

Graduate soft skills and employability in Malaysia: The view of employers from different manufacturing companies

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ABSTRACT

Employers are increasingly concerned about graduates' shortcomings in soft skills, particularly in leadership, communication, and critical thinking. These deficiencies can negatively affect organisational performance and overall economic growth. This study examines the soft skills that are most valued by managerial personnel in manufacturing companies throughout the Klang Valley. It focuses on communication, critical thinking and problem-solving, leadership, and teamwork, as well as their influence on employability. A structured survey, adapted from the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, was administered to 173 managerial employees from various manufacturing firms. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS, which involved multiple regression analysis, reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha), and descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that critical thinking and problem-solving abilities are the most essential skills overall. However, teamwork showed the strongest relationship with employability, followed by communication, leadership, critical thinking, and problem-solving. These results emphasize the vital role that soft skills play in workforce readiness, supporting the employability skills model. To enhance managers' competencies in teamwork and communication, the study recommends that organisations implement mentoring programs, leadership development initiatives, and targeted training. Higher education institutions should integrate experiential learning and structured soft skills development into their curricula to better align graduates' competencies with industry requirements. Additionally, policymakers are encouraged to promote soft skill development through targeted funding and sector-specific initiatives. Future research should investigate the long-term effects of individual soft skills across various industries and regions to more effectively anticipate the evolving demands of the labour market.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly competitive labour market, soft skills have become essential competencies that significantly influence employability and job success. Managers place considerable importance on these skills when evaluating a graduate's potential for long-term performance. While hard skills, such as academic credentials and technical expertise, remain vital, employers are increasingly prioritising non-technical talents like communication, leadership, critical thinking, and teamwork (Al Asefer & Zainal Abidin, 2021; Monteiro et al., 2024; Munir, 2022; Zhan et al., 2024). Organisations are now looking for individuals who not only excel at job-specific tasks but also demonstrate adaptability, teamwork, and effective leadership in dynamic work environments.

It's crucial to understand the specific needs of employers within various industries. Graduates often struggle to identify the most important soft skills when seeking employment, especially if they lack prior work experience (Darmi et al., 2020; Masood, 2021). Industry leaders have raised concerns about graduates' deficiencies in key interpersonal and cognitive areas, including communication, leadership, problem-solving, and collaboration (Daka et al., 2023; Hassan et al., 2017). This concern aligns with global trends that highlight adaptability, innovation, and emotional intelligence as critical attributes for employability (Hurrell, 2016). Almost 88% of employers now consider soft skills, particularly communication, teamwork, and digital literacy to be essential (Changwong et al., 2018). However, many graduates face difficulties in articulating ideas coherently, demonstrating professional discipline, or translating theoretical knowledge into practical applications (Daka et al., 2023; Dobbins & Pettman, 1997; Hove, 2011; Monteiro et al., 2024; Zhan et al., 2024). This skills gap is especially evident among graduates from technical and vocational education programs, who, despite being technically proficient, often lack confidence in essential soft skills (Daka et al., 2023). Today, employers expect candidates to possess not only discipline-specific knowledge but also a wide range of skills, including leadership and cross-functional teamwork (Hurrell, 2016; Monteiro et al., 2024; Zhan et al., 2024).

Despite the emphasis on education and skill development, Malaysia faces significant challenges regarding graduate employment. A recent survey revealed that 24.6% of university graduates remained unemployed six months after graduation (Basir et al., 2022). Current data indicates that new graduates make up approximately 40% of the unemployed workforce in the country (Aljohani et al., 2022). Many of these graduates find themselves in roles that do not align with their degrees or career aspirations, highlighting a broader issue: the ongoing mismatch between academic output and labour market needs. This gap arises not from a lack of academic knowledge but rather from deficiencies in essential soft skills, which employers frequently cite as a concern.

