



## Soft Skills and Their Relationship with Employability in Local Contexts: A Study of the Service Sector in Morelia

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**KEYWORDS:** Soft skills, job placement, employability.

**ABSTRACT:** The objective of this study was to analyze the relationship between soft service sector, higher education institutions, skills and job placement among university students in service sector companies in Morelia, Michoacán. The research was conducted using a quantitative approach with a non-experimental, cross-sectional design. The sample consisted of 52 companies in the service sector, selected through random sampling. A Likert-scale questionnaire was used for data collection; the instrument's reliability was high, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.962. Kendall's Tau-b coefficient was used for data analysis. The results revealed significant associations between soft skills indicators and job placement criteria, highlighting that competencies such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability positively influence employability. Furthermore, the findings are consistent with international trends that emphasize the growing demand for socio-emotional skills in digitalized work environments. It is concluded that soft skills constitute a key tool for strengthening employability; therefore, their development is recommended through curricular strategies that include practical activities, linkage with the productive sector, problem-based learning, competency-based assessment, and graduate follow-up.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The job placement of university graduates constitutes one of the most relevant indicators for evaluating the social relevance of higher education. In contexts characterized by accelerated technological transformations, automation of production processes, and redefinition of occupational profiles, educational institutions face the challenge of training professionals capable of adapting to complex and dynamic work environments. According to Laines et al. (2021), in the current context of the 21st century, although it is important that professionals today have quality preparation in the technical area or hard skills, since today's world is undergoing accelerated evolution, it is also essential that they have adequate development in soft skills, which allow them to face the different crises that affect us today. Therefore, it is necessary to link the impact of soft skills on organizational productivity, especially after the pandemic.

These soft skills described by Laines et al. (2021) are of great importance for organizations, as they have an impact on all areas of the company, since they are related to values, attitudes, behaviors, among others. Therefore, it is necessary to identify these areas of opportunity among employees and support them in developing an adequate level of these skills. All these analyses make it possible to understand the importance that soft skills have in enabling individuals to successfully adapt to organizational life.

Due to the importance that the study of soft skills and their impact on different fields has gained, countless investigations have been carried out in which these skills are essential in various economic sectors, and which in current generations have been developing and significantly impacting the development of individuals when working in different international contexts. Therefore,

it becomes necessary to evaluate the competencies that students possess at the higher education level, taking into account the different generations present in the academic environment, in order to develop various teaching strategies that achieve results that positively impact working life.

Fuentes et al. (2021) state that, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to work in a different way of exercising leadership, with a tendency toward strengthening empathy, emotional intelligence, trust, time management, among others, which is reflected in the customer.

Maya and Orellana (2016) affirm that current entrepreneurs consider that there is sufficient technical preparation among employees; the intellectual aspect is covered. However, it is essential to focus on hiring personnel who have developed soft skills, since these represent a competitive advantage in organizations, and in their opinion, educational institutions provide little training in these. Therefore, today's executives highly value soft competencies in their employees and consider them a determining factor in hiring, equal to or even more important than hard or technical skills.

Saravia (2019) mentions the importance of soft skills, as they are oriented toward human abilities and are tools that make it possible to solve problems generated by human interaction rather than technical ones. An example of this is teamwork; this skill enables any individual to interact with people who have different ways of thinking and to achieve a common objective.

For Zepeda et al. (2019), the main engineering fields that dominate the labor market require technical-scientific knowledge; however, it is also true that the capacities individuals have to carry out collaborative work, attitudinal qualities, conflict resolution, and adequate decision-making are essential. The outcomes of engineering education should therefore include a special program for the development of competencies in the area of soft skills, explaining the importance of preparing students from university educational programs in the development of soft skills, as this will facilitate their job placement in this new era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Ceja et al. (2022) highlight that soft skills are important in the socio-affective aspect for interaction among individuals, solving problems, making decisions, developing creativity, identifying emotional skills, and building affective relationships, which contributes to personal development. The pandemic has driven Higher Education Institutions to work in virtual environments, which implies that both teachers and students must acquire skills and competencies to ensure learning. In this context, it is concluded that it is necessary to develop new skills and talents. Soft skills are important in the labor market to adapt to change, foster creativity and innovation, manage crisis situations, challenge professional goals, and step out of the comfort zone.

