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Rosli Ibrahim, Ali Boerhannoeddin, Kazeem Kayode Bakare,

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The effect of soft skills and training methodology on employee performance

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effect of soft skill acquisition and the training methodology adopted on employee work performance. In this study, the authors study the trends of research in training and work performance in organisations that focus on the acquisition of technical or 'hard skills' for employee training and evaluating work performance. This study was conducted to redirect the focus of employee training and development goals to the acquisition of soft skills, which have a very high and lasting impact on improving employee performance.

Design/Methodology/Approach

This study adopted a quantitative research approach. Questionnaires were administered to selected managers and executives of a few Malaysian private companies. The questionnaire was specifically designed to examine the competencies of various Malaysian-based company managers, executives and supervisors who had undergone a soft skills training program over a period of a few weeks or months. These soft skills training programs were not conducted consecutively, but rather with a break or 'time-space' in between each session. The target population in this study consisted of 810 employees from nine companies. The sample size was 260 trainees who were selected from the population with a 95 percent confidence level within 0.05 risk of sampling error.

Findings

Using regression analysis, this study estimated the relationships between employees' acquisition of soft skills, the training methodology adopted by the trainer, and work performance. The results

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indicate that the two predictors—soft skill acquisition and training methodology—significantly predict employee performance. The authors propose the need for employers to redesign the methodology for training employees in soft skills. Based on the findings, 'time-spaced learning' is highly potent in undermining the hindrance associated with training transfer.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study help to raise the awareness of employers, human resource managers, professional and industrial experts, and the government to rethink the need to improve soft skills training methodologies. Specifically, this can be achieved by giving the trainees 'space' or breaks to practice, apply and internalise what they have learned intermittently during the training program. This will enhance employee performance, and consequently, organisational performance. These findings also inform company managers that the time-spaced learning method enables employees to acquire soft skills more effectively, which will invariably bring about positive behaviour changes in employees towards their work and co-workers.

Originality/value

The originality of this research is based on the fact that the results is peculiar to Malaysia, while most of the literatures on training methodology especially the time-space and softskill have focused on developed countries. Furthermore, the article emphasized that time-space learning training methodology helps employees in transferring knowledge acquired during training to their work. The research also emphasized that soft-skills acquisition brings about increase in employee work performance. This research shows that 14.5% increase employee's work performance in the selected companies is due to their employees' acquisition of soft skills and that 27.9% increase in the employees' performance is based time-space training methodology.

This makes the investigation on the effects of soft skills acquisition and the training methodology adopted on employee performance very important for organisational survival.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Time-Spaced Learning, Work Performance, Culture, Training

Introduction

To survive in the competitive and dynamic business the world today, employee and needs to possess both soft skills and hard skills. Accordingly, most employers today expect workers to demonstrate and excel in many 'softer' skills such as teamwork and group development (Rothwell, Arnold 2007). Employers are interested in tapping into vital soft skills obtained by employees during study and periods of work experience, rather than just degree-specific knowledge (Raybould, Sheedy, 2005). Maniscalco (2010), refers soft skills to "cluster of qualities, habits, personality traits, attitudes and social graces" which everyone tends to possesses in varying degrees, and are needed for everyday life as much as they are needed required for work. Similarly, Lorenz (2009) refers to soft skills as "a cluster of personal qualities, habits, attitudes and social graces that make someone a good employee and a compatible coworker". Gibbons, Wood and Lange (2000) maintain that the term "soft" skills are synonymous with core skills, key competencies and personal skills. Empirical studies have been carried out in several areas in Asia, specifically Malaysia. For instance, a study by Shariffah (2013) revealed that on soft skills in Malaysian tertiary education being a major concern of Malaysian higher school of learning. Further more, Staffan Nilsson (2010) study on enhancing individual employability found that hard formal and technical vocational skills were considered to be of declining importance. Generally, these hard skills are considered less important in relation to individual employability and performance compared to different forms of soft skills. This indicates connection between employees' soft-skills and performance. Study on the importance of soft

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skills in the workplace, found that the soft skills gap caused the high unemployment statistic of graduates Seetha (2014). Soft skills played an important role in determining the success of a project or work performance, and that soft skills required for the success of organization.

To achieve a high work performance culture, an organisation must provide its employees training and development programs designed specifically to instil, build and change their attitudes and/or behaviours towards several organisational functions. As stated by Heathfield, (2008), *training* is an important element in creating a high work performance culture.

The fact that training is one of the solutions that enable organisations to achieve a high work performance culture, it is important to know the *kind of training and development program* that organisations need to use in order to change the culture, i.e. the attitude and/or behaviour of all the employees in the organisation. This attitude will depict the values and practices of the workers and enhance their work performance. In today's business world, the skills training for employees can be generally divided into two main categories: *hard skills and soft skills*. The term 'hard skills' normally refers to *technical or administrative procedures* related to an organisation's business (Maniscalco, 2010). On the other hand, the term 'soft skills' refers to the *personal qualities, habits, attitudes and social graces* that make someone a good employee and a compatible co-worker (Lorenz, 2006). To be competitive in the business world today, one needs to possess soft skills in addition to hard skills. It is often said that hard skills get one a job but soft skills keep one in the job. According to Gibbons-Wood and Lange (2000), the term 'soft skills' is synonymous with core skills, key competencies and personal skills.

