



Teaching Soft Skills in Workforce Programs: Findings from WorkAdvance Providers

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Key Points

- Soft skills have been valued in the workplace for decades, and recent research suggests that soft skills are important for academic and economic success. Yet there is no consensus around how to define these skills or what term to use for them, and little rigorous evidence is available on how best to teach these skills in the context of workforce programs.
- WorkAdvance offers training to low-income adults in both technical and soft skills. WorkAdvance providers offered soft skills instruction as part of their career readiness training. The providers all had the same goal—to equip participants with the skills they needed to succeed in the workplace—but varied in how the providers approached and implemented soft skills training.
- One main finding from the WorkAdvance evaluation’s implementation analysis was that soft skills taught in career readiness training were as important to participants and employers as the technical skills taught in occupational skills training. Yet, many participants who lost their jobs did so due to issues around soft skills. This suggests some participants could have benefited from additional soft skill instruction and that there is still room to improve how soft skills are taught within workforce programs.

Skills have long been associated with productivity and economic well-being. A large body of evidence shows the value of academic and technical skills in the workplace. And in recent years, soft skills—skills that make for an effective employee, such as time management and communication—have also become increasingly valued in the workplace. Employers often include these skills in job postings, and many employers report that they value soft skills as much or even more than hard skills in job applicants.¹

Yet at the same time, many employers report difficulty finding job applicants who already possess soft skills.² And limited research is available on the

most effective strategies to teach these skills, particularly in the workforce development field.

WorkAdvance is a sector-focused workforce development model that calls for providing education and employment-related skills to help participants enter and advance in the labor market. The model was implemented by four providers, and the programs were evaluated using a randomized controlled trial design. The programs offered participants training in technical skills, as part of occupational skills training, and soft skills, as part of career readiness services. The evaluation’s findings showed positive

economic effects in some sites through a three-year follow-up period.³

This report will first give an overview of what soft skills are and why they are important in today's workforce. Then it will discuss how the WorkAdvance providers implemented soft skills training and highlight a few best practices for soft skills instruction that WorkAdvance providers identified.

What Are Soft Skills? And Why Do They Matter?

Soft skills are the general habits and competencies that make for an effective employee, such as showing up to work on time and working cooperatively with others. These skills can be applied broadly and are often seen as a complement to “hard” or “technical” skills—skills that can be formally taught and are sometimes specific to a sector or occupation. Examples of hard skills include computer programming and machine operation.

The value of soft skills in the workplace has been documented for decades, yet there is no consensus on how to define these skills or what term to use for them.⁴ Many recent definitions of soft skills are more comprehensive than in the past and often include more than just the skills needed in the workforce.

One proposed framework for thinking about soft skills identified common employability skills and put them into four groups: personal skills, people skills, applied knowledge, and workplace skills.⁵ Another framework identified five skills—social skills, self-control, communication, positive self-concept, and higher-order thinking skills—as crucial for youth workforce success.⁶

Employers also use their own definitions and look for different skill sets in applicants and employees. For example, one employer survey found the most important soft skills were teamwork, analytical reasoning and critical thinking, complex problem-solving, and agility and adaptability.⁷ An analysis of job posting data found that a different set of skills—communication, organization, writing, and customer service—was most in demand.⁸

A further complication is that different groups and fields use different terms—including noncognitive, employability, and 21st-century skills—to describe these skills. And while these terms are

used to describe related skill sets, terms are not always interchangeable and often emphasize some skill areas more than others.⁹ This lack of consensus on how to define these skills and what term to use for them has made it difficult for education and workforce providers to teach and assess these skills.

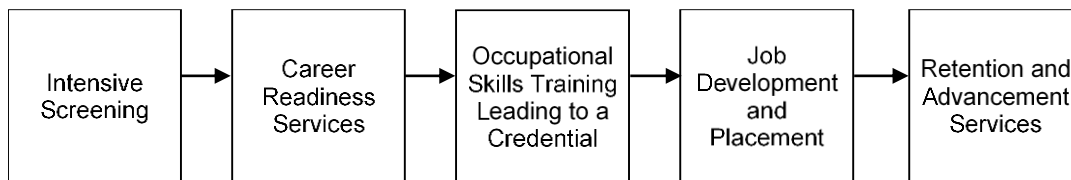
Despite this, recent research suggests that soft skills are important for academic and economic success.¹⁰ Much of the literature around the importance of soft skills for academic success focuses on the K–12 domain and addresses a range of diverse noncognitive skills.¹¹ For example, researchers studying “grit” and “growth mindset” have found that social skills learned early and further developed in school can improve academic outcomes.¹² Related skill sets—sometimes referred to as executive function skills or social and emotional learning in the early childhood and K–12 domains—have also been linked to academic success.¹³

