
Fostering Mental Wellness via the Inclusion of Soft Skills in Learning and Development Program: Strategies and Impact

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Abstract: In today's world, people recognize the importance of mental health. Mental health is not related to any kind of mental illness or sickness, but it is a state of well-being where people can deal with the challenges of day-to-day life. They can recognize their potential and contribute to the society they live in. This paper discusses the role of mental health within the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals under Goal 3 and explores the significance of integrating soft skills in learning and development programs in professional settings to enhance mental health outcomes. As the whole world is making every effort to achieve sustainable development, it is necessary to prioritize mental health as a fundamental element of our collective well-being.

Keywords: mental health, society, Sustainable Development Goals, soft skills, stress management, soft skills, mental health, stress management, SDGs (sustainable development goals), well-being.

Soft skills, like personal attributes, social abilities, and emotional intelligence, play a vital role in improving overall well-being and fostering healthy relationships. By examining the existing literature on soft skills and mental health, this paper proposes strategies for integrating soft skills in educational programs in organizations to promote emotional well-being and resilience. The findings highlight the importance of cultivating self-awareness, effective communication, empathy, and stress management skills to support mental health and personal growth. The implementation of these strategies can contribute to a holistic approach to education, enabling individuals to thrive in various domains of life.

Introduction: Mental health as SDG under Goal 3 is essential for the overall well-being and progress of individuals, communities, and nations. In recent years, we can see that mental health has emerged as a serious concern in various aspects of our lives, especially in the professional area. Our work environment plays a major role in shaping our mental well-being. The demands, pressures, and expectations of the professional world can have an intense impact on individuals, which can lead to mental health challenges. "A 2023 report by Prodoscore claimed that there was a rise in 'toxic productivity' during the Covid-19 pandemic, as remote workers started working on weekends to prove their commitment. This eventually led to a work culture which devalued work-life balance and eventual burnout."(The Economic Times)

Several factors contribute to the increase of mental health issues within professional settings. Initially, the competitive nature of many companies promotes a high-pressure environment where individuals are insistently striving for success. This continuous pressure to perform can lead to stress, anxiety, burnout, depression, etc. Furthermore, long working hours, heavy workloads, and tight time limits can eat away at work-life balance; in addition, interpersonal dynamics, such as conflicts with colleagues, bosses, or superiors, can create a toxic work environment which further worsens mental health challenges. "According to a study published in The Lancet, areas hit hardest by the virus suffered huge increases in depression and anxiety. In all, the authors estimated COVID-19 generated an additional 53.2 million cases of depressive disorder and 76.2 million cases of anxiety disorder."(Garen Staglin, *Forbes*)

The consequences of mental health problems in professional settings are extensive. Firstly, the individual suffering from mental health challenges may experience a decline in productivity and job performance. Moreover, mental health conditions can weaken concentration, decision-making abilities, creativity, etc, which can hinder professional growth and development. In addition, untreated mental health issues can lead to absence, workplace sickness, and higher employee turnover rates, which can result in significant financial loss for organizations.

Furthermore, mental health challenges can also have a harmful impact on personal relationships. Individuals may struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance, which can damage family life, cause social isolation, and diminish overall happiness. If these consequences are left unaddressed, they can have a worse effect, not only impacting the individual but also affecting team dynamics and organizational culture. As Jim Yong Kim points out, "This is not just a public health issue; it's a

development issue. We need to act now because the loss of productivity is something the global economy simply cannot afford. ("Investing in treatment for depression and anxiety leads to fourfold return," World Health Organization)

Before discussing the role of soft skills in mental health, it is important to know what mental health is. According to the World Health Organization, the report *Investing in Mental Health*, "...mental health can be defined as a state of well-being enabling individuals to realize their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their communities. (pg, 4)" So, if a person is not able to do his or her work with normal stress and anxiety. He does not know his capabilities; he cannot identify the problem and overcome it. He is unable to manage his day-to-day tasks, and personal and professional relationships and does not know what's going on in society and in the community; it means he/she has poor mental health. According to the World Health Organization:

- More than 150 million persons suffer from depression at any point in time;
 - Nearly 1 million commit suicide every year;
 - About 25 million suffer from schizophrenia;
 - 38 million suffer from epilepsy
- , and ¹

Mental health plays a key role in the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). United Nations members adopted 17 global goals under the SDGs in 2015 to address the various social, economic, and environmental challenges faced by the world by 2030. While the goals cover a wide range of issues, mental health is directly linked to several of them, such as 'Good Health and Well-Being,' 'No Poverty,' 'Reduced Inequality,' 'Quality Education,' 'Gender Equality,' 'Decent Work and Economic Growth,' 'Sustainable Cities and Communities,' 'Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions', 'Partnerships for the Goals,' etc.²

We are living in a world where the quest for knowledge and professional growth reign supreme, and the importance of nurturing one's mental health becomes more significant. Today's workplace demands not only technical expertise but also a holistic set of interpersonal abilities called 'soft skills'. As organizations and educational institutions have started recognizing the intense impact of mental well-being on overall productivity and success, there is a shift in progress toward integrating soft skills into learning and development programs. This practical

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² Sustainable-Development-Goals<
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>>

approach aims to empower individuals so that they can find ways to handle the challenges of the digital age by developing a culture in the organization that prioritizes mental health as an essential aspect of personal and professional growth.

