

The Impact of Soft Skill Development on Employee Success

HR Training and Development Strategies in the Turkish Business Environment

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Abstract: This study looks at how HR training supports the development of soft skills and, through them, employees' professional success in Turkish companies. Drawing on three semi-structured interviews with HR and Learning and Development professionals from the textile, manufacturing, and technology sectors, it examines how organisations identify soft-skill needs, design development programmes, support the transfer of learning to the workplace, and judge the results. Using Kirkpatrick's framework and thematic analysis in NVivo 12, the findings suggest that soft skills are increasingly treated as strategic competencies tied to leadership, coordination, adaptability, and organisational effectiveness. Measuring their direct impact, though, remains hard: outcomes tend to be read through indirect signals such as performance reviews, promotion readiness, engagement, productivity, and innovation.

Key words: soft skills development, professional success, HR training strategies, competency frameworks, career advancement, talent retention.

JEL: M53, J24, M12

1. Introduction

Professional success no longer rests on technical knowledge alone. Employees are now expected to communicate well, work in teams, adapt to change, and manage relationships inside increasingly complex workplaces (Boyatzis, 2008; Robles, 2012; Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995). These abilities, usually grouped under the label of soft skills, have grown in importance as organisations shift towards more dynamic, collaborative, and performance-oriented structures.

Their importance is widely acknowledged, yet organisations often struggle to make sure these skills are actually developed and put to use. Research on training transfer shows that employees do not always apply what they learn, even after a well-designed programme, because motivation, supervisor support, and wider workplace conditions all get in the way (Blume, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010; Botke, Jansen, Khapova, & Tims, 2018; Salas, Smith-Jentsch, Tannenbaum, & Kraiger, 2012). The problem is sharper in emerging economies, where organisational structures, labour-market conditions, and cultural norms shape how development is designed and carried out. Turkish organisations, in particular, work within a business environment marked by rapid economic change, intense competition, and relatively hierarchical management (Aycan, 2001; Hofstede, 2011).

Despite a large literature establishing that soft skills matter for employability and career progression, relatively little attention has gone to how organisations practically design, deliver, and evaluate soft-skill development. The Kirkpatrick model is the usual yardstick for training effectiveness, sorting outcomes into reaction, learning, behaviour, and results (Kirkpatrick, 1996). In practice, though, most organisations stop at the first two levels, leaving long-term behavioural change and organisational impact under-examined. This study addresses that gap by treating soft-skill development as a concrete organisational process rather than an abstract idea, asking how Turkish HR professionals prioritise these skills, design training, support transfer into daily work, and assess what comes of it.

2. Literature Review

Soft skills are the behavioural and interpersonal competencies that shape how people interact, respond to change, and perform at work. They do not replace technical expertise; they decide how effectively that expertise actually gets used, especially in roles built around communication, coordination, and collaboration (Robles, 2012; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). In organisational settings they usually cover abilities such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, emotional self-regulation, leadership, and problem-solving, competencies that shape workplace interactions, feed into decision-making, and support overall performance. Their weight has grown alongside a broader change in the nature of work: organisations now run on collaboration, fewer routine tasks, and constant cross-functional coordination, so employees are expected not only to handle technical work but also to manage relationships, cope with uncertainty, and adjust to shifting demands.

A good deal of research connects soft skills to career progression and managerial success. Studies of executive and managerial roles suggest that interpersonal effectiveness, leadership,

and emotional competence drive career advancement, influence within the organisation, and long-term professional credibility (Boyatzis, 2008; Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995). The literature also ties soft skills to employability: technical competence may get someone into a role, but lasting success tends to depend on the ability to communicate, collaborate, and respond well under pressure. This is why competency-based approaches increasingly weigh behavioural competencies alongside technical ones when judging overall performance (Boyatzis, 2008; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Soft skills can be developed through a range of HR and learning interventions, but the literature is clear that they rarely improve through passive methods alone. Because they involve behavioural change, judgment, and interaction, they need active engagement, reflection, and continuous feedback rather than one-way content delivery (Noe, 2017; Salas, Smith-Jentsch, Tannenbaum, & Kraiger, 2012). Within HR practice this has pushed organisations towards competency-based training that lines development up with organisational needs and role-specific expectations. Workshops, simulations, role-play, mentoring, coaching, and blended formats are repeatedly singled out as effective, since they let people practise and refine behaviour in realistic or semi-structured settings (Armstrong, 2020; Salas et al., 2012).