Hard skills are typically easier to observe, quantify and measure. They are also easier to train, acquire and deal with because, most of the time, the skill sets are not brand new to the learner and no unlearning or behavioural change is involved. On the other hand, soft skills are typically

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difficult to observe, quantify, measure and to deal with (Yen *et al.*, 2001). For example, skills such as communicating, listening, dealing with people, managing people, etc. play a large role in relating to people. Some people make friends easily, for instance, which would be considered a valuable skill in the world of sales. In fact, soft skills include competencies that span a wide range: self-awareness, one's attitude towards managing one's career, handling critics and not taking criticism personally, taking risks, getting along with people, etc. (Alboher and Marci, 2008). Most employers today expect workers to demonstrate and excel in many 'softer' skills, such as teamwork and group development (Rothwell, 1998).

Statement of the Problem

The decision makers and management of many organisations, both government and private, must ensure that their employees meet certain requirements in terms of academic and technical competencies in various knowledge areas. These hard skills include technical subjects like engineering, computers, accounting, finance, marketing, operations, etc. However, it is not clear whether the 'softer' skills are seen as significant factors in employee competency, and if so, which soft skills are considered vital to the employees' work performance within the organisation. The identification of various skill sets is becoming necessary in differentiating high potential and non-high potential employees in the present global market (Boyatzis, 2006; Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2008).

Meanwhile, managers and executives of many companies across many industries are yet to fully recognise the importance of soft skills training on employee performance. In fact, some managers have misconceptions about soft skills itself. Many lament on the huge amounts of money spent on such training; they cannot really account for its return due to the inability of the trainees to transfer what they have learnt to their jobs. Many companies place greater emphasis

on professional certification programs and training that constitute technical skills, i.e. 'hard skills', than on human skills, i.e. soft skills. As hard skills are more directly relevant to the employees' daily job functions and activities. This has become the norm for most companies to resist investing in soft skills training and development for their employees.

Consequently, over-reliance on technical and managerial skills at the expense of human skills or soft skills, which are deemed critical to the success of a company's management, may jeopardise the company's mission in the long run (Muzio *et al.*, 2007). In addition, developing only the hard skills of employees makes them more task-oriented and rule adherent but less relationship- and initiative-driven. Study conducted by Bailly and Léné (2013), found an increase in the demand for soft skills for recruitment and recognition by the employer. The further cautioned that this increment in demand for softer skills may caused the service labour process to become highly personified. Many CEOs and managers of companies nowadays are spending significant time and energy on designing programs, attending to details, and monitoring the execution of routine tasks only. As a result, they neglect to address emotional issues in a timely fashion, and sometimes create unnecessary stress and unhealthy working relationships with their co-workers and clients. We conclude that to be competitive in the business world today, one needs to possess soft skills, which, according to Gibbons-Wood and Lange (2000), are synonymous with core skills, key competencies and personal skills.

To ensure that employees, upon receiving the soft skills training program, acquire the skills taught and change their behaviour and attitude to depict their values and practices, the manner in which the program is conducted, i.e. the training methodology, should also be reviewed. According to Mandakini (2002), training methodology includes the methods, materials, techniques and resources used to implement the training or workshop and transfer new

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knowledge, skills and attitudes to participants. Various training methodologies have been used to develop soft skills, such as demonstrations by the trainer, discussions and debates, lecture presentations, role-playing, case studies, game activities, and electronic media such as TV, video and film. It is estimated that more than USD30 billion is spent on classroom (off-the-job) training programs every year (Jacobs, 2003; Noe, 1999). The lecture or classroom approach has also been described as the most frequently used training methodology (Noe, 1999). The pattern of trials used during training, if distributed over time (spaced out across the entire learning process), are superior at generating long-term memories than if they are presented at very short intervals (on consecutive days) (Sutton *et al.*, 2002). According to Simone and Nale (2010), the method of spacing out the training, known as 'time-spaced learning', is superior to massed training, which conducted consecutively, in terms of transfer quality, self-reported sales competence and organisational outcomes. Although the time-spaced learning method has been in existence for a long time, its application in the business training industry has been minimal compared to other training methods, as current literature about spacing out the learning is built more on education and architectural embodiments of educational philosophies (Monahan, 2002).

Objectives

Many organisations are now slowly realising the importance of soft skills development for their employees. They have begun to invest heavily in the training and development of their workforce to develop their critical skills, attitude/behaviour and knowledge, and to change the existing organisational culture to a higher work performance culture. The objective of this research, therefore, is to examine the influence of soft skills and training methodologies, specifically using 'time-spaced learning', on employee performance.