González et al. (2024) state that one of the most important soft skills in students is emotional intelligence, which is a set of abilities that allows individuals to recognize, understand, and manage their own emotions and those of others. In the university context, emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in students' academic performance.

Various studies have shown that students with high emotional intelligence tend to have better academic performance and a more positive university experience compared to those with low emotional intelligence. Soft skills are widely related to behavior and are fundamental for coexistence and communication among peers; they have been linked to the understanding of emotions, achievement of objectives, and decision-making, which is why some authors have categorized them as socio-emotional skills. Their origins date back to the 1980s when Howard Gardner referred to intrapersonal intelligence as the ability to distinguish a feeling of pleasure from one of pain, and interpersonal intelligence as the ability to differentiate the moods, motivations, and temperaments of other individuals (González et al., 2024).

Job opportunities and professional success are not determined by a grade or average; they seem to be more closely linked to the management of human skills, the ability to relate and work independently and in groups, especially with self-knowledge and the control and recognition of emotions. Therefore, as a conclusion, students' emotional intelligence has a direct impact on academic, work, and emotional performance (González et al., 2024).

Soft skills vary, but for García (2021) they comprise a list of more than 20 competencies that individuals may possess or develop. These include: organizational capacity, productivity, time management, negotiation skills, resilience, positive attitude, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills. In addition, flexibility and adaptability, creativity, assertive communication, decision-making ability, problem-solving, empathy, leadership, initiative, discipline, and a propensity for teamwork, innovation, concentration, attention, persuasion, ability to relearn, perseverance, and critical thinking.

For this research project, only four variables are studied: Leadership, Emotional Intelligence, Collaborative Work, and Assertive Communication, as well as their correlation with job placement in the service sector in Morelia, Michoacán.

In the municipality of Morelia, Michoacán, the service sector constitutes one of the main sources of formal employment. This scenario implies that university graduates seeking to enter the local labor market must demonstrate competencies that go beyond technical disciplinary knowledge. However, multiple educational diagnoses have pointed out the existence of gaps between academic training and employers' expectations.

Recent studies have shown that employers particularly value competencies such as leadership, collaborative work, effective communication, emotional intelligence, critical thinking, adaptability, and professional responsibility. However, these skills are not always systematically developed within university curricula, which creates difficulties in the transition processes from academic life to the labor environment.

**II. METHOD**

The research approach was quantitative because it allowed the relationship between soft skills and employability of university graduates in service sector companies in Morelia to be specified through inferential statistics, using quantitative techniques (Hernández & Mendoza, 2018).

Similarly, for this research a non-experimental, cross-sectional correlational design was used. It was correlational because the variables were not manipulated and the data were collected at a single point in time in their natural context. Likewise, it was correlational, since it sought to analyze the relationship between soft skills and job placement (Hernández & Mendoza, 2018).

The study population was identified using the National Statistical Directory of Economic Units (DENUE) of INEGI (the Mexican National Institute of Statistics and Geography), selecting small and medium-sized service companies located in the city of Morelia, which totaled 2,155 as of September 25, 2023. The sample size was estimated using the formula for finite populations, considering a 90% confidence level, a 10% margin of error, and maximum variability ( $p = 0.5$ ), resulting in a minimum required sample size of 66 companies.

However, due to limitations in accessing the units of analysis, a final sample of 52 service sector companies was obtained through random probabilistic sampling. While the sample size does not reach the estimated theoretical size, it allows for an exploratory analysis with statistically acceptable validity.

Data was collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire, which demonstrated high reliability as analyzed with Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = 0.962$ ). The data analysis was performed using Kendall's Tau-b coefficient, in order to identify the relationship between soft skills and employability.

