

# Soft skills as a workforce development strategy for Opportunity youth: Review of the evidence

## Scoping Report

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## INTRODUCTION

More than a quarter of a million young people in Canada between ages 15 and 29 are neither in employment or in education, and are therefore sometimes referred to as “NEET” youth.<sup>1,2</sup> While some of these youth may be actively looking for employment or transitioning from school to work, as a group, they face substantial barriers to employment.<sup>2,3</sup> Many of these barriers are due to intersecting systemic challenges the youth may experience in their physical and social environments, such as poor housing or health.<sup>1,4,5</sup> There are increasing calls to move beyond the deficit-based term NEET to describe these youth, and towards using “Opportunity youth.”<sup>4,6</sup> This latter term suggests that without investment and supports for these young people, their potential may not be fully realized, becoming *missed opportunities* for themselves and for society.<sup>4</sup> By improving outcomes for this population, businesses and communities have the potential to improve the quality of talent available to employers, and interrupt a multi-generational cycle of poverty for youth and their families.<sup>4,7</sup>

Employment support and training programs exist in Canada and across the world to help people on the path towards employment. These programs can lead to many positive labour market outcomes for young people.<sup>8,9</sup> However, evidence from systematic reviews shows that, overall, the success of these programs may in large part be due to local contextual factors such as the local labour market and participant characteristics, and may not lead to better outcomes for all young people.<sup>9,10</sup> Consequently, there is growing interest in developing innovative approaches to better support young people in general towards employment and young people facing multiple barriers (such as Opportunity youth) in particular.<sup>1</sup>

One of these approaches may be for programs to incorporate skills development that is better aligned with shifts in the modern economy. Due to technological shifts and greater digitization, employers and government agencies are increasingly reporting the need for young people to have a diverse set of non-technical skills to succeed in the modern economy; these are often referred to as soft skills, non-cognitive skills, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, or socio-emotional learning skills.<sup>1,11–14</sup> These skills<sup>1\*</sup> are among the top skills employers are seeking in young workers while also reporting that these are the skills youth lack most.<sup>12,15</sup> Some evidence suggests that the levels of soft skills may be lower among Opportunity youth compared to other youth.<sup>16,17</sup>

Due to the increased interest in and demand for soft skills, there is a need to understand the evidence base regarding effective approaches to operationalizing their development within

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<sup>1\*</sup> When referring to this broad set of skills in this report, we use the term “soft skills” as it is the most widely used term in the literature and across different sectors.

employment programs.<sup>18</sup> Embedding promising approaches for soft skills development within employment support and training programs may help increase their effectiveness. As such, in this scoping review we aim to describe the current literature on soft skills as well as any evidence on approaches for operationalizing these skills within programs for Opportunity youth.

## PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This report is part of a larger research project, *Soft Skills as a Workforce Development Strategy for Opportunity Youth*, designed to define and contextualize employment-specific soft skills and synthesize promising approaches used by leading employers and employment support programs serving Opportunity youth in Canada. The project will result in an evidence-informed employment service delivery model that provides recommendations for operationalizing soft skills training for Opportunity youth in Canada. More specifically, the project will address the following research questions:

1. What are soft skills and how are they important for finding and succeeding in employment? What is the value and need of these skills in the current economy for youth in general, and specifically for youth facing multiple barriers, like Opportunity youth?
2. What approaches are being used by employers and employment support programs to foster these soft skills among youth with multiple barriers, in Canada and other similar contexts? Are there any notable examples that provide useful guidance for developing programs?
3. According to Canadian service providers, what are the enablers, challenges, and opportunities for operationalizing soft skills? What specific approaches and leading strategies can employers and employment support programs implement to enhance soft skills development among Opportunity youth?

This report summarizes the evidence from a literature review and environmental scan conducted as part of the larger research project, addressing research questions 1 and 2. As such, this report:

- Describes the extent of academic and grey research literature around the value and need of soft skills within the employment training context;
- Outlines key conceptual frameworks that can help illustrate the benefits and approaches for soft skills development in employment support programs; and
- Provides an overview of key employment support programs/ initiatives for soft skills development among Opportunity youth across Canada and other countries.

## METHODS

We conducted a scoping review<sup>2\*</sup> of the research and practice-based literature on the value and need for soft skills within the employment training context, as framed by Research Question 1. The aim of our search was to capture systematic reviews, topic reviews, and primary research articles. These findings were then supplemented with an environmental scan of the grey literature, including websites and program documents, to help contextualize research findings and ensure a practice-based lens was captured in the narrative. This search was designed to provide a detailed overview of the employment support programs integrating or focusing on soft skills development in Canada and similar countries, as framed by Research Question 2.

### Literature review

The literature review used an iterative approach to develop queries across academic and grey literature searches. These queries focused on “soft skills,” “social emotional learning skills,” and “non-cognitive” skill development or youth employment training. The parameters of the search and inclusion criteria for retrieved materials included:

- *Scope:* Soft skills or social emotional learning or non-cognitive skills specifically in relation to their value in the workplace and on-the-job training (as opposed to soft skills training in educational curricula).
- *Themes:* Soft skills, workplace and workplace training, social emotional learning, non-cognitive skills, 21st century skills or competencies, essential skills, youth, recent graduates, NEET youth, Opportunity youth, vulnerable youth, marginalized youth.
- *Language:* Published in English.
- *Date of publication:* Published between 2010 and 2020 (a handful of articles identified as foundational that fell outside of this range were included).
- *Jurisdictions:* Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Europe, and the United States. While the search used international databases, it did not aim to be exhaustive, but rather to identify and review common approaches and promising practices. Research and practice syntheses from multi-national bodies such as the Organization of Economic Co-operation

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<sup>2\*</sup> For the purposes of this report, a scoping review is defined as a preliminary assessment of potential size and scope of available research literature, which aims to identify the nature and extent of research evidence.<sup>95</sup> This type of research synthesis maps the literature on a particular topic and provides an opportunity to identify key concepts, research gaps, and types and sources of evidence to inform research and practice.<sup>96</sup>

and Development (OECD), the World Bank, and the International Labour Organization, were reviewed throughout the search process.

Table 1 below summarizes the databases and websites used in the searches of the peer-reviewed and grey literature.

**Table 1**            **Databases and websites searched**

Type	Source
Peer-reviewed literature	Business Source Complete
	CINAHL
	EconLit
	Medline (Ovid)
	PsycInfo (Proquest)
	Soc Abstracts
Grey literature	Google Scholar
	Open Grey
	Google web

## Environmental scan

Building on the findings from the literature review, the environmental scan was conducted with the goal of comprehensively capturing articles and materials relevant to service delivery. The scan used the same terms to identify resources available online using Google’s search engine. We conducted a broad search to capture both Canadian and international resources.

In addition, we performed a targeted search of specific organizations and relevant resources. These included employment services organizations, government bodies, and research organizations. Examples include the Canadian Conference Board, the Government of Canada, the Government of Ontario, and the OECD. A review of reference lists of retrieved documents was also performed to identify any other relevant materials or documents.