Literature Review

Soft Skills

According to Maniscalco (2010), soft skills refer to '[a] cluster of qualities, habits, personality traits, attitudes and social graces' that everyone possesses in varying degrees and are needed for everyday life as much as they are needed for work. Lorenz (2006) refers to soft skills as qualities that make someone a good employee and a compatible co-worker'. Nevertheless, according to Gibbons *et al.* (2000), the term 'soft skills' is synonymous with core skills, key competencies and personal skills. Therefore, soft skills are the non-cognitive abilities that are innate in individuals and are necessary for good social relationships at the workplace. Soft skills are typically difficult to observe, quantify and measure. Others are extremely punctual or able to make rational decisions under pressure. A person may also have the ability to work with co-workers from other cultures or learn a new language quickly. According to Zedeck and Goldstein (2000), soft skills such as dealing with conflict and gathering and sharing information are highly sought after by organisations. Leigh *et al.* (1999) assert that workplace competencies include problem solving, communication skills, personal qualities and work ethics, which are soft skills categories.

Studies conducted by Campbell (1990) proposed eight dimensions of job performance taxonomy which are Job-specific proficiency Non–job-specific proficiency, Core technical proficiency, General soldiering proficiency, Effort and leadership, Personal discipline Physical fitness and military bearing. Through the process of sorting out critical incidents, Borman and Brush (1993) agreed upon categories of management performance. Stevens and Campion (1999) developed a taxonomy that describes five dimensions of soft skills: communication, problem solving, conflict resolution, goal setting and planning, and task coordination. Studies on financial success conducted by the Carnegie Foundation of Advance Teaching (CFAT), and later confirmed by the

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Carnegie Institute of Technology (CIT), discovered that 15% of a person's financial success is due to the knowledge that he/she gained, and 85% of his/her success is due to skills in 'human engineering', such as the individual's personality and ability to lead people, i.e. soft skills (Carnegie, 1981). Developing the soft skills of an organisation's personnel is very crucial for the effectiveness of companies. Effective teamwork requires mastering specific abilities, such as leadership, coordination and conflict management. This implies that if higher education institutes want to meet the requirements of their students' future professional lives, they must address the acquisition of such soft skills and provide the technology to support them (Rugarcia *et al.*, 2000).

Many studies have been carried out on how the personal managerial skills of a project manager can affect the performance of a project. These studies allowed clients to have a better understanding of project managers, thus enabling them to select the appropriate project manager for their proposed project. For instance, Fryer dated back to 1985 listed social skills, decision-making skills, problem-handling skills, opportunity recognition skills, and management of changes as personal attributes that affect project success. Acquisition and usage of skills as well as provision of training effects an area of the economy that is predicted to have massive jobs growth (Nickson, Warhurst, Cullen & Watt, 2003). Pinto and Slevin (1988) reported that the critical success of a project depends on 10 factors. These are project mission, top management support, project schedules, client consultation, personnel recruitment, technical tasks, client acceptance, monitoring and feedback, communication and trouble-shooting**.** Softskill acquisition amomg the executive stimulates the discovery of effective approaches and solutions and innovation with increasing potential to improve the organization wellbeing (Massaro, Maurizio, Roland, and Andrea, 2016). Soft-skill enables employee to propel change in organization (Massaro, et..al 2016).

Nilsson (2010) found that competence, interpersonal skills and personal characteristics significantly influence the employability of individuals. Sail and Alavi (2009) assert that interpersonal skills increase the knowledge of employees after they receive training. Olivier *et al.* (2009) mention that the structuring and awareness features of room-based collaborative platforms can enhance the learning experience of soft skills (communication and leadership skills) courses. Shyamala *et al.* (2009) second that the infusion acquisition of soft skills remains highly concentrated on specific items/skills for both coursework and training. Pilar *et al.* (2009) assert that the skills that assure the success of teamwork, such as communication, leadership, negotiation, or team management. Evidence shows that there are links between performance and skills and that relationship is the main impetus to increase skills, as well as one of the main forces legitimising them (Grugulis & Stoyanova 2011). Thus, it is clear from the abovementioned literature that communication skills, problem-solving skills, leadership, teamwork and interpersonal skills are some of the categories of soft skills that have been empirically tested and proven to improve employee performance and project success.

Work Performance

Work performance has always been an important issue in any organisation. Many organisations, as a result of a competitive global business environment (Neely, 1999), have made training and development programmes a routine exercise in order to maintain high work performance. Notably, the overall effectiveness and productivity of an organisation have always been attributed to high work performance, as it has been regarded as a core concept. Thus, the assessment and monitoring of work performance have contributed largely to organisational outcomes and success (Eccles, 1991). That is why an organisation, at all times, needs to develop a strong organisational performance culture while also maintaining their goals and objectives.

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Bacharach and Bamberger (1995) argue that work performance is not only influenced by individual performance but also by situational constraints. The situational perspective, according to Sonnentag and Frese (2001), refers to factors in the individuals' environment that stimulate, support or hinder performance; it encompasses approaches that focus on workplace factors. Arguably, there is a link between knowledge skills, effort and job performance; this has to be taken into consideration in the situational perspective in the models of job performance. These links may be moderated by certain situational factors, such as soft skills training (Izadikhah *et al.*, 2010). However, on the empirical level, the conceptualisation of situational constraints is based on the factors that are relevant to the constraints (Bacharach and Bambarger, 1995).