Soft skills include a wide range of non-technical competencies such as emotional intelligence, communication, empathy, adaptability, resilience, problem-solving decision-making, etc. These competencies play a pivotal role in shaping an individual's personality, emotional balance, and social connections, contributing significantly to overall mental health. By acknowledging the inseparable link between cognitive and emotional well-being, policymakers are recognizing the potential of integrating soft skills training into learning and development programs. The cultivation of soft skills facilitates better communication and collaboration, reduces conflicts, and encourages a supportive environment. As a result, learners become more adept at managing work-life balance, cultivating emotional flexibility, and taking help when needed. Moreover, by incorporating mental health awareness and well-being initiatives into learning and development programs, organizations can directly deal with burnout and other mental health issues that may occur due to persistent competition and set targets, etc. In doing so, they promote a positive and inclusive work environment where employees feel valued, supported, and motivated to achieve their full potential. Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vijender Jain, former Chief Justice of Punjab and Haryana High Court, Chandigarh, once said,

We need to reprogram our mindsets and prepare to play our roles as responsible global citizens. In this respect, a culture of change is vital at all levels and in all spheres of life in the ways we learn, live, and work. We have a long way to go. But I am convinced that we have no other option than to reinvent ourselves. Each and every one of us should become an agent of change... (Punjab and Haryana High Court)

In today's competitive world, learning and development (L&D) programs have become an indispensable part of personal and professional growth. Organizations and individuals both spend on these initiatives to improve their skills, increase efficiency, and accomplish career goals. While the primary focus of these programs is skill development, their influence extends beyond professional growth by encompassing mental health benefits and contributing to overall well-being. One of the fundamental outcomes of L&D programs is boosting confidence and self-efficacy among individuals. As individuals participate in these programs, they acquire new knowledge and skills, which leads to a sense of accomplishment and the feeling of competence and capability in one's abilities, which enhances self-esteem and reduces feelings of failure. Here are some key reasons that highlight the importance of learning and development programs in organization:

- Learning and development activities allow individuals to acquire new skills, knowledge, and competencies. This sense of achievement and empowerment can boost self-confidence and self-esteem, which can lead to improved mental well-being.
- Continuous learning and intellectual challenges excite the cognitive functioning of the mind and help individuals maintain brain health.
- Learning new things, such as a new language or a professional skill, can provide a sense of personal growth and fulfillment. These positive experiences contribute to a greater sense of purpose and overall life satisfaction, which are important factors in maintaining good mental health.
- Learning and development programs also teach valuable coping strategies that develop effective coping methods, which enhance an individual's ability to manage difficult situations and emotions, reducing the risk of mental health problems.
- Many learning programs provide opportunities for social interaction and networking to the individuals so that they can fight with feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Learning and development activities can help individuals build resilience, which is an important factor in preventing and managing mental health issues. They can expose them to new challenges and teach them how to adapt and conquer obstacles.
- The concept of lifelong learning promotes ongoing personal development and growth throughout one's life.

Thus, learning and development programs (L&D) provide a range of benefits that contribute to improved mental health. Before formulating strategies for integrating soft skills in learning and development programs (L&D), organizations must figure out the relevance of soft skills programs in the workplace. Soft skills are not only essential for building harmonious work environments but are also instrumental in improving a company's growth. Hence, a clear understanding of how these skills contribute to organizational success will drive commitment and enthusiasm towards their integration. An organization can employ the following strategies to effectively integrate soft skills into their learning and development initiatives:

1. **Assessment and Skill Gap Analysis:** Conducting a systematic need based assessment and skill gap analysis is central for identifying the specific soft skills that need to be integrated into learning and development programs. This involves surveying workforce, managers, and stakeholders to find out the existing skill set and areas

that require upgrading. The collected data provides a foundation for designing training programs to address the identified gaps.