## FINDINGS

### WHO ARE OPPORTUNITY YOUTH?

NEET is a widely recognized indicator and umbrella term to describe a group of young people who are neither in education nor employment. However, within this category, there is immense diversity of young people's characteristics, experiences, and life circumstances.<sup>2,19,20</sup> Some NEET youth may have recently completed higher education and be looking for employment, while others may be facing more challenging circumstances and additional barriers to employment or further education. Some NEET youth may not be seeking employment for a variety of reasons, such as taking care of a family member or having a long-term disability. In fact, about 38.0 per cent of NEET youth in Canada were reported to be actively looking for paid work.<sup>2</sup>

One criticism of the term NEET is that it is a deficit-based label that classifies young people as being in a problem state.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, characterizing young people in a state they are *not* (i.e., *not* in education or employment) can be inherently stigmatizing for young people who are in other pursuits, such as volunteering, carrying for others, transitioning between school and work, or facing systemic challenges to pursuing their employment and educational goals.<sup>6</sup> Many people, including young people themselves, have argued the term itself acts as a barrier and misrepresents youth.<sup>7</sup>

The terminology to describe this group of youth has evolved over time, and has included “disconnected,” “at-risk,” “multi-barriered,” or “vulnerable.” The term “Opportunity youth” is increasingly being adopted, particularly in the United States, although NEET is still prevalent in Canada. Like NEET, Opportunity youth describes young people who are not in school or employment while recognizing that some young people face different levels of disadvantage.<sup>4</sup> The term emphasizes that some young people may be actively seeking opportunities to succeed, but face individual, structural, and social barriers to finding sustainable employment.<sup>1,4,21</sup> Without investment and supports at this stage in young people's lives, their potential may not be fully realized, becoming *missed opportunities* for society.<sup>4,22</sup> Simply put, all Opportunity youth can be classified as NEET, but not all youth who are NEET may be considered Opportunity youth.<sup>3\*</sup>

National surveys, however, do not make such distinctions. Despite not currently being in school or education, the Canadian Labour Force Survey (2018) found that many NEET youth were engaged in a wide range of activities in their recent past. Just over half (52.6 per cent) had been

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<sup>3\*</sup> In this report, we use “Opportunity youth” when referring to this group of youth. However, when discussing specific studies, we use either NEET or Opportunity, depending on the term used in the cited study.



employed or enrolled in school within the previous 12 months.<sup>3</sup> Of those who had had paid employment, 39.6 per cent had held a temporary employment position, which is a higher rate than for other youth (19.0 per cent). This suggests some NEET youth are not completely disconnected from the labour market, but rather, face barriers to finding sustained, long-term employment.<sup>3</sup> Opportunity youth may need enhanced supports in overcoming the challenges they face before they are able to become “connected” to school or the labour market.

U.S. studies indicate that Opportunity youth face challenges in their social and physical environments that put them at an increased risk of several adverse outcomes, including lower completion rates for high school and post-secondary education, and greater involvement with the justice system.<sup>21</sup> A similar picture emerges in Canada, with research suggesting that NEET youth are more likely to experience poorer physical and mental health, and make up a larger share of youth seeking social supports for housing, mental health, justice, and education.<sup>2,5</sup> These multifaceted and intersecting experiences, such as poverty, homelessness, mental health problems, or physical disabilities, contribute to the “disconnect” youth feel from education or employment.<sup>4</sup> As such, it is important to recognize that employment-specific interventions alone are likely to be insufficient to support Opportunity youth and may need to be accompanied by interventions to health, educational, and social environments.

At the same time, interventions that recognize and address the broader experiences of Opportunity youth and take a strength-based lens to their skills and assets have the potential to change the life trajectory of those young people and promote a wide range of positive outcomes for individuals and communities.<sup>23</sup> Specifically, there is growing interest today in re-developing youth employment programs to enhance skills – soft skills in particular – so they align with business needs, but also to address the challenges young people are facing and support them on the path to employment.<sup>1,14</sup> Incorporating promising approaches for soft skills development within employment support and training programs may help to increase effectiveness of these programs and help youth facing multiple barriers to attain employment goals. The following section summarizes the reviewed literature to define and describe “soft skills.”

## WHAT ARE SOFT SKILLS?

Youth employment programs are designed to rapidly fill existing skills gaps by providing training, work experiences, and other services to help boost young people’s chances of finding and succeeding in employment.<sup>8,9</sup> In Canada and across the world, there is increasing recognition that technological shifts in the economy are leading to a greater demand for a diverse set of skills, referred to as “soft skills.”<sup>11-14</sup> The term has been used over the past three decades to describe a wide range of skills related to emotional intelligence, inter- and intra-personal abilities, and personal traits or attributes favourably associated with career development.<sup>24,25</sup> Other terms like social-emotional learning skills (often used in education) and

21<sup>st</sup> century skills (used to emphasize their importance to succeeding in the modern, digital economy) are also used. We continue to use the most common term, soft skills, in this report.

Soft skills are generally differentiated from “hard skills,” which are skills related to technical knowledge and abilities, performing a specific task, mastering a specific tool or software, or specialized knowledge.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, soft skills are recognized to be applicable in a variety of contexts and thus are not related to a specific job, but transferable across different occupations.<sup>24</sup>

As noted by several international reviews, there is a lack of universal definition or classification of specific soft skills.<sup>11,25</sup> Instead, different skills, attributes, and traits are given more emphasis in different contexts.<sup>11,26</sup> Often these skills refer to personality traits or behavioural qualities that help individuals navigate social interactions and employment.<sup>11,27–30</sup>

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*“The literature on soft skills is confusing. The phrase ‘soft skills’ is catchy but ambiguous, and authors use it extensively with little agreement on meaning. In [different] fields ...articles list all kinds of soft skills derived from formal and informal research methods. Yet definitions of the term vary. No formally agreed upon, universal set of soft skills exists.” – Matteson et al., 2016, p. 75*

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This lack of consensus or single universal definition poses challenges to both measuring soft skills and researching interventions designed to develop them.<sup>26,28,31</sup> Much of the research is based on conceptual understandings of soft skills represented in different frameworks, each emphasizing certain skills over others. For example, Harvard University’s Ecological Approaches to Social Emotional Learning (EASEL) Laboratory compiled 40 conceptual frameworks relating to social-emotional and non-academic skills.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the American Institute for Research identified 136 frameworks related to social and emotional competencies.<sup>33</sup> The Institute found that many existing frameworks do not differentiate between age or developmental stages, and few consider the experiences of young people from diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds or young people facing barriers.<sup>33</sup>

## Progressing towards a consensus on soft skills

For the first time, the OECD is currently assessing soft skills in the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies survey. This survey is being conducted in several countries and aims to better identify which skills have the most relevance within education and training, and to build consensus on differentiating these skills.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, it is well recognized that there is a need to develop a Canadian-specific skills framework that encapsulates the changing needs of employers and employees due to technological shifts in the economy.<sup>28</sup> As such, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) is currently renewing the Essential Skills framework to incorporate greater emphasis on soft skills while also ensuring soft skills are clearly distinguished from other skills.<sup>35</sup> This OLES-led initiative is bringing together experts across Canada, including SRDC, to help develop the new framework. Findings from their review are expected in 2021.