None of this works without knowing what is missing in the first place. Prior research stresses systematic needs assessment before any programme is designed: identifying competency gaps through performance appraisals, feedback systems, and competency frameworks keeps training relevant and tied to real organisational objectives, and without it programmes risk drifting away from actual workplace needs (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). The whole effort is also shaped by wider organisational factors, such as, resource availability, leadership priorities, and how much behavioural competence is genuinely valued (Noe, 2017). These all together influence both how training is run and what impact it is seen to have (Noe, 2017).

The best-known framework for evaluating training effectiveness is Kirkpatrick's four-level model, which sorts outcomes into reaction, learning, the transfer of learning into workplace behaviour, and overall organisational results (Kirkpatrick, 1996; Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). It stays relevant because it links training design to both individual and organisational outcomes, and for soft skills it is especially useful: it draws a sharp line between attending a programme and actually changing behaviour. A course can be well received and still leave no mark on the workplace if the new skills never get used. That makes the behaviour and results levels the telling ones, particularly for communication, leadership, and teamwork, where the whole point is behavioural application (Blume, Baldwin, & Huang, 2010).

The model has limits, though, and the literature names them. Soft-skill outcomes tend to be gradual, context-dependent, and hard to measure directly, so organisations fall back on indirect signals such as performance evaluations, engagement, retention, or managerial judgment. The model also says little about how organisational and cultural context shapes transfer. The structure, leadership style, and workplace norms all affect whether employees actually apply what they learned. In other words, Kirkpatrick offers a valuable scaffold, but it works best alongside a broader reading of the contextual forces acting on training outcomes.

This paper defines 'transfer' as how knowledge and skills gained in training get used back at work, which is one of the recurring challenges in the literature. Attending a programme does

not automatically change behaviour. Whether new competencies stick depends on motivation, organisational support, and the chance to practise once training is over (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Blume et al., 2010). This is doubly true for soft skills, because they live in social interaction: communication, leadership, and collaboration are all shaped by team dynamics, managerial expectations, and the surrounding culture, so transfer cannot be treated as a purely individual matter.

Empirical work shows that supportive conditions make sustained change far more likely. Managerial encouragement, peer support, behavioural modelling, and structured feedback all help embed new behaviour into daily practice (Botke, Jansen, Khapova, & Tims, 2018; Salas et al., 2012). The opposite conditions hold it back: rigid hierarchies, limited feedback, heavy workloads, and low autonomy all narrow the room employees have to apply new skills, a particular concern in high-power-distance settings, where formal authority and hierarchical structure shape communication and behaviour (Hofstede, 2011). The lesson the literature draws is that transfer should be read as a dynamic interaction between individual capability and organisational conditions, which is also why the same programme can produce very different results across organisations (Blume et al., 2010; Botke et al., 2018).

It is important to mention that the value of soft skill development becomes undeniable when organizations are forced to confront sudden macroeconomic shifts. For instance, research examining the COVID-19 crisis reveals that business resilience hinges directly on human capabilities like rapid opportunity recognition and agile resource use. By proactively cultivating these adaptive mindsets and problem-solving skills within the general workforce, companies don't just safeguard their operations; they empower individual employees to turn unpredictable challenges into pathways for professional success (Marinescu & Veith, 2022; Veith et. al, 2023; Veith & Grigore, 2023).

At the individual level, competencies such as emotional intelligence, interpersonal effectiveness, and leadership are repeatedly linked to promotion, managerial credibility, and broader perceptions of professional success, including influence within the organisation and long-term career sustainability (Boyatzis, 2008; Judge et al., 1995). Beyond the individual, soft skills also feed organisational performance: effective communication, collaboration, and leadership improve team performance and coordination, and settings where teamwork and leadership are central tend to gain the most from developing behavioural competence (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002).

The connection to performance, however, is rarely direct or easy to measure. Its effects usually run through organisational systems, management practices, and context: better communication or leadership may show up as higher engagement, lower turnover, or stronger collaboration, which then feed performance only indirectly. Soft skills are best understood, then, not as isolated variables but as capabilities embedded in wider organisational processes, with an impact that emerges over time and resists being pinned on any single intervention (Boyatzis, 2008; Harter et al., 2002). Taken together, this body of work supports a qualitative, interview-based study of Turkish organisations: the theoretical frameworks are strong, but they say little about how these ideas play out in specific settings, especially in emerging economies. The present study therefore treats the Kirkpatrick model and the transfer perspective not as rigid structures but as analytical tools for exploring how HR professionals actually interpret and implement soft-skill development.

