Most of the studies accomplished in the area focused on the impact of soft skill on organizational performance, employer's view and consequences of having and not having soft skills (Ling *et al.*, 2000; Azim *et al.*, 2010; Esa *et al.*, 2011; Bailly and Léné, 2012; Pritchard, 2013). Some researchers examined its significance on change management (Nelson, 2013; Leser and Francis, 2014)

and graduate development and employability (Schulz, 2008; Majid *et al.*, 2012). There are several types of research identified soft skills of employees. This study is an attempt to further contribute to the literature by identifying the awareness and practice regarding the soft skills necessary in the context of manufacturing organizations. In addition, the study also identifies the parties who are involved in developing soft skills. □

2.1. Communication Skill

There is a number of studies identified the importance of communication skill in terms of solving mathematical problem (Kinman, 2010; Reynolds, 2010) environmental courses (Auer, 2010) and modifying students' behavior (Horner, 2011). Zolnieriek and DiMatteo (2009) mentioned the positive correlation between physician communication and patient adherence and satisfaction (Clochesy *et al.*, 2015). McGreavy *et al.* (2015) demonstrated the influence of *communication competencies on mutual understanding, the inclusion of diverse ideas, and progress toward sustainability-related goals*. Even to encourage safe sexual practices among youth communication between parent-child is considered an effective strategy (Leser and Francis, 2014). Akhter *et al.* (2009) in their study found that majority of the business executives have positive opinions regarding the significance of communication course designed for executives. These results present the awareness and importance of communication in achieving the desired goal.

2.2. Critical Thinking

Critical thinking seems a very important soft skill for various types of organization. Research shows the influence of critical thinking on teachers to change their perception to determine the education reform (Innabi and Sheikh, 2007). Thinking critically was also emphasized for children (Butera *et al.*, 2014). A strong awareness pushed preschoolers' critical thinking and problem-solving through creative movement skills (Marigliano and Russo, 2011). Shaw (2014) emphasized on practicing of critical thinking in musical education.

2.3. Team Work

Majority of organizations have realized the significance of teamwork. The study conducted by Garbee *et al.* (2002) evaluated the efficacy and retention of teaching team-based competencies to inter professional student teams. Teamwork is an essential ingredient to complete a project. There are several studies showed the effectiveness of teamwork in improving performance (Criss, 2010; Weinstein *et al.*, 2013) and patient safety (Farley *et al.*, 2010).

2.4. Professionalism

Sullivan (2004) argued that professions are central to the knowledge economy. Swann *et al.* (2010) showed how changing teachers' professionalism conceptions had an influence on successful government in past as well as it would be in the future. Whereas Peytcheva and Warren (2011) worked on the importance of internalizing professional standards for auditors. As per Hamilton and Brabbit (2007) the philosophy of professionalism must be transformed by each professional generation to have a better practice.

2.5. Strong Work Ethic

Beeri *et al.* (2013) explored employees' awareness' after the implementation of ethics program on Israeli regional council. The result showed that the ethics program was very effective especially in terms of resulting awareness of the code of ethics. Research shows the practice of business ethics continues to develop in North America in teaching, training and research publications (Petrick *et al.*, 2011). Holland and Albrecht (2013) showed the scholars' perceptions regarding business ethics education received the most responses in the survey. Gustavson (2011) found that there had been a shift of academic business ethics to an organization and its employees, to business' impact on the natural environment and external stakeholders in Oceania. □

2.6. Attitude and Enthusiasm

A review of the literature by Kilgore (2013) demonstrated how enthusiasm worked behind American Revolution and Election Campaigns (Best *et al.*, 2012). Other researchers showed how enthusiasm hooks students (Reisch, 2010).

2.7. Creativity/Innovation

Motivating creativity (Kachelmeier *et al.*, 2008) impact on firm performance (Weinzimmer *et al.*, 2011) product and process innovations (Ahlin *et al.*, 2014) community building (Heine *et al.*, 2008) have been identified in many literatures. The study demonstrated that the creativity depends on the culture (Williams and McGuire, 2010) and climate (Hoegl *et al.*, 2012) of the organization.

2.8. Reliability

There are few studies have focused on reliability as a soft skill. The study assessed the appropriateness of the prevention and resilience approaches to reliability in a dynamic context (Blatt *et al.*, 2006) and explored the relationship among researchers, especially the social dynamics of inter-coder agreement (Sanders and Cuneo, 2010).