Other recent research suggests that nonacademic skills, in addition to academic skills, may be important determinants of wages and other labor market outcomes.¹⁴ One study found that between 1980 and 2012, wages in occupations requiring social skills have grown more rapidly than wages in other occupations.¹⁵ Recent technological changes—including increases in automation—may be driving some of this because nonroutine tasks and skills, such as problem-solving and adaptability, cannot easily be automated.¹⁶

Employers have valued these skills for decades. According to one analysis of job posting data, around one-third of skills listed in job postings are soft skills. And this holds true even in more technical sectors, such as health care and information technology (IT), where one-quarter of desired skills in job postings are soft skills.¹⁷ Many employers also report they are more interested in job applicants who have soft skills and can teach individuals hard, technical skills.

Yet at the same time, employers often report difficulty in finding job applicants who possess soft skills.¹⁸ This skill gap is seen not just in entry-level jobs but in higher-skill jobs as well.¹⁹ Many workforce programs now emphasize soft skills to help make participants more attractive job candidates. And workforce practitioners and employers agree that training should cater to more than just hard skills.²⁰

Figure 1. WorkAdvance Model Components



Source: Richard Hendra et al., *Encouraging Evidence on a Sector-Focused Advancement Strategy: Two-Year Impacts from the WorkAdvance Demonstration*, MDRC, August 2016.

WorkAdvance Evaluation and Model

WorkAdvance is a workforce development model that uses a sectoral approach to improve economic outcomes for low-wage workers via training and placement into jobs in high-demand sectors with strong career pathways. Figure 1 shows the model's five main components.

Soft skills training was incorporated into the career readiness services that WorkAdvance providers offered (which also included an introduction to the target sector, resume and interview assistance, and preemployment coaching). The provider staff also worked with and coached participants individually to further develop these skills throughout the program.

The WorkAdvance model was implemented by four providers starting in mid-2011, and programs were evaluated using a randomized controlled trial design. Findings from the evaluation show encouraging evidence for sector-based programs. WorkAdvance increased the likelihood of completing occupational skills training in the targeted sector at every site and of obtaining a credential in the targeted sector.

The results also show that sector programs can have economic effects that last through three years of follow-up. But provider maturity and experience running sector programs matter, and not all programs will lead to economic gains.²¹ One WorkAdvance site produced large increases in employment and earnings throughout the follow-up period. One site had little to no effect on any economic outcomes. And the findings for the other two sites are mixed: Those sites increased earnings in some years, and increases were mainly among individuals who came into the study later. See Appendix A for more information on and findings from the WorkAdvance evaluation.

How the WorkAdvance Providers Implemented Soft Skills Training

All the WorkAdvance providers offered career readiness training, which included soft skills instruction. However, the providers varied in how they implemented the career readiness and soft skills training due to the requirements of the sectors they were targeting and other programmatic elements. This section describes how the three providers that had positive economic impacts—Per Scholas, Madison Strategies Group,²² and Towards Employment—implemented soft skills training and highlights similarities and differences across the providers.²³ Specific examples from the providers are included to illustrate their approaches.

This section draws on information from the implementation analysis that was done during the original WorkAdvance evaluation and on more recent interviews—completed around five years after the evaluation ended—with staff at Per Scholas, Madison Strategies Group, and Towards Employment. The bulk of the information presented here describes how the providers delivered soft skills training during the evaluation period (2011–14), except for the final section, which focuses on changes the providers have made to their soft skills training since the evaluation ended. Table 1 provides a summary of the key characteristics of the three providers and the features of their career readiness training.

Soft Skills Definition. The WorkAdvance providers thought about and defined soft skills in similar ways. They felt that soft skills were crucial for helping participants get, maintain, and advance in a job, and they focused most of their soft skills training on the skills participants would need to succeed in the workplace. For example, Per Scholas referred

Table 1. WorkAdvance Provider and Career Readiness Training Characteristics

	Per Scholas	Madison Strategies Group	Towards Employment
Provider Characteristics			
Location	Bronx, New York	Tulsa, Oklahoma	Northeast Ohio
Target Sector(s)	Information technology	Transportation, manufacturing	Health care, manufacturing
Approach	Training first	Training and placement first until fall 2012, then mostly training	Training and placement first until fall 2012, then mostly training
Career Readiness Training			
Timing	Concurrent with occupational skills training	Typically provided immediately following enrollment and before start of occupational skills training	For placement first track: typically provided before job search For training first track: typically provided concurrent with occupational skills training
Length	12 seven-hour sessions (84 total hours)	5 six-hour sessions (80 total hours)	10 six-hour sessions (60 total hours)
Curriculum	Developed in-house	Developed in-house	Developed in-house
Assessments	Observation	Pre and posttest; observation	Career readiness training checklist; observation

