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POWER OF SOFT SKILLS DETERMINING ACADEMIC CAREER SATISFACTION: EMPIRICAL STUDY ON RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

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ABSTRACT

Recent debate on skill acquisition by employees focuses on skill shortages (lacking required skills) and skills gaps (lack proficiency in the job) (Hurrell, 2015). Technical skills are not only ones considered in this context. As mostly discussed in literature, performing a job requires several technical skills that are acquired by knowledge in cognitive sense and influenced by an individual's intelligence. However, such skills are not enough for today, there is a need to have interpersonal, human, people or behavioral skills in order to apply technical ones in the workplace (Weber, Finley, Crawford, Rivera, 2009) that are not reliant on abstract reasoning, are involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts (Hurrell, Scholarios and Thompson, 2012). Thus, technical skills are discussed to complement with soft skills such as human, conceptual, interpersonal and leadership etc. to allow the proper expression, implementation and collaboration of knowledge assets (Brill, Gilfoil and Doll, 2014; Weber, Crawford, Lee and Dennison, 2013). Even there is not a precise taxonomy of such skills; in literature four categories are mostly used to define them as leadership/people/ relationship; communication; management and organization, cognitive skills and knowledge (Kantrowitz, 2005). In this context, the ultimate aim of this study is to discuss whether academician's soft skills (e.g. communication, interpersonal relations, openmindedness, positive attitudes, teamwork, creativity etc.) have an impact on their satisfaction from their career. This study also argues that without having soft skills, how a prospective academician, here Research Assistants, could prepare his students for the future demanding more than technical skills in order to manage themselves and their careers. Proposed sample consists of research assistants who are working in a state university located in Istanbul. The importance of this study lies in the changing role of educational institutions especially universities and the changing role of academia as well.

Keywords: Soft skills, Career Satisfaction, Academia.

JEL Codes: M19

1. INTRODUCTION

As stated in many academic writings, magazines and so on, employers are demanding not only technical skills but also other skills that are used for effective practicing of such skills- named soft skills. Today's competitive job market conditions have changed the minimum requirements for success in the workplace (Lazarus, 2013). Also, in recent years skills deficits are discussed across many developed countries that many vacancies are filled by people who are lacking not only required job skills but also soft-interpersonal and social skills (Hurrell, 2016).

Workplace skills are said to be intensifying, thus technical skills are no longer sufficient (Connel, 1998) in the face of complex problems, tasks requiring creativity, projects realized with team works. Especially in

universities as the first step towards business life, developing these skills are discussed, even need for transforming curriculums and by this means, preparing students for more demanding world are emphasized. However, before designing new curriculums or any other education material, there is a need to analyze faculty staff's degree of such skills, awareness of its importance and how to teach/transfer those skills. Besides, there is also need to examine the relationship between soft skills and career satisfaction, because even if there is significant relationship between these constructs, it would be easier to assume that soft skills have capacity to ensure career satisfaction, satisfied individuals are more eager to teach and reflect those skills to students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Soft Skills Umbrella Term

As Weber explained in his study, "hard skills usually require the acquisition of knowledge, are primarily cognitive in nature, and are influenced by an individual's intelligence-quotient score." (Weber, 2013 p:313). Beside such skills, another skills category has emerged including interpersonal, human, people, or the behavioral skills. These so called soft skills are needed to apply technical/hard skills and knowledge in the workplace (Weber,2013). Thus skills' definition regarding only technical aspects has changed, new category of skills has emerged (Hurrell et al,2012).

Beside technical requirement of jobs, there is a need to complement technical/hard skills. They are the soft skills having the capacity to complement cognitive capacities (Pandey and Pandey, 2015; Brill, Gilfoil and Doll, 2014). Hard skills correspond to the skills in the technical and administrative categories, and soft skills correspond to the skills in the human, conceptual, leadership, and interpersonal categories (Weber, Crawford, Lee and Dennison,2013). In this sense, hard skills could be easier to identify thus more tangible, however soft skills are more ambiguous and are harder to identify or assess via standard questionnaire-type instruments (Mullen, 1997). Yet these frameworks see each set as a necessary complement to the other (Parente, Stephan and Brown,2012). This ambiguity also manifests itself in the literature of soft skills, because authors label different skills as soft ones with little agreement on them. This makes difficult to find universal set of soft skills (Miriam, Anderson and Boyden, 2016). The concept differs from discipline to discipline, from context to context, even it has different meanings in different cultures (R de Villiers, 2010).

