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Soft Skill Development in Youth Employment:
A Scan of the Landscape

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June 2014

I. Introduction

A comprehensive evaluation conducted of the 2013 Summer Youth Employment Initiative in Jacksonville, Florida, funded by the Jessie Ball duPont Fund ("duPont Fund") and administered by United Way of Northeast Florida ("United Way"), revealed that the **primary benefit** to participating high school youth was **the acquisition of a basic set of professional behaviors and attitudes**. This skill set was not specific to any one industry or job experience but rather constituted the basic building blocks for professional success in any sector.

With this finding in hand, United Way in partnership with duPont Fund staff made the critical decision to focus the program even more directly on the acquisition of these non-technical, or "soft" skills. To help further orient the program in this direction, Pratt Richards Group ("PRG") was engaged to do a cursory landscape scan of youth development programs and youth employment programs working at this intersection. In addition, PRG reviewed the relevant research on the topic. (See Bibliography, Page 12, for a list of programs reviewed and relevant articles.)

This report represents the critical findings from this effort. Specifically it addresses:

1) Context and Definition: Who is saying these skills are important, and what skills are they?

2) Operationalizing the Work: What are the best practices in soft skill development, specifically in youth employment settings?

3) Evaluation: How does one assess successful soft skill development?

II. Context and Definition

Employers across the board agree that the future workforce needs a basic set of professional skills and attitudes for long-term career success. A 2006 survey of over 400 employers revealed that employers named the following four skills as most critical for future workers: professionalism/work ethic, oral and written communications, teamwork/collaboration and critical thinking/problem solving.[1] Interestingly, eight years later, this list matches closely to a list provided by the Summer Youth Employment Initiative's Advisory Committee. When asked about the skills they found most important in hiring youth, this group responded with a list that included the following:

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[1] The Conference Board, "Are They Really Ready to Work?" 2006
http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/FINAL_REPORT_PDF09-29-06.pdf

- Personal responsibility
- Trust
- Taking Initiative/Asking Questions
- Verbal and Written Communication
- Ethical behavior
- Team work
- Interpersonal skills
- Conflict Resolution
- Networking
- Goals
- Critical Thinking
- Listening

In sum, it is clear that local Jacksonville employers are reading the situation similarly to their national counterparts. **In the eyes of employers**, **soft skills are not an added benefit, but rather requisite to future workplace success**.

Defining "Soft Skills"

While all agree that soft skills are crucial for youth, interviewees and the research indicate that to date there is no consistent definition of what constitutes this set of skills. Moreover, it is unclear which, if any, of these skills are the best predictors of long-term employment. A large regional funder, based in the Midwest, is in the process of funding research to answer this question, but it will be years before the outcomes from the study will be available. Without this research, employers, youth employment and youth development programs can only base their definition on specific program experiences and articulated need.
