



Influence of Employee Soft Skills on Job Performance: Evidence from SMEs in Cameroon

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Research Article

Abstract

Purpose: Due to COVID-19's global impact, work from remote has become the norm which led to the closure of offices throughout the globe. Workplace learning, communication skills, collaboration, and emotional intelligence are all examples of soft skills, and they are crucial in the workplace. They are likely to boost workers' efficiency and effectiveness on the job. This study is sought to examine the relationships between employee soft skills and job performance based on evidence from Small and Medium Size Enterprises in the Bamenda Metropolis of Cameroon.

Methods: A mixed-method (quantitative and qualitative) research design was used in this paper. Data were collected from 241 SMEs using a structured questionnaire. Data analysis used both descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results: Results show that improving communication skills results in higher job performance. Further, it is found that the higher the capacity of employees to discern and manage their emotions the better the job performance. Teamwork is revealed to increase the level of job performance. Work ethics shows a minimal effect on work performance.

Implications: SME management should focus on developing employees' emotional intelligence as this will improve their job performance. SMEs that are yet to adopt effective teams as an approach to functioning should consider doing so following the established benefits of effective teamwork in the organization. Employers also should try to cultivate a culture of work ethic at their place of work.

Keywords: Employee Soft Skills, Job Performance, Remote Work, SMEs.

1. Introduction

In today's world of work, hard skills appear not to be the only determining success factors as workspaces have become more global. Employees' ability to function well in the global workplace also requires knowledge of soft skills. As highlighted by Manullang, (2017), soft skills are qualities that aid workers to relate with others, making it possible for workplace success. These skills include communication skills, leadership skills, creative and critical thinking, active learning, time management, emotional intelligence, work ethics, teamwork, and adaptability among others.

Scholars posit that soft skills have been viewed in varied ways. For example, Anggiani (2017) views soft skills as individual qualities that enhance collaboration with others and hence job performance. Gibbons and Lange (2000) equate soft skills to core skills, individual abilities, and essential aptitudes. To Balcar, (2014), soft skills are closely connected to an individual's attitude. According to Cimatti (2016), soft

skills designate all those competencies not connected to a specific task but overbearing in all positions given that they are centered on how individuals involved in an institution relate. Laura *et al.* (2015), view soft skills to be a collection of varied skills, competencies, qualities, and characteristics in individuals that strengthen them to work together with others in achieving organizational pre-stated goals.

Across the world, COVID-19 resulted in the closedown of offices and ushered in remote working, a new dimension that has shaped the future of work. At the onset, when closedowns were visible, many organizations started organizing staff training on the use of digital tools to enhance remote working. This implies that workplace learning, communication skills, teamwork, and emotional intelligence, which are some of the elements of soft skills, are very important in the working environment as they have the potential to increase employee job performance, which leads to an increase in productivity. Today advances in technology have resulted in the modernization and globalization of working environments, making the need for soft skills to be on an increase (Balcar, 2014). Thus, many businesses uphold that without employees equipped with both hard and soft skills, the achievement of excellence will continue to be difficult in today's competitive business world (Sharvari & Kulkarni, 2019). This suggests the growing need for the skilling up of employees as technology advances.

Globally, it has been reported that often candidates seeking employment lack the sufficient soft skill sets needed by employers (Manpower Group, 2013; Sharvari & Kulkarni, 2019). For sure, in the 21st-century marketplace, technical skills void of soft skills are not sufficient for employees (Lazarus, 2013). Hence the high need for blending (Griffith & Hoppner, 2013; Seetha, 2014). Apparently, soft skills are extremely vital for employee success (Kautz *et al.*, 2014). They are instrumental in building better human relationships (Alabdulkareem *et al.*, 2018), and strengthening staff capacity which leads to improvements in organizational performance (Massaro, Bardy, & Garlatti, 2016).

