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## **DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS THROUGH CAREER COUNSELING FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

**Abstract:** In this article we consider the problem of soft skills development through career counseling of graduate students. In the course of literature analysis we have established that “soft skills” allow any person, especially students, to realize themselves in professional activity, as well as to increase its efficiency and ensure the achievement of career growth. It was determined that the application of career counseling is especially important for students, taking into account its modern peculiarities in relation to the fact that students of the last courses have different needs of their development as future specialists. The results of the questionnaire survey showed the importance for students to develop indicators of soft skills, including through career counseling. The developed Program of soft skills development through career counseling offered for training of final year students allowed to increase the indicators of the main soft skills of students: communication; teamwork; leadership; presentation skills; time management; problem solving and creativity.

**Keywords:** soft skills, career counseling, career development, communication, teamwork, leadership, presentation skills, time management, problem solving, creativity.

**Introduction.** The relevance of the research topic lies in the presence of problems that can be solved with the help of career counseling. The first problem should be recognized as high requirements of the modern labor market to university graduates. Since the modern employer expects specialists who have not only deep knowledge in their professional field, but also the presence of such developed soft skills as soft communication, critical thinking skills, soft skills in teamwork, creativity and many others. Also, many graduate students find it difficult to find a job after graduation. Many do not even know how to find a suitable position in their profession, how to make a resume, how to prepare for an interview, how to define their career goals, and so on.

Career counseling is quite often used to develop soft skills, which can help students in their final years to realize the importance and necessity of developing such skills. Career counseling can then provide students with the tools to further improve the most important soft skills for a career.

It is believed that career counseling is one of the methods that can help students develop key indicators of soft skills and become more confident in themselves and their abilities. Also, career counseling can help students navigate the world of work, increase their competitiveness in the labor market, and facilitate the employment process. In addition, career counseling provides an opportunity to develop effective communication skills, easily solve existing problems, make good decisions and adapt to changing conditions, which is considered useful in the professional field and in ordinary life. At the same time, the development of soft skills contributes to the personal growth of students, and it seems important especially in the last years of study, because then it may be too late to develop them, as it will be necessary to work hard.

The purpose of the study is to examine the importance of career counseling in developing soft skills in graduate students and to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed program.

Objectives of the study: to conduct a literature review on the problem of soft skills development and career counseling for students; to determine the importance of career counseling for graduate students; to develop a career counseling program aimed at developing soft skills in graduate students; to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed program.

### **Research methods and organization**

The research methods were defined as: literature analysis; survey; methods of generalization, grouping, logical and mathematical analysis and system description.

The study was conducted in two stages:

1. Theoretical - conducting a literary analysis;
2. Practical: conducting an experiment, in which a program for the development of soft skills by means of career counseling is developed, and the effectiveness of soft skills development is evaluated.

To study the relationship between the development of soft skills and career counseling among graduate students, an anonymous questionnaire survey was conducted. The survey was conducted on the basis of a self-developed questionnaire using GoogleForm program in which the questions formulated in advance were uploaded. The survey was attended by 62 students of Toraigyrov University in Pavlodar, studying at technical specialties. The questionnaire included questions to establish knowledge of soft skills and to find out the level of perception of the importance of developing these skills for career advancement. The most important question in this questionnaire is the one that includes self-assessment of the level of development of soft skills within the proposed competencies. A five-point scale was proposed for self-assessment. The obtained results were processed using the methods of generalization, grouping, logical and mathematical analysis and system description.

#### *A literature review of the research topic.*

There is a large number of definitions of the term “soft skills.” Thus, the Oxford Dictionary defines them as personal qualities of a person that enable him/her to communicate effectively with others (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). While Batsunov and Derecha emphasize that these are personal qualities and unified skills that allow increasing the efficiency of activity and communication with other people, through the ability to manage development, time, and persuade another (Batsunov & Derecha, n.d.). Abashkina (2015) proposes to consider soft skills as human qualities, without which even a person who considers himself the best professional cannot achieve a good result. Golulman, Bortsich, and McKee (2009) showed by examples from practice that the level of development of soft skills determines the effectiveness of a person in the profession and his career. According to the author, it is the level of development of soft skills that distinguish a successful professional worker from an unsuccessful one. Gaiduchenko and Marushev (n.d.) connect soft skills as allowing a person to find a common language with other people, establish connections, and maintain them, which is important in life and in industrial activity.