Source: Richard Hendra et al., *Encouraging Evidence on a Sector-Focused Advancement Strategy: Two-Year Impacts from the WorkAdvance Demonstration*, MDRC, August 2016; and WorkAdvance providers, in discussion with author, April and May 2019.

to its career readiness and soft skills training as “career development training” and focused on teaching skills to help ensure workplace success. This encompassed skills such as communication, problem-solving, and how to dress and socialize appropriately in a work environment.

The providers also felt that soft skills helped participants in other areas of their lives, such as staying engaged in and completing training and having healthy relationships with friends and family. Madison Strategies Group intentionally taught participants that soft skills were needed in every domain of life and explained how skills such as emotional intelligence and healthy conflict resolution could be applied to professional and personal relationships. Similarly, when Per Scholas taught

participants about time management, it emphasized the importance of showing up for work on time and showing up for their training on time.

The providers also recognized the complexity of defining and teaching soft skills. For example, Towards Employment staff described soft skills as “gray components”—in contrast to more black-and-white components such as creating a resume—and felt that every participant took something different away from their soft skills training. Towards Employment defined soft skills in a few different ways: (1) the concrete skills needed to get and maintain a job (such as getting to work on time and having an appropriate email address); (2) the skills and behaviors needed to be successful and advance in the workplace (such as conflict resolution and goal setting); and (3) self-efficacy skills needed to solve

home and life issues that could affect work life (such as being aware of available resources, like child-care).

Intake Process and Initial Assessment. The WorkAdvance model called for intensive applicant screening before enrollment to identify individuals who had the ability to complete training and be attractive to employers while not being too qualified that they did not need the program's services. Provider staff used a combination of objective (such as math scores) and subjective criteria (such as interest in training) to screen applicants.

As part of the screening process, the providers tried to assess whether applicants already possessed soft skills. In most cases, they did not screen applicants out because they lacked soft skills. Rather, the providers used the screening process to figure out the specific soft skills participants needed to develop and, therefore, what skills they should focus on when working with participants.

Per Scholas' intake process included a group information session followed by a one-on-one interview. During the interview, staff tried to assess applicants' behaviors and knowledge. Some of their assessment was more concrete, such as whether the applicant was dressed appropriately (which they were told to do during the group information session), and some was based more on staff observations, such as how well the applicant was able to articulate his or her thoughts. Both assessments demonstrated applicants' soft skills—for instance, listening and communication skills—and through this process, staff gained insight into which participants needed more support and which needed less.

Towards Employment used a similar approach. Applicants interacted with staff multiple times before enrolling in the program—during a phone screen, at a general information session, and at orientation—and staff used these various touch points to get a baseline understanding of where individuals were and start building relationships with them. Staff felt this also helped get buy-in from participants on why it was important to learn these skills.

At Madison Strategies Group, applicants attended an interview as part of the intake process. There, staff saw how applicants interacted with them;

staff looked for skills such as whether the applicant used eye contact and was able to communicate effectively. The program did not specifically screen out applicants because they lacked soft skills. But if staff identified behaviors or attitudes in an applicant they felt could not be addressed during the limited time they had to work with them, the applicant was screened out. For example, combative applicants may have been screened out if staff felt the applicant was not willing to work with them or not open to learning.

All the providers served a range of participants with varying needs. Some participants came into the programs with previous work experience; these participants often already had a baseline knowledge of soft skills, including an awareness of how to act in a work environment, and only needed a refresher. Other participants needed a lot more soft skills instruction. These participants tended to have less work experience and had not yet learned about employer culture and how to function successfully in a workplace.

Madison Strategies Group staff felt that many of their participants came in with a baseline understanding of soft skills, but they were not always able to talk about those skills or show employers their competency in them. Per Scholas staff noted that their training cohorts consisted of participants with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. And staff used this as an opportunity to have participants teach and learn from one another.

Format. All three providers incorporated some soft-skills instruction into their group-based career readiness training. These trainings also covered preemployment skills, such as resume development and mock interviews.