Apparently, most small and medium-sized enterprises do not have sufficient financial resources and thus engage in minimal soft skills training activities for their staff. This often affects staff job performance, causing productivity to be very low. In some cases, the managers do not even seem to acknowledge the importance of soft skills and do not even have an interest in investing in technology to improve their soft skills. However, recent experience with the advent of COVID-19 has pushed many organizations and even individual employees to engage in initiatives to gain soft skills, so as to remain competitive and stay in business.

Although researchers have reported that soft skills are playing a positive role in job performance, it is not clear whether this holds in all sectors. In Cameroon, the SME sector is still seemingly poorly structured, with most operators operating informally. Further, in the surveyed area, demand for quality goods and services is often greater than supply, and this may make soft skills less of a serious performance factor. SMEs surveyed in this study included pharmacies, clinics, hospitals, liberal professions (lawyers), pressing, bakeries, restaurants, travel agencies, microfinance, public establishments and decentralized territorial collectivities, public contractors, service providers, and distributors of brewery products. Given that there exist weak functional structures and the nature of their activities pulls consumers to go to them often, this study seeks to examine the relationship between employees' soft skills and job performance building evidence from Small and Medium Size Enterprises in the Bamenda Metropolis. The study investigates the following research questions:

- a) Does employee communication skill affect job performance?
- b) Does employee emotional intelligence influence job performance?
- c) Does teamwork affect job performance?
- d) Does work ethics have an impact on job performance?

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Job Performance

Effective job performance is critical for organizational success and sustenance. According to Miller and Bromiley (1990), job performance is an image of a worker's ability to achieve the pre-stated goals. This is usually for each employee dependent on the job description for respective assignments. As observed by Federman (2009), individual job performance results in organizational-level performance which may be visible in terms of profits made.

Apparently, situational constraints influence work performance. Sonnentag, Volmer, and Spsychala (2008), opine that certain factors may either motivate higher performance or demotivate and lower the performance. Thus, workplace factors should be constantly reviewed to ensure that the negative factors are handled as soon as noticed. And employee soft skills are believed to solve performance-related problems within an organization (Lawler & Porter, 2008).

2.2 Soft skills

Chen et. al., (2019) view soft skills as individual knowledge, expressed in qualities visible in interactions (Vasanthakumari, 2019), making an employee to be good at what he does and compatible with where he works (Nealy, 2005). This implies that an individual's experience builds and improves personal soft skills and they influence how people interact with others in organizations. Soft skills, namely communication skills, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and/or work ethics are thus an essential component of business success. As highlighted by the research, effective communication as a soft skill is essential for business success at all levels of the organization (Jay, 2004). For sure, leadership success may depend on effectively using both verbal and nonverbal means of communication. Therefore, poor communication skills can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, as such negatively influencing individual performance and hence organizational performance. Apparently, effective communication skills help individuals know when, how, and what to communicate especially within teams as such enhancing cohesion and togetherness among employees. Therefore, through good communication skills, managers can create an environment within their teams that encourages creativity and innovation.

According to Succi and Canovi (2020), listening and observing to appropriately comprehend, deliberate, and transmits opinions and ideas either in oral or written form is what constitutes communication skills. Similarly, Jelphe (2006) opines that communication skills make the interaction between associates of the working team possible. For sure, through careful and effective communication, managers can create bridges for better collaboration among team members in an organization (Bucăța and Rizescu, 2017). From these adopted conceptual definitions, the researchers building on the observed realities of the study area hypothesize as follows.

H1: There is a positive relationship between employee communication skills and job performance.

Another soft skills component utilized in this study is emotional intelligence which has been defined varyingly by different scholars. To Segal and Jaffe (2022), emotional intelligence is all about individuals' ways of discerning and managing their emotions positively to get rid of stress and be able to communicate empathetically with others and handle challenging situations. This implies that emotional intelligence helps to build resilient connections at work sites, helping employees to attain professional and individual goals. Serrate (2017) describes emotional intelligence as the aptitude, to appropriately manage not just one's emotions but also those of peers working in teams. Goleman (2006) highlights that all emotions are in essence impulses to act, the instant plans for handling life that evolution has instilled in all mankind. Given these viewpoints, the researcher's hypothesis is as follows.