Career counseling of final-year students is usually understood as a process of joint work of a professional counselor with a student, which is aimed at establishing values regarding the activity in terms of determining the professional interest, degree of education, level of available skills, and experience (Selivanova, 2014). Counseling includes the analysis of resources and opportunities, long-term and immediate goals, to ensure the student's self-realization in professional activity both in the labor market and in a particular enterprise or organization. The main purpose of career counseling is to assist young people in the process of vocational education and self-determination in a specialty or profession. This is explained by the fact that in higher education a secondary stage of self-determination takes place, which gives the

opportunity to clarify the goals regarding the profession and professional growth, and necessarily indicate the main motives for the formation of their career (Shamardina & Kozhevnikova, 2019; Alaeddin & Litvina, 2021).

The main tasks that a career consultant has to solve for graduate students and for any other client include informing the client about the types of career growth and specific opportunities, establishing levels of professional skills that ensure the development of competence and job growth opportunities, mastering the factors and basic conditions that contribute to career development in a particular profession or position, and establishing intra-organizational and professional indicators and personal interests. Additionally, a career consultant must identify existing barriers to career development and ways to overcome them, identify indicators of professional growth that are directly related to a future career, and establish personal and professional potential in relation to a career (motivation, style of activity, achievements, level of claims, value orientations, creative potential, innovative orientation, features of interaction with people and with management, etc.). They must also help draw up a career development program (or a career path) of service or professional growth (Sargsyan, 2021).

A career counseling program is usually developed in three stages (Alaeddin & Litvina, 2021):

1. At the first stage, a person's attitude to career is established: the concept of professional development, motivation and professional orientation, professional goals, values, and plans are considered.

2. At the second stage, the person is analyzed by the following indicators: current labor performance, professional preparedness, professional qualification, and compliance with the set goals for career development.

3. The third stage involves planning the individual's career and discussing the selected career strategy.

Career counseling for future professionals (or future university graduates) differs from the counseling of other groups of employees and has its own features, which in turn depend, according to Shirokova (2019), on the following: professional self-determination needed by students in the last years as future professionals, conditions based on self-development, self-realization, independent implementation, and the level of career guidance organized in the university.

The peculiarities of special career counseling that should be taken into account by graduate students as future professionals in the process of learning how to create a successful career are highlighted. Career goals are not yet fully understood and realized by the student, so they cannot express the initial reason or their request, as they do not always correctly present their future professional activity. This prevents them from independently determining the goals of career development and developing certain career goals. They often resist advice coming from their elders. For the most effective presentation, it is important to know the personality-typological, cognitive, emotional-volitional, and other abilities of a young person. Career counseling used by modern students is usually very theoretical and virtual and therefore not always effective. However, career counseling in the form of a developed program helps to motivate students to realize their career goals (Ivanova & Dubinenkova, 2012; Brown & Lent, 2020).

### **The results of the study and discussion**

In the course of literature analysis, it was established that in all definitions it seems to be common that “soft skills” help a person to be realized in the profession. On this basis, it is possible to consider soft skills through the system of competencies, which include any personal skills that allow increasing the efficiency of professional activity and career growth of a