3. Research methodology

The study uses a qualitative, exploratory design, which suits a question about organisational processes and managerial perspectives rather than measurable relationships between variables (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were the main method, since they strike a balance between a guided agenda and the freedom to follow whatever a participant finds worth explaining. The sample is small and purposive. It is formed of three HR and training professionals from organisations operating in Turkey, in the textile, manufacturing, and technology sectors. The aim was never statistical generalisation but depth.

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom, in Turkish, so participants could speak comfortably and in detail. Each ran roughly 20 to 30 minutes and, with consent, was recorded, transcribed, and then translated into English with care for meaning and tone. Reflective notes written straight after each interview captured context that the transcripts alone might miss. The Kirkpatrick model framed the analysis across its four levels, reaction, learning, behaviour, and results. The analysis covered how organisations set priorities and identify needs at the input stage, and how they read learning, behavioural change, and organisational impact at the outcome stage (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Goldstein & Ford, 2002).

Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages, combining deductive coding guided by Kirkpatrick with inductive codes that let new themes surface from what participants actually said. Coding was done by hand, for closer engagement with nuance and context, and then supported by NVivo 12. Auto-coding, word clouds, text searches, and word trees served as exploratory aids, not as findings in their own right.

4. Results

Across all three organisations, participants were consistent on one point. Soft skills are not a secondary or optional extra but something they treat as strategically important for individual and organisational performance. How those skills are defined and ranked, though, shifts with the sector. A recurring theme is that soft skills feed leadership development, coordination, adaptability, and long-term effectiveness, even as the same participants admit they struggle to make learned behaviour stick in everyday work, and to measure its impact with any precision.

At the input level, soft skills now sit close to the centre of HR strategy, though the emphasis varies. The textile company tied them mainly to leadership readiness and managing relationships within teams, the manufacturing company stressed communication on the shop floor, delegation, and day-to-day efficiency, and the technology company framed them in forward-looking terms such as, adaptability, collaboration, creativity, innovation. All three described needs analysis as a structured process drawing on performance evaluations, 360-degree feedback, employee surveys, and competency assessments, and all favoured applied, experiential formats over lectures, with the technology firm leaning hardest on digital and microlearning tools. As one participant put it, "soft skills are integrated into training programmes to support leadership development and improve communication across teams" (T1, Textile HR Manager).

On learning, participants saw technical and soft skills as complementary rather than

competing. Technical proficiency dominates at entry level, but as people move into supervisory and managerial roles the behavioural side, such as communication, delegation, feedback, relationship management, becomes the deciding factor: “technical skills are important at early career stages, but soft skills become more critical for career progression and leadership roles” (T1). Competency frameworks recurred as the main way of turning abstract qualities into observable, manageable behaviours; the designs differed (a multi-level scale in textiles, a leadership-aligned model in manufacturing, an awareness-application-mastery progression in technology), but the purpose was shared, a common language for behavioural expectations (Barutçugil, 2004; Sabuncuoğlu, 2013). Reaction-level satisfaction was treated as a weak signal: enjoying a session is not the same as benefiting from it, so positive feedback mostly fed back into design rather than counting as success.

Transfer was described as the hardest part of the whole process with one of managers mentioning that “training is only valuable if employees apply what they learn in real work situations” (T2, Manufacturing HR Manager). Managerial support came through as the strongest enabler, via follow-up conversations, coaching, mentoring, and ongoing feedback; the main barriers were hierarchical structures, heavy workloads, and time pressure, all of which limit chances to try new skills out. In the Turkish setting, hierarchical norms seem to weigh especially heavily, sometimes narrowing the open communication and experimentation that transfer needs (Aycan & Kanungo, 2000; Hofstede, 2011). Monitoring relied on performance reviews, managerial observation, peer feedback, and project-based evaluation, but stayed an ongoing managerial judgment rather than a precise measurement system, so it tends to catch behavioural trends rather than exact figures.