2. Organizations should create customized training programs that are in a line with their unique culture, industry, and workforce. These programs should be designed to connect learners through interactive workshops, simulations, case studies, and role-playing exercises, etc so that employees can relate more effectively to the lessons being taught.
3. **Integration with Technical Training:** Incorporating soft skills training with technical training helps the workforce apply their newly acquired skills in practical circumstances. For instance, combining communication training with project management workshops can improve an individual's ability to lead cross-functional teams. It will ensure that technical skills are complemented by the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively.
4. **Mentoring:** Implementation of mentoring programs can significantly support in soft skills development. Experienced employees or external coaches can guide individuals through real-life challenges by providing feedback and insights on how to navigate complex interpersonal situations.
5. **Gamification and E-Learning:** Soft skills training becomes more engaging and accessible if you use gamification and e-learning platforms. Interactive scenarios, quizzes, and virtual mock-ups can create a real-world situation that allows employees to practice and refine their skills in a safe environment. These platforms also offer the flexibility for employees to learn at their own pace.
6. **Assessments and Feedback Mechanisms:** Regular assessments and feedback mechanisms are necessary to track the progress of the staff and classify the areas that need further improvement. Self-assessment tools, close evaluations, and supervisor feedback can provide employees with valuable insights into their strengths and areas for growth, motivating them to continuously enhance their soft skills.

Thus, in today's interconnected and people-centric workplaces, the integration of soft skills into learning and development programs is no longer optional but vital. By applying given strategies, such as understanding the relevance of soft skills, conducting needs assessments, integrating soft skills training with technical training, creating customized programs, implementing coaching and mentoring,

utilizing technology, etc., organizations can nurture a workforce that is equipped with the essential interpersonal skills required to excel in their roles and take organizational success in the dynamic business landscape.

The integration of soft skills in learning and development programs has the potential to significantly impact mental health outcomes. **For example**, investing in the training of soft skills that facilitate enhanced ‘emotional regulation’ has become a valuable chase. Soft skills encompass a range of interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities that allow individuals to deal with various social and professional situations effectively. Among these skills, ‘emotional intelligence’ takes center stage. Knowledge about soft skills covers the awareness, understanding, and management of emotions, as well as the ability to understand and communicate effectively with others. Soft skills exercises train individuals in a way so that they can identify the root of the cause, understand the patterns that are causing emotional issues, and respond according to that situation. This type of training is very useful in high-pressure settings where a composed and empathetic personality can promote positive outcomes.

Moreover, ‘good communication skills’ are very important for ‘good mental health’. The ability to communicate enables individuals to express their emotions and thoughts effectively. When we cannot communicate our feelings effectively, it leads us towards frustration, isolation, and anxiety, which causes stress. Effective communication skills have become an essential skill in personal and professional growth in today's world. Soft skills training offers an inclusive approach to enhancing these skills. It allows individuals to express themselves clearly, connect with others empathetically, and navigate complex scenarios proficiently.

Soft skills’ training is also helpful in ‘managing stress’. It is an important contributor to managing mental health problems. Soft skills like time management, resilience, and problem-solving help individuals cope with stress more efficiently. By prioritizing tasks, setting boundaries, and developing strategies to handle challenges, individuals can reduce stress levels and prevent it from growing into chronic anxiety or depression. Cultivating these skills empowers individuals to maintain a healthy work-life balance and take proactive steps to manage stress effectively.

Constructing and fostering ‘positive interpersonal relationships’ is a key outcome of soft skills training that impacts mental health deeply. Healthy relationships provide emotional support, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for social connection that are vital for overall well-being. Effective soft skills such as active listening, empathy, and conflict resolution promote harmonious relationships. These skills improve communication, strengthen bonds, and reduce the possibility of loneliness and isolation, which results in promoting positive mental health.

Soft skills training ‘encourages self-reflection’ that allows individuals to assess their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for personal growth. This introspection cultivates self-awareness and helps individuals identify self-care practices that ally with their needs. Incorporating soft skills exercise into one's self-care routine can lead to holistic well-being. By enhancing communication, emotional intelligence, time management, stress management, boldness, active listening, problem-solving, and self-reflection skills, individuals become better at navigating life's complexities and maintaining a healthier and more fulfilling lifestyle. As Indra Nooyi said in her interview,

So I think we are on an interesting point in the evolution of work, where we could actually evolve a new work style with humanity in the center. At the same time, we could also be viewed as ignoring the needs and the challenges of the working people who keep our economy going. So we're at an interesting fork in the road.

In conclusion, this paper shares insight into the vital role of integrating soft skills within learning and development programs to promote enhanced mental health outcomes. The wide examination of the interconnectedness between soft skills development and mental well-being highlights the significance of a holistic approach to personal and professional growth. The discussion demonstrates that the nurturing of skills such as emotional intelligence, communication, adaptability, and resilience can empower individuals to navigate challenges, build meaningful relationships, and effectively manage stressors. By recognizing the relationship between soft skills and mental health, organizations and policymakers can collaboratively design and implement strategies that prioritize not only the attainment of technical knowledge but also the holistic development of individuals.

It is clear that an investment in programs that promote the attainment of soft skills can lead to not only professional success but also improved mental health and overall quality of life. As we move forward, it is crucial to continue exploring the complicated methods through which soft skills contribute to mental well-being, thereby paving the way for a more resilient, adaptable, and empathetic society.

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