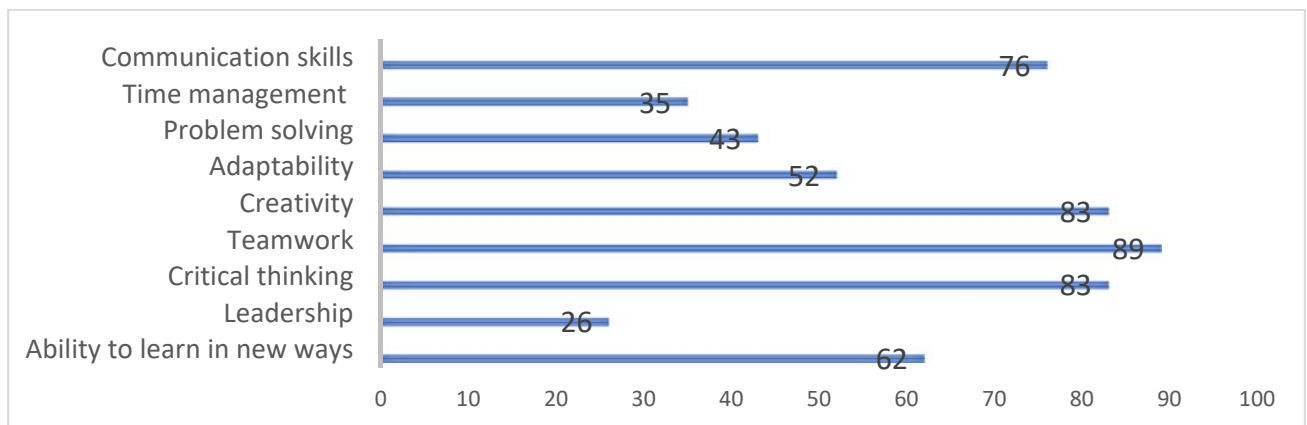
specialist. Almost all experts and researchers emphasize that in the modern world it is necessary and important to use career counseling for students, especially in the last courses. At the same time, it is important to take into account the peculiarities of modern career counseling in relation to the last year students as future specialists. Taking into account these peculiarities, it is suggested to conduct counseling to prepare students for career development, ensuring the career development is successful.

*Results of the questionnaire survey*

The results of answering the question of whether you are familiar with the term and characteristics of soft skills are as follows: the majority of graduate students (61%) have an idea about soft skills, but some of them (36%) need additional explanation (counseling) about this term. While only 24% are familiar with the concept of career counseling, the rest are not familiar with the term. The results of answering the question of which soft skills help to achieve a successful career are labeled according to Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Results of the importance of soft skills that help to achieve a successful career, in %*



The analysis of the results showed that graduate students believe that the most important soft skills for achieving a successful career are critical thinking (83%), teamwork (89%), creativity (83%), communication skills (76%) and the ability to learn in new ways (62%). This allows us to assume that students recognize, in relation to careers, the importance of developing their mental abilities, the ability to work with others and adapt to new situations. However, skills such as leadership, adaptability, problem solving and time management were rated significantly lower by them, which are considered particularly important in practice. All this may suggest that students have not yet encountered the major issues of human development in professional practice and have not yet realized their importance.

The results of answers to the question showing the general level of self-assessment in the scope of proposed soft skills are shown in Table 1

**Table 1**

*Results of self-assessment of the importance of soft skills for graduate students, in %*

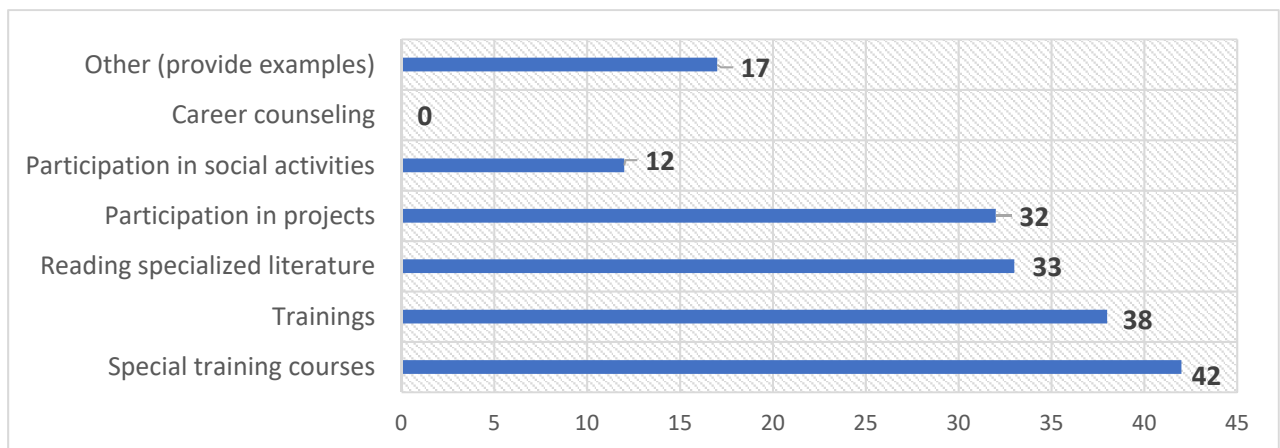
Score points	Ability to learn new things	Critical thinking	Teamwork	Creativity	Adaptability	Communication skills
5 points	0	16	0	7	0	2
4 points	0	14	9	28	7	24
3 points	14	36	24	29	26	40
2 points	22	26	38	36	41	31
1 point	64	9	29	0	26	3