H2: There is a positive relationship between employee emotional intelligence and job performance.

Further, teamwork as a soft skill defined from varied perspectives was employed in this study. According to Sarah *et al.* (2008), teamwork is the capability to liaise with others to attain organizational goals. Thus, teamwork builds employee skills given that they turn to share opinions and experiences in their day-to-day interactions as they function as a team, creating effects on individual employee job performance (Sanyal and Hisam, 2018). For sure, in today's world of work, employers are more interested in employees who are capable of working in a team, collaborating fully, and motivating each other as teammates (Klaus 2010).

According to Salas, Reyes, and McDaniel (2018), teamwork is the process by which team members, using their know-how, talents, and abilities passionately interact with coworkers, and seek to realize the common goals of an organization. Salas, Reyes, and McDaniel (2018) further opine that through positive behaviors recorded when working as teams synergies for work teams can be effectively created. Building on the above, this study hypothesizes the following.

H3: There is a positive relationship between employee teamwork and job performance.

Generally, work ethics as a soft skill refers to acceptable behaviors and beliefs based on setout standards at a workplace. This implies that work ethics may only be viewed as poor or good based on pre-established standards for a particular work environment. Andrew (2018) defines work ethics as the belief that work and conscientiousness have a moral advantage and an intrinsic ability, virtue, or value to reinforce character and individual aptitudes. For sure, respect for work ethics may enhance the character of employees, leading to better job performance. From the aforementioned and adopted conceptual definition of work ethics employed in this study, the hypothetical relationship was developed as follows:

H4: There is a positive relationship between employee work ethics and job performance.

2.3. Small and medium-sized enterprises

Nso (2020) building on the European Commission perspective states that SMEs are businesses with less than 250 employees, with a 50 million Euros maximum in annual turnover. The World Bank (2013) SMEs have 300 employees at a maximum, with 15 million US dollars in annual revenue and assets. The legal definition of SMEs in Cameroon is guided by the law (# 2010/001 of April 13, 2010) on the promotion of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises. Based on this law, SMEs in Cameroon may be defined based on type, number of employees, and annual sales revenue as summarized in the table below.

Table 1: Defining SMEs in Cameroon

Type of Enterprises	Number of Employees	Annual Sales Revenue (turnover) in FCFA
Very Small (Micro)	At most 5	15 Million
Small Businesses	6 to 20	From 15 Million to 100 Million
Medium Sized	21 to 100	From 100 Million to 1 Billion

3. Methodology

This study employs mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) research. The quantitative investigation design involved the use of quantitative tools such as correlation and regression analysis, while the qualitative research made use of descriptive statistics, notably frequency tables. Primary data was gotten using a structured questionnaire. Using a two-stage sampling technique, a sample size of 241 SMEs was retained in this study. The first stage in the sampling involved identifying the dominant sectors with many SMEs. This was done by visiting the SMEs enterprise tax center for Mezam Division. The second stage involved a proportionate collection of data. The key sample inclusion criteria included that the operation of the SMEs must fall within the selected category studied; the SMEs must have been

functioning for at least two years; they must be located within the Bamenda Metropolis; the representative must be in a good state of mind; and they must have at least two employees (excluding the manager).

Data analysis used both descriptive and inferential statistical approaches. For descriptive statistics, the multiple response set approach was employed. Using the multiple response set approach, perceptions of respondents were aggregated for each of the independent variables respecting the ordered nature (Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD)) under which the data was collected, and presented using a frequency table to establish the magnitude in a descriptive matter of the relationship with the dependent variable – Job performance. It is worth mentioning that the direction of the conclusion was arrived at through further aggregating the positive perceptions (strongly agree (SA), agree (A)) and comparing them with the negative perceptions (disagree (D), strongly disagree (SD)).