## Identifying key conceptual frameworks of soft skills

Owing to a lack of universal definition of soft skills, we explored existing conceptual frameworks relevant to soft skills in order to help identify specific skills recognized as important for the youth employment and training context. While these frameworks may not yet be broadly adopted by Canadian skills and training providers, they can serve as a foundation for operationalizing training for soft skills development. After reviewing the 40 frameworks identified by EASEL, we selected three based on their:

- **Applicability** to workforce development and employment settings as compared to education;
- **Relevance** to a broad range of training programs and businesses (i.e., not specific for one industry); and
- **Adoption** by leading organizations, which may promote further research and evaluation of these frameworks in practice.

The selected frameworks identified as most relevant to soft skill development in the content of employment and skills training were:

### 1. **Key Soft Skills for Cross-Sectoral Youth Outcomes** by *FHI360, USAID, and YouthPower*<sup>36</sup>

This framework, developed by YouthPower – a US agency dedicated to expanding the evidence base for positive youth development – underscores the value of soft skills in predicting positive outcomes for young people in workforce development, violence prevention, and sexual and reproductive health programs.<sup>36,37</sup> As such, the soft skills identified by YouthPower are applicable across a wide range of employment and social programs. This framework is valuable in that it brings a youth development lens and is accompanied by an inventory of tools used to measure the skills in this framework.<sup>38</sup> The five skills this framework identified as being related to workforce success include:

- Higher order thinking skills
- Self-control
- Communication
- Social skills
- Positive self-concept

### 2. **ACT Holistic Framework of Education and Work Readiness** by *ACT Inc.*<sup>39</sup>

This framework, developed by ACT – a US-based non-profit focused on education development and assessment – consists of skill domains intended to support young people along the path from education to employment. During each phase of training (early education, high school, post-

secondary, and the workplace), skills are grouped into categories: academic skills, cross cutting abilities, behavioural skills, and education and career navigation skills. While ACT is geared more towards education, a key aspect of this framework is that it emphasizes skills that are important for the school-to-work-transition, which may be critical to supporting Opportunity youth.

**Table 2**      **Subset of soft skills identified by the ACT Framework<sup>37</sup>**

Cross-cutting Abilities	Behavioural Skills	Education & Career Navigation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technology and information literacy</li> <li>Collaborative problem solving</li> <li>Learning skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acting with honesty</li> <li>Getting along well with others</li> <li>Maintaining composure</li> <li>Socializing with others</li> <li>Sustaining effort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Self-knowledge</li> <li>Environmental factors</li> <li>Integration of skills/ abilities</li> <li>Managing career and education actions</li> </ul>

### 3. **Employability Skills Framework** *by the Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education<sup>40</sup>*

This framework was developed by the leading U.S. government agency focused on skills and career development. It compiles the necessary skills that can allow young people to succeed in the labour market, irrespective of industry or vocation. Its three domains are skills related to workplace, effective relationships, and applied knowledge (see Figure 1 below). An accompanying checklist of the skills within each domain is also provided to help education and training providers consider how a learning activity aligns with these skills. Designed from the onset for training providers, it may resonate most with service providers working with youth. Currently, measurement tools are not available for this framework.

Figure 1 Employability Skills Framework<sup>40</sup>



### *Summary of findings from conceptual frameworks*

Across all three frameworks, several skills are common. Building a strong personal identity – which includes having a positive sense of self and high self-worth, along with an ability to assess and recognize one’s strengths – is noted as important by all three frameworks. For Opportunity youth who are likely to face more systemic barriers in education and employment, building a sense of confidence and sense of self-worth may be especially pertinent.<sup>4,5</sup> In addition, skills relevant to relationships, like communication, collaboration, and social skills, and those related to learning and applying knowledge – especially critical thinking skills – are also featured in these frameworks. These skills are applicable to a variety of settings and may help young people not only obtain job opportunities, but also progress and succeed in employment.

Not surprisingly, the three conceptual frameworks emphasize distinct aspects of skills. For example, the YouthPower framework is more focused on broad traits and categories of skills important for youth development. The ACT framework provides a unique lens on the value of skills that may be important for the transition between school and work. Both frameworks take a youth-centric lens, which is important for organizations aiming to support young people. While the Employability Skills framework was not developed specifically for youth, it provides more breadth in specific skills relevant for the modern economy. Its emphasis on skills relevant to applying knowledge, strengthening relationships, and workplace skills provides direction to employment support organizations aiming to build these skills within trainees.

With the presence of many different frameworks conceptualizing soft skills, these three frameworks illustrate a variety of principles and concepts that may be important for different areas of development. Moreover, with so many definitions and varied interpretations of soft skills, these frameworks identify common areas and list specific soft skills that could be applied and understood real-world settings. Employers and employment support providers may find these frameworks particularly relevant when designing skills development programs for Opportunity youth. Similarly, these frameworks are useful to our project as they help guide our inquiry, including when speaking to service providers actively working in soft skills development in the subsequent stages of our research.

The following section of the report describes our findings with respect to the value of soft skills, focusing on Opportunity youth in particular.

## WHAT IS THE VALUE OF SOFT SKILLS, ESPECIALLY FOR OPPORTUNITY YOUTH?

### Summary of findings

- Soft skills are in high demand in today's economy and are considered a critical part of a transferable skillset as movement across job sectors is becoming more common.
- Soft skills play an important role in success along the career pathway – from job searching to landing a job to excelling in the workplace.
- Employers are placing an increasing demand on soft skills, but repeatedly report being dissatisfied with the level of soft skills held by youth and recent graduates entering the workforce.
- Much of the research on soft skills in the workplace is focused on employer perspectives; the lack of youth perspectives presents a significant gap, which could affect the design of training and other interventions.
- With Opportunity youth facing multiple barriers, they often encounter challenges to skill development, which puts them at a greater risk for unemployment than youth who already have strong soft skills.

### *Need for soft skills in the current economy*

Despite the growing demand for digital skills from employers, soft skills are consistently ranked at the top of skills most valued or sought after by employers.<sup>41</sup> A 2019 research report released by Burning Glass Technologies found soft skills (referred to in the report as “human skills”) to be in high demand across today's economy, particularly critical thinking, creativity, communication, analytical skills, collaboration and relationship building.<sup>42</sup> Even those working in more specialized technical industries are expected to have foundational “non-digital” skills, especially communication, teamwork, and problem-solving.<sup>41</sup>

Employment is drastically different for youth today than it has been in previous generations.<sup>43</sup> In the current economy, employment opportunities tend to take the form of part-time or temporary full-time work.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the increase in tech-reliant jobs and use of automation in workplaces, combined with a shift from production-based work to service-delivery positions, has led to a consistent decline in the number of low-skilled and general labour positions.<sup>28</sup> This puts those without easy access to professional development programs or opportunities at a greater risk for unemployment.