The variables and indicators used for this research are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Conceptualización de variables e indicadores**

Variables	Conceptualization	Indicators
Soft skills	<b>Soft skills</b> are defined as a set of resources or abilities acquired by an individual that provide capacity and promote optimization in whatever they perform, whether in the professional, work, academic, psychological, emotional, and not least in the personal sphere (Vásquez, Vila & Tuesta, 2020).	Dimensions: Leadership, assertive communication, emotional intelligence, and collaborative work
	<b>Leadership</b> Leadership is conceptualized as the capacity that a human being possesses to influence a group of people, in which the established goals are achieved; that is, it is the process of influencing other individuals in order to promote teamwork, working with enthusiasm and achieving objectives together (Aguirre, Serrano & Sotomayor, 2017).	Collaboration with team members – work environment Productive leadership skills Capacity to consider the interests of the entire work team Constant motivation of team members
	<b>Assertive Communication</b> Effective communication is a type of assertive communication that does not give rise to different interpretations; it is that which is given and received in the same way, it is not distorted along the way. Both the sender and the receiver intentionally focus on one single idea and one single topic. For this reason, effective	Constant communication Active listening Communication skills Clear and concise communication

	communication is necessary within teamwork, since it allows all members to be connected with each other through the same idea (Musheke & Phiri, 2021).	
	<b>Emotional Intelligence</b> A set of characteristics or abilities that enable individuals to motivate themselves and persist in the face of adversity, control impulses and delay gratification, regulate mood and prevent distress from impairing the ability to think, show empathy, and maintain hope (Goleman, 1999).	Resilience in the face of conflicts that arise Empathy with members of the organization Control of emotions Adaptation to change.
	<b>Collaborative Work</b> Collaborative work is defined as a process in which individuals work together in a coordinated manner to achieve common objectives, sharing responsibilities, knowledge, and skills, which fosters the joint construction of learning and the generation of more effective solutions (Johnson et al., 2014).	Teamwork to achieve objectives Organization of activities Creation of multidisciplinary teams for better organizational results Coordination with different areas
Job placement	<b>Job placement</b> Process of incorporation of individuals into economic activity (García & Gutiérrez, 1996).	Graduates with soft skills Soft skills activities in institutions Integration of hard and soft skills Soft skills programs in organizations

Source: Own elaboration

### III. RESULTS

To examine the relationship between the indicators, Kendall’s Tau-b coefficient was used, a non-parametric statistic suitable for ordinal variables and moderate samples. This coefficient allows the evaluation of the intensity and direction of the association between pairs of variables, providing a robust measure of correlation when normality assumptions are not met. Data processing was carried out using the statistical software SPSS version 22. The use of this tool made it possible to calculate reliability coefficients, factor analyses, correlations, and descriptive statistics necessary for the comprehensive interpretation of the results. The methodological rigor of the study was supported by the systematic application of statistical procedures validated in the scientific literature, which guarantees the robustness of the findings and their consistency with international standards of quantitative research.

The Kendall’s Tau-b statistical technique was used, as it is a robust non-parametric measure of correlation suitable for ordinal data, such as the evaluation scales of soft skills and job placement. This methodological choice makes it possible to explore the relationship between these variables in a significant and valid manner, offering useful insights for human resource management and professional development in the local context. Thus, in this section, the step-by-step procedure to apply Kendall’s Tau-b is detailed, from data collection and organization to the interpretation of results, providing a solid basis for understanding and analyzing the association between soft skills and job placement in the service sector in Morelia, Michoacán.

According to Agresti (2018), it is a measure for non-parametric studies that correlates and measures the strength and association between two ordinal variables, whose measurement is carried out through scales. It is especially useful when the observations have the same classification scale. This coefficient can vary within a range from -1 to 1. When the correlation equals 1, it indicates a perfect positive correlation; 0 indicates that no correlation exists; and -1 indicates a perfect negative correlation. To address the correlation in greater depth, the values are interpreted in Table 2.