The inferential statistical approach was multi-staged: first, the Shapiro-Wilk normality test was conducted to ensure that the data were normally distributed; secondly, correlational analysis, notably Spearman's rank correlation, a correlation test was conducted to establish the presence of serial correlation amongst the variables, and finally, we employed the ordered logistic regression to determine the association between employees' soft skills and job performance. The ordered logistic regression equation was expressed as follows:

$$\text{Log}\left(\frac{\gamma_j(x_i)}{1-\gamma_j(x_i)}\right) = \mu_j - (\beta_1 X_{1i} + \beta_2 X_{2i} + \beta_3 X_{3i} + \beta_4 X_{4i})$$

$$J = 1, \dots, J; i = 1, \dots, n$$

In which 'Y j' cumulative probability is as follows:

$$\gamma_j(x_i) = \gamma(\mu_j - \beta x_i) = P(\gamma_i \leq j | x_i)$$

Where;

X_1 represents communication skills, X_2 represents employee emotional intelligence, X_3 represents teamwork and X_4 represents work ethics. Communication skills were captured using proxies like appropriate use of visual communication, diligent use of written communication, systematic application of non-verbal communication, and active listening. Emotional intelligence was captured using the degree of self-regulation, exercised self-awareness degree of internal motivation, and relationship management. As concerns teamwork, the existence of self-managed teams, the continuous existence of project teams, the timely creation of task force teams, and working in teams ability were used as proxies. Also, to capture work ethics, the extent of loyalty to co-workers, personal responsibility, trustworthiness, and business fairness were the proxies used.

Validity and reliability were ensured through triangulation as well as member checking. Further, content validity was established through literature review which made it possible the identification of proxies to better capture the study variables.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Descriptive Results

4.1.1 Socio-Demographic Results

Socio-demographic data was collected which helped in ascertaining that the respondents had the right profiles to be participants in this study. The data collected was analyzed and presented in frequency tables. Table 2 below presents the demographic information of respondents with respect to their gender, age, and the type of contract they operate under. From Table 2 above, the majority of participants were male. That is 180 respondents were male while 69 were female respondents. Hence the participants whose views were widely sampled were male. Also, 21% of the respondents were aged between 20-30 years,

24% of the respondents were between 31-40 years of age, 32% were between 41-50 years, and 23% were above 50 years of age.

Table 2: Gender, Age, and Contract Type of Respondent

		Frequency	Percentage
Age distribution	20-30	90	21.0
	31-40	60	24.0
	41-50	43	32.0
	50 and above	48	23.0
	Total	241	100.0
Gender	Male	180	57.0
	Female	69	43.0
Contract of work	Temporary	151	47.0
	Permanent	43	32.0
	Voluntary service	47	21.0

Also, from the above table, 47% % of the respondents had a temporary contract of work, 32% had a permanent contract of work and, 21% had a voluntary contract of work. Further, data was collected on the educational qualification and work experience attained by the respondents. Table 3 below summarizes the results.

Table 3: Work Experience and Education Attainment of Respondents

		Frequency	Percentage
Work Experience	2-5 years	152	45.0
	6-10 years	40	19.0
	11-15 years	35	26.0
	16-20	14	10.0
	21 and above	0	0.0
	Total	241	100.0
Highest Qualification	First School LC	125	28.0
	Ordinary Level	40	24.0
	Advance Level	25	18.0
	Diploma	20	9.0
	First Degree	19	11.0
	Masters	12	10.0
Total		241	100.0

From the above table, 28%% of the respondents had FSLC, 24% had O Level,18% had A Level,9% had a Diplome,11% had a first degree and 10% had a master's degree. Also, 45% of the respondents had 2-5 years of work experience, 19% had 6-10 years of work experience, 26% had 11-15 years of experience and 10% had 16-20 years of experience. None had 21 or more years of experience.