2.9. Research Skill

Research skill is related to innovation and creativity which is considered as a very important factor for employees. Very little research has been conducted regarding this issue. A research conducted by Feliú and Helen (2012) explored the state of existing research skill training among law school graduates.

2.10. Networking

A study conducted by Linehan and Scullion (2008) examined the role of networking for woman career development. Moreover, this study showed the reasons for slow career for the woman is due to the lack of networking. Another study by Scaffidi and Berman (2011) demonstrated the importance of networking along with subject knowledge for post-doctoral students. Some other studies focused on the knowledge network in the field of development and peace building (Verkoren, 2006). Whereas, Ersoy and Güneyli (2016) emphasized that more efforts need to be made to make use of social networks for formal education within the context of North Cyprus.

2.11. Agreeableness

The study shows that agreeableness can recover lost life satisfaction faster and more completely (Boyce and Wood, 2011). Another study indicates agreeable followers can improve motivation and team performance in spite of having an angry leader (Kleef *et al.*, 2010).

2.12. Conscientiousness

The study shows that behavioral and demographic predictors of conscientiousness are correlated with different cross-national measures of conscientiousness (Heine *et al.*, 2008). Another study tested the effects of the uncivil workplace on employee and behavior which was moderated by conscientiousness (Taylor *et al.*, 2012). The effects of employees' conscientiousness on organizational politics and citizenship behavior (Chang *et al.*, 2012) and workplace incivility and citizenship performance (Taylor *et al.*, 2012) was demonstrated in several studies. It is also found how controlling the conscientiousness changes job performance (Hatrup *et al.*, 2005).

2.13. Adjustment

Most of the work done on adjustment is mainly based on risk (Eggleston *et al.*, 2012) psychology of married adults, Khaleque *et al.* (2013) educational institution (McDonald and Vrana, 2007) and parental divorce and

children's adjustment (Lansford, 2009). There are only a few studies have been conducted on organizational perspective and adjustment. On the other hand, numerous scholars conducted several studies regarding adaptability where most of those are based on the ecosystem (Stewart *et al.*, 2012; Wagner *et al.*, 2014; Cheng *et al.*, 2015). Cullen *et al.* (2014) considered the relationship between employees' adaptability to change-related uncertainty and employees' satisfaction and performance. Role of adaptability in crisis management (Deverell and Olsson, 2010) and career adaptability for transferable skill was examined by Rocha (2012).

2.14. Leadership Skill

The leadership skill is considered an important skill for all employees. It is one of the most important factors contributing to effective environmental governance (Evans *et al.*, 2015) and corporate governance (Allen and Wanna, 2016). The importance of practicing leadership for LIS professionals and its change has been discussed by Hicks and Given (2013). Hamstra *et al.* (2014) showed that supervisor's leadership style influences employees' achievement goals. An analysis of relevant literature suggests that art educators have begun to examine the importance of leadership in art education preparation (Cera, 2013).

2.15. Parties Involved in Developing Soft Skills

Soft skills are equally important for social life as well as for career growth and success (Taylor, 2016; Willmot and Colman, 2016). But developing the soft skills does not come easily to everyone since it depends on the availability of learning exposure (Taylor, 2016). Soft skills start to develop from an early age mostly through family and social exposure (Robles, 2012). Therefore, the roles of family, friends, and society are significant in developing the soft skills of a person. Besides that, an academic institution is the key party of soft skill development where people are taught about norms, values, and etiquettes that are widely accepted (Robles, 2012; Taylor, 2016). Through academic learning, people learn about the communication techniques, teamwork, and adaptability which sharpen their creativity, sense of humor and capacity to accept and learn from criticisms (Taylor, 2016). Attitude, personality, and character are developed from family, peers and academic attachment which elevated positivity (Willmot and Colman, 2016; Pereira and Costa, 2017). Thus, soft skills boil down emotional intelligence and ability to understand work around. Soft skills are also developed at work by the influences of supervisors, colleagues and the learning environment (Robles, 2012; Taylor, 2016). Employees learn about particular behavior and attitude from peer action. It is often influenced by the responses of supervisor and management structure of the organization. There are some proven methods of soft skill training at work that include seminar, eLearning, periodic feedback, be a role model, team building exercises and retreats (Pereira and Costa, 2017). These activities help an employee to improve their knowledge and soft skills for career development. □

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Based on the review of the literature this study addresses two objectives (1) identify the practices of soft skills among the employees and workers of RMG sector in Bangladesh. (2) identify the parties who are involved in developing the soft skills.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study has followed quantitative approaches in order to find out the practices of soft skills among managers. The data has been collected through a structured questionnaire survey where stratified random sampling was applied. 500 respondents of 30 different RMG organizations were surveyed between December 2017 and April 2018. The dimension that has been included in the questionnaire has taken from the study of Pritchard (2013). Respondents were chosen based on convenient sampling from various levels (top, mid, lower and production) of RMG sector. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 22.0. First, data were screened using descriptive analysis.