The highest self-assessments are given to the following soft skills: creative thinking and communication skills, as they received the highest score, albeit in a small number: 16 and 2%. It should also be noted that no one highly evaluated the importance of such skills as teamwork and adaptability (0% each). The importance of creativity (28%), communication skills (24%), critical thinking (24%), teamwork (9%) and adaptability (7%) are rated 4 points or good. On average, all of the identified soft skills are considered important. Insignificantly important are mostly identified by many students, and first of all they are Ability to learn new things (64%), Teamwork (28%) and Adaptability (26%).

Figure 2 shows the results of answers to the question what methods and means you or the university apply to improve the development of soft skills.

**Figure 2**

*Structure of answers to the question what methods and means you or the university use to improve the development of soft skills, in %.*



The analysis of the obtained data allows us to conclude that graduate students actively use various methods and means to improve the development of soft skills. At the same time, special training courses (they account for 42%) and trainings (38%) are more used. It should also be noted that many students read special literature (33%) and participate in projects (32%). Participation in social activities is not a common method of developing soft skills (only 12%).

At the same time it should be noted that career counseling is not used by graduate students, perhaps they are not available to them or do not know enough about the importance of career counseling. It is also worth mentioning that 17% of students mentioned other methods, even if they did not label them, the main thing that graduates are willing to use to improve the development of soft skills.

The results of answers to the question whether it is necessary to include in the educational or additional courses of higher education institutions the training of soft skills through career counseling: Yes - 95, 2%; No - 4,8%;

The results show that the vast majority of graduate students (95.2%) believe that it is necessary to include career counseling in academic or supplemental higher education courses to teach soft skills. While only 4.8% were against this idea.

A program to develop soft skills through career counseling for graduate student learning:

1. Introduction.
2. Definition of soft skills.
3. Assessment (diagnosis) of the current level of soft skills development
4. Career counseling measures of soft skills development through measures of specific soft skills needed to achieve career advancement: Communication Skills; Time Management; Problem Solving and Critical Thinking; Teamwork; Leadership and others.
5. Feedback and evaluation of progress.
6. Benchmark assessment of soft skills development.
7. Re-training: if required results are not obtained.

Career counseling interventions aimed at developing soft skills in graduate students may include the following activities we have outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Career counseling interventions to develop soft skills in graduate students*

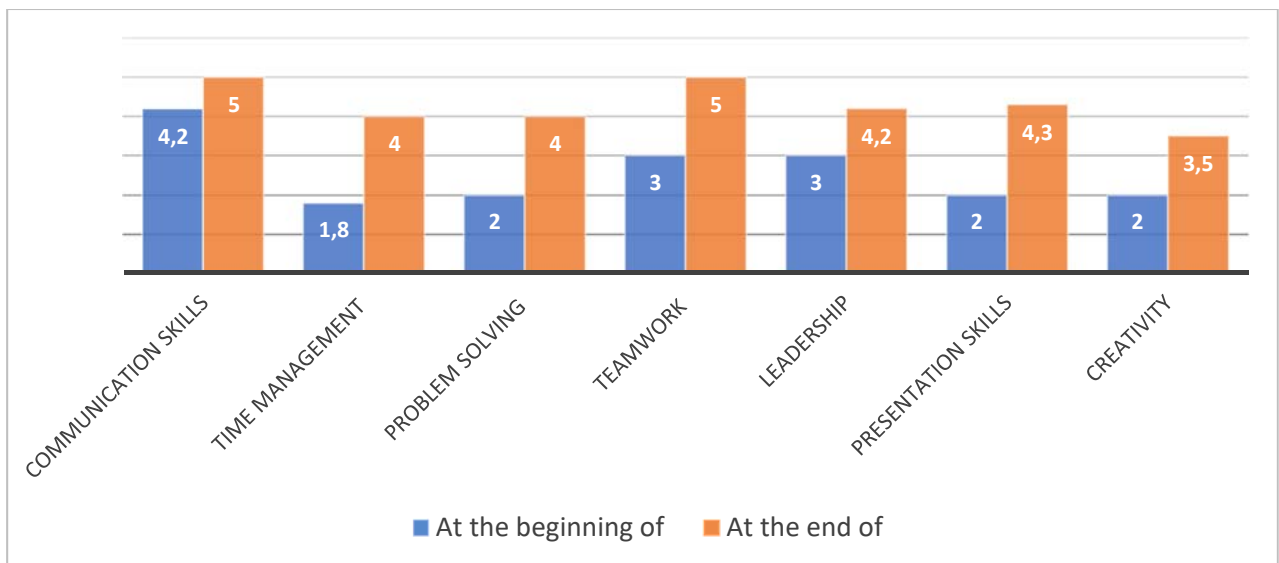
Skills	Activities	Career counselor activities
Communication skills	Communication skills training	acts as a training facilitator, leads exercises and discussions, helps participants learn new communication techniques and learn to express themselves effectively
Time management	Master class on time management (Time Management)	invites a time-management expert
Problem solving	Problem-solving roundtable: Career development challenges: how to overcome obstacles and achieve success?	organizes a meeting where students can share their problems and find solutions together. Maintains an atmosphere of openness and cooperation, helping participants to develop critical thinking and the ability to find compromises.
Teamwork	Business game on teamwork	Creates an environment for students to practice teamwork, solve complex problems, and learn to collaborate.
Leadership	Leadership Lecture: "Leadership and emotional intelligence: the key to career success. Team Leadership: How to Achieve Success Together"	An experienced leader is invited to speak about their principles and approaches to leadership. Participants can ask questions and receive valuable advice on leadership development.
Presentation skills	Presentation Skills Training: "How to persuade an audience or mastery of public speaking"	provide students with individualized support and feedback.