4.1.2 Aggregated Frequency Distribution - soft skills and job performance

Data was collected from the study participants using the various proxies selected to measure employee communication skills, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and work ethics. The data collected was aggregated with multiple response set values and summarized as can be seen in Table 4 below. From Table 4, the SA and A values were 31.6% and 29.1% respectively while the D and SD values were only 10.1% and 21.2% respectively. Going by these values, respondents seemed to uphold the view that there is a relationship between employee communication skills and job performance. Further, a relationship was also observed between employee emotional intelligence and job performance with calculated SA, A, D, and SD values of 28 %, 43 %, 13%, and 11% respectively. Also, the SA, A, D, and SD values of 32.5%, 48%, 7%, and 18.5% respectively indicated a positive relationship between employee teamwork and job performance. Interestingly, the aggregated scores for work ethics and job suggested that no positive

relationship was existing. This was visible with the SA, A, D, and SD values of 15%, 9%, 23%, and 46% respectively.

Table 4: Aggregated Frequency Distribution - soft skills and job performance

Aggregated Responses for each independent variable		Job Performance				
		SA	A	N	D	SD
X ₁	Employee communication	32%	29%	8%	10%	21%
	Multiple response set value	78	69	7	44	43
X ₂	Employee emotional intelligence	28%	43%	5%	13%	11%
	Multiple response set value	67	105	12	31	26
X ₃	Teamwork	32%	43%	1%	7%	17%
	Multiple response set value	77	103	3	17	41
X ₄	Work Ethics skills	15%	9%	7%	23%	46%
	Multiple response set value	36	22	17	55	111

4.2. Inferential Statistic Result

The Shapiro-Wilk test for normality results are summarized as seen in Table 5 below;

Table 5: Normality Test - Shapiro-Wilk

Shapiro-Wilk	W	Test	
Variable	Obs	W	Prob>z
Job performance	241	0.99553	0.69108
Communication skills	241	0.99431	0.47412
Emotional Intelligence	241	0.99324	0.32009
Teamwork	241	0.99641	0.84304
Work ethics	241	0.99508	0.60763

From Table 5 above, it is observed that the very high Shapiro Wilk values are an indication that the data is normally distributed. Given that the data was observed as being normally distributed, the Spearman rank correlation test was then conducted to determine if there was a serial correlation amongst the variables or not. These results obtained were as seen below in Table 6.

Table 6: Spearman Rank Correlation Test

	Job performance	Communication skills	Emotional intelligence	Teamwork	Work ethics
Job performance	1				
Communication skills	-0.0704	1			
Emotional intelligence	0.0083	0.0864	1		
Teamwork	0.0373	-0.0021	-0.0511	1	
Work ethics	-0.0002	0.0988	-0.0296	0.0474	1

The correlation test results presented in Table 6 above indicate that there is no correlation among the variables due to the very low correlation values ($r < 0.1$). This shows that the variables are independent of one another. The ordered logistic regression was then employed to determine the relationship between employees' soft skills and work performance. The results are represented in Table 7 below. As concerns communication skills, results showed that an increase in the communication skills of employees will decrease the log odds of job performance by 0.099. This implies that improving communication skills will rather decrease job performance in small and medium-sized enterprises in the Bamenda Metropolis, thus creating a negative relationship. This could be associated with the types of SMEs surveyed, such as travel agencies, pharmacies, and restaurants, where communication is very minimal given the nature of

the services they render. The result was, however, statistically insignificant. We, therefore, reject the hypothesis and conclude that communication skills have a significant effect on job performance in SMEs in Bamenda.