While various studies have explored the role of soft skills in enhancing employability, few have investigated how employers assess these competencies within specific sectors or regions. Much of the existing research addresses the relationship between soft skills and job outcomes in general terms, with limited focus on industry-specific expectations. In Malaysia, the industrial sector has increasingly voiced concerns about graduates' shortcomings in soft skills, particularly in communication, critical thinking, and collaboration. Research conducted by Chan et al. (2018) and Rasul et al. (2013) indicates that manufacturing companies prioritise interpersonal, problem-solving, and communication skills, yet a significant gap remains between these expectations and the actual competencies of graduates. Teoh et al. (2023) corroborated this disparity, showing that although employers place a high value on soft skills, such as English fluency, collaboration, and critical thinking, they are often dissatisfied with graduates' performance in these areas. This ongoing discontent underscores the urgent need to address the soft skills gap to facilitate smoother career transitions for graduates.

Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of soft skills, regional insights remain insufficiently examined, particularly in the Klang Valley, Malaysia's largest economic hub and a crucial centre for industrial activity. This region is home to numerous technology-driven and high-performance

manufacturing companies that demand not only technical expertise but also adaptability, communication, and leadership skills from new employees. Employers in this sector have expressed growing concerns about graduates' preparedness to thrive in fast-paced, innovation-oriented environments. By focusing on the manufacturing industry within the Klang Valley, this study addresses a significant contextual gap and offers geographical and industry-specific insights that can inform targeted educational, training, and policy initiatives. Such specificity enhances the practical relevance of this research, particularly in aligning university curricula with industry expectations in one of Malaysia's most critical economic sectors.

Employability skills models, such as the USEM Model (Yorke & Knight, 2006) and the DOTS Model (Law & Watts, 1977), provide a systematic understanding of how various competencies contribute to graduate employability. The theoretical foundation of this study is anchored in these models. The USEM model emphasizes four interconnected components: a) subject matter knowledge; b) marketable skills; c) efficacy beliefs that influence motivation and self-confidence; and d) metacognition, which encompasses self-awareness of learning and development. Conversely, the DOTS model underscores the importance of self-awareness, opportunity awareness, transition learning, and choice learning, all of which are essential for personal and professional growth. According to these frameworks, employability encompasses the development of cognitive, social, and behavioural skills that facilitate graduates' integration into professional environments, rather than being solely a product of academic achievement. By incorporating these models into the current study, the aim is to ensure that soft skills are regarded not as abstract concepts but as measurable, practical attributes that can be cultivated and assessed within academic and professional settings.

To address the challenges and gaps identified, this study aims to explore the soft skills most valued by employers in Malaysia's manufacturing industry and their impact on graduate employability. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of labour market expectations within this significant industry sector. The specific objectives of the study are: a) to identify which soft skills namely leadership, teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving are deemed most critical by managerial personnel in manufacturing companies in the Klang Valley; b) to examine the strength of the relationship between each soft skill and perceived graduate employability; and c) to provide practical insights for higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Importance of Soft Skills in Enhancing Employability

Soft skills, often referred to as 'people skills', 'emotional intelligence', or 'non-technical skills', are increasingly recognised as vital components of employability for recent graduates. These skills include interpersonal communication, critical thinking, leadership, and collaboration, all of which are essential for building successful professional relationships and adapting to evolving workplace environments (Affandi et al., 2017). Matwa, Fongwa, and Wilson-Strydom (2021) argue that individuals with strong soft skills can leverage their technical knowledge more effectively. Moreover, Majid et al. (2019) assert that these intangible qualities significantly influence an individual's overall employability and competence. As job descriptions continue to evolve in response to global economic changes and technological advancements, employers today expect graduates to demonstrate robust human-centric qualities in addition to their technical expertise (Noah & Aziz, 2020; Tem, Kuroda, & Tang, 2022).

Stakeholders in the Malaysian industry have expressed growing dissatisfaction with graduates' ability to meet workplace expectations, particularly concerning communication, time management, and teamwork (Noah & Aziz, 2020; Norshima, Nur Syafiqah, & Belinda, 2022). Other commonly cited concerns include inadequate interpersonal skills, poor presentation abilities, and unrealistic salary expectations despite a lack of basic job qualifications (Karimi & Pina, 2021). Employers now seek candidates who exhibit flexibility,

emotional intelligence, and the ability to tackle challenges creatively. While some postgraduate students recognise their soft skill deficiencies (Ab Aziz, Zainal Shah, & Abdul Nasir, 2023), the market continues to favour graduates who can adapt, innovate, and enhance productivity within complex work environments (Leech, Barrett, & Morgan, 2005).