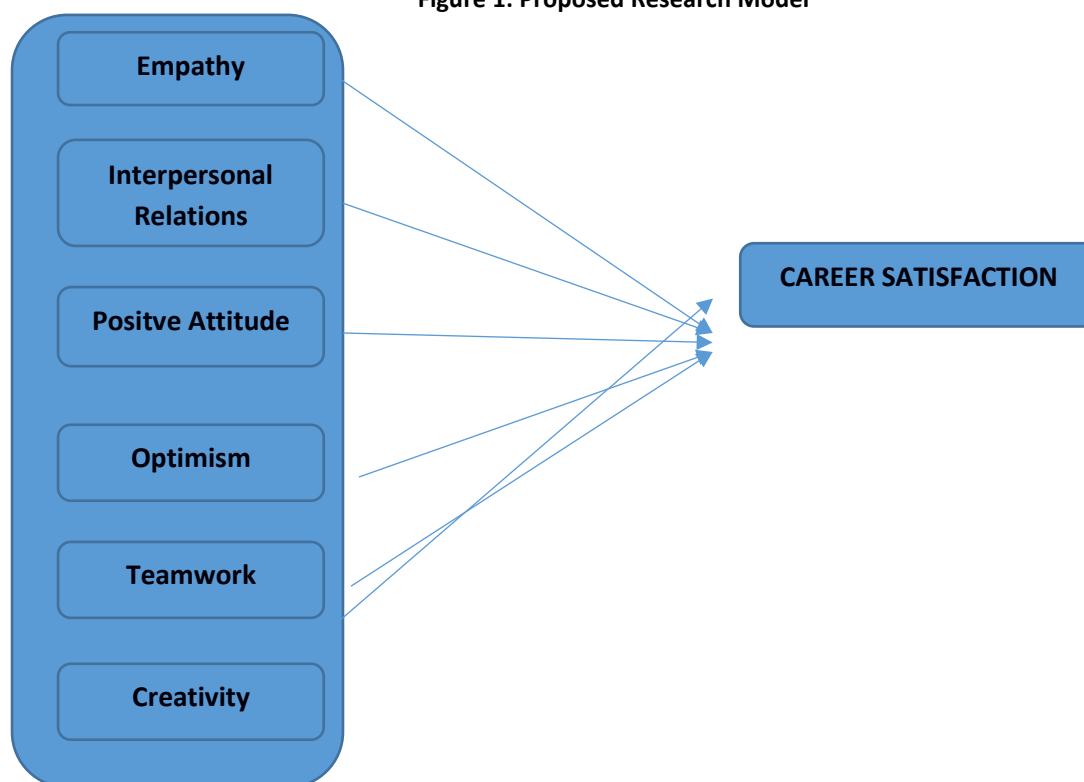
In literature, there are several efforts for reframing soft skills as shown some of them in the Appendix I. These skill categories are not limited to those shown in the table, because it is possible to find more and more studies covering such skills. Among classifications made in the literature, frequently discussed skills include communication skills, teamwork skills, creativity, and other relational skills mostly debated under emotional intelligence construct.

2.2. Importance of Soft Skills: Education and Career Link

Career satisfaction reflects individual's subjective feelings of success that are related to many aspects of work behavior and well-being. It refers individual's progress made towards meeting different career related goals in terms of income, achievement and development etc. (Spurk ,Abele and Volmer, 2011). In other words, subjective career assessment echoes individual's own sense of his or her career and what is becoming (Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom,2005).Besides objective criteria (pay, promotions, occupational status), subjective ones have increasingly been adopted within career success research over the last decade (Heslin, 2005).