**Table 2: Interpretación del valor del coeficiente de Tau\_b de Kendall**

Valor	Correlation
1	Correlation perfect
0,80 a 0,99	Very high correlation
0,60 a 0,79	High correlation
0,40 a 0,59	Moderate correlation
0,20 a 0,39	Low correlation
0,01 a 0,19	Very low correlation
0,00	No correlation

Source: Information obtained from Agresti (2018).

The results of the analysis of the constructs of Leadership, Assertive Communication, Emotional Intelligence, and Collaborative Work are presented below.

**Table 3: Kendall’s Tau-b correlation statistics for the Leadership construct**

			Positive work environment development	Leadership skills	Interest in the work team	Team motivation, achievement of objectives
Kendall’s Tau-b	Positive work environment development	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	1.000 52	.377** .000 52	.707** .000 52	.761** .000 52
	Leadership skills	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	.377** .004 52	1.000	.378** .004 52	.397** .003 52
	Interest in the work team	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	.707** .000 52	.378** .004 52	1.000 52	.765** .000 52
	Team motivation, achievement of objectives	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	.761** .000 52	.397** .003 52	.765** .000 52	1.000 52

Source: Own elaboration. Based on data from the statistical package SPSS V22.

The main findings of the leadership construct observed in Table 3 show a correlation strength that can be described as a high association between the graduate’s contribution to the development of a positive work environment and their consideration for the interests of the entire work team, with a correlation of .707. Likewise, the graduate’s ability to motivate their coworkers to achieve objectives presents a Kendall’s Tau-b coefficient of 0.761\*\*, and the motivation provided to coworkers to achieve objectives in relation to considering the interests of the entire work team shows a correlation coefficient of 0.765\*\*.

The leadership construct showed significant associations among its indicators, which demonstrates internal coherence within the dimension. A high correlation was observed between the ability to generate a positive work environment and the consideration of team interests, suggesting that behaviors oriented toward group well-being constitute a central component of effective leadership in organizational contexts.

**Table 4: Kendall’s Tau-b correlation statistics for the Assertive Communication construct**

			Communication with the work team	Willingness to listen to others	Effective communication	Clear and concise communication
Kendall’s Tau-b	Communication with the work	Correlation coefficient	1.000	.715** .000	.696** .000	.570** .000

	team concise communication	two-tailed N	52	52	52	52
	Willingness to listen to others	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	.715** .004 52	1.000	703** .004 52	.565** .003 52
	Effective communication	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	.696** .000 52	.703** .004 52	1.000 52	.807** .000 52
	Clear and concise communication	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	.570** .000 52	.565** .003 52	.807** .000 52	1.000 52

Source: Own elaboration. Based on data from the statistical package SPSS V22.

Table 4 shows the strength of the correlation, which can be described as a high association regarding the importance of graduates maintaining constant communication with their work team and being willing to listen to others, with a coefficient of 0.715. Likewise, graduates demonstrate effective communication with a coefficient of 0.703\*\*, and a strong perceived correlation is observed between having effective communication skills and communicating clearly and concisely with the work team, with an association of 0.807, indicating a very high correlation.

The results of the correlational analysis showed very high associations among the indicators that make up the assertive communication construct. The most significant relationship was observed between effective communication and the ability to express oneself clearly and concisely, which demonstrates that both attributes are part of the same competency core. High associations were also found between communication within the team and the willingness to listen actively. This finding suggests that organizational communication does not depend solely on message transmission, but on bidirectional interaction that enables understanding needs, resolving conflicts, and coordinating actions. These results are consistent with previous research that highlights communication as one of the most valued competencies by employers in selection processes. In contemporary work environments, communicative clarity facilitates decision-making, problem-solving, and interdisciplinary collaboration, which are key factors for initial performance.