Class sizes ranged from 2–15 participants at Madison Strategies Group—depending on the number of current training offerings—to 20–22 participants at Per Scholas. Madison Strategies Group staff felt peer interaction that happened in the career readiness training classes was invaluable and could not be duplicated in a one-on-one setting. Through these interactions, participants practiced skills such as teamwork, conflict resolution, and communication. Per Scholas staff noted that because they worked with participants from a wide range of

backgrounds, participants often learned from one another as much as they learned from staff.

The timing of group-based career readiness and soft skills training varied across providers. Madison Strategies Group, for the entire evaluation period, and Towards Employment, for the first part of the evaluation period, offered career readiness training as one of the first services post-enrollment. Both providers initially offered direct job placement services, in addition to occupational skills training services.²⁴ And because some participants were starting their job search immediately, both organizations had to offer career readiness training upfront.

Staff at both providers felt that soft skills learned in the career readiness training were beneficial to participants not only when they reached the workplace but also while they attended occupational skills training. For example, skills such as time management and persistence could be applied during training and on the job. Having career readiness training upfront also helped with engagement in the program because it got participants into services quickly and allowed staff to build relationships with participants before they attended occupational skills training, which was provided by external partners.

Partway through the evaluation period, Towards Employment began offering part of its career readiness training concurrently with occupational skills training. Participants attended a short career readiness training upfront, and then once participants started occupational skills training, staff would go to training sites weekly to offer additional instruction.

Per Scholas used a similar approach. It offered career readiness training concurrently with IT, or hard skills, training. One day per week was reserved for career readiness training. Per Scholas structured its training this way because it felt that some of the skills taught were better learned earlier in the program—for example, conflict resolution—so they could be used and further developed by participants during training. Other skills were better taught later in the program—such as how to act during an interview—when participants began looking for a job.

In addition to group-based training, all three providers used one-on-one coaching sessions with participants to further develop their soft skills. Towards Employment staff felt that group- and

individual-based methods needed to go together. During group-based training, participants learned lessons and behaviors. Then through one-on-one coaching, staff built on those lessons, provided individualized advice to participants, and addressed any behavior issues that participants, staff, or employers identified.

Similarly, Per Scholas staff provided real-time feedback to participants to address any issues they observed. If, for example, a participant was showing up to class late (which demonstrated a need for better time management), staff would talk to the participant about what was going on and try to coach around the issue. And because all training at Per Scholas—for soft and hard skills—was offered on site and led by provider staff, participants received real-time feedback and coaching consistently throughout the 15-week program.

Length. The total time participants spent in group-based career readiness training, which included soft skills training, varied somewhat across providers. Per Scholas had the longest career readiness training; they offered 12 daylong (seven hours) sessions. Madison Strategies Group offered four daylong (seven hours) sessions, and Towards Employment offered weeklong training with six to seven hours of training per day.

The providers felt these trainings were long enough to start building participants' awareness of skills and change their behaviors. Madison Strategies Group staff observed that many participants had an aha moment in the first day of class and that many participants noted that their mindset had changed by the end of training.

But the providers also recognized that soft skills development is a continuous process, and many participants needed additional coaching beyond career readiness training. Madison Strategies Group staff noted that they had only a short time to teach participants new skills and that many participants needed more intensive services. At the end of Towards Employment's career readiness training, participants developed a tailored plan with next steps and then worked individually with coaches to carry out the plan.²⁵

The WorkAdvance model also called for staff members to continue working with participants after they found employment—something not typical

in most workforce programs. This ongoing contact post-employment was intended to help participants maintain their jobs and eventually advance along a career pathway. Many of the retention- and advancement-related topics staff discussed with participants drew on soft skills that were previously taught. Examples of topics discussed in these meetings included showing up for work consistently (which required dependability and punctuality) and asking for and negotiating a raise (which required good communication skills).

This post-employment contact may have also been especially important during a new hire's first 30–60 days when their risk of job loss was greatest. Madison Strategies Group staff saw, for example, that some program graduates were fired from their jobs for issues covered during the career readiness training. Staff continued to work with these participants who needed additional support.

Curriculum and Approach. All three providers developed their own curriculum to teach career readiness and soft skills. The providers all viewed their curriculum as a “living” document that was constantly evolving based on feedback from participants and employers. For example, Per Scholas actively sought feedback from employers on its curriculum (and other parts of its program) and then made updates accordingly.

The providers felt that the way training was delivered was just as important as the skills taught. Several providers mentioned that their soft skills training was not just a series of lectures but rather incorporated as many interactive and group-based activities as possible. For example, at Towards Employment, instead of describing good teamwork, staff had participants work in groups to accomplish a task.

