



SOFT SKILLS ACQUISITION AMONG BUSINESS EDUCATORS: A PANACEA FOR E-WORLD RELEVANCE IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study was aimed at determining the soft skills acquisition among business educators as a panacea for e-world relevance in public universities in South East, Nigeria. Two research questions guided the study while two null hypotheses were tested at $p \leq 0.05$ level of significance. Survey research design was adopted for the study. The population for the study consisted of the entire 75 business educators drawn from the eight universities that offers business education programme in South East Nigeria. The instrument for data collection for the study was a 27 item structured questionnaire titled: *Soft Skills Acquisition among Business Educators Questionnaire (SSABEQ)*. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained using Cronbach Alpha reliability method. The data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation for answering the research questions while t-test was used for testing the null hypotheses. The study found out that communication skills, teamwork, leadership skills critical thinking among others were soft skills that must be acquire by business educators. Similarly the study found out that insufficient period of exercise; poor funding of education; large class size, insufficient self development by business educators; unwillingness to embrace change; fear of job lose among business educators and inadequate collaboration with foreign colleagues are constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills. The study recommended that business educators should embrace soft skills as part of skills they must possess to be able to deliver efficiently and effectively in this e- world era. Business educators should anticipate new skills and skills change and adopt them as soon as they emerge so as to be up-to-date with the latest trends in education; business educators should be self motivated, academically focused and at the same time create sufficient time for personal development on the latest skills for efficient service delivery. Business educators should endeavour to undergo self/personal training on soft skill so as to transfer it on their students among others

Keywords: Skills, Soft Skills, Business Educator, E world.

Introduction

The core mandate of business education especially in the Electronic- world is to equip individuals with specific skills that will give them the ability, capability and competencies to function as sound entrepreneurs or employees in the field of work (YourDictionary, 2017). Job skills allow one to do a particular job and life skills help one through everyday tasks. There are many different types of skills that can help one succeed at all aspects of one's life whether in school, work, or even in sport or



Teaching especially in this e-world is a multifaceted performance, demanding a wide range of knowledge and skills containing hard and soft skills to successfully accomplish the burdens of the class-room (Tang & Mohd, 2014). Teaching business subjects with the latest skills like soft skills is a social activity that comprises communal collaboration between business educators and students (Lim, Tang, & Tan, 2013). In doing this, the skills applied, the teaching style among others can be considered as the sum of behaviours that will bring change in the life of the students. As a result, the talent of teaching business education does not only comprise a modest transmission of knowledge from business educator to students, it is also a multifaceted procedure that eases and affects the process of student learning (Prasertcharoensuk and Tang, 2016). Soft skills are relational and social in nature. As such, they are e-world necessity for business educators who toil in a high - performance setting, ultimately promoting collaboration, efficiency and effectiveness among business education students.

Soft skills are important to the success of almost all employers irrespective of the sector. Nearly every job requires employees to engage with others be it through collaboration, information sharing, team-work among others. Soft skills are acquired over time as such people with these skills are often sought for and at the same time seen as having unique and broad backgrounds that can diversify any organizations and help it run more efficiently. Soft skills are particularly important in the teaching and learning of business education especially in this e-world era that product of different institutions is expected to compete with their counterparts across the globe. Thus, soft skills are seen to boost competency and to consequently upsurge business educator's ability in subsidizing communal progression and transform (Duncan & Dunifon, 2012; Romedios, 2012). As stated by Salleh, Sulaiman, and Talib (2010), soft skills are the most operative instruments and methods for higher education institutions to appraise the future capabilities of business educators and business students. Therefore, recognizing and evolving the importance of soft skills acquisition has been a thought provoking task for curriculum designers in this e-world era (Hodges & Burchell, 2003).

Acquisition of soft skills is often viewed as something that happens in the normal course of events and it has the potential to transfer and to create knowledge based on the local requirements (Tang, Nethanomsak, & Ariratana, 2014). Subramaniam's (2013) study indicated that lecturers (business educators) have acknowledged the associated role of soft skills in the development of instruction for e- world students. Subramaniam emphasized that soft skills acquisition is relevant for business education students mostly now that they are looking for global collaboration and relevance. Intrinsically, business educators should now undertake more wide-spread preparation and progression to successfully impart soft skills acquisition in their teaching. Thus, understanding of soft skills itself is vital for lecturers to vary their teaching approaches for the students in this e-world era.