In 2017, a Government of Canada report indicated that 24.0 percent of workers under the age of 34 had already worked in as many as four industries.<sup>44</sup> In the face of a changing labour market, the Government of Canada suggested the term “career lattice” is now a more accurate term than the previously-used “career ladder,” since current trajectories are characterized by a constant



process of learning and skills development.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the report presented a broader and pressing rationale for re-thinking career development:

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*“The future of vulnerable groups may worsen if governments don’t adapt skills training, redefine skilled immigration, and shift curricula to prepare Canadians for the career lattice and lifelong learning. If individuals can’t cope, reactionary political movements could form, threatening inclusion.” – Government of Canada, 2017, p. 4*

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With fewer permanent work opportunities available, combined with more frequent job- and sector-switching, it is important for youth to have a set of skills applicable to and valued across jobs and sectors, so that they can successfully adapt and pursue opportunities in different work environments.<sup>28,44-45</sup>

### *Importance of soft skills across the employment pathway*

The specific soft skills identified in the research literature as having particular value to employment include:

- Communication<sup>27,28,41,46-51</sup>
- Problem-solving and critical thinking<sup>27,28,41,46-52</sup>
- Willingness to learn<sup>24,49,53</sup>
- Planning/organization<sup>27,41,46,48,49,51,52</sup>
- Leadership<sup>47,52</sup>
- Interpersonal skills<sup>41,46-49,51,52,54</sup>

The vast majority of existing research literature characterising which skills are critical for employment success are based on employer perspectives. Many of the studies are based on surveys and qualitative interviews with business leaders and managers in different companies to identify the most common soft skills considered to be important.<sup>11,28</sup> However, the value of these skills is not based on rigorous evidence that shows a causal relationship between specific soft skills and employment success.<sup>26</sup>

One foundational 2015 review by the non-profit Child Trends, *Key ‘Soft Skills’ that Foster Youth Workforce Success: Toward a Consensus Across Fields*, synthesized findings from 172 articles from over 20 years of research. This review pointed to certain soft skills that play an important role through the different stages of the employment pathway (see Figure 2 below).<sup>37</sup> While the findings are largely based on employers’ perspectives, they do include studies that examined correlations between soft skills and employment outcomes. More detailed descriptions of the importance of each skill to specific stages of along the employment pathway are provided below.

Figure 2 Critical soft skills across the employment pathway\*



\*Adapted from a review by Child Trends of critical soft skills across the employment pathway<sup>37</sup>

## Job searching

Finding a job is the earliest stage of the employment journey, one that can be long and arduous for young people, especially those with less job experience. There is evidence to suggest that training interventions that go beyond interview and job search skills and focus on developing soft skills can help job-seekers persevere and succeed in their search for employment.<sup>37,55</sup>

One meta-analysis on the efficacy of job-search interventions concluded that job seekers who use these programs were over two times as likely to obtain employment compared to job-seekers who did not participate in interventions.<sup>37</sup> This study showed that programs that included components to build skills in *self-efficacy*, *self-presentation*, *goal setting*, and encourage the *use of social supports* were more effective than interventions that failed to include those components.<sup>37</sup> Finally, *conscientiousness* (i.e., working diligently and with persistence) has been also found to be a highly effective soft skill for finding employment.<sup>56</sup>

## Landing a job

Soft skills have also been found to play an important role in interviews and landing a job.<sup>15,37,47,49,51,54,57</sup> A review synthesizing results from 27 studies from a dozen countries indicated that employers are more likely to hire people with strong socio-emotional and non-cognitive skills, and show a preference to candidates who possess both hard skills in combination with soft skills.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, having a strong *positive self-concept* is an important factor in landing a job and being hired,<sup>37</sup> perhaps because these candidates are more able to showcase their skills. For example, an analysis of the United States' National Longitudinal Youth Survey showed that having *high optimism* and a *positive attitude* was significantly associated with finding employment.<sup>57</sup>

This evidence is especially important when considering barriers youth face in employment, and the common perception by employers that young people and recent graduates do not possess a satisfactory level of soft skills for jobs.<sup>49,54</sup> For example, a 2016 report published by the Business Council of Canada revealed that private-sector employers are increasingly interested in hiring individuals whom they feel can *work well in teams* and show a *willingness to learn* and *ability to problem-solve*.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, a series of interviews in 2017 with individuals from 39 organizations in the Niagara region found employers placed a high value on soft skills when hiring recent graduates:<sup>47</sup>

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*“We need soft skills...The other things we need are technical skills, education, and the ability to move...but in the end, if they don’t have the soft skills, we won’t hire them...We will repost if we have to.” – Cassidy, 2017, p. 3*

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### Excelling in a job/ job performance

Soft skills play an important role in job retention, continued professional development, and high job performance.<sup>37</sup> Research has shown that in an economy marked by rapid advancements in technology and digitization, strong *communication skills*, *adaptability*, and *ability to continue learning* are recognized as critical soft skills and positively associated with job performance and development.<sup>59</sup> One systematic review found that overall job performance was strongly correlated with *conscientiousness*, which includes *motivation*, *self-control*, *responsibility* and *persistence*.<sup>60</sup> Studies from international contexts have also shown a positive relationship between soft skills training and job performance.<sup>46,53,61,62</sup>

Some research suggests that employees who are *confident* and have a strong *sense of self-efficacy* are more readily prepared to take advantage of feedback from supervisors, which in turn allows them to positively adapt their performance, leading to increased productivity.<sup>37</sup> Employers may also be more inclined to invest in training for young people who show a *willingness to learn and adapt* and have strong *interpersonal skills*, since these individuals may be perceived as more likely to take advantage of learning opportunities and to provide greater professional returns.<sup>37</sup>

### Income and earnings

Although evidence of soft skills influencing employment income is limited and largely based on correlational analysis, several studies have found a positive relationship. Using longitudinal data from the United States, United Kingdom, Finland, and Sweden, one study showed that having higher non-cognitive skills – defined as *self-esteem* and a *sense of personal effectiveness* – during adolescence (ages 13 to 16) was associated with higher earnings in adulthood.<sup>63</sup> Another study using longitudinal data from the US showed that having a *positive attitude*, *self-concept*, and

*greater optimism* was associated with higher earnings, though this effect may have been due in part to greater educational achievement.<sup>64</sup> Based on another foundational review, Lippman et al. (2015) theorized that having greater soft skills and non-cognitive skills may lead to higher incomes over time, and that this effect may be more pronounced among lower income earners.<sup>37</sup>