In this study, main argument is that if a person is endowed with soft skills, he will be satisfied with his career and this could be an important subjective evaluation of success. Further, satisfied individuals, in this case academic staff, would be more successful for transferring those skills to students and preparing them for business life. Hence, it is assumed that there is a direct link between soft skills and subjective career evaluations based specifically on career satisfaction and an indirect link with education as a way of transferring those skills.

Figure 1: Proposed Research Model



3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Objective

The main objective of this study is to find whether soft skills (empathy, interpersonal relations, positive attitude, optimism, teamwork and creativity) could be antecedent of career satisfaction as one of major career outcomes, so to reveal the relationship between such skills and career satisfaction.

3.2. Research Settings and Participants

Data for this study was collected from 204 Research Assistant working for a state university located in Istanbul. Firstly, all faculties have been informed and asked for their consent for participation in this study. Then, they are asked for passing all forms to Research Assistants based on departments. Research assistants have been chosen for sample of this study, because they are at the outset of academic career, they have different aspirations and different subjective career evaluations and they have also close connection/interaction with students.

Among those answered questions of gender and level of education is shown in the following Table 1. According to results, 193 participants accepted to answer questions of gender and education, among them 30.1% is female, 69.9% is male. In total, 29% of participants continue their master's (either completed all prerequisite courses and started to write thesis or still taking courses) and 71% of them continue PhD (either completed all prerequisite courses and passed the PhD qualification exam, started to write dissertation or still taking courses/preparing PhD qualification exam).

Table 1: Gender and Education Demographic Statistics of the Sample

			Education		Total
			Master's Degree	PhD	
Gender	Female	Count	13	45	58
		% within Gender	22,4%	77,6%	100,0%
		% within Education	23,2%	32,8%	30,1%
		% of Total	6,7%	23,3%	30,1%
Male	Count	43	92	135	
	% within Gender	31,9%	68,1%	100,0%	
	% within Education	76,8%	67,2%	69,9%	
	% of Total	22,3%	47,7%	69,9%	
Total	Count	56	137	193	
	% within Gender	29,0%	71,0%	100,0%	
	% within Education	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	
	% of Total	29,0%	71,0%	100,0%	

3.3. Measurement Instruments

Survey method has been chosen to collect data. Scales used have been constructed after a deep literature review and have been adapted to the Turkish culture by using the method of translation and back translation as suggested in the literature. Soft skills are measured through multiple scales. Among them, positive attitudes, openmindedness, teamwork, communication skills are adapted from Lee and Lee (2011). However, for interpersonal relations and empathy, Emotional Intelligence (EI/EQ) scale originally developed by Dr. Reuven Bar-On and adapted to Turkish by Fusun Tekin Acar (2001) was used. Creativity scale was adapted from Zhou and George (2001) in which questions are directed to supervisors, in this case all questions were modified in order to ask participant to evaluate his level of creativity. Lastly, scale developed by Greenhouse, Parasuraman and Wormley (1990) was used for measuring career satisfaction of participants.

Participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the statements on a six-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree"=1 to "strongly agree"= 6.

3.4. Data Analysis and Results

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 21.0 software. Firstly Factor Analysis and Reliability analyses of all measurement instruments were conducted and their factor structure was revised based on the results.

3.4.1. Exploratory Principal Component and Reliability Analyses

As stated before, in this study soft skills are used as an umbrella term which consists of several sub-scales. Table1. indicates Factor and Reliability Analyses of Empathy, Interpersonal Relations, Positive Attitude, Teamwork and Creativity.