Employer Expectations and Sectoral Needs

A recurring issue identified in various research studies is the need to pinpoint the fundamental soft skills that employers seek across different industries. These skills include effective communication (Abdulla et al., 2024; Basir et al., 2022; Aljohani et al., 2022; Darmi et al., 2020), leadership abilities (Agnihotri et al., 2024; Mohamad et al., 2024; Nazrona et al., 2017), critical thinking, problem-solving capabilities (Changwong et al., 2018; Majid et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2022), as well as teamwork and collaboration (Álvarez-González, López-Miguens, & Caballero, 2024). While technical knowledge remains essential, soft skills are increasingly recognised as key differentiators in the hiring process, enhancing creativity, decision-making, and long-term organisational performance.

Despite the growing body of knowledge, there is still a pressing need to examine how these competencies are assessed and prioritised within specific sectors and geographical contexts. Many existing studies tend to explore the relationship between soft skills and job outcomes in broad terms, often lacking insights that are specific to sectors or regions. For instance, the manufacturing sector is vital to Malaysia's economic growth and innovation landscape, yet there has been relatively little research on employer expectations within this high-impact industry, especially in the Klang Valley, which serves as a major economic hub. Recent studies by Mohamad et al. (2024) and Yong and Ling (2023) emphasize the necessity for further exploration into how graduates' skills align with industrial demands, particularly in regions experiencing rapid technological advancement and changes in the labour market.

Challenges in Graduate Employability

Despite investments by Malaysian institutions in employability initiatives and curricular enhancements, a significant gap remains between employer expectations and graduate outcomes. Several studies highlight the challenges graduates face in meeting the demands of technologically advanced, fast-paced industries, particularly within the manufacturing sector. Research by Noah and Aziz (2020) and Norshima et al. (2022) reveals that over 50% of new graduates struggle with teamwork, professional communication, and adapting to corporate culture. Furthermore, while graduates often overestimate their employability, employers' express frustration over their inability to demonstrate leadership potential, independent thinking, and teamwork skills (Ab Aziz et al., 2023; Karimi & Pina, 2021; Nadarajah, 2021).

Despite previous studies highlighting the significance of soft skills, there has not yet been a comprehensive analysis of how employers in the Klang Valley's manufacturing sector perceive and prioritise these skills. This study aims to fill that important gap by providing practical insights tailored specifically to this sector and region. Given the manufacturing sector's critical role in Malaysia's digital economy and the need to align graduate competencies with industry demands, this research is both timely and relevant. A nuanced understanding of employer expectations at the sectoral level, as suggested by Römogens et al. (2020) and Li et al. (2024), could significantly enhance both higher education curricula and national workforce strategies.

Employability Skills Model

Employability skills models offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of graduate employability, particularly the USEM Model (Yorke & Knight, 2006) and the DOTS Model (Law & Watts, 1977). These models emphasize the importance of developing soft skills—such as communication, critical thinking, leadership, and teamwork—alongside academic knowledge that employers increasingly seek in the 21st century workforce. For instance, the USEM model conceptualises

employability as a holistic construct by integrating understanding (U), skills (S), efficacy beliefs (E), and metacognition (M). These models are especially relevant to Malaysia's manufacturing sector as they provide insights into employers' expectations regarding graduates' readiness for the job market. By incorporating these models into this research, we can bridge the gap between academic outcomes and market demands, allowing for a thorough exploration of how soft skills influence hiring decisions in the corporate landscape.