Electronic world is the soft-skill world where virtually all dealings are paperless. With the advent of industrial revolution, discovery and development has formed a strong force with regards to the dissemination and exchange of information across the globe (Etonyeaku, Onuoha and Kanu, 2016). Today's institutions are thinking on how to operate and compete in the new economy through the provision of students that will fit every work-place. The electronic world has become one of the most common means of using ICT to provide education and training to learners, both on and off-



hobby. The author noted that skills are what make one confident and independent in life and are essential for success. It might take determination and practice, but almost any skill can be learned or improved. There are skills needed for jobs that are not only desirable by employers but necessary in order to grow in ones role or work well with others. Skills can fall into various categories and can be transferred from one job to another.

Skills can either be in hard or soft form. Hard skills are knowledge one needs to perform a job. They are skills gained through education, training programmes, certifications, and on-the-job training (Doyle, 2018). To the author, they are typically quantifiable skills that can be easily defined and evaluated. Soft skills, on the other hand, are interpersonal (people) skills. They are much harder to define and evaluate. Soft skills are the personal attributes, personality traits, inherent social cues, and communication abilities needed for success on the job. It is similar to emotions or insights that allow people to “read” others. In fact, soft skills are much harder to learn, measure and evaluated especially in a traditional classroom. Soft skills are transferable skills that can be used regardless of the job on which the person is working. They are personal attributes one need to succeed in the workplace. According to Marcel (2018), soft skills are a combination of people skills, social skills, communication skills, character traits, attitudes, career attributes, social intelligence and emotional intelligence quotients among others that enable people to navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals towards complementing hard skills. In the same vein, The Collins English Dictionary (2017) defined the term "soft skills" as “desirable qualities for certain form of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge. They include common sense, the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude.

Soft skills are a cluster of productive personality traits that characterize one's relationships in a milieu. These skills can include social graces, communication abilities, language skills, personal habits, cognitive or emotional empathy, time management, teamwork and leadership traits (Bortz, 2017). A definition based on reviewed literature explains soft skills as an umbrella term for skills under three key functional elements: people skills, social skills, and personal career attributes. Soft skills characterize how a person interacts in relationships with others (Silber & Foshay, 2009). The National Business Education Association of Arkansas Department of Education, (2007) saw soft skills as critical for being industrious in today's workplace. Soft skills complement hard skills also known as technical skills, for productive workplace performance and everyday life competencies.

In the context of this study, soft skills are personal traits that enhance business educators' interaction, job performance, and career viewpoints in this e-world era. Pachauri and Yadav (2014) defined soft skills as personality traits, social gracefulness, fluency in language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism to varying degrees. Soft skills should be adopted as an ordinary feature of a business educator's selection of community skills and character traits (Tang & Tan, 2015). Business educators constitute the workforce that provides its recipients with the right skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to function in the world of work (Okanazu, Madu and Anyakoha, 2016). To the authors, business educators are experts who have undergone several training, acquired requisite certificates and have built their capacity, skills and competencies in the business environments. A good business educator is expected to be committed to his or her work and to have the ability to take the initiative and they are mostly found in public universities. Public universities are those universities owned, financed and managed by either state or federal governments.



campus (Livingstone, 2016). The electronic world may be seen as a period when the use of electronic media to deliver instructional contents to learners regardless of the locations is paramount. E-world involves the use of GSM, Radio and Television broadcast, Internet, Intranet, Audio, Video, Tape, CD-ROMs, DVD and so on to provide learning at a distance. E-world can be explained as technology based learning in which learning materials are delivered electronically to remote learners through computer network (Kwacha, 2007).