According to Weisenger (1999), more empirical data are coming out all the time to show that soft skills is another variable to reckon with when it comes to an organisation's performance. Recent developments in the interest in soft skill competencies appeared to be connected to work success. It is no wonder, then, that organisations are more willing to invest in soft skills development for better work performance, especially at top executive levels (Homer, 2001). However, some researchers have questioned performance improvement programs, such as soft skills competencies, as to whether it does in fact lead to significant improvements in an organisation's performance (Robert and Donald, 2001). It was argued that the provision of information and feedback about business activities and customer-related issues are now the focus of managers. This information is believed to solve performance-related problems (Lawler, 1998; Dean and Evans, 1994).

In addition, Spencer (1994) stated that the success of work performance improvement programs depends on the system that the management set up in an organisation that can adversely improve employee performance. Blackburn and Rosen (1993) and Heneman *et al.*

(2000) support this view: they share the opinion that employees should be given more say and decision-making opportunities in an organisation if job performance must improve. Even if all the required information is given to employees, work performance in an organisation will still depend on the ability of the employee to utilise the given information to improve his job performance (Anderson *et al.*, 1994). Moreover, for employees to retain and transfer skills acquired during training for performance improvement, the training method and style adopted by the trainer also play a vital role. The problem of the inability to transfer training by the trainee might not really lie in the training approach in itself, but in the learning style embedded in the training methodology (Rogers, 1996).

Training Methodology

Several stages must occur before training methods are selected. First, needs analysis should be conducted to define the problem that the training is expected to solve. Training is used to address knowledge, skill or attitude deficiencies.There are several learning activities that take place within the workplace training. Off-the-job training is giving the high relevance and validity of the training to the individual. However, the review of literatures on training methodologies like adult learning showed that adults as learners have specifics characteristics that set them apart from children. These characteristics vary from author to author; however, there seems to be a consensus in the literature (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, 1990; Rogers, 1996, Jarvis, 1995; Cross, 1981) on some common characteristics that have an impact on learning efficacy and the overall classroom experience. Maria and Elena (2008) summarised the various characteristics as follows:

Adults participate in the learning process with specific intents, goals and expectations;

Adults already have certain knowledge and experience as well as fixed perspectives;

Adults have already developed personal styles of learning;

Adults are bound to self-directed activities throughout their lives

Adults have to deal with certain obstacles in their learning process

Space learning is an adult learning method. The significance of the 'spacing effect', first discovered over a century ago, describes the observation that humans and animals are able to remember things more effectively if learning is distributed over a long period rather than all at once. Brown (2005) defines learning spaces as spaces that encompass the full range of places in which learning occurs, from real to virtual, from classroom to chat room. Hence, we can describe or define 'time-spaced learning' as the time and opportunity given for the participants to apply, practice and internalise what is learned in the classroom into their real-workplace environment. Nevertheless, at this point, no single definition captures all of the nuances of technology-impacted learning spaces. This effect is believed to be closely connected to the process of memory consolidation, whereby short-term memories are stabilised into long-term ones, yet the underlying neural mechanism involved has long remained unclear.

The extent to which trainees have sufficient time and resources available to practice and internalise what they have learnt determines the extent to which the training content will be used or constrained on the job (Noe, 1986; Russ-Eft, 2002). These opportunities to use training on the job has been defined as 'the extent to which a trainee is provided with or actively obtains work experiences relevant to the tasks for which he or she was trained' (Ford *et al.*, 1992). The training method adopted has been reported to have a significant impact on the transfer of both hard skills and soft skills (Arthur, 1996). Simone and Nale (2010) argued that the space training method helps in transferring quality aspects of training. However, current literature on learning spaces is built on education and architectural embodiments of educational philosophies (Monahan, 2002). In this study, the 'time-spaced learning' approach will be favoured as a

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variable of interest for training methodologies. Although space learning has been in existence for a long time, its application in industry has been minimal compared to other training methods. Further, the 'space effect' of this approach on the transfer of the acquired skills during training has not been critically articulated in literature. Cannon's (1988) extensive synthesis of research on the impact of the environment on learning provides a starting point for the space learning discussion.

Various studies had discovered that spacing learning over time helps people learn more quickly and remember better and it has been found to be very effective in various areas, from sales training to language learning to medicine (Logan, Haber, Viehman & Castel, 2012). In practice, this mean that a training or learning program with 'spaced learning' in mind, will educate the learners with a concept or learning objectives and then allow a period of time (days, weeks, or months) for the trainees to experiment what they have learnt (Kolb, 2005). Then the trainees or learners come back to reinforce the previous learning, and perhaps to share their positive experiences with the trainer. The trainer then encourage to continue applying the new concepts, while continue with the subsequent training learning objectives. This might involve a few or many repetitions, depending on how complex and detail the content is.