While scholarly interest in graduate employability is growing, previous research has often overlooked the employer's perspective, particularly within industry-specific contexts like manufacturing. The focus has primarily been on the viewpoints of students and academics, covering areas such as curriculum design and student self-perceptions. Additionally, existing literature frequently relies on general frameworks that do not specifically address the demands of industries or geographical locations. This study aims to address these gaps by adopting employability skills models from the employers' perspective and highlighting the critical need for soft skills within the context of manufacturing companies in Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, and Shah Alam. Research conducted by Jackson (2016) and Bennett et al. (2016) has effectively utilised the USEM model to assess how metacognitive understanding and self-efficacy contribute to graduate readiness. Meanwhile, Pool and Sewell (2007) developed the CareerEDGE framework based on the DOTS model to enhance graduate employability. However, these applications have primarily focused on the student perspective. By incorporating employers' insights into this study, we aim to enhance the applicability of these models and validate the theoretical frameworks in an employer-led, industry-focused environment. As a result, the findings are expected to provide valuable insights that can guide workforce planners, higher education institutions, and the development of graduate training and curriculum initiatives.

Soft Skills Dimensions and Their Relationship to Employability

Communication Skills and Employability

Employers across all sectors continue to regard communication as one of the most essential skills, applicable not only to management or academic roles but also to recent graduates entering the workforce. Effective communication encompasses a variety of skills, including the ability to articulate concepts clearly, engage in persuasive argumentation, produce professional reports, and practice active listening. As noted by Aljohani et al. (2022), communication is crucial for conveying corporate objectives, enhancing internal coordination, and fostering interpersonal trust among team members. In today's complex and fast-paced professional environments, skills in negotiation and dispute resolution are becoming increasingly important.

A comprehensive assessment by Basir et al. (2022) highlights that communication was identified as a critical factor in 65% of the publications reviewed related to employability, with a particular focus on written accuracy, vocal clarity, and intercultural competency. Employers also expect graduates to contribute confidently to meetings, give and receive constructive feedback, and effectively represent the organization in professional settings. Given these expectations, effective communication is not just a means of interaction with colleagues; it also reflects an individual's professionalism and emotional intelligence. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₁: Communication skills and employability are positively related.

Leadership Skills and Employability

In today's organisational landscape, leadership is recognised as a vital attribute at all levels, not just a characteristic associated with upper management. Employees are now expected to demonstrate leadership qualities in the workplace, such as taking initiative, making ethical decisions, setting goals, and inspiring others, even if they do not hold supervisory roles. According to Noah and Aziz (2020), the leadership skills exhibited by graduates reflect their ability to manage projects, motivate their colleagues, and align with organisational objectives. Additionally, Karimi and Pina (2021) suggest that possessing leadership traits

enhances an individual's influence within teams, facilitating career advancement and employee retention. Recent perspectives indicate that leadership can be developed through experiential learning, mentoring, and participation in student-led initiatives or community service. This challenges traditional views, such as those of Dobbins and Pettman (1997), which argue that leadership is primarily genetic (Matwa et al., 2021). As organisations increasingly seek candidates capable of leading under pressure, navigating change, and making a broader impact, leadership skills are becoming a key factor in hiring decisions. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: Leadership skills and employability are positively related.

Teamwork Skills and Employability

A fundamental aspect of organisational performance is teamwork, especially in industries that utilize agile and collaborative operational methods. Key qualities for effective teamwork include interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and a shared sense of responsibility. High-performing teams often exhibit shared accountability, mutual respect, and trust, as noted by Mohd Affandi et al. (2017). In these environments, employees are expected to engage in active listening, resolve conflicts, and provide constructive suggestions that align with the team's objectives. Majid et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of collaboration in fostering creativity and ensuring the smooth execution of projects, particularly in high-tech and knowledge-intensive sectors. As organisations increasingly adopt cross-functional structures, the demand for team-oriented employees continues to grow. Graduates who can effectively navigate cultural diversity, succeed in collaborative environments, and communicate well within teams are considered more adaptable and valuable by employers. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H₃: Teamwork skills and employability are positively related.

Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills, and Employability

Critical thinking and problem-solving skills have become essential for employability due to the evolving demands of the labour market. Graduates who possess these skills can effectively evaluate situations, navigate uncertainty, and develop innovative, practical solutions. According to Changwong et al. (2018), critical thinking is crucial for both employees and students when tackling complex social, scientific, and organisational challenges. Additionally, Daka et al. (2023) emphasize that critical thinking promotes intellectual autonomy by encouraging individuals to consider all relevant information, ask insightful questions, and make well-informed decisions instead of relying solely on administrative directives or standard operating procedures. Employers increasingly value these skills because they are associated with adaptability, creativity, and a commitment to lifelong learning—qualities that are essential for success in dynamic sectors such as manufacturing, where automation and digital technology are continuously reshaping the nature of work. Furthermore, since employees often need to solve problems collaboratively while considering the perspectives of various stakeholders, these abilities also enhance cross-functional teamwork. As a result, graduates who demonstrate both independent analytical reasoning and effective group problem-solving skills are highly sought after in the job market. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₄: Critical thinking and problem-solving skills and employability are positively related.

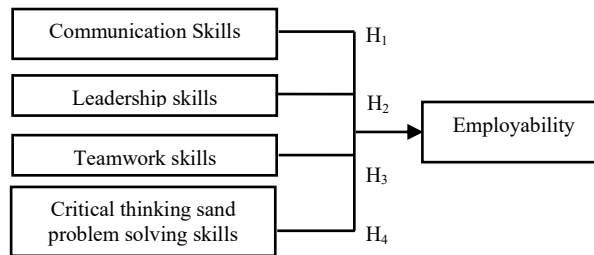


Fig. 1. Proposed conceptual framework

METHODOLOGY

This study examined employers from manufacturing firms in Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya, and Shah Alam, with a total of 173 participants completing the questionnaire. The sample size was determined based on various methodological factors, including the need for statistical power and representativeness. According to Field (2013), sample sizes of at least 150 respondents are typically sufficient for conducting robust regression analyses, ensuring reliable and valid results, especially when exploring relationships among multiple variables. In this case, the inclusion of 173 participants provides a solid foundation for identifying significant patterns and trends in the data, while also being practical in terms of time and resources. This sample size is appropriate for extrapolating findings within the sector and geographic region, as supported by research on sample sizes for employer-based studies in human resource management (Creswell, 2014).

The sampling method utilised in this study was non-probability sampling, specifically employing a purposive sampling approach. This method allowed for the selection of participants most relevant to the study's objectives, particularly targeting employers who play a significant role in evaluating and hiring recent graduates. A sample size of 173 was deemed adequate for collecting a range of perspectives from employers while ensuring the scope remained manageable. Data collection was conducted using a self-administered closed questionnaire, adapted from the Graduate Tracer Study (GTS) instrument developed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) of Malaysia. The GTS is widely recognised in academic and policy research for assessing graduate employability, thereby ensuring the instrument's relevance and validity within the Malaysian context. For instance, Mohd Tahir et al. (2018) employed the GTS to examine the perspectives of both graduates and employers regarding the enhancement of employability skills after the revision of the National Blueprint of Graduate Employability. Their findings affirmed the construct validity of the GTS in capturing critical aspects of employability, such as communication skills (0.847), leadership (0.800), critical thinking and problem-solving (0.813), and teamwork (0.802), which employers often identify as lacking in new graduates.

The data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency analysis was conducted to explore demographic characteristics and responses, providing a comprehensive understanding of data distribution. Descriptive statistics, including percentages, means, medians, modes, and extreme values, were utilised to effectively summarise participant feedback. To examine the relationships between the dependent and independent variables, regression analysis was performed, helping to establish the strength and direction of these associations. Cronbach's alpha was applied to assess the internal consistency of the revised questionnaire, with values exceeding 0.70 considered acceptable, indicating construct reliability. Finally, inferential statistical tests, such as regression analysis, were executed to test the hypotheses and identify significant relationships among the key variables.