## Soft skills gaps may be particularly pertinent for Opportunity youth

Overall, our analysis suggests that there is an emerging evidence base to show that soft skills play an important role in success across the employment pathway, from job search through to job performance, with potential effects on earnings over time. In theory, soft skill gaps could have a substantial effect on youth's success in employment – and on Opportunity youth in particular – given the confluence of other barriers and challenges these youth face in their lives. In particular, Opportunity youth are more likely to have to contend with homelessness, poverty, substance use, mental health issues, or physical disabilities. Due to these complex barriers, Opportunity youth may have fewer opportunities to build skills and professional networks in educational, employment, or other spheres of their lives.<sup>4</sup>

Two empirical studies support this theory. A 2016 study that followed a cohort of British youth showed that at age 18, young people who were NEET were more committed to finding employment than non-NEET youth, but perceived themselves as having lower levels of soft skills such as teamwork, decision-making, and communication.<sup>17</sup> These youth also reported that they were less optimistic about their employment prospects and more likely to experience mental health challenges than their non-NEET peers.<sup>17</sup>

In Canada, interim findings from a BC program to improve outcomes for NEET youth showed that staff of employment support organizations ranked a lack of soft skills (and not a lack of technical training) as the most important barrier affecting young people's ability to find employment.<sup>16</sup> That being said, employers can be reluctant to invest in soft skills training, especially for young employees. Since many current employment opportunities are offered as temporary or part-time work, youth are likely to spend a maximum of two years in a position before moving on.<sup>28,37,65</sup> Knowing their younger employees are likely to move on after a couple of years can act as a significant deterrent for employers to invest in workplace-based, soft skills training for young people.

Beyond the above-mentioned studies, however, we found little empirical evidence that a lack of soft skills is a major barrier to employment for Opportunity youth. Similarly, the evidence related to operationalizing soft skills training is also still emerging and requires further inquiry.<sup>66</sup> The following section focuses on available research findings pertaining to approaches being used by employers and employment support programs to foster soft skills among Opportunity youth.

## WHAT APPROACHES ARE BEING USED TO FOSTER SOFT SKILLS?

### Summary of findings

- There are few interventions or training programs in the published literature aimed exclusively at developing soft skills. Of the soft skills interventions evaluated, training curricula were not described.
- In the research we reviewed, soft skills training for Opportunity youth was often offered in combination with other services. While some of these programs have been evaluated for effectiveness, evidence of the independent effects of soft skills training for Opportunity youth is limited. Research suggests that programs are most effective when targeted to a specific group of youth and tailored to meet their needs.
- Compared to programs focused on addressing behaviours or attitudes, strengths-based interventions that focus on building soft skills can be more effective in helping youth develop strategies to address the barriers they may experience. Additionally, work-based learning programs and subsidized learning opportunities may incentivize youth participation.
- Opportunity youth most disconnected from supports may benefit from comprehensive approaches that offer multiple services (e.g., education, cognitive skills training, housing support, healthcare, and family counselling) along with employment supports that include soft skills training.
- Collective Impact models are a promising approach to creating sustainable pathways to education and employment, and are receiving increased attention in the US, Canada, and Australia. This approach is recognized as a collaborative, cross-sector strategy to build and strengthen partnerships for communities to address complex problems faced by Opportunity youth.

### Employment interventions aimed at developing soft skills

Our search yielded a total of 18 documents describing specific interventions for operationalizing soft skills, of which 14 were studies of interventions in the peer-reviewed literature and four were reports in the grey literature (see Appendix A for a list of peer-reviewed soft skills intervention studies). Across programs for youth generally and for specific sub-groups, soft skills training programs were most often offered as part of broader skills development programs, such as employability skills training. Intervention or program details were often not available in the literature, particularly if they were part of comprehensive services for Opportunity youth. Peer-reviewed studies were especially limited in Canada, although several Canadian programs were found to be undergoing evaluation, with results not yet known.

In terms of youth perspectives on employability programs, including soft skills training, interviews and survey data indicate that the support they received helped develop their future orientation, career aspirations, and employment hope. These outcomes were attributed to mediating improvements in self-sufficiency, self-efficacy, and perceived marketability following soft skills training.<sup>79,83,89,112</sup>

### *Approaches to support soft skills development for youth in general*

While educational programs were not a focus of our search, our review found this is an area of considerable program activity. Indeed, teaching skills and providing education about work through programs offered in educational contexts were the most prominent interventions found for soft skills development for all youth. These educational programs were aimed at raising aspirations, mentoring, career development, alternative education programs, and professional development for teachers about 21st century career development.<sup>67</sup>

Within the education sector, there is growing recognition of the need to encourage and support youth in fostering the skills needed to meet employer demands for soft skills in the modern economy. Educational curricula aimed to develop soft skills valued in the workplace and to broaden youth's understanding of labour market possibilities and processes, thereby strengthening their capacities to navigate the labour market.

A meta-review conducted in Australia in 2015<sup>67</sup> outlined several recommended practice principles specific to educational approaches to soft skills development:

- Education about work, cognitive and non-cognitive skills, and how to navigate to decent jobs needs to be *universally delivered* from the elementary and secondary years.
- Career development and information, and education for non-cognitive skills should be delivered *incrementally*.
- Classroom teachers need to be *supported* to develop their knowledge about 21<sup>st</sup> century employment futures and pathways.
- Education for work programs ought to be *accessible* from wherever young people are seeking support services (including non-conventional schools and youth-specific services).
- It is important to *develop career aspirations among youth early*, even in childhood (i.e., after age 11); this is considered key to broadening employment horizons and developing soft skills required in workplaces.<sup>67,68</sup> Mentoring programs and programs designed to develop career aspirations can help keep youth engaged in learning, and prevent disengagement or support reintegration into education.

### *Approaches to support soft skills development for Opportunity youth*

Approaches to support soft skills development for Opportunity youth tended to be specific to and tailored for the particular employment barriers faced by different groups of youth. The literature provided several examples of interventions using diverse approaches for different groups of youth and across various settings. Below we summarize the various types of approaches used for

distinct youth populations in different contexts. While these examples do not provide an exhaustive list of interventions found in the literature, they highlight approaches to soft skills training that appeared most often across settings and groups of youth.