This modeling helped participants not just learn what good teamwork is but also start to adopt the behavior. Staff felt this was crucial because a lot of soft skills development is about behavior change. At the end of Madison Strategies Group's career readiness training, participants were asked to write a “message in a bottle” about what they learned. Staff felt that having participants write down their takeaways helped them validate what they learned.

One way Per Scholas emphasized and reinforced soft skills was by having staff model workplace

norms. This gave students a glimpse of what they could expect—and what would be expected of them—once they found a job. In many cases, this was at a large, corporate employer, and that work environment was new to some participants. Participants were also held accountable to an expected set of behaviors from the time they applied to the program. For example, during the intake process, if an applicant showed up late or was not dressed appropriately, staff would give them feedback and ask them to return on a different day.

Once in the program, staff enforced a “zero tolerance policy” for the first three weeks, and participants could be dismissed if they arrived late to class during that time. These practices seemed to make a good impression on employers. One employer interviewed as part of the original Work-Advance evaluation said:²⁶

The school's always clean, everyone's professional and nice. They get on their students. If anyone is late to class, or not dressing appropriately, they get on them. It's *that* that really takes individuals from the community and takes them to the next level.

Sector Focus. All the providers felt that a core set of soft skills—including skills such as time management, problem-solving, and clear communication—were beneficial for all participants to learn and practice, regardless of the occupation or sector they were hoping to work in. These skills were universally valued by employers in all sectors.

But the providers did customize parts of their soft skills training to the specific sectors and occupations they were targeting. For example, Per Scholas focused on customer service skills since IT employers value this and many graduates end up in jobs where they interact directly with customers.

Staff also worked with participants on their verbal communication skills. These skills were needed for the workforce in general and specifically for jobs in the IT sector. Per Scholas staff observed that during the interview process for many IT jobs, employers asked applicants to talk through how they would complete a process—such as finding a file on a computer—and applicants needed to provide a clear answer.

Towards Employment used sector-specific examples when teaching certain skills. For instance, when teaching problem-solving to participants in manufacturing training, staff would use examples of issues participants may encounter when working on a shop floor, such as what to do if a machine breaks down.

Employer Engagement and Input. All the providers sought and valued feedback from employers. The providers used this feedback to update their soft skills training and other parts of their programs.

Per Scholas identified itself as a feedback-oriented organization and sought feedback on its soft skills curriculum (and its technical skills curriculum), how participants did during interviews, and how participants were doing after they were placed in a job. Staff felt that employers were comfortable providing feedback to them because they had strong relationships and believed in Per Scholas' work.

Similarly, Madison Strategies Group asked for feedback from employers at various stages. When staff met with new employers, they would ask what their needs were and what they were seeing—and not seeing—in their new hires. Staff would then relay this information back to their career readiness training instructors. The same held true for feedback on why program graduates were fired from their jobs.

Employer input came in many forms and often depended on employers' characteristics. For example, Towards Employment interacted differently with employers in the health care sector than employers in the manufacturing sector. (The site targeted both industries during the evaluation period.) Because Towards Employment had deep relationships with large employers in the health care field, staff went to the employer sites regularly to get real-time feedback on current job openings and participants who had been hired.

Conversely, many of the manufacturing employers Towards Employment worked with were smaller, so staff instead worked more with their industry membership partners. Whenever possible, provider staff tried to talk to frontline managers and directors to ensure they were hearing a consistent message about the skills employers wanted.

Employer Needs and Assessments. The providers noted that they consistently heard from employers that soft skills were just as important for job applicants as were hard skills. Towards Employment tried to engrain this message into participant's minds as early as possible. At their information sessions—which applicants attended before enrolling—staff shared a quote from an employer about how employers can teach employees to use a machine, but they cannot teach them to show up on time.

One provider noted that while some employers said they valued soft skills over hard skills, this was not always observed in practice. Some employers hired applicants with stronger technical skills over applicants with weaker technical skills, even when those applicants had stronger soft skills. In this provider's experience, employers looked for a combination of soft and hard skills in applicants, but in the end, applicants with stronger hard skills often won out. This provider made sure to equip their participants with both skill sets.

An added complication was that providers felt some employers lacked a concrete definition of soft skills. One provider said this made it difficult for them to help participants prepare for interviews because it was unclear what skills the participant should highlight and demonstrate.

Related, the providers also noted that many employers had difficulty assessing soft skills in job applicants, and their assessments were often imperfect. One provider felt that some employers were better at interviewing applicants than other employers and that larger employers tended to use more standard interview questions. Another provider felt that because not all employers knew what they were looking for in applicants, they sometimes ended up making biased hiring decisions to lower their perceived risk.