FINDINGS

Of the 230 questionnaires distributed, 173 respondents completed them, resulting in a response rate of 75.2%. The demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information on respondents

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	108	62.4
Female	65	37.6
Education Level		
SPM	31	17.9
Diploma	59	34.1
Degree	79	45.7
Master Degree	4	2.3
Working Experiences		
1-5 years	118	68.2
6-10 years	50	28.9
11-15 years	5	2.9
More than 16 years	0	0.0
Department		
Operation	43	24.9
Engineering	8	4.6
Finance	21	12.1
HR	53	30.6
IT	10	5.8
Production	13	7.5
Sales/Marketing	20	11.6
Others	5	2.9
Industry		
Accounting/Finance/Banking	16	9.2
Arts/Media/Communication	6	3.5
Building/Construction	33	19.1
Computer/IT	11	6.4
Education/Training	14	8.1
Engineering	1	0.6
Healthcare	7	4.0
Hotel/Restaurant	4	2.3
Sales/Marketing	2	1.2
Professional Services	47	27.2
Others	32	18.5
Company Ownership		
100% Malaysian Owned	50	28.9
50% Malaysian Owned	31	17.9
50% Foreign Owned	27	15.6
100% Foreign Owned	65	37.6
Number of Employees		
Less than 50 Employees	23	13.3
51 – 100 Employees	54	31.2
101 – 500 Employees	88	50.9
501 – 1000 Employees	8	4.6
Years of Operation		
Less than 10 years	55	31.8
11 – 20 years	51	29.5
21 – 30 years	62	35.8
31 – 40 years	5	2.9
More than 50 years	0	0.0

Most of respondents (62.4%) are men, with 45.7% holding a degree. Additionally, 68.2% have between one to five years of job experience. The highest percentages of respondents work in professional services (27.2%) and human resources (30.6%). Many are employed in organisations often led by foreign managers

(37.6%) and within mid-sized businesses that have between 101 and 500 employees (50.9%). Furthermore, most of these companies have been in operation for 21 to 30 years (35.8%), while those with fewer than 10 years of operation make up the second largest group at 31.8%. Overall, the data indicates that most respondents are young professionals working in professional services and human resources at reputable mid-sized companies.

Validity and reliability analysis

The reliability analysis presented in Table 2 indicates that all variables demonstrate acceptable internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach's Alpha. Among these variables, teamwork skills show the highest reliability, with a score of 0.768, followed closely by leadership skills at 0.747 and communication skills at 0.736. These scores reflect strong consistency among their respective items. Employability and soft skills also show good reliability, with a score of 0.722. Meanwhile, critical thinking and problem-solving skills exhibit moderate but acceptable consistency, with a score of 0.669. Overall, these results suggest that the measurement instruments used to assess these skills are both reliable and suitable for further analysis.

Table 2. Validity and reliability analysis

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Item
Communication Skills	0.736	14
Leadership Skills	0.747	9
Teamwork Skills	0.768	10
Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills	0.669	8
Employability	0.722	10

Level of soft skills

Table 3 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the soft skill levels of 173 respondents. Communication abilities received a high mean score of 4.449; however, the standard deviation (3.84704) indicates significant variability in responses. Leadership skills also received strong evaluations, with a mean score of 4.426 and a smaller standard deviation (2.59456), suggesting somewhat less variability. Teamwork qualities earned a mean score of 4.434, accompanied by a standard deviation (3.27119) that shows considerable variation. Notably, critical thinking and problem-solving skills achieved the highest mean score of 4.486, although their standard deviation (3.40372) suggests a wide range of responses. Overall, all soft skills were rated highly, but the high standard deviations reflect differing levels of competency among individuals.

Table 3. Level of soft skills

Items	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication skills	173	4.347	4.584	4.449	3.84704
Leadership skills	173	4.347	4.538	4.426	2.59456
Teamwork skills	173	4.347	4.514	4.434	3.27119
Critical thinking and problem-solving skills	173	4.387	4.561	4.486	3.40372

Regression Analysis

Table 4 presents the results of a regression analysis that explores the relationship between soft skills and graduates' employability, along with their significance values (Sig. 2-tailed). The findings confirm a significant relationship between soft skills and employability, as all four hypotheses are supported by the beta (β) values and p -values ($p < .05$). The p -values, which are 0.000 for all variables, indicate that each soft skill substantially impacts employability. Employers place a high value on teamwork skills, as reflected in their strong impact ($\beta = 0.672$). Effective communication ($\beta = 0.475$) is also essential for achieving strong work performance. Leadership skills ($\beta = 0.398$) contribute moderately to employability, emphasizing the

importance of decision-making and guidance abilities. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills ($\beta = 0.360$) show the least impact, although they are still significant. This suggests that while analytical skills are important, they may not be as critical for employability as communication and teamwork. The explanatory power of the regression model reveals that soft skills (which include communication, leadership, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving) account for 48% of the variation in employability ($R^2 = 0.48$). The remaining percentage is attributed to other factors that are not included in the model.