### **Strengths-based approaches**

Best practice for employment services practitioners identified in the grey literature emphasized the importance of using strengths-based approaches to building soft skills competencies with Opportunity youth.<sup>69,70</sup> For example, building social emotional learning competencies – awareness of self and others, positive attitudes and values, responsible decision making, social interaction skills – was identified as central to the approach to support justice-involved youth with successful community re-entry.<sup>70</sup> These social emotional learning interventions exist along a spectrum of supports, and can include pro-social activities and social skills program, cognitive-behavioural interventions, aggression replacement training, mentoring, and intensive case management.<sup>70</sup>

### **Comprehensive youth-centred approaches**

Comprehensive youth-centered approaches were identified in the literature as most appropriate for Opportunity youth who are far removed from the labour market and often have several complex needs. These wrap-around approaches combine employment training with other supports to secure needs for daily living, such as housing, education, or health support.<sup>71</sup> Below we offer a few highlights from our review of these approaches:

- In working with young people ages 18 to 24 who use shelters and are vulnerable (described as “high acuity, unstably connected and chronically disconnected”), the Calgary Homeless Foundation argued that employment training must be comprehensive and done in combination with housing, education, and intensive personal support.<sup>71</sup> Such employment training initiatives incorporate workplace, life, and essential skills training into one delivery model for youth facing multiple complex challenges. Case studies have highlighted key features of successful initiatives to support these youth along the path to employment, which included wraparound services such as personal and family counselling, 24/7 crises support, and long-term mentoring provided even after an individual secures employment.<sup>23,72</sup>
- The Alex is a community hub in Calgary that serves those with complex health needs – often the result of issues such as poverty, trauma, homelessness, or addiction – with health, housing, and wellness programming. This organization piloted a promising intensive case management program that included workplace skills training for youth who are who are at the acute end of the ‘unstably connected’ group (i.e., those who experience mental health concerns or street entrenchment). The pilot sought to engage youth already participating in



other Alex programming and receiving support from a team of doctors, nurses, social workers, and other professionals.<sup>71</sup>

- Alternative education options aim to reengage young people not in formal schooling by providing training on basic skills and developing non-cognitive skills to support their employability.<sup>67</sup> These multi-component interventions tend to use pragmatic approaches such as work experience rather than targeting psychological barriers to work engagement, such as enhancing confidence.<sup>10</sup> One recent systematic review of interventions targeting re-engagement of NEET youth found that high-contact, multi-component (i.e., classroom and work-based) interventions decreased unemployment among NEET youth by 4.0 per cent; however, there is insufficient evidence to compare the approaches and content of these interventions.<sup>10</sup>

### **Providing financial incentives**

There is some evidence to suggest that employment programs for Opportunity youth that offer financial incentives for participation through work-based learning or subsidized employment strategies can support youth to increase their financial capability:

- Workplace training or work-based learning interventions have been described by Opportunity youth as increasing their capacity for non-cognitive skills and helping them navigate challenges in following the program. On-the-job training or in-school and work-based learning programs have only recently included soft skills training.<sup>29</sup> International evidence from program evaluations is limited; however, one best practice synthesis indicated that offering youth financial incentives creates opportunities for “critical teachable moments.”<sup>69</sup>
- Creating opportunities to develop skills through early exposure to workplaces and access to ongoing support from at least one positive adult have been identified as key factors for programs supporting the employment transitions of youth facing multiple barriers to employment.<sup>73,74</sup> In a study of low-income and racially and ethnically diverse graduates from an urban high school in the US, participants attributed their development of academic and non-cognitive skills to navigate post-high school challenges to work-based learning.<sup>75</sup> They specifically described improved capacity for self-control, intentional self-regulation, and future orientation through work-based learning.<sup>75</sup>
- Various subsidized employment strategies in several cities across the US are being tested as part of the Young Adult Internship Program.<sup>71</sup> This multiphase program targets NEET youth living in poverty to ‘jump start’ productive activity, and includes an internship with an aim to develop hard and soft skills through participation in paid five-hour educational workshops

on job readiness, conflict resolution, healthy living, and money and time management.<sup>71</sup> No results on the effectiveness of this program were available at the time of this review.

## **Education-based employment training for youth with disabilities**

We identified several education-based interventions in our search, such as manualized teaching curricula, developed specifically for youth with disabilities. Select examples include:

- Studies examining employer perspectives on soft skills for youth with disabilities cited communication skills, ability to learn, and a good attitude as essential, along with employee motivation and emotional self-regulation.<sup>51,76</sup> There is some research evidence that employment training for youth with disabilities can lead to improvements in self-advocacy and self-efficacy skills to help build career goals and confidence, as well as employment hope and self-sufficiency.<sup>76,77</sup>
- Two specific curricula with promising results were Assistive Soft Skills and Employment Training (ASSET) Intervention for young adults with high-functioning autism and Supported Employment, Comprehensive Cognitive Enhancement, and Social Skills (SUCCESS).<sup>78,79</sup> Both programs resulted in significant improvements in social cognitive and social communication skills, specifically in work-related social skills knowledge, social functioning, and social self-efficacy. Employment rates of SUCCESS participants also doubled from 22.0 to 56.0 per cent following the program.<sup>78,79</sup>

## **Collective Impact Models**

Collective Impact models are receiving increased attention in many jurisdictions as a collaborative, community-based strategy to create pathways to education or employment for Opportunity youth. For example, the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund led by Aspen Institute works with 24 communities to build and deepen education and employment pathways for Opportunity youth.<sup>80</sup> An evaluation of the Fund found that each community had strengthened collaborative infrastructures, commitment, and collective action to create quality sustainable pathways for Opportunity youth.

In Ontario, Collective Impact for Connecting Youth was established in 2016 to bring together a provincial partnership (co-designed with public, private, non-profit, and philanthropic sectors) aimed at improving outcomes for NEET youth. Overall, recent initiatives using Collective Impact models to address youth unemployment in Canada and the US indicate promising results. However, more robust evaluation could offer important insights on their effectiveness in supporting soft skill development and addressing the unique needs of Opportunity youth.

## *Selected programs*

An inventory of selected programs and initiatives focused on soft skills development identified in our search of the literature is summarized in Appendix B. Programs selected have either been evaluated or are undergoing evaluation. The summary includes each initiative's target group (e.g., NEET or Opportunity youth) and references any evidence of effectiveness in the literature. Below we highlight two Canadian programs, NPower Canada and In Motion & Momentum, as notable examples of programs working with Opportunity youth. The final section of the report offers a discussion of the findings, including implications.

### **Spotlight on Canadian programs**

#### **NPower Canada**

NPower Canada was established in 2014 to help low-income young adults from diverse backgrounds – including youth from racialized communities, newcomers, on social assistance, LGBTQ+, and with disabilities – build skills for digital careers. The NPower Workforce Development Program Model includes readiness training, daily professional and technical training, job placement, and career advancement coaching post-hire. Soft skills training is included throughout readiness training through aptitude assessments and employability coaching as well as professional skills training, such as simulated workplace environments. In 2017, there was a total of 443 enrollees, with 84% of NPower Canada graduates employed or enrolled in postsecondary education within six months of program completion (2017 Annual Report). With four locations across the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), NPower now has over 500 trainees and has partnered with more than 135 employers.

#### **In Motion & Momentum (Ontario Centre for Workforce Innovation & Blueprint-ADE, 2018)**

The In Motion & Momentum project was originally designed and delivered in New Brunswick and is currently being tested for vulnerable populations in Ontario. The project aims to build essential skills among participants who experience complex challenges to finding work through a series of workshops made up of two parts, "In Motion" and "Momentum". In the first workshop, "In Motion", participants create a vision and "identify and build targeted life and basic employability skills", including communication, healthy interpersonal relationships, problem-solving, dealing with stress, and dealing with change. In part two, "Momentum," participants can build on their vision by choosing and taking part in a community project. Participant-directed activities are fundamental to the program theory of change, contributing to improved self-esteem, confidence, sense of personal control and motivation. Participants are supported in applying and building life and employability skills, creating a vision for their future, and practicing settings goals to move toward employment, education, and/or personal development goals. An evaluation of the program showed improvements in well-being, social supports, and employment readiness as well as positive effects on individual confidence, outlook, and motivation to achieve goals.