Table 5: Kendall’s Tau-b correlation statistics for the Collaborative Work construct

			Teamwork	Activities among collaborators	Formation of multidisciplinary teams	Integration of teams across different areas
Kendall’s Tau-b	Teamwork	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	1.000 52	.524** .001 52	.467** .001 52	.536** .000 52
	Activities among collaborators	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	.524** .000 52	1.000	.681** .000 52	.506** .000 52
	Formation of multidisciplinary teams	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	.467** .001 52	.681** .000 52	1.000 52	.763** .000 52
	Integration of teams across different areas	Correlation coefficient two-tailed N	.536** .002 52	.506** .000 52	.763** .000 52	1.000 52

Source: Own elaboration. Based on data from the statistical package SPSS V22.

Table 5 presents the main significant results according to the collaborative work construct, considering it a highly important skill for the job placement of graduates. The Kendall’s Tau-b correlation coefficients show a high correlation between the importance of graduates organizing activities among collaborators to facilitate collaborative work and forming multidisciplinary teams to achieve better organizational results, with a correlation coefficient of 0.681. Likewise, the ability to work in teams with colleagues from different areas shows a degree of association of 0.763\*\*. The analysis of the indicators associated with collaborative work revealed significant relationships that reflect internal consistency within the dimension. The obtained correlations show that cooperation, shared responsibility, and the willingness to support other team members are part of the same behavioral pattern.

This result supports the idea that teamwork is not an isolated skill, but an integrated set of social behaviors oriented toward common goals. In the organizational context, effective collaboration translates into higher productivity, reduced conflicts, and better use of human talent. From the perspective of job placement, the ability to integrate into multidisciplinary teams is a fundamental requirement for university graduates. Employers tend to value candidates who can adapt to group dynamics, assume shared responsibilities, and contribute to the achievement of institutional objectives.

**Table 6: Kendall’s Tau-b correlation statistics for the Emotional Intelligence construct**

			Resilience	Empathy	Emotional control	Adaptation ability
Kendall’s Tau-b	Resilience	Correlation coefficient	1.000	.440**	.461**	.507**
		two-tailed N	52	.001	.001	.000
	Empathy	Correlation coefficient	.440**	1.000	.474**	.679**
		two-tailed N	52	.001	.000	.000
	Emotional control	Correlation coefficient	.461**	.474**	1.000	.605**
		two-tailed N	52	.001	.000	.000
	Adaptation ability	Correlation coefficient	.507**	.679**	.605**	1.000
		two-tailed N	52	.002	.000	.000

**Source:** Own elaboration. Based on data from the statistical package SPSS V22.

The emotional intelligence dimension showed consistent associations among its indicators, confirming its relevance within the proposed model. The results indicate that the ability to recognize one’s own and others’ emotions is closely related to the capacity to manage complex work situations. This finding is consistent with the literature that identifies emotional intelligence as a predictor of job performance, especially in positions that require constant interaction with people. In the service sector, where the quality of interaction directly influences user perception, this competency acquires strategic value.

The evidence obtained suggests that employers consider emotional regulation an essential attribute for initial job performance, as it allows individuals to maintain professional behavior in situations of pressure, conflict, or uncertainty. From a systemic perspective, the model suggests that the development of one skill promotes the strengthening of others, generating a multiplier effect in the graduate’s professional profile. This finding is consistent with theoretical approaches that consider transversal competencies as integrated and dynamic structures. The evidence obtained supports the research hypothesis, as it confirms the existence of significant relationships between the analyzed dimensions and job placement criteria.

**IV. DISCUSSION**

The results obtained show that the soft skills analyzed—leadership, assertive communication, collaborative work, and emotional intelligence—present significant associations among their indicators and are determining factors for the job placement of university graduates in companies within the service sector in Morelia, Michoacán. In the leadership construct, the highest correlations were observed between the ability to generate a positive work environment and the consideration of team interests (Tau-b = 0.707\*\*) and motivation toward the achievement of collective objectives (Tau-b = 0.761\*\*). This finding is consistent with Fuentes et al. (2021), who emphasize the importance of competencies such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and adaptive leadership, especially in post-pandemic contexts where human interaction and team coordination become essential.