Table 4. Relationship between Soft Skills and Employability

Hypotheses	Relationships	Beta	p-values	Final Decisions
H ₁	COM→EMP	0.475	0.000	Supported
H ₃	LEA→EMP	0.398	0.000	Supported
H ₄	TEA→EMP	0.672	0.000	Supported
H ₂	CTPS→EMP	0.360	0.000	Supported

Note: COM-Communication skills; LEA-Leadership skills; TEA-Teamwork skills; EMP-Employability
CTPS-Critical thinking and problem-solving skills;

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that managers highly value soft skills, particularly communication and teamwork, which are identified as the key indicators of employability. This aligns with the insights of Al Asefer and Zainal Abidin (2021), who noted that companies prefer graduates who can excel in diverse team environments. Interestingly, despite a strong emphasis on leadership skills in training and education, their relationship with employability is weaker (Matwa, Fongwa, & Wilson-Strydom, 2021). This could be due to the perception that leadership is often a skill developed through experience, making it less critical for entry-level positions compared to immediate contributions within a team. Likewise, while critical thinking and problem-solving are essential, they may not be as directly applicable to lower-level roles.

Notably, contrary to the common belief that leadership is a crucial trait sought by employers and educational institutions, the relationship between employability and leadership skills is relatively weak (Matwa, Fongwa, & Wilson-Strydom, 2021). Given the increasing focus on leadership development in organisational and educational contexts, this conclusion warrants further examination. One possible explanation is that while leadership skills are important, their immediate applicability may be limited in entry-level roles where adaptability and teamwork are prioritised. Since recent graduates typically lack managerial experience, employers in these positions tend to favour teamwork and task-specific abilities over leadership (Johnson et al., 2018). Consequently, in the manufacturing sector, communication and teamwork may be valued more highly than leadership, which becomes more significant at higher-level positions (Cohen, 2015; Ng & Burke, 2010). Additionally, as noted by Raghavendra (2018), leadership skills often develop over time, suggesting that they may hold greater importance in mid-career stages rather than for new recruits.

Communication skills significantly influence employability, serving as a cornerstone for nearly every aspect of business operations. Effective communication allows individuals to articulate their thoughts clearly, collaborate with diverse teams, and engage meaningfully with colleagues and clients, leading to smoother workflows and fewer misunderstandings (Chan et al., 2018). As companies increasingly adopt team-based and cross-functional approaches, the importance of communication grows, enhancing task coordination, problem-solving, and relationship-building (Hassan et al., 2017). For example, in the manufacturing sector, clear communication ensures that instructions are understood, minimizing costly errors and improving efficiency (Teoh et al., 2023). Additionally, individuals with strong communication skills often emerge as team leaders, helping to bridge gaps and foster teamwork. Effective communication includes not only verbal exchanges but also active listening, emotional intelligence, and nonverbal cues, all of which contribute to better professional relationships and conflict resolution (Hurrell, 2016). The ability

to communicate across multiple platforms while maintaining clarity and professionalism is becoming increasingly essential in the modern workplace (Al Asefer & Zainal Abidin, 2021). Therefore, communication skills remain crucial for employability, directly influencing an individual's ability to contribute to and thrive in today's dynamic work environments.