Active participation of the learners and opportunity to experiment what had been learned, will have an impact in changing the learners old habit to new desired habits (Rogers, 2002). Giving 'time space break' to experiment what trainees had learned as opposed to massed learning (straight consecutive days learning style) will impact on the skills and invariably increase employees' workperformance. This claim is supported by Kolb's model of experiential learning; "a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". Kolb articulates that "active experimentation" create new experiences to the learners. In addition,

this learning style is further supported by Sutton et. al. (2002), who asserts that 'spaced learning' is more superior that 'massed learning'. Space effect is one of the most reliable method of learning and behaviour change. However, it is one of the least utilized learning methods in the workplace Thalheimer, (2006). Studies have shown that spacing learning over a period of time produces substantial learning benefits resulted from different mechanisms, including those based on repetitions and on other factors. Spaced learning repetition effects deserve attention since the enormous research literature supporting it use.

For instance, a one-day workshop to be delivered by a trainer in a classroom could be spaced out by adding additional repetitions of key learning points either before or after the workshop. This could be done by having the learners read the training modules or chapters before coming to the workshop and after the workshop to have them practice in their real workplace after the training. This will augment different types of primary learning events and facilitate long-term retention and transfer (Thalheimer, 2006).

The research gap between this present study and the previous studies is the 'time space learning' training methodology approach which has not been critically articulated in previous literatures. Therefore, 'spaced learning' method, will be favored as the variable of interest for in this study.

Conceptual Framework

Work performance is influenced by many different factors, including incentives, remuneration, the training content or curriculum delivered to the trainees, the training methodology adopted and the trainer's effectiveness in conducting the training (Jacobs, 2003). To provide a clear framework for the research, some of the soft skills commonly referred in this study are self-confidence or self-assurance (Gallup, 2011), interpersonal or human relations (Strang, 2007;

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Katz, 1991; Honey, 1988), communications (Mantel *et al.*, 2004; Leigh *et al.*, 1999; Lussier, 2003), attitude (Mueller, 2011), leadership (Mantel *et al.*, 2004; Rosenau, 1998), management skills (Boyatzis, 1982), creative thinking (Rosenau, 1998), and problem solving (Leigh *et al.*, 1999; Lussier, 2003). In this paper, training methodology refers to the methods, materials, techniques and resources used to implement the training or workshop and to transfer new knowledge, skills and attitudes to the participants (Mandakini, 2002). Thus, developing employees' soft skills, coupled with the adoption of a suitable training methodology, will improve employee performance. Figure 1.0 shows the conceptual model of the relationship between the various variables.
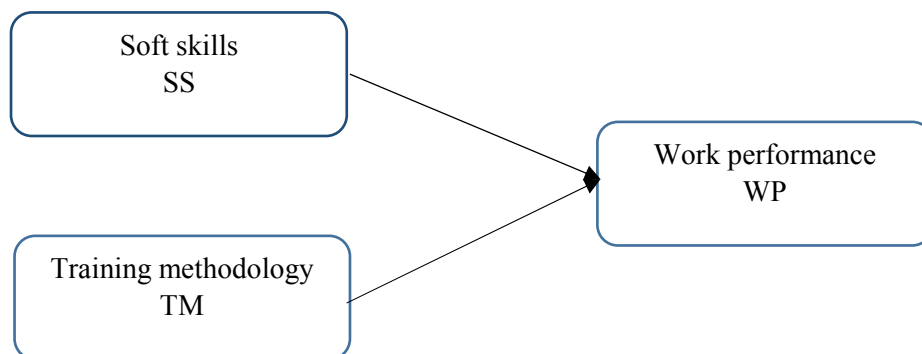

Figure 1.0: Conceptual model of the soft skills training, training methodology and work performance

As previously mentioned, an organisation's performance culture has to do with its employees' behaviour and attitudes. Soft skills (SS) is an independent variable (IV) that must be incorporated in the training and development curriculum to enhance individual work performance. This SS independent variable is connected to a dependent variable (DV): work performance (WP). In addition, the training methodology (TM) of time-spaced plays a significant role in the transfer of the soft skills learned to a new desired behaviour and attitude, which, in turn, enhances work performance. Based on the postulated model, the following hypotheses were tested:

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H1: Soft skills training influences employee performance.
H2: Training methodology adopted influences employee performance.

To verify these hypotheses, the researchers utilised a quantitative methodology research design in the form of a survey to invite responses from participants who had gone through a soft skills training program that adopted the time-spaced learning methodology at a Malaysian private company.

Research Design and Methodology

This research was designed to accommodate regression analysis. Thus, the questionnaires were constructed based on the theories and previous researches. There were 55 questions to address three factors namely: soft skills, training methodology and work performance. Demographic variables were also included, covering information on gender, age, work experience and the employee's position.

Instrument Validation

A panel of expert judges reviewed the questionnaire for content validity. Professionals and academicians in Human Resource Training & Development, including specialists in the fields of evaluation, education and busines scrutinised the survey and conducted a series of revisions. First, the experts were asked to provide suggestions on how the researchers could improve the items. To establish the validity index, the researcher used the formula and the input from the expert to establish the content validity index (CVI) for each item. The validity index was established for each item in the questionnaire and for the instrument to be accepted as valid, with the condition that the average index of all items should be 0.7 or above (Amin, 2005). Second, the questionnaire was piloted with 98 trainees (and respondents) from a few Malaysian private

organisations in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The reliability test of Cronbach's Alpha (1960) was estimated to be 0.88, which is considered acceptable.