In Nigeria today, e-world is considered by many scholars “as a critical strategy among institutions eager to provide affordable, efficient and flexible learning environment for rapidly growing and diverse communities of learners” (Gulati, 2008). With e-world platform, learners can reach out to fellow colleagues, receive educational materials from the teacher, submit assignments through the internet technology at their own pace, take tests and receive feedback. Business educators can also reach out to students (Kozima, 1999). Among other benefits or advantages of e-world platform, which make it indispensable to teaching and learning, it improves access to quality education and information; enables interaction between students and teachers is enhanced; offers opportunity for acquisition of up-to-date technological skills; creates greater collaboration among academics; gives learners control over contents; creates prospect of self-learning and learning can take place anytime, anywhere; tracking of learners' progress is made easier; learners are exposed to standard course content and the learning content can easily be updated (European Commission , 2005). This feature of e-world enables it to play crucial roles in providing learner centered and demand-driven programmes and the need to acquire emerging skills by business educators in order to continue being relevant in the e-world era. It is against this backdrop that the researchers set out to determine soft skills acquisition among business educators as a panacea for e-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.

Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of the study was to determine how soft skills acquisition among business educators will be a panacea for E- world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to identify:

Soft skills that should be acquired by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.

Constraints in the acquisition of soft skills by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

What are the soft skills that should be acquired by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.

What are the constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.



Hypotheses

- H0₁:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female business educators on the soft skills that should be acquired for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.
- H0₂:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business educators in federal and state universities on the constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.

Method

Two research questions guided the study and two hypotheses were tested at the probability level of 0.05. Survey research design was adopted for the study. Survey design was found suitable for this study because questionnaire was used to collect data from respondents on soft skills acquisition among business educators as a panacea for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. The population of the study consisted of all the entire 75 business educators drawn from the eight universities that offer business education programme in South East Nigeria. Due to the relatively manageable size of the population, the entire population was used for the study without sampling.

The instrument for data collection was a 27 item structured questionnaire titled: Soft Skills Acquisition among Business Educators Questionnaire (SSABEQ). The questionnaire was structured on a 4-point rating scale of Strongly Agreed (SA); Agreed (A); Disagreed (D); and Strongly Disagreed (SD) respectively. The instrument was face- validated by three experts in business education. For the purpose of establishing the internal consistency of the instrument, Cronbach Alpha reliability method was used. The reliability coefficient obtained was .83. Copies of the questionnaire were distributed by the researcher with the help of three research assistants. All the 75 copies of the questionnaire administered were retrieved representing 100% return rate. The data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions while t-test was used to test the null hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The null hypothesis of no significant difference was accepted for items whose p-values were greater than 0.05 level of significance while hypothesis of no significant difference was rejected for items whose p-values were less than 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question One

What are the soft skills that should be acquired by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria?

- H0₁:** There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female business educators on the soft skills that should be acquired for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.

The data for answering the first research question and testing the first null hypothesis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean ratings and t-test of the responses of business educators on Soft skills that should be acquired for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. (N 75)

S/N	Soft skills that should be acquired by business educators for E-world relevance include:	\bar{X}	SD	Rem . RQ	P-Value	Remark
1.	Communication skills	3.42	.81	A	.75	NS
2.	Teamwork skills	3.91	.67	SA	.69	NS
3.	Leadership skills	3.94	.79	SA	.58	NS
4.	Critical thinking skills	3.88	.47	SA	.74	NS
5.	Work ethic	3.69	.91	SA	.68	NS
6.	Positive attitude	3.13	.78	A	.53	NS
7.	Creative problem solving skills	3.16	.67	A	.34	NS
8.	Decision Making skills	3.71	.59	SA	.76	NS
9.	Conflict resolution skills	3.66	.61	SA	.84	NS
10.	Adaptability skills	3.81	.72	SA	.87	NS
11.	Responsibility skills	3.57	.64	SA	.74	NS
12.	Professionalism skills	3.86	.77	SA	.56	NS
13.	Interpersonal skills	3.86	.55	SA	.52	NS
14.	Integrity	3.67	.82	SA	.29	NS
15.	Courtesy	3.50	.77	SA	.78	NS
16.	Flexibility	3.94	.69	SA	.43	NS
17.	Self motivation	3.57	.87	SA	.67	NS
18.	Time management	3.81	.86	SA	.41	NS
Overall		3.56	.73	SA	.67	NS