Then data were treated for outliers and missing values. Next descriptive analysis such as mean and standard deviation was used to determine the result.

5. FINDINGS

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

Total 429 respondents have completed the questionnaire survey where 81% are male respondents and 19% are female. Though the majority of the employees are female in RMG sector, sufficient data could not be collected from the female respondents due to the unwillingness of the female workers and management non-cooperation. 79% of the respondents are between the age of 20 and 41 years whereas only 14% of them are above 41 years. There are only 7% respondents who are below 20 years which indicates the rate of young workers in RMG sectors is comparatively low. Among the respondents, 48% are either graduate or post graduate. However, 35% of them have not completed their secondary level of education. At the same time, 63% of the respondents are having work experience below 5 years. Only 13% of them are having work experience of 11 years and above. In this survey, 56% of the respondents are from the production department, 30% from commercial and merchandising department and only 14% of them are from the administrative department.

5.2. Skills Practiced in RMG Sector

Soft Skill Practice in RMG sector has been shown in Table 01. The table shows that among the fourteen variables reliability is the most practiced skill by the respondents with a mean of 3.94 and standard deviation of 0.43. This skill is respectively followed by conscientiousness ($m= 3.88$, $std\ dev= 0.37$), professionalism ($m= 3.71$, $std\ dev= 0.21$), adaptability ($m= 3.63$, $std\ dev= 0.098$). Communication, critical thinking or problem solving, teamwork or interpersonal skill, strong work ethic, attitude and enthusiasm, agreeableness are almost equally practiced by the respondents. The mean of these skills is ranged from 3.4 to 3.5 with an average deviation of 0.20. However, networking is the least practiced variable of among the other given variables. Since the data has been collected mostly from production-based employees who are not directly involved with customers, networking issues are less practiced by them.

Table-1. Soft Skill Practice in RMG Sector in Bangladesh

Soft Skills	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication	3.43	0.26
Critical Thinking/Problem solving	3.33	0.20
Teamwork/Interpersonal skill	3.44	0.29
Professionalism	3.71	0.21
Strong Work Ethic	3.49	0.29
Attitude and Enthusiasm	3.52	0.20
Creativity/Innovation	3.19	0.19
Adaptability	3.63	0.098
Reliability	3.94	0.43
Networking	2.77	0.014
Agreeableness	3.46	0.40
Conscientiousness	3.88	0.37
Adjustment	3.29	1.07
Leadership	3.43	0.27

5.3. Opinion Regarding the Parties Who are Playing the Role to Develop the Soft Skill

The result suggests that respondents consider family and self-motivation with the same mean of 2.49 and a standard deviation of 0.69 are the principle initiator which is supporting to develop the soft skill among people. Undoubtedly, it is family where the primary learning of a child develops. Moreover, without self-motivation no

learning is possible. Then employer's initiatives are considered with a mean of 2.16 and a standard deviation of 0.69. Respondents could think that nowadays organization arranges different types of training related to soft skills, which have a significant contribution in developing some qualities among them. Finally, universities and colleges take place similar position with a mean of 1.93 and 1.89 and a standard deviation of 0.85 and 0.72 respectively.

Table-2. Parties Involved in Developing Soft Skills

Party	Mean	Std. Deviation
Family	2.49	0.69
School	2.15	0.64
College	1.89	0.72
University	1.93	0.85
Employer	2.16	0.69
Self-motivation	2.49	0.67

6. CONCLUSION

Among the fourteen skills tested in this study, in terms of application reliability is the most used elements in the workforce. Reliability which includes regular and on time attendance, communication regarding expectations, deadlines, setbacks are the most practiced skill in this case. The reason might be that as being the main export-oriented industry, human resources in RMG are supposed to be punctual and careful about meeting deadline whereas networking is in the lowest rank. RMG is a labor-intensive industry; that is why the respondents may not realize the importance of networking for career success. It is also found from the study that family and self-motivation are the sources of developing soft skills.

However, these findings will benefit not only business executives, but it will be helpful to upgrade the civilization of human existence in the society. Since the RMG sector is still booming due to comparative advantage, use of soft skills will make differences at work with innovation, growth, and prosperity.

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