This provider focused on building relationships and trust with employers, so that employers would know any applicants the provider referred had the skills—soft and hard—they wanted. Staff at this provider also talked to employers about the needs of individuals in the communities they were hiring from—including participants—so they would be prepared to help new hires transition more easily into their jobs.

The providers noted that soft skills were valued by employers not just in applicants but also among their current employees. One provider noted that soft skills help employees get recognized by their employers and put them in a position to be considered for advancement opportunities. Employees then used their hard or technical skills to actually obtain the new job or opportunity.

Provider Assessments. All the providers assessed participants' soft skills throughout the program, although assessments were often informal and developed in house. Madison Strategies Group had participants complete a 25-question assessment before and after they attended career readiness training. The assessment was developed by staff and included questions to check participants' understanding (for example, "What is a transferable skill?") and more situational questions (for example, "How would you tell your boss you are resigning?"). Since participants were given the same test before and after training, staff could measure their progress and skill attainment over time. Towards Employment used a checklist at the end of its career readiness workshop that included yes or no questions—such as "Do you have an appropriate email address?" and "Did you pass three mock interviews?"—to assess what participants had achieved.

In addition to these assessments, the providers noted that soft skills attainment is about behavior change, which was hard to measure in a formal, standard way, especially within their limited time frame with participants. To do so, staff observed participants' behaviors and saw whether participants were, for example, showing up to class and appointments on time (demonstrating dependability and punctuality), staying engaged in trainings (demonstrating motivation), and communicating effectively with other participants and staff (demonstrating collaboration and good communication).

Towards Employment specifically set up its career readiness training classes to simulate a work environment. Staff felt that this allowed them to see how participants handled deadlines and solved problems they would face once they got jobs. The program also relied on career readiness instructors and coaches to observe participants'

behaviors, such as whether they worked effectively with a team.

Per Scholas staff noted that they tried to observe whether participants applied the feedback they were given by staff when they interviewed with employers or even after they obtained a job. Similarly, Madison Strategies Group staff felt they could tell whether a participant learned and was using soft skills when they saw how the participant handled a difficult situation at work on their own. For example, if a participant asked their employer for a new schedule, this demonstrated skills such as communication and problem-solving.

The providers noted that soft skills attainment is about behavior change.

Changes over Time. All three providers have made changes to their soft skills training since the WorkAdvance evaluation ended. These changes range from using a new curriculum to hiring new instructors with different background and teaching styles. Many changes were based on lessons the providers learned through their participation in the evaluation and on feedback from employers and participants.

For example, through their participation in the WorkAdvance evaluation, Towards Employment realized that its curriculum should be more contextualized to the specific industries it targets. The provider now constantly tweaks its curriculum and has worked to identify which skills should be taught in all career readiness training classes and which skills need to be taught only for participants looking to enter a specific industry.

Madison Strategies Group has made several changes to its career readiness and soft skills training. Now, its training is more interactive and streamlined, its curriculum emphasizes certain skills such as teamwork and self-reflection, and staff use a mix of lectures, group work, and individual work that touch on all learning styles. The provider also now offers follow-up workshops to reinforce the skills taught in core training. Madison Strategies Group staff have also been doing work recently around

resume development. After pulling job descriptions, staff noticed that many resumes now list soft skills, and in response, staff have updated their career readiness training to emphasize the importance of including soft skills in a resume.

Per Scholas has experimented with dividing its career readiness training into smaller chunks of time. It has tried offering half-day sessions of career readiness training a few days each week and offering one- to two-hour sessions of career readiness training every day. These changes were based on participant feedback; participants noted that soft skills training was not as exciting or interactive as technical training, and staff felt that dividing up soft skill instruction could help participants stay engaged.

Additionally, Per Scholas now uses an online tool—the Skills to Succeed Academy developed by Accenture—to teach some of its career readiness curriculum. While Per Scholas already teaches most of the content that is available through the online tool, staff feel that delivering the material in a different format helps participants stay engaged. The online tool has interactive lessons, and each module ends with a quiz that assesses what students have learned.

Findings on Soft Skills from the WorkAdvance Evaluation

While the WorkAdvance providers took different approaches to teaching soft skills, they all had the same goal: to equip participants with the skills needed to succeed in the workplace. One key finding from the evaluation’s implementation analysis was that soft skills taught in career readiness classes appear to have been as important to participants and employers as technical skills acquired from occupational skills training.²⁷ This is consistent with findings from other research and surveys of employers.²⁸

Yet even though the WorkAdvance providers taught and emphasized soft skills to participants, when participants lost their jobs, it was rarely because of technical failings. In some cases, participants did not show up predictably, walked off the job without explanation, or had trouble managing anger.²⁹ This suggests that soft skills attainment is a continuous process and that some WorkAdvance

participants may have benefited from—and in some cases received—additional training or support to learn and implement the necessary behavior changes. This also suggests that there is still room to improve the soft skills training offered by the WorkAdvance providers. (Additional research is needed on how best to teach these skills to adults in workforce programs.)