	“Stress Management and Confidence in Speaking	
Creativity	Organization of competitions: “How to offer a unique solution to create an innovative product or service” “How to attract attention and be remembered by creating an advertising campaign”	provide students with individualized support and feedback.

Thus, it was found that all activities within the Soft Skills Development through Career Counseling Program are aimed at helping graduate students develop the soft skills necessary for a successful career. In doing so, the career counselor plays a key role in organizing and conducting these activities, as well as providing support and assistance to the participants as feedback is established between him/her and the students.

Results of the assessment of the benchmark level of soft skills development in comparison with the initial level (in points).

**Figure 3**  
*Comparative assessment results in points*



The results of comparative analysis showed that after the implementation of career counseling measures, graduate students improved in the development of all soft skills. The highest rates were noted in communication skills, teamwork, leadership, presentation skills, time management, and problem solving, while the lowest rate was noted in creativity. These findings are indirectly supported by other studies that have focused on similar topics. For example, Sarkisyan (2021) considers career counseling as one of the methods of building a successful career in college students. Sarkisyan emphasizes the importance of psychological support for students and the need to account for the peculiarities of modern career counseling for students as future professionals who are to be employed. Therefore, they need soft skills such as presentation skills, time management, problem solving, and teamwork.

The importance of developing soft skills through career counseling is also confirmed by Ivanova and Dubinenkova (2012), who conducted a study on the development of soft skills through career counseling. They focused on the state and local government system and

highlighted the effectiveness of training and development of soft skills in enhancing career outcomes.

### Conclusions

Literature analysis on the problem of soft skills development and career counseling for graduate students found that students need such soft skills as communication skills, teamwork, leadership skills, creativity, time management and some others, as they are the ones that allow them to adapt to changing conditions and interact effectively with others, which is important for achieving a successful career. Career counseling (in its various methods and techniques) is recognized as one of the effective tools to help graduate students develop soft skills, as it makes students analyze their strengths and weaknesses, helps to identify goals and strategies for upcoming career development. According to other researchers soft skills development and career counseling are important aspects of students' education. As they help students to prepare for their future career, increase their competitiveness in the labor market and achieve success in professional activities.

Through a questionnaire survey, we established the importance of career counseling for graduate students. Based on this, we developed a career counseling program aimed at developing soft skills in graduate students, which includes specific measures to develop such soft skills as communication, time management, problem solving, teamwork, leadership, presentation skills and creativity. The evaluation of the effectiveness of the proposed program showed that all the career counseling measures we conducted can be recognized as effective, as they allowed to develop the most important soft skills in graduate students.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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