Note: \bar{X} = Mean; O = Overall; SA = Strongly Agreed; A = Agreed; N = No of Respondents; S* = Significant; NS = Not Significant; Sig. at 0.05

Data presented in Table 1 show that the mean ratings of the responses of the respondents on 15 out of the 18 items in the Table ranged from 3.50 - 3.94 which are within the boundary limit of 3.50-4.00 on 4-point rating scale. This indicates that the business educators strongly agreed that the fifteen identified items are soft skills that should be acquired by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. Furthermore, the results show that the mean ratings on items 1, 6, and 7 are 3.32, 3.13 and 3.16 respectively which are within the boundary limit of 2.50-3.49 on 4-point rating scale. By this finding, the business educators agreed that the remaining three items are soft skills that should be acquired by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.

The results also, indicate that the P-values of the entire 18 items in ranged between .29 to .87 which is in each case greater than 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female business educators on the soft skills that should be acquired for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant difference is accepted on all the eighteen items.

Research Question Two

What are the constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.

H0₂: There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business educators in federal and state universities on the constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.

The data for answering the second research question and testing the second null hypothesis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean ratings and t-test of the responses of business educators on the constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. (N = 75)

S/N	Constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills include:	\bar{X}	SD	Rem. RQ	P-Value	Remark
1.	Insufficient period of exercise	3.56	.57	SA	.85	NS
2.	Poor funding of education	3.50	.67	SA	.49	NS
3.	Having large class size to teach (overload)	3.32	.82	A	.35	NS
4.	Poor academic focus among business educator	3.19	.77	A	.84	NS
5.	Poor anticipation of new skills by bus. educators	3.97	.61	SA	.38	NS
6.	Insufficient self development by business educators	3.11	.72	A	.73	NS
7.	Unwillingness to embrace change	3.77	.69	SA	.64	NS
8.	Fear of job lose among business educators	3.82	.50	SA	.99	NS
9.	Inadequate collaboration with foreign colleagues	3.54	.95	SA	.78	NS
Overall		3.75	.68	SA	.71	NS

Note: \bar{X} = Mean; O = Overall; SA = Strongly Agreed; A = Agreed; N = No of Respondents; S* = Significant; NS = Not Significant; Sig. at 0.05

Data presented in Table 2 reveal that the mean ratings of the respondents on six out of the nine items range from 3.50 - 3.97 which are within the boundary limit of 3.50 - 4.00 on 4-point rating scale. This indicates that the business educators strongly agreed that the six identified items are constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. The result further show that the mean ratings for items 3, 4 and 6 are 3.32, 3.19 and 3.11 respectively which are within the boundary limit of 2.50-3.49 on 4-point rating scale. By this finding, business educators agreed that the remaining three items are also constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria.

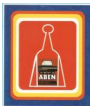


Data presented in Table 2 also reveal that the p-values of the entire nine items range between .35 - .99 which are all greater than 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that there are no significant difference in the mean ratings of business educators in federal and state universities on the constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. Therefore, the null hypothesis of no significant difference is accepted on all the nine items.