## DISCUSSION

### EVIDENCE SUMMARY

The results of our scoping review allow us to partially answer the research questions posed. Our findings show many youth are struggling to find sustainable and long-term employment as a result of trends such as an increase in digitization and automation in the economy, shifts in the labour markets to more service-oriented jobs, and higher educational requirements for entry-level positions.<sup>14,28,43</sup> Opportunity youth are often found to be actively seeking employment, yet face substantial barriers. Without adequate supports, Opportunity youth represent a group whose potential may not be fully realized, which becomes a missed economic and social opportunity for society.<sup>4,21</sup> There is growing interest in developing innovative approaches to better support Opportunity youth toward employment success, including through the development of soft skills. These describe a wide range of skills related to emotional intelligence, inter and intra-personal abilities, and personal traits or attributes associated with employment success and career development.<sup>24,25</sup>

Our review of the literature found that despite the different ways in which soft skills are defined, conceptualized, and measured,<sup>37</sup> they are recognized by employers as critical for employment success and among the top sought-after skills, yet are reported as often lacking in younger job candidates.<sup>12,15,51</sup> The value of soft skills is not promoted *in place* of technical or job-specific skills, but rather *in addition* to these, to enhance job opportunities.<sup>28</sup> Among Opportunity youth, there is emerging evidence that the lack of soft skills may be one of the key barriers limiting their employment success.<sup>16,17</sup> Soft skills gaps may carry significant burden for Opportunity youth in particular, given the confluence of other barriers and challenges these youth face in their lives.

Although research in this area is limited, evidence suggests that soft skills play an important role along the employment pathway, from job search to job performance and career progression,<sup>37</sup> with potential effects on earnings over time. Indeed, several studies show correlations between high conscientiousness, a positive self-concept, and high optimism (among other soft skills and traits) with different employment outcomes.<sup>37,57,63,81</sup> Interventions implementing soft skills training development are currently limited – with few specific to either youth in general or Opportunity youth in particular – and show limited evidence on influencing employment outcomes. However, our review and synthesis of existing interventions showcased some notable examples of promising programs for Opportunity youth in Canada and beyond.

## Limitations

We took a planned and structured approach to this review of the literature in order to address the project's research questions while allowing for some flexibility, as required in the iterative nature of scoping reviews. However, some limitations are important to note.

First, our scoping review of the peer-reviewed and grey literature – while extensive – was not an exhaustive or comprehensive search in the manner of a systematic review, for example. Our iterative, practical approach to searches was designed to draw out insights for the research questions while allowing us to identify gaps, with a view to informing future work. We adapted searches as needed and, in some cases, focused more on searching the body of grey literature, which was yielding more relevant results (i.e., articles and reports focused on Opportunity youth specifically). The diverse terminology and indistinct concepts in this field limited our ability to conduct more systematic searches.<sup>11,26,82</sup>

Second, some of the articles we identified were based on practice, opinion, and theory rather than empirical research. This type of evidence limited our ability to describe measurable effectiveness of interventions for soft skill development.

Third, the identified literature consisted largely of interventions focused on specific subgroups of youth, such as youth with disabilities, those experiencing mental health challenges, and young people along the autism spectrum. We limited this line of searching due to its limited relevance to employment and skills training; however, it is important to note that Opportunity youth often face a broad spectrum of barriers, including those related to mental health and well-being.

Finally, the evidence for soft skills interventions specifically supporting Opportunity youth is still emerging. Overall, the evidence base is currently limited in assessing the effectiveness of soft skills training programs or interventions.

## IMPLICATIONS

While there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of interventions designed to develop or enhance soft skills, our evidence review does show a relationship between soft skills, such as positive self-concept and high conscientiousness, and favourable employment outcomes.<sup>37,48,55,57</sup> These findings are consistent with research in the wider field of youth development, which emphasizes the need for youth-centric programs to adopt strengths-based approaches that build confidence and provide a safe space for building skills, without stigmatizing or deficit-based approaches.<sup>83-85</sup> Building and developing soft skills in youth is paramount as this takes place while young people explore different employment and education-based opportunities and are at a critical time in their social, cognitive, and psychological development.<sup>86</sup> Research suggests that

programs designed to support youth need to provide flexibility, build on their strengths, and develop their confidence, so they can succeed throughout their employment trajectories.<sup>8,23,83</sup>

Our findings suggest that soft skills training may need to be embedded within existing technical or job-specific training programs, and not necessarily as stand-alone programs.<sup>28</sup> While soft skills are highly valued by employers, they are emphasized in addition to technical skills, not in place of them.<sup>28</sup> Interventions that only provide soft skills training and do not incorporate job-specific skills may not be as effective.<sup>28,87</sup> Moreover, for youth facing multiple barriers to employment, holistic and wrap-around supports that help address factors affecting a young person's well-being are also known to be important and valuable components of skills development programs.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, research with youth experiencing mental health challenges illustrates that measuring program success should not be limited to a narrow range of employment outcomes, since this often incentivizes rapid employment in low-wage, low-status positions. Rather, outcomes should be framed using a more holistic and youth-centric lens.<sup>88,89</sup> For example, obtaining a low-paying or short term job that offers little opportunity for career progression may not lead to long-term employment success for these young people. Instead, programs supporting Opportunity youth or youth with barriers should consider participation in and successful completion of various forms of education and training as important and valuable measures of success.<sup>4,88,89</sup> Indeed, supporting many Opportunity youth back on the path to education may be critical for their long-term success in employment and more broadly.<sup>90</sup>

## NEXT STEPS

In the next phase of this project, we aim to learn from practitioners who provide training or employment supports directly to youth about their experience operationalizing soft skills training and supports to help Opportunity youth succeed in the labour market. At the same time, it is important to recognize that, in addition to facing individual-level barriers (e.g., lack of skills), Opportunity youth face wider systemic challenges to employment. These may include experiences of racism, discrimination, and lack of access to appropriate health services, among several other intersectional barriers.<sup>4,22</sup> Indeed, we recognize that skills-focused interventions are likely only one part of a mix of approaches needed to support Opportunity youth fulfill their potential and achieve success in employment and society in general. Accordingly, we will also explore how support and training providers address the broader systemic challenges to employment faced by Opportunity youth.