Table 2: Factor and Reliability Analysis of Soft Skills Index

SOFT SKILLS	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
1. Empathy		.764	6
I approach empathetically towards others.	.819		
I care not to hurt others' feelings.	.735		
I approach kindly to others.	.711		
I do care what happens to others.	.663		
Even if not stated directly, I can understand others' feelings very well.	.616		
I can easily realize others' emotional needs.	.586		
<i>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.</i>			.807
<i>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</i>			307,136
<i>Approx Chi-Square</i>			
<i>df</i>			15
<i>Sig.</i>			.000
2. Interpersonal Relations		.763	5
I easily make friends.	.771		
People think that I am a social person.	.759		
My friends can bare their heart to me.	.743		
Forming good relationship is important both for my friends and me.	.693		
I can form good relationship with others (people).	.620		
<i>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.</i>			.738
<i>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</i>			
<i>Approx Chi-Square</i>			265,129
<i>df</i>			10
<i>Sig.</i>			.000

3. Positive Attitude		.846	10
I accept personal responsibility.	.767		
I am a lifelong learner.	.752		
I respect to students (learners)	.736		
I possess a positive attitude.	.727		
I can take personal initiative in various situations.	.698		
I possess decision making skills.	.664		
I am able to adapt to various situations.	.577		
I can manage stressful classroom situations.	.566		
I exhibit enthusiasm for my work.	.554		
I can build rapport with learners.	.522		
<i>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.</i>			.864
<i>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</i>			696,691
<i>Approx Chi-Square</i>			
<i>df</i>			45
<i>Sig.</i>			.000
4. Teamwork		.887	6
I share ideas with other team members.	.862		
As a team member, I have problem solving skills.	.824		
I possess collaboration skills.	.798		
I can recognize multiple perspective in the team.	.789		
I contribute to make decisions as a team.	.775		
I have the ability to work with my colleagues.	.747		
<i>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.</i>			.852
<i>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</i>			
<i>Approx Chi-Square</i>			646,294
<i>df</i>			15
<i>Sig.</i>			.000
5. Creativity		.928	9
Comes up with creative solutions and problems.	.864		
Develops adequate plans and schedules for the implementation of new ideas.	.819		
Is a good source of creative ideas.	.800		
Suggests new ways to achieve goals or objectives.	.797		
Often has new and innovative ideas.	.796		
Suggests new ways of performing work tasks.	.795		
Exhibits creativity on the job when given the opportunity	.789		
Comes up with new and practical ideas to improve performance.	.780		
Promotes and champions ideas to others.	.751		
<i>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.</i>			.926
<i>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</i>			1205,834
<i>Approx Chi-Square</i>			
<i>df</i>			36
<i>Sig.</i>			.000

Empathy is made up of 6 items Cronbach's Alpha Level of the scale is (α) .764. One item "I could not realize the others suffering- from something" has been excluded from the analysis due to its lower factor loading (.448). Cronbach's Alpha Level of Interpersonal relations scale is (α) .763, ultimate structure consists of 5 items. Two of them has been excluded from further analysis: First one which is " I cannot express my love" disrupted reliable structure, the second one which is " I cannot get along well with people around me" has lower factor loading (.428). As the third one, Positive Attitude includes 10 items with (α) .846, all of items originally included in the scale has been eligible for further analysis. Sub- scale of Teamwork also show reliable results with its 6 items that all has been considered reliable (α : .887). Lastly Cronbach's Alpha Level of creativity with its 9 items is (α : .928), four items are not considered for further analysis. Beside, Factor and Reliability analyses have not been applied to both Communication and Optimism scale due to lower levels (<.70) of *Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy*.

As shown in Table 2, Career Satisfaction which indicates level of satisfaction with the progress that an individual made toward meeting goals for advancement, overall career goals, goals for development new skills, goals for income and the success achieve in his career has (α): .865 with 5 items.

Table 3: Factor and Reliability Analysis of Career Satisfaction Index

	Factor Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
<i>Career Satisfafaction</i>		.865	5
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for advancement.	.864		
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals.	.857		
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for the development of new skills.	.819		
I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career.	.816		
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for income.	.699		
<i>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.</i>			.795
<i>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity</i>			
<i>Approx Chi-Square</i>			555,941
<i>df</i>			10
<i>Sig.</i>			.000

3.4.2. Regression Analyses Results

First simple regression analysis result shows that empathy explains ($R^2 = .043$) 4.3% variance in career satisfaction. There is also significant and positive relationship between empathy and career satisfaction ($\beta = .207$, $P < .05$).