This study provides valuable insights for managers and employers regarding the essential soft skills that enhance graduates' employability. Organisations should prioritise the development of collaborative environments that encourage teamwork, as these skills have been identified as the most significant predictors of success. Employers can assist employees in improving their interpersonal and collaboration skills through initiatives such as leadership rotations, mentorship programmes, and team-building activities. Moreover, HR managers should reassess their training and recruitment strategies to emphasize collaboration, ensuring that employee development programs, on-boarding processes, and hiring assessments align with industry standards. It is also crucial to integrate communication training into workplace development plans, given that effective communication is vital for professional success. While critical thinking and leadership skills are important, they may require long-term development programmes, such as executive coaching, succession planning, and problem-solving workshops. Additionally, to align performance evaluations with the growing emphasis on soft skills, managers must regularly update their competency frameworks.

CONCLUSION

The emerging trend in employability suggests that employers are increasingly prioritising soft skills during the hiring process (Al Asefer & Zainal Abidin, 2021; Basir et al., 2022). In today's workforce, individualism is becoming less important, as managers prefer team-based projects, believing they enhance both employees' knowledge and collaborative abilities (Daka et al., 2023). Graduates are encouraged to participate in professional development courses, training programs, and networking events to refine their soft skills (Noah & Aziz, 2020; Majid et al., 2019). To ensure that students are adequately prepared through targeted training, it is essential for managers to clearly communicate their expectations for recent graduates (Aljohani et al., 2022). By integrating structured soft skills development programmes into curricula, providing opportunities for experiential learning, and fostering industry collaborations, educational institutions can effectively bridge the gap between academic training and workplace requirements (Matwa et al., 2021; Norshima et al., 2022). Additionally, the government can play a supportive role by funding skill development initiatives, launching public awareness campaigns, and offering subsidies for soft skills training to equip the workforce with competencies that align with evolving industry demands (Mohd Affandi et al., 2017).

This study provides important theoretical and methodological contributions to the discussion on employability and soft skills. It affirms the critical roles of teamwork and communication as key factors influencing employment outcomes while presenting a refined approach to understanding how the value of soft skills differs across various sectors and contexts. The findings align with existing research that emphasizes the importance of interpersonal skills in the workplace, supporting employability and human capital theories that advocate for ongoing skill development. Unlike much of the current literature, this study offers a nuanced evaluation of soft skill priorities, particularly noting the reduced relevance of leadership skills within Malaysia's manufacturing sector. This contrasts with previous research, such as that by Majid, Eapen, Ei Mon, and Oo (2019), which identified leadership as the most significant factor affecting employability. This highlights the need for a more contextualised and sector-specific application of employability models.

Future research could explore several topics to deepen our understanding of employability trends. To enhance generalisability and identify regional variations in employer expectations, it would be beneficial to expand the sample beyond the Klang Valley to include other Malaysian states (Basir et al., 2022).

Additionally, investigating specific soft skills such as adaptability, emotional intelligence, and professional ethics may provide a more nuanced understanding of the key attributes that drive success in the workplace (Karimi & Pina, 2021). Longitudinal studies would also be valuable for tracking the evolution of soft skill preferences over time, offering more accurate and forward-looking insights into employment trends (Changwong et al., 2018). Moreover, comparative studies across different sectors, such as manufacturing, services, and technology, could clarify whether certain industries prioritize distinct skill sets.

In terms of methodology, future research could benefit from employing a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative insights gathered from focus groups or interviews with quantitative analyses. This combination would allow researchers to gain a more nuanced understanding of the perspectives of both graduates and employers (Darmi et al., 2020; Daka et al., 2023). By linking employer expectations with the actual job search experiences of graduates, researchers may enhance their findings (Noah & Aziz, 2020). Furthermore, a more extensive and impactful study could emerge from incorporating a range of performance metrics and exploring additional factors that influence employability, such as digital literacy, internship exposure, or corporate culture (Hassan et al., 2017). Following these directions would strengthen the theoretical and practical implications of future research on graduate employment.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Idris Osman carried out the research, wrote and revised the article. Alisa Ibrahim and Idaya Husna Mohd conceptualised the central research idea and provided the theoretical framework. Maryam Jameelah Mohd Hashim and Nursaadatun Nisak Ahmad designed the research, supervised research progress; Idris Osman anchored the review, revisions and approved the article submission.

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