Regarding assertive communication, very high associations were identified between effective communication and the ability to express oneself clearly and concisely (Tau-b = 0.807\*\*), as well as between the willingness to listen and interaction with the team (Tau-b = 0.715\*\*). These results reflect the importance of bidirectional and active communication in the workplace, supporting the conclusions of Saravia (2019) and Zepeda et al. (2019), who highlight that communicative clarity and interpersonal interaction are competencies valued by employers for coordinating activities and solving problems in multidisciplinary teams.

With respect to collaborative work, it was observed that team integration and the formation of multidisciplinary groups present high correlations (Tau-b = 0.763\*\*), confirming that cooperation, shared responsibility, and the willingness to support others form an integrated behavioral pattern. These results are consistent with the findings of González et al. (2024) and Ceja et al. (2022), who argue that effective collaboration enhances productivity and the adaptability of graduates to complex organizational contexts.

Finally, emotional intelligence showed significant relationships among resilience, empathy, emotional control, and adaptability (Tau-b between 0.440\*\* and 0.679\*\*), highlighting its strategic role in the initial performance of graduates. This finding supports the observations of González et al. (2024) and Laines et al. (2021), who state that emotional regulation and the understanding of one's own and others' emotions are critical competencies in contemporary work environments, especially in the service sector where interaction with clients is constant.

The previous results show that soft skills are not isolated attributes, but rather interrelated competencies that strengthen employability and facilitate job placement in dynamic and collaborative contexts. Likewise, the evidence suggests that the systematic development of these competencies within university educational programs can constitute a competitive advantage for graduates, reducing the gap between academic training and labor market demands, as emphasized by Maya and Orellana (2016) and García (2021).

## V. STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study has some limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the sample size (n=52) does not reach the calculated theoretical size, which limits the possibility of generalizing the findings to the entire study population. Likewise, the analysis is based on information collected at a single point in time, due to the cross-sectional design, which prevents establishing causal relationships between the variables analyzed.

Furthermore, the data were obtained from the perspective of companies in the service sector, which could introduce biases related to employers' perceptions of soft skills.

In this regard, it is recommended that future research increase the sample size, incorporate longitudinal designs, and consider including different stakeholders, such as students and graduates, in order to strengthen the external validity of the results.

## V. CONCLUSION

It is concluded that soft skills such as leadership, assertive communication, emotional intelligence, and collaborative work are determining factors for the job placement of university graduates in the service sector in Morelia, Michoacán. The results show that these competencies are interrelated, forming a system that facilitates adaptation to the work environment and effective collaboration within organizations. Likewise, skills related to social interaction have a more significant impact on employability than those focused exclusively on cognitive processes, reflecting the importance of interpersonal relationships and the ability to respond to user needs in this sector.

The findings indicate that it is possible to evaluate these competencies through reliable instruments, allowing the identification of development levels in students and the orientation of training strategies that strengthen their employability. The integration of activities focused on active learning and teamwork contributes to transferring theoretical knowledge into practical situations, enhancing skills applicable to the workplace. Finally, both educational institutions and organizations can benefit from the promotion of these competencies, as professionals who possess them demonstrate greater adaptability, learning capacity, and willingness to collaborate, positively impacting their performance and organizational outcomes.

Therefore, including these skills as a fundamental part of the competencies to be developed at the university level will ensure comprehensive training to face the current challenges professionals encounter in the workplace. It is also very important to establish continuous evaluation processes that allow measuring the development of these skills from the beginning of academic programs, fostering an institutional academic culture based on the human and professional development of future graduates from Higher Education Institutions.

Finally, the relevance of strengthening soft skills from academic education is emphasized, as their presence significantly increases the opportunities for successful employment in contemporary environments, particularly in the post-pandemic service sector. Likewise, the development of an Institutional Program for Strengthening Soft Skills (PIFHB) is suggested for Higher Education Institutions in Morelia, with the main purpose of systematically fostering the identified soft skills in alignment with the competencies required by the service sector in the municipality of Morelia.

## VI. DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in relation to this work.

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