The soft skills learned in WorkAdvance (and in other similar sector programs) may also be more important to individuals long term than hard skills. To begin, soft skills may be important for career advancement.³⁰ This was also noted by staff at the WorkAdvance providers: Staff indicated that participants who took ownership of their goals, believed in themselves, were committed to attending training, and communicated more frequently with staff members were more likely to advance in their jobs. In contrast, participants who were either overconfident or lacked self-confidence were likely to have trouble advancing.³¹ Further, participants may be able to draw on the soft skills they have developed whether or not they work in the targeted sector. Many soft skills are transportable and are valued by employers in a range of sectors, which is not the case for many hard or technical skills.³²

Best Practices Identified by the WorkAdvance Providers

The WorkAdvance providers described similar factors they felt were important for workforce providers to consider when teaching soft skills. A few best practices were highlighted by the WorkAdvance providers.

Continually Adapt Soft Skills Curriculum and Materials. Stay on top of which soft skills are currently in demand by employers and how other external factors—such as advances in technology—influence which soft skills are needed. This can be done by talking with employers about the issues they are facing and asking for feedback from employers about participants they have hired.

Invest in Staff and Instructors. Staff must understand participants’ needs and backgrounds. Providing training to staff can ensure that participants are hearing a consistent message and that all

staff can work with participants to overcome soft skill–related issues. Career readiness and soft skills training instructors should use best practices from adult education, teach to a mix of learning styles, and be familiar with targeted sectors and occupations.

Be Mindful of the Approach Used to Teach Soft Skills. Understand and be intentional about the approach used to teach soft skills so it meets participants’ needs. Think about which skills should be taught earlier—so participants can practice using them while in the program—and which should be taught later, when participants begin looking for jobs. Also think about different strategies—including modeling behaviors or using group exercises—that can be used with a soft skills curriculum to reinforce and promote certain behaviors.

Learn from Participants. Ask program graduates what they thought worked well and what did not work as well. This type of feedback can be used to update and improve the program. Also have past participants return and speak to current participants. Some participants may not initially see the value in learning soft skills, but by seeing participants who successfully completed the program and were hired, they will better see where they are going and what they need to do to get there.

Build Relationships Among Participants. If soft skills are taught in a group setting, think about ways to incorporate team building so participants feel safe and can learn from one another. This is especially important early in a program. Participants can learn as much from each other as from the curriculum.

Summary

While there is no consensus on the definition of (or even the term for) soft skills, workforce providers, participants, and employers all acknowledge that these skills are crucial for obtaining and keeping a job. These skills may also be important for helping individuals advance in their careers.³³ Yet there have been few, if any, rigorous evaluations of how best to teach soft skills in the workforce development field.

One major hurdle is the lack of consensus in the workforce field around how to reliably measure these skills. More work has focused on developing assessments and measures of soft skills in education. For instance, several assessments measure soft skills among middle and high school students.³⁴ Appendix B highlights an ongoing evaluation of a 21st-century employability skills curriculum, the New World of Work (NWoW), which is being implemented at several community colleges in California. One of NWoW’s features is digital badges that measure competencies in various soft skills.

Another challenge is that changing behaviors takes time. And it may take more time than most workforce providers have with participants. Past work has been done on how to teach these skills to elementary, middle, and high school students, which could help promote positive behaviors at an earlier age. Several studies of school-based social and emotional learning interventions have shown positive effects on a range of well-being indicators for youth. Some of these interventions may also have longer-term effects on academic and other outcomes.³⁵

Despite these challenges, as long as employers demand these skills and feel there is a skills gap, workforce providers must teach these skills to help set up participants for success in the labor market.

Appendix A. The WorkAdvance Evaluation

The WorkAdvance model was implemented by four providers, and programs were evaluated using a randomized controlled trial design. Between June 2011 and June 2013, 2,564 individuals enrolled in the study and were assigned at random to either the program (WorkAdvance) group or the control group. Individuals in both research groups were tracked over time, and their outcomes were compared to estimate the programs' impacts.

