

When employees lack ‘soft skills’, whose fault is it?

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Skills gaps and the ‘blame game’

Skills deficits have been reported as a problem across a number of developed economies including the UK and [US](#). Employers report problems filling vacancies because applicants lack the required skills (shortages) and/or that current workers lack proficiency (gaps). The 2013 [UK Employers Skills Survey](#) revealed that almost four times as many establishments were affected by skills gaps than shortages. Skills gaps are frequently reported in ‘soft’ social/non-cognitive skills (such as customer service and communication), which have become a key [policy concern](#) and the focus of this article.

The ‘blame game’ for skills deficits is typically directed [at individuals or the education system](#). Surprisingly, given UK employers report greater problems internally than on the external labour market, scrutiny on how they may contribute to soft skills gaps has been largely absent.

Employers may contribute to skills gaps through poor HR practices. A further possibility, however, is that poor quality employment causes job dissatisfaction, low commitment and reduced work effort, leading workers to *withdraw* skills. Indeed, [high strain jobs](#) combining low autonomy with intensive work effort are growing in the UK.

The study

My own study recently published in [Human Relations](#) investigated where the blame for soft skills gaps may lie and the role of skills withdrawal. Three establishments were compared in Scotland (where soft skills issues have gained some [prominence](#)); two mid-high end establishments from a sector reporting high levels of soft skills gaps (hotels) and one from a sector reporting low-levels of such gaps (scientific services). Managerial and employee interviews were used, alongside a survey.

All managers in one hotel (‘Fontainebleau’) reported soft skills gaps affecting 25-30 per cent of the establishment’s total workforce (especially in customer service); whilst such gaps were only present in some kitchen staff in the second hotel (‘Oxygen’). No managers in the scientific services firm (‘Silex’) reported soft skills gaps, despite such

skills being widely used and highly valued.

Despite variations in response within each establishment some trends emerged. All but one of the hotel managers interviewed had witnessed skills withdrawal. In Fontainebleau, managers were most likely to blame individual fecklessness for withdrawn soft skills in both current and former employees. Oxygen managers were generally more cognisant of the job and organisational factors that might cause withdrawal. Oxygen's HR representative differentiated "can't do's" who experienced work difficulties or frustrations beyond their control, from "won't do's" who wilfully withdrew skills. Given that few current soft skills gaps were reported in Oxygen, withdrawal was generally reported in employees who had subsequently left the organisation. Silex managers identified transient instances where people's soft skills were not present for both individual (e.g. "off moments") and job related reasons (e.g. workload), but these were *not* generally classified as withdrawn skills (i.e. gaps).

Despite the levels of soft skills gaps and managers' attributions of withdrawal, Fontainebleau employees did not display significantly lower levels of job satisfaction, commitment or work effort. They did, however, report that the (extensive) training was prescriptive; that the job allowed little autonomy; and that the intensity of work sometimes interfered with their ability to perform soft skills. Oxygen employees also reported issues caused by tiredness, but managers were less likely to blame employees for skills issues caused by job-related factors. Oxygen employees also reported that they were offered high degrees of autonomy on the job, enabled by training.

Fontainebleau managers were also less selective than their counterparts in assessing individuals' skills and their 'fit' with the establishment during recruitment and selection. The other establishments also provided candidates with an opportunity to tour the establishment during the recruitment process and ask questions, to further establish mutual fit, which Fontainebleau did not.

Whilst the skills withdrawal mechanism did not apparently operate via employee disaffection, the issues of employer attribution of blame for soft skills gaps and the role of job quality remain. Fontainebleau managers reported most soft skills gaps and blamed individuals most for skills withdrawal. However, this establishment had the highest strain work environment which appeared to hamper soft skills display, even though employees maintained positive attitudes (a contradiction also discussed [elsewhere](#)). Maintaining positive attitudes in such an environment may lead to employee turnover, with many skills withdrawers apparently exiting Fontainebleau (and Oxygen – although turnover was only 56 per cent that of Fontainebleau). The blame for Fontainebleau's reported soft skills gaps also seemed largely attributable to their less effective HR policies. In the other establishments there was more managerial reflection on internal factors and fewer reported soft skills gaps. Employers should thus reflect on whether observed soft skills gaps (and skills withdrawal) may be attributable to their own actions and practices, which may in-turn, make such gaps easier to remedy.



Notes:

- This post is based on the author's paper [Rethinking the soft skills deficit blame game: Employers, skills withdrawal and the reporting of soft skills gaps](#), in *Human Relations* 0018726715591636, first published on September 29, 2015
- The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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