Discussion of Findings

The study identified the soft skills that should be acquired by business educators for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria to include: communication skills; teamwork skills; leadership skills; critical thinking skills; work ethic; positive attitude; creative problem solving skills; decision making skills; conflict resolution skills; adaptability skills; responsibility skills; professionalism skills; interpersonal skills; integrity; courtesy; flexibility; self motivation and time management. This is in agreement with the opinions of Tan and Tang (2015) who explored the levels and processes of soft skills development through the Diploma in Business Studies (DBS) programme in Privates College situated in Georgetown, Penang, Malaysia. The author found out that teamwork skill arose steadily as the utmost appraisal soft skill aptitude, followed by information management skill. The lowest soft skill was ethics, moral, and professional skills. The findings of this study is also in line with that of Tyler (2016) who noted that there are too many soft skills, but that the essential soft skills that employers most appreciate in workplaces include: strong work ethic, communication skills, creative problem solving, time management, teamwork and leadership. To the author, good work ethic, problem solving, time management, communication skills, and teamwork ability are all skills that can make one a great business educator in this e-world. MindTools.com (2017) in support postulated that soft skills are increasingly becoming the hard skills of today's work force. According to Mindtool.com, it is not enough now to be highly trained in technical skills, without developing the softer, interpersonal and relationship-building skills that help people to communicate and collaborate effectively. These people skills are more critical than ever as organizations, institutions struggle to find meaningful ways to remain competitive and be productive in e- world era. Meanwhile, Catone (2017) stated that it is important for one to recognize the vital role soft skills play within one's team or organization. To Catone, the areas to be examined and evaluated include: personal accountability, collaboration, interpersonal negotiation skills, conflict resolution, people's adaptability and flexibility, clarity of communications, creative thinking, inclusion, coaching and monitoring.

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of male and female business educators on the soft skills that should be acquired for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. This is because both male and female business educators required the same soft skills for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. This is in agreement with the view of Tang (2018) who explored the soft skills acquisition of lecturers and the importance of soft skills in the teaching profession. The author opined that teamwork and lifelong learning skills were the most important soft skills acquired by all lecturers irrespective of their gender and programme. The findings also revealed that the important aspect of soft skills acquisition included: delivery of effective and quality teaching; career development and enrichment and management of student skills.



Furthermore, the study identified the constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills by business educators for e-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria which include: insufficient period of exercise; poor funding of education; having large class size to teach (overload); poor academic focus among business educator; poor anticipation of new skills by business educators; insufficient self development by business educators; unwillingness to embrace change; fear of job lose among business educators and inadequate collaboration with foreign colleagues. This is in agreement with the opinions of Tang, Tan and Uma Devi (2015) that identified critical issues of soft skills development through professional training. The authors asserted that factors like big class size, academic focused, insufficient period of training among other were responsible for failure of soft skills development. Also Tang, Tan and Vetriveil (2015) study collaborated this because they investigated the critical problems of the soft skill development through teaching specialized exercise. The authors equally revealed that the factors associated with the failure of soft skills development among lecturers included insufficient training time, lack of self motivation among others. They therefore suggested the incorporation of soft skills in every course scheme.

There is no significant difference in the mean ratings of business educators in federal and state universities on the constraints faced in the acquisition of soft skills for E-world relevance in public universities in South East Nigeria. This is because both federal and state universities have the same issues with regards to soft skills. This study is also in line with the views of Malasysia Ministry of Higher Education (2016) which stated that poor training and personal development among higher education lecturers in communication, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork, lifelong learning and leadership skill are among the factors retarding the full development of soft skills among lecturers irrespective where there are.

Conclusion

This study looked at soft skills acquisition among business educators as a panacea for e-world relevance in public universities. Soft skills like communication skills, critical thinking skills, leadership skills, teamwork, good work ethics, positive attitude, problem solving among others as the most critical soft skills needed for efficient and effective service delivery in this e-world era. Furthermore, constraints like poor funding of education, handling of large class size, poor academic focus, insufficient training time, lack of self motivation among others were equally identified.

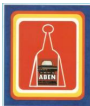
Thus, business educators must be aware of their shortcoming. They should identify their weaknesses and limitations on soft skills and take the opportunity to acquire as much soft skills as possible so as to prepare themselves for the ever-demanding work place. More importantly, business educators must realize the importance of enhancing their soft skills so that they will be able to compete in the e-world without boundaries.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

Business educators should embrace soft skills as part of the skills they must possess to be able to deliver efficiently and effectively in this e- world era.

Business educators should anticipate new skills and skills change and adopt them as soon as they emerge so as to be up-to-date with the latest trends in education.



Business educators should be self motivated, academically focused and at the same time create sufficient time for personal development on the latest skills for efficient service delivery.

Business educators should endeavour to undergo self/personal training on soft skills so as to transfer same to their students.

Government on their part should fund education in general in the area of provision of equipment, sponsoring training programmes and providing academic scholarships.

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