The WorkAdvance evaluation included implementation, participation, economic impact, and cost-benefit analyses.³⁶ All these analyses were done at the site level because of substantial variation in starting points and organizational emphases across the four providers: Per Scholas, St. Nicks Alliance, Madison Strategies Group, and Towards Employment.

Implementation Analysis. One of the main findings from the implementation analysis was that it took time for the providers—and even more time for the providers that were newer to sector strategies—to implement all WorkAdvance model components. Because of this, it was hypothesized that individuals who entered the study later likely received a stronger set of services than individuals who entered the study earlier, and therefore, the impacts for individuals in the “late cohort” would be stronger than for individuals in the “early cohort.”³⁷

Participation Analysis. WorkAdvance produced large increases in participation, beyond what would have happened without the programs, in all model components—career readiness services, occupational skills training, job search, and post-employment services—at all four sites. These participation impacts—some of which were larger than is typically seen in evaluations of workforce programs—allowed for a good test of the WorkAdvance model.³⁸

Economic Impact Analysis. The economic impacts of WorkAdvance through Year 3 are varied across sites.³⁹ Per Scholas produced large impacts on employment and earnings that grew stronger in Year 3. St. Nicks Alliance did not produce any impacts on employment or earnings throughout the follow-up period. The impacts for the full samples at Madison Strategies Group and Towards Employment faded somewhat in Year 3, but among the late cohort at both sites, WorkAdvance group members earned more than control group members (although the estimated impact at Towards Employment is close but not statistically significant). The pattern of impacts across the sites suggests that provider experience and maturity matter, and not all programs will lead to economic gains.⁴⁰

Appendix B. The New World of Work Evaluation

The New World of Work (NWoW) is a 21st-century employability skills curriculum that was developed to help community colleges ensure their graduates are equipped with not only academic and technical skills but also employability skills. Through a two-stage process that involved researching the evidence on 21st-century skills and convening panels of employers, instructors, and students in California, the curriculum developers came up with a list of the 10 most essential and relevant skills for community college students. The key competencies they identified are adaptability, analysis and solution mindset, collaboration, social and diversity awareness, communication, digital fluency, entrepreneurial mindset, empathy, self-awareness, and resilience.⁴¹

The NWoW curriculum is flexible by design and can be adapted to meet the needs of individual community colleges.⁴² Colleges and instructors can choose to teach either all or some of the curriculum's modules, offer the curriculum in a classroom or online setting, or tailor the curriculum to a specific major. (The competencies are general skills.)

In addition to receiving instruction on 21st-century skills, students participating in an enhanced version of the NWoW program also complete a work-based learning experience and have the opportunity to earn digital

badges to show their mastery of each competency. The work-based learning component is designed to give students a chance to practice the skills they are learning in a workplace setting. And the badges are meant to indicate to employers that an applicant is competent in a given skill and remind students that they have learned that skill.

Since 2017, MDRC has been conducting a two-part study of the NWoW program.⁴³ In the first stage, MDRC provides feedback and recommendations to the NWoW curriculum developers and their community college partners on ways to strengthen and refine the program. In the second stage, MDRC will rigorously test the more robust model to assess its impact on student outcomes. This evaluation will provide evidence on the NWoW model's promise for improving 21st-century skills acquisition and academic or other outcomes.

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21. A future report on the WorkAdvance evaluation will present findings through Year 5.

22. Madison Strategies Group is now often known as Tulsa Community WorkAdvance.

23. The WorkAdvance evaluation was not designed to measure the effects of soft skills training (or any of the individual model components) on economic outcomes. Rather, the WorkAdvance model was evaluated as a whole. Still, the information in this section highlights how the providers that did have economic impacts approached and implemented soft skills training.

24. Madison Strategies Group and Towards Employment both initially implemented a “placement first” track—in which participants skipped occupational skills training and sought immediate employment—in addition to the main “training first” track, in which participants attended occupational skills training. The placement first track was phased out about halfway through the study intake period. For more information, see Richard Hendra et al., *Encouraging Evidence on a Sector-Focused Advancement Strategy: Two-Year Impacts from the WorkAdvance Demonstration*, MDRC, 2016.

25. As part of the career readiness training at all providers, participants developed an individualized career plan that included their motivations, their personal and career goals, and action steps to achieve those goals. These career plans were then reviewed one-on-one with a coach following the training. Some participants included soft skills acquisition as one of their goals or as part of one of their action steps, but the individualized career plans were not specifically designed to promote soft skills development.

26. Emphasis added. Employer of WorkAdvance group members, in discussion with WorkAdvance evaluation team members, September 2013.

27. Hendra et al., *Encouraging Evidence on a Sector-Focused Advancement Strategy*.

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