Soft Skills Scale (Independent Variable)

The questionnaire for the soft skills scale was adapted from different professional training programs on soft skills, which are all backed by academic literature and years of experience in the business training industries. The trainer gave the trainees 25 items on the 5-point likert scale questionnaire to test their competency level in many areas of soft skills to be covered in the training program. The researcher collects the completed questionnaire from the employees (trainee), their team members (peers and/or subordinates) and their immediate supervisor; the researcher then takes the average score for each item in the questionnaire to eliminate bias in assessing individual soft skill competencies. This is also done to identify the existing soft skills competency level they possesses at the start of the training process.

Work Performance Scale (Dependent Variable)

The researcher informed trainees that their supervisor would be evaluating them on their performance at the workplace after approximately two months of the learning process to see if there are improvements in each of them. The work performance (WP) instruments contained 18 items and were adopted from Griffin (2003), which was validated using Factor Analysis by Griffin (2003). The WP questionnaires were given to each trainee's supervisor for evaluating the staff (trainee) on their work performance areas after going through the soft skills training. The scale used in this study was 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

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Training Methodology Scale (Independent Variable): Evaluated by Trainees Only on the 'Time-Spaced Learning' Method

At the end of the training process, which spanned over two months, the researcher gave the trainees a 16-item questionnaire that used a 5-point Likert scale to test the effect of 'time-spaced learning' on their transferability of the soft skill. The questionnaire was self-developed with the support of the literature and professionals; it was also validated and determined to have high validity. The questionnaire consisted of four main parts. The first part measured the demographic of the respondent, such as the years of experience and the highest degree earned. This was followed by questions eliciting information on training methodology (TM), of which 'time-spaced learning' methodology stands as the targeted variable. The scale used in this study was a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree), and the Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient for these sixteen items on the TM scale was 0.913, i.e. very good and reliable. The total item correlation and square multiple correlation for each items is above 0.5. This indicate that the mean of individual item scores is perfectly correlated with the sum of the item scores. Single mean score or sum of items score can represent variable to conduct regression and correlational analysis (Earl Babbie 2012). A content validity test was also conducted on these TM instruments. The average content validity index (CVI) for the overall instruments for this TM was calculated; the result gave a CVI value of 0.875 for TM, i.e. high validity.

Data Analysis Procedure

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 16.0 (SPSS Inc., 2006) was used to compute the descriptive statistics, and perform reliability as well as regression analyses. The scores for each variable were calculated by totalling the scores of items under specific factors. This was followed by regression analysis to examine the influence of the two independent

variables, i.e. soft skills (SS) and training methodology (TM), on the dependent variable, i.e. trainees' work performance (WP).

Results

The sample consisted of 98 employees from a few Malaysian private organisations in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The respondents were the participants or trainees selected by their company to attend the soft skills training and development before the sampling was taken. The trainees were manager & executive level from nine (9) Malaysian-based organizations (i.e. private, state government, government link and multinational organizations). The trainees were mixed of gender, multi-racial and a wide age range (or years of work experience), thus enriching the data as much as possible with diverse responses. The distribution along the demographic of the respondents is shown in Table 1.0 below.

Table 1.0 - Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

S/N	Demographic Variables Of The Respondents	Categories	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	64.3
		Female	35.7
2	Age	18-29	42.9
		30-49	57.1
3	Qualification	Certificate	3.6
		Diploma	21.4
		Degree	64.3
		Postgraduate	10.7
4	**Position**	**Executives**	**84.6**
		Managers	**15.4**

Table 2.0 - Mean Score and Standard Deviations of Soft Skills

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
ss1	3.7539	.45810	.118	-.513
Ss2	3.4606	.40332	.335	.238
Ss3	3.7476	.37514	.329	.419
Ss4	3.6435	.38553	.002	-1.184
Ss5	3.7579	.35037	-.020	-.962
Ss6	3.5965	.38334	-.313	-.658
Ss7	3.4061	.46421	-.312	-1.063
Ss8	3.2610	.47494	-.059	-.929

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Ss9	3.6877	.31276	-.534	-.647
Ss10	3.6444	.40393	.146	-1.112
ss11	3.5934	.42389	.035	-.810
ss12	3.4911	.37816	.237	-.486
ss13	3.4509	.40704	.119	-.233
ss14	3.6070	.36557	-.139	-.455
ss15	3.8789	.41274	-.322	-.743
ss16	3.7332	.40545	-.436	-.827
ss17	3.5596	.38645	-.498	-.221
ss18	3.7106	.38215	-.458	-.244
ss19	3.5986	.46160	-.796	.559
Ss20	3.7545	.32994	-.219	.657
Ss21	3.6847	.39534	-.778	.213
Ss22	3.4186	.40689	.119	-.011
Ss23	3.4013	.47155	-.443	-.458
Ss24	3.3602	.35501	-.030	-.582
Ss25	3.4183	.37253	-.455	-.047