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## APPENDIX A: PEER-REVIEWED SOFT SKILLS INTERVENTION STUDIES

Reference	Intervention	Target group	Country	Outcomes
91	The program provided the following to each program participant: (1) work-related training, (2) skill and attitude training, (3) leadership in sport training, (4) money skills training, (5) mentoring experience, and (5) other employment opportunities (e.g., volunteering, physical activity, and networking visits)	Marginalized youth	UK	Statistically significant differences among several “soft” beneficiary outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, and perceived marketability)
75	Work-based learning (WBL). Details not provided	Low-income youth	US	Non-cognitive skills for self-control, intentional self-regulation, and future orientation developed through WBL
46	On-the-job soft skills training	Female garment workers	India	Program increased women's extraversion and communication, and spurred technical skill upgrading
49	WBL	Logistic industry workers	US	Soft skills deficits and emotional behaviors could affect business outcomes and should include a focus on individual and groups needs
54	Details not provided	Students and recent graduate	Singapore	Students considered positive attitude, oral communication, self-motivation and self-direction, and problem solving. Employers positive attitude, teamwork, good ethics, and problem-solving skills, but felt recent graduates usually possess less than satisfactory soft skills

Reference	Intervention	Target group	Country	Outcomes
87	Intensive training on interpersonal skills, including 45 hours over a 9-day period (5 hours/day) with over 17 sessions. Maximum of 30 participants in each training group. Training took.	Recent college graduates	Jordan	Soft skills training does not have any significant employment impact in three rounds of follow-up surveys
53	WBL. Details not provided	Managers	Malaysia	Soft skills acquisition and training significantly predict employee performance
78	Assistive Soft Skills and Employment Training (ASSET). Curriculum covers six soft skills: communication, enthusiasm and attitude, teamwork, networking, problem solving and critical thinking, and professionalism, but also incorporates ASD-specific pedagogy, including a structured-learning and social performance training. Eight, weekly, 90-min sessions followed by an optional social hour. Group format created opportunities to explicitly practice skills through peer interaction with the guidance of group and provision of immediate feedback.	Young adults with high-functioning autism (HFASD)	US	Significant improvements in social cognition, social function, and social confidence and reductions in anxiety, and a trend toward lessening depressive symptoms
92	ASSET (see above)	Young adults with HFASD	US	Significant improvements in work-related social skills knowledge, social functioning, and social/empathy self-efficacy

Reference	Intervention	Target group	Country	Outcomes
93	Supported Employment, Comprehensive Cognitive Enhancement, and Social Skills (SUCCESS) is comprised of two sections: cognitive enhancement (executive functioning and memory skills; 13 meetings) and social skills (social cognitive and communication skills. There are 12 meetings with each meeting's concepts threading into subsequent meetings for a comprehensive learning experience	Young adults with ASD	US	Evaluation results showed improvements in both cognitive and social cognitive abilities as well as employment rates
62	WBL. Details not provided	Service sector employees	India	Soft skills training is successful in changing employee behavior and enhanced employee work performance by 23%
68	Healthy Minds curriculum made up of 14 separate educational modules targeted at improving HRQoL, which include elements on building resilience, navigating social media, looking after mental health, developing healthy relationships, and understanding the responsibilities of being a parent. High school teaching programme delivered in one-hour, weekly teaching lessons within timetable over a four-year period.	Youth in high school	UK	Changes career aspirations, with participants being less likely to choose competitive work and more likely to choose work that involves "people-skills". Career aspirations can be changed through a school-based initiative after the age of 11

Reference	Intervention	Target group	Country	Outcomes
93	Juventud y Empleo is comprised of 75 hours of soft skills training plus a component of 150 hours of vocational training. Soft skills include: (i) planning skills: development of the participant's personal life project; (ii) basic cognitive skills: management of basic math and communication skills; (iii) social skills: improved management of social risk situations as well as conflict prevention and negotiation skills; (iv) skills for productive work: promotion of decision-making skills, team collaboration, and the ability to work with efficiency and quality; and (v) sensitivity to gender equality and respect of the physical environment.	Teenagers not already mothers	Dominican Republic; Latin America and Caribbean	Program reduces probability of teenage pregnancy by about 20%. Protective effects as well as improvements in self-esteem were also observed
94	National Volunteer Service Program partnered with the International Youth Foundation developed and deliver a 30h soft skills training to participating youth using the "Passport to Success" curriculum, which focuses on a core group of widely endorsed life skills, such as self-confidence, responsibility, and respect. Additionally, the curriculum includes workplace readiness skills, such as interviewing and time management. Training delivery relied on a series of Training of Trainers sessions to deliver soft skills training to youth during the implementation of volunteering activities.	Youth	Lebanon	Youth were more likely to report higher tolerance values as well as a stronger sense of belonging to the Lebanese community roughly one year after the completion of activities

## APPENDIX B: INVENTORY OF INITIATIVES FOCUSED ON SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Program or initiative	Intervention types	Population group	Jurisdiction	Evidence of effectiveness
Opportunity for All Youth	Coalition	NEET Youth	Canada	N/A
NPower Canada	Digital and professional skills training	Low-income diverse young adults	Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario	Evaluation in progress
HireNext	Employer tools to hire opportunity youth	Opportunity youth	Ontario	N/A
IPS in six integrated youth service hubs	Individual Placement and Support (IPS), online and in-person skills training for practitioners	People with serious mental illness	British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Quebec	Evaluation in progress
In Motion & Momentum	Pre-employability program providing training and resource for community organizations to help participants build essential skills	Individuals who have unresolved complex challenges to finding work	New Brunswick, Ontario	Evaluation in progress
Indigenous Employment Hub	On-reserve training, including essential skills, life skills, and technical/job skills using a holistic approach based on First Nation culture	First Nation communities	British Columbia	Evaluation in progress
Youth Job Connection (YJC/YJC-S)	Paid pre-employment training, job matching, mentoring and work transition support	Youth facing multiple barriers to employment	Ontario	Evaluation in progress

Program or initiative	Intervention types	Population group	Jurisdiction	Evidence of effectiveness
Assistive Soft Skills and Employment Training (ASSET)	Manualized group intervention	Young adults with high-functioning autism (HFASD)	US	Evaluated with statistically significant improvements <sup>78,92</sup>
Supported Employment, Comprehensive Cognitive Enhancement, and Social Skills (SUCCESS)	Manualized curriculum	Young adults with ASD	US	Evaluation results showed improvements in both cognitive and social cognitive abilities as well as employment rates <sup>79</sup>
Young Adult Internship Program (YAIP)	Multiphase program with internship and educational workshops	NEET youth living in poverty	New York City, US	Evaluation in progress
The Alex	Intensive case management with wrap-around services, including workplace skills training	Acute youth unstably connected	Calgary, Alberta	Pilot
Collective Impact for Connect	Provincial initiative to improve employment, education, and training outcomes for youth	NEET youth	Ontario	Testing in 5 Ontario communities: Thunder Bay, Kingston, London, Hamilton, Brantford
Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund (OYIF)	Collective impact initiative to invest in collaboratives focused on building pathways to employment and education	Opportunity youth across 24 communities	US	Evaluations across communities



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