Table 4: Regression Analysis- Empathy and Career Satisfaction

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant (Constant)	2.787	.527	.207	5.290	.000
Empathy	.321	.107		3.011	.003
Model : R= .207, R ² =.043 F (1,202)=9.066 p<.05					
a. Dependent Variable: Career Satisfaction					

Secondly, interpersonal relations explains ($R^2 = .046$) 4.6% variance in career satisfaction. In the same way, there is a significant and positive relationship between interpersonal relations and career satisfaction ($\beta = .215$, $P < .05$).

Table 5: Regression Analysis-Interpersonal Relations and Career Satisfaction

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant (Constant)	3.101	.407	.215	7.618	.000
Interpersonal Relations	.265	.085		3.132	.002
Model: R= .215, R ² =.046 F (1,202)=9.809 p<.05					
a. Dependent Variable: Career Satisfaction					

positive relationship with career satisfaction ($\beta = .368$, $P < .05$). It seems that there is stronger correlation between these two variables other than empathy and interpersonal relations.

Table 6: Regression Analysis-Positive Attitude and Career Satisfaction

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant (Constant)	1.214	.563	.368	2.155	.032
Positive Attitude	.630	.112		5.619	.000
Model: R= .368, R ² =.135 F (1,202)=31.575 p<.05					
a. Dependent Variable: Career Satisfaction					

Further, Teamwork explains ($R^2=.093$) 9.3% variance in career satisfaction. Again, there is a significant positive relationship between these two variables ($\beta=.304$, $P<.05$).

Table 7: Regression Analysis-Teamwork and Career Satisfaction

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant (Constant)	1.909	.543	.304	3.515	.001
Teamwork	.483	.106		4.543	.000
Model: R=. 304, $R^2=.093$ F (1,202)=20.641 p<.05					
a. Dependent Variable: Career Satisfaction					

Last regression analysis shows that creativity explains ($R^2=.095$) 9.5% variance in career satisfaction. As in between other skills and career satisfaction, there is a significant and positive relationship between creativity and career satisfaction ($\beta=.308$, $P<.05$).

Table 8: Regression Analysis-Creativity and Career Satisfaction

Coefficients ^a					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant (Constant)	2.302	.452	.308	5.094	.000
Creativity	.427	.093		4.600	.000
Model: R=. 308, $R^2=.095$ F (1,202)=21.160 p<.05					
a. Dependent Variable: Career Satisfaction					

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The ultimate aim of this study is to reveal whether acquired soft skills have an impact on satisfaction getting from career. All the skills included in the study (empathy, interpersonal relations, positive attitude, teamwork and creativity) have a positive and significant relationships with career satisfaction. However, explanatory power of the model developed between positive attitude and career satisfaction is higher than that of others, β indicator between (shows correlation in regression analysis) these two are also higher. Results show that an individual who accepts responsibility, take personal initiative, possess decision making skills, is able to adapt easily, manage difficult situations, evaluate every alternative as a learning opportunity thus being a lifelong learner, and overall has a positive attitude will be more satisfied with progress made in the career.

This study's main contribution lies in its argument that without considering soft skills in one's career, how a prospective academician, here Research Assistants, could prepare his students for the future demanding more than technical skills in order to manage themselves and their careers. This also put an emphasis on the

changing perspectives on education and the main responsibilities of universities as the first step on the career path and the changing role of academia as well.

In this study, mostly stated skill "communication" did not give significant results; even it could not be included factor and reliability analyses. For further studies, it could be measured with using different scales to test its effect. To the knowledge of authors, this study is the first one bringing different skills under soft skills umbrella and test main effect on one of the important career outcomes-satisfaction. However, the results should be interpreted with a caution because of the weak explanatory power of each model. This could be ensued from some other variables having an impact on satisfaction together with these skills. It is also possible that there is hierarchy between these skills. In the future, it could be possible to test soft skill construct with different dimensions in different context. Also, composite scale for soft skills could be developed and validated, thus more powerful results could be attained in different occupational groups.

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APPENDIX 1.