Note: SS=soft-skill

Using the 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree), Table 2.0 reveals the distribution of the mean score ranging from 3.2610 to 3.8789 for the items representing soft skills training. These overall average scores show the employees' soft skill competency levels at the start of the training process. The lowest mean score (M=3.2610) is represented by the item or question: 'Express ideas with gestures and voice energy effectively when presenting/briefing'. This indicates that the soft skills level, to some extent, enables employees to effectively present and express their ideas concerning their job. The highest mean score (M=3.8789) is represented by item or question: 'Is open-minded and can easily discuss things with'. This response highlights the employees' soft skills competencies level in interacting with their co-workers, welcoming others' ideas and listening to others and/or their superiors. Based on the descriptive data, it can be concluded that most of the employees' (trainees) in these Malaysian private organisations do have the soft skill competencies in the beginning and will benefit more from the soft skills training.

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Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was used to predict employees' work performance (WP). The independent variables (IV) were soft skills (SS) training and training methodology (TM). Prior to the analysis, the data were subjected to normality tests to determine whether it was normally distributed. The normality assumption tests include the P-P plot and the Scatter plot. Both the former and the latter indicated that the data was normal, as most of the data seemed to lie on the straight diagonal line. Based on the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (K-S test), it was also found that all the items were normally distributed at a significant level of 0.05. To test for the autocorrelation among variables, the homoscedasticity test was conducted. The output of the homoscedasticity test shows that all variables are not significant at a confidence level of 5 percent, meaning that all data had equal variance, which meant that the data was normally distributed and free from the problem of heteroscedasticity of variance.

However, the IVs did not seem to be free from violating the assumption of collinearity, i.e. the IVs somehow had a high correlation. This was revealed in the tolerance value. This is quite common with social science data (Hair *et al*., 2006). The value of the R-squared (R^2) shows an acceptable value for explaining the variability of employees' work performance. Analysis of the variance test statistics (ANOVA) indicates that the model is significant at $\alpha = 0.05$. Table 3.0 provides the information on the significance of the model, indicating a significant p-value of 0.021, the standardised regression coefficient and the model summary value. In examining the multiple regression model, the prediction equation following the regression analysis is:

Work performance = a + β1soft-skill + β2training methodology.

Therefore, work performance = a + soft skills (0.178) + training methodology (0.353).

Table 3.0 - Regression Analysis: Soft Skills, Training Methodology and Work Performance

Sources	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Sig.	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Regression	2	2.082	1.041	4.029	021[a]	.178	.159
Residual	95	24.544	.258				
Total	97	26.626					
Coefficient							
	B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	t		ANOVA	
(Constant)	4.726	.775		6.097		000.	000.
TSS	.178	.172	.145	.455		.050	.050
TM	.353	.125	.279	2.826		.006	.006

Table 3.0 indicates that the model explains 17.8 percent of variation in employees' work performance, which is explained by the predictors training soft skills (TSS) and training methodology (TM). The remaining 83.2 percent is explained by factors not captured in this model. However, this percentage dropped to about 15.9 percent when a smaller sample was used, as indicated by the adjusted R^2. Given that the p-value is lesser than 0.05, the model is significant for the prediction of the relationship among the predictors and criterion variables. Moreover, based on the standardised Beta calculation ($\beta = 0.279$, p= 0.006), the training methodology has greater influence on work performance than other factors. This is followed by soft skills with a standardised Beta ($\beta = 0.147$, p=0.05).

In summary, multiple regression analysis was used to test if soft skills training acquisition and training methodology (time-spaced learning) significantly predicted employees' work performance in an organisation based on supervisors' performance ratings. The results of the regression indicate that the two predictors explained 17.8% of the variance (R^2=0.178, F [2, 95] = 4.029, p<0.05). It was found that training methodology significantly predicted work performance ($\beta = 0.279$, p = 0.006) and soft skills ($\beta = 0.147$, p= 0.05).

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Discussion

The present study investigates the effect of soft skills training, training methodology on work performance. The findings showed a strong empirical support for the causal relationship between soft skills (SS) acquired by employees and their work performance (WP). An inspection of the model indicated that when trainees or employees acquire the necessary soft skills elements this led to increase in work performance. Putting it differently, if soft skills are broadly acquired and applied by employees, individual work performance will significantly increase (Homer, 2001; Kantrowitz, 2005). This finding is also in tandem with propositions of Weber, Finley, Crawford, and Rivera (2009), wherein they contend that soft skills contribute toward work performance of managers in terms of decision making and problem solving. Similarly, in the teaching profession particularly, the Tang et al. (2015) study suggested that soft skills should be imparted to all teachers in Malaysia in order to create a quality and effective teaching practice. On the other hand, this result contradict the findings of Robert and Donald (2001), in which soft skills competency indicated not to have really contributed greatly to organizational improvement.

However, researchers such as Spencer (1994), Blackburn and Rosen (1993), Heneman and Judge (2000) as well as Ahmad and Schroeder (2003) are of the opinion that organizational success is a function of the system in which the management set up in an organization that can adversely improve the employees' work performance. As such, if all required and relevant soft skills are given to employees, work performance in an organization will improve; but it will still depend on the ability of the employees to utilize the given information to improve their

job performance.