At the results level, participants spoke of professional success in concrete organisational terms, such as, promotion, leadership readiness, improved performance, internal mobility, and tied those outcomes to behavioural competence rather than technical skill alone. At the organisational level they linked soft skills to engagement, retention, productivity, safety, and innovation, but were careful not to claim training alone produced them; the relationship was described as contributory, one element within a wider system, not a clean causal line. The cross-case picture is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Cross-case comparison of soft-skill development practices in Turkish companies. Source: Own research.

Category	T1 (Textile)	T2 (Manufacturing)	T3 (Technology / Service)
Organisational indicators	Cultural development, internal coordination	Safety, quality, productivity	Innovation, customer experience, engagement
Transfer mechanisms	Feedback cycles, performance discussions, managerial follow-up	Supervisor monitoring, action plans, daily work observation	Project application, coaching, peer communities, continuous feedback
Success indicators	Promotion, leadership readiness, talent development	Productivity, safety, quality, team coordination	Innovation, customer experience, employee engagement

5. Discussion

One observation runs through all three interviews: soft-skill development is treated as practical and necessary, not symbolic. Participants linked these skills directly to everyday problems, such as, communication breakdowns, leadership under pressure, cross-functional coordination, which fits research placing soft skills at the centre of organisational effectiveness (Boyatzis, 2008; Robles, 2012). The pattern also matches the logic of Kirkpatrick's model: the companies engage strongly with learning and behavioural application, while measuring direct organisational results stays the harder, fuzzier task.

The strategic elevation of soft skills makes sense against the Turkish labour market, where employers regularly flag gaps in communication, teamwork, and adaptability (Aycan, 2001; Sabuncuoğlu, 2013). Seen that way, this is a response to a real structural problem, not an imported management fashion. The career-stage pattern, such as, technical skills first, behavioural skills increasingly decisive later, echoes competency-based accounts of long-term success (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). On needs analysis, the organisations look fairly mature, drawing on several data sources and using competency frameworks to turn vague qualities into observable behaviours, and they favour experiential delivery, adapted to their operational context, over passive instruction (Noe, 2017; Salas et al., 2012).

Transfer is where intention meets friction. The companies clearly know the challenge and try to support transfer through coaching, feedback, and monitoring, but hierarchy and operational pressure keep shaping how well that works, hierarchy acting, in effect, as a double-edged sword that lends structure while discouraging initiative. And although participants confidently connected training to promotions, engagement, and productivity, establishing real causality would need pre/post data or control groups, so the organisations sensibly fall back on indirect indicators. The clearest lesson for practice is that managerial involvement and a tight link between training and actual work situations matter more than programme content on its own.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to understand how HR departments in Turkish companies design, deliver, and evaluate soft-skill training, and how those efforts feed professional success and organisational performance. The picture that emerges is of practice that is more sophisticated and context-aware than the "emerging economy" label might suggest. Soft skills have moved from tactical add-on to strategic priority, recognised everywhere as leadership and career enablers but interpreted differently by sector, cultural transformation in textiles, operational harmony in manufacturing, innovation agility in technology, and by career stage. Needs analysis is multi-source, competency frameworks turn intangibles into measurable milestones, and delivery leans on deliberate, experiential practice.

Transfer is the pivotal challenge, with managers and supervisors at the centre, amplified by hierarchy yet constrained by cultural and communication barriers. Level-4 outcomes, though based on perception rather than hard metrics, were confidently linked to promotions, engagement, productivity, and innovation. Together these patterns confirm Kirkpatrick's continued

usefulness while bringing out distinctly Turkish features: hierarchy as a double-edged influence on transfer, sector contingencies driving priorities, and a collectivist framing that tends to define success in organisational terms (Aycan, 2001). The contribution is partly theoretical, extending Kirkpatrick and the transfer perspective to a hierarchical, emerging-market context, and partly a practical benchmark documenting how capable domestic HR practice has become.

The limits are real. Three companies in three sectors give depth but not breadth: SMEs, family firms, the public sector, and multinational subsidiaries are absent, as are regional contrasts between Istanbul headquarters and Anatolian factories. The data came only from HR and L&D leaders, so it may miss gaps between policy and what employees and line managers actually experience, and the Level-4 links rest on HR perceptions rather than longitudinal tracking, which risks optimism bias. A snapshot also cannot show skill retention over the six to twelve months the transfer literature considers decisive (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). For practice, the findings point to investing in managers as coaches, giving smaller firms simple competency frameworks, and tailoring training tightly to each sector's daily pressures rather than relying on generic leadership content.

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