Table 7: Ordered logistic regression results

Variable	Obs	Coefficient	Ordered Logistic Regression	
Job Performance (Dependent variable)			Z-Value	P-Value
Communication skills	241	-0.0991838	-1.15	0.250
Emotional Intelligence	241	.0216567	0.26	0.792
Teamwork	241	.0518207	0.63	0.528
Work ethics	241	.0010382	0.01	0.990
Number of obs = 241, Chi square = 1.73; P-value = 0.7846; Pseudo R square = 0.0022				

Also, the findings from the ordered logit carried out showed that an increase in emotional intelligence will increase the log odds of job performance by 0.22. The implication is that, as employees increase their emotional intelligence towards one another, their job performance also increases. The result was statistically insignificant. Thus, the hypothesis is rejected and we conclude that emotional intelligence does not significantly influence the work performance of employees of SMEs in Bamenda.

Results on teamwork indicated that an increase in the level at which employees operate committedly as teams will increase the log odds of job performance by 0.52. This means that increased teamwork amongst the workers of SMEs in Bamenda can result in improvements and higher job performance. Given that the results are statistically significant, the hypothesis is accepted and we conclude that within the surveyed SMEs in the Bamenda Metropolis, there exists a significant relationship between teamwork and job performance.

Lastly, the log odd of 0.001 with regards to work ethics indicates that a unit increase in work ethics will increase work performance by 0.001. This implies that the relationship between work ethics and job performance is positive. The P-Value of 0.79 indicates that the results are globally insignificant while the pseudo R-Square value of 0.0022 falls out of the acceptable range (0.2-0.4).

4.3. Discussion

The first research question investigated if there is an association existing between communication skills and job performance among SMEs in the Bamenda Metropolis. An analysis of the respondent's views is presented in Table 4. The results showed a positive relationship. Apparently, when each of the components of communication skills can positively impact the job performance of employees in SMEs, then such an enterprise is bound to grow in the right direction.

The second research question examined if a connection exists between employee emotional intelligence and job performance. An analysis of the respondent's views is presented in Table 5. The results showed a positive relationship. These findings appear to be similar to those of other researchers like Lopes et. al., (2006), and Sunil and Rooprai (2009) upholding emotional intelligence as a key individual quality needed for better performance at the workplace. Thus, leaders, managers, and owners of SMEs must take cognizance of it if they are to thrive in an ever-challenging business environment. Higher emotional intelligence levels have been reported to result in more employee commitment, lower employee turnovers, and higher organizational performance (Goleman, 2006; Ashkanasy & Hooper, 2014).

The third question of this study investigated if a relationship exists between employee teamwork and job performance in SMEs. An analysis of the respondent's views is presented in Table 6. The results revealed that there is a positive relationship between employee teamwork and job performance at SMEs. Trust among coworkers is an essential relational skill in job performance as it builds confidence promoting the supportive spirit of cooperation (Abd Hair et al 2010).

The fourth research question of this study was to investigate if a relationship exists between employee work ethics and job performance in SMEs in Bamenda Metropolis. An analysis of the respondent's views that enabled this research question to be answered is presented in Table 7. The results showed that

a positive association exists between employee work ethics and job performance among the surveyed SMEs. These results disagree with those of Li *et al.* (2019).

5. Conclusion and recommendations

From the results of this study, we conclude that soft skills are essential success factors in today's workplace. SMEs should thus seek to enhance team building through participation, which will go a long way toward increasing employee job performance. For sure, employees capable of working in teams will easily improve on other soft skills. Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that the management should focus on developing employees' emotional intelligence as this will improve their job performance. Also, great attention should be placed on encouraging teamwork within these SMEs. Employees should be trained on how to work as a team through workshops. Also, employers should try to cultivate a culture of good work ethic at their place of work.

6. Limitation and Direction for future studies

The present research studied SMEs as a group without isolating individual sectors and treating them separately. Thus, it is not possible to identify the specificities from certain sectors that may influence the results. Future research should be conducted for specific SMEs in various sectors and comparisons be made on how soft skills influence employee job performance in the various sectors.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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