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The findings also showed a strong empirical support for the causal relationship between training methodology (TM) – ('time space learning') and employees' workperformance (i.e., training methodology has a direct influence on workperformace of trainees). This indicates that the training methodology which uses 'time space learning' method has directly contributed to the rate at which employees are able to transfer knowledge acquire during training to their job. This finding supports the findings of previours researchers, suitable training methodology, will improve employee performance (Mandakini, 2002), training modules that combine training programme and work encourages more practice in employees' real workplace after the training (Thalheimer, 2006), Space effect is one of the most reliable method of learning and emplyees behaviour change (Sutton et. al. 2002).

In the present study, employee's work performance was found to be explained by 15.9% of its predictor soft skills acquisition and training methodology. This indicates that one unit increase in soft skills of an employee and training methodology, will lead to 15.9% increase in work performance. It can be concluded that the more the employees learn and utilize the soft skills acquired such as interpersonal or people skills, problem solving skills, decision making skills, communication skill, leadership skills, and so forth, the more they develop positive behavior and attitude toward their job, hence increase in performance at work. well-conducted soft skills training program will enhance work performance. Hence, there is a link between soft skills and job (Izadikhah et al., 2010).

Conclusion

Returning to the original research question, it can be stated here that there is a positive relationship between training (soft skills and training methodology) and work performance. Although the researcher cannot claim absoluteness in the prediction of the criterion measure,

both soft skills and training methodology appear to play an important role in employees' performance on their job. The predictors of work performance—training methodology and soft skills training—were used to assess employees' leadership skills, ability for teamwork, creativity, communication skills and problem-solving skills before and after the soft skills training program was conducted by the trainer. In summary, work performance was predicted by soft skills and the training methodology adopted. It might be expected that the training methodology (time-spaced learning) has an impact on the employees' transfer of the soft skills acquired during the training to their job, which invariably improves work performance.

Implications for Research and Practice

The present research findings have highlighted several implications of soft skills training and thus extended the literature on soft skills and employee performance. It is a disagreeable disagreement, that the insights derived from this study about soft-skills, time-space training method and work performance will be sufficient by themselves to bring about transformations desire by managers in organizations as described in this study. Therefore, research and practice must be linked together to serves the interest of employees and that of management. In the context of this study, the research implications would focus on the establishement and use of theory-based time-space training for soft-skills.

Theoretical Implications

Even though studies have shown that all the employee's work performance such as an increase in productivity are mostly influenced by hard skills (technical and job-related skills), however this study has proven that soft skills acquisition and training methodology will directly influence employee work performance. Theoretically, it can be concluded that if organizations plan to develop their employees in soft skills area, they should consider seriously adopting their soft

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skills training program using the 'time space learning' – training methodology (TM) as it will highly likely affect their work performance improvement positively. Further more, this study has established that the combination of the time-spaced learning training methodology and soft skills training directly influence work performance. From findings of this study, the researchers drew the following:

implications for practice

This study has highlighted the urgency of intervening into the patterns of employees'work performance and soft skills acquisition relationship, precisely the issue related to the use of 'time space learning' - training methodology to enhance the soft skills acquisition and organizational employee development from the organization's training investment. It can be suggested that the research model implies that employees who had undergone soft skills training using 'time space learning' - training methodology are better in terms of the performance at the workplace after the training. In the present context, the soft skills are represented by skills such as communication skills, decision making and problem solving skills, leadership skills, interpersonal or people skills, and so forth as experienced by the trainees or employees during the training session.

In the real organizational context, employers should be able to seize the benefit inherent in the use of 'time space learning' - training methodology, in lieu of other training methods. This will serve as a catalyst in expediting the employees'productivity by giving them the opportunity to apply, practice and experiment what they learned in the classroom back into their job, and to evaluate their work performance enhancement while the training program is still ongoing and after the program ended. In addition, with an effective training methodology – ('time space learning'), employees will be able to experience in their real workplace environment what they had learned in the classroom. The degree of utilization and experience is determined greatly by

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their own attitude of willingness to improve and change, their workplace environmental factors, and support from their supervisors - not only after the training but also while the training is ongoing.

Policy Implications

Understanding employees' orientations, experience of trainer's effectiveness and training methodology - ('time space learning'), as well as the necessary elements of soft skills that will promote work performance, can be part of the policy or direction of an organization. As for the soft skills syllabus/curriculum, the organization can identify the soft skills areas that contribute most to the employees' work performance; rather than just focus on the hard skills (technical or job-related) types of training. The focus should be on skill building, mindset, attitude and/or behavior change development for the employees, and not just acquiring the knowledge.

Limitation and Recommendations

The limitation of this study is that the researcher only examined private companies. Also, the selected private companies were mainly in sales and service domains. To this end, the researchers are not able to generalise these findings to all kinds of firms or organisations; the positive outcomes linked to soft skills in this study are thus limited to private sales and service companies. Future research could explore soft skills training in other types of organisations, such as public/government organisations and manufacturing companies.

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