Table 1: SOFT SKILLS CONSTRUCT EXAMPLES

STUDY	Soft skills and category explanations
De Villiers, R. (2010). The incorporation of soft skills into accounting curricula: preparing accounting graduates for their unpredictable futures. <i>Meditari Accountancy Research</i> , 18(2), 1-22.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communication Skills: Presentation skills, negotiation skills, active listening skills, questioning techniques, persuasion, conflict resolution, understanding different perceptions, handling objections, giving and receiving feedback, rapport building, written communication and report writing skills. 2. Problem-solving and thinking skills: creativity, analytical skills, framing issues, asking questions, probing and awareness of ambiguities and complexities. 3. Leadership and team work skills: Drive, vision, negotiation, conflict resolution, persuasion, interpretations of social style and situational leadership, service provision, project management, compromise, judgement, sociability, collaborative problem solving, performance management, knowledge and application of decision-making strategies, evidence of approachability, demonstrating a vision, team formation and norm setting, holding others accountable, group work, leadership social skills including empathy, motivation, leading change, a self-deprecating sense of humour and the drive to overcome diversity and failure. 4. Ethical and moral values: cultural awareness, a professional code of conduct and values, cross-cultural, appreciation, diversity management, work ethic, trustworthiness, integrity and honesty. 5. Self-Management: self-awareness and knowledge, self-confidence, time management, self-motivation, realistic self-assessment and self-regulation, work-life balance, responsibility, accountability, goal-setting, workplace organisation, use of electronic tools, personal values, flexibility and adaptability, curiosity, openness to change, CV writing and continuous learning and upgrading of skills
Brill, R. T., Gilfoil, D. M., & Doll, K. (2014). Exploring Predictability Of Instructor Ratings Using A Quantitative Tool For Evaluating Soft Skills Among MBA Students. <i>American Journal of Business Education (Online)</i> , 7(3), 175.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leadership: The ability to effectively guide or direct others. 2. Teamwork: The ability to cooperatively and with a coordinated effort work with others to reach a common cause or interest. 3. Critical Thinking: Disciplined thinking that is clear, rational, open-minded, and informed by evidence which helps one to decipher whether a claim is true or false. 4. Logical Reasoning: The ability to determine a conclusion, by applying a rule to a given precondition. The three types of logical reasoning include deduction, induction, and abduction. 5. Communication Skills: the ability to convey thoughts, opinions, and information to others. This can include speech, writing, or signs. 6. Holistic Thinking: The ability to recognize the larger picture and understand the interrelationship between the parts and the whole
Jungsun (Sunny) Kim Mehmet Erdem Jeoung Woo Byun Hwayoung Jeoung, (2011), "Training soft skills via elearning: international chain	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Personal Quality: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personality: exerts a high level of effort and preserves towards goal attainment. • Self-esteem: believes in own self-worth and maintains a positive view of self.

<p>hotels", International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, Vol. 23 Iss 6 pp. 739 - 763</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sociability: demonstrates understanding, friendliness, adaptability, empathy and politeness in group settings. • Self-management: assess self accurately, sets personal goals, monitors progress, and exhibits self control. • Integrity/honesty: chooses ethical courses of action. <p>2. Thinking skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative thinking: generates new ideas, combines information in new ways. • Decision making: specifies goals and constraints, generates alternatives, considers risks, and evaluates and chooses best alternative. • Problem solving: recognizes problems, devises and implements plan of action. • Knowing how to learn : uses efficient learning techniques to acquire and apply new knowledge and skills. • Reasoning: discovers a rule or principle underlying the relationship between two or more objects and applies it when solving a problem <p>3. Interpersonal skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participates as a member of a team : contributes to group with ideas, suggestions, and effort. • Teaches others: helps others learn. • Serves customers : works and communicates with customers to satisfy their expectations. • Exercises leadership: communicates ideas to justify position, persuades and convinces others. • Negotiates : works toward agreements that involve exchanging resources or resolving divergent interests. • Works with diversity : works well with men and women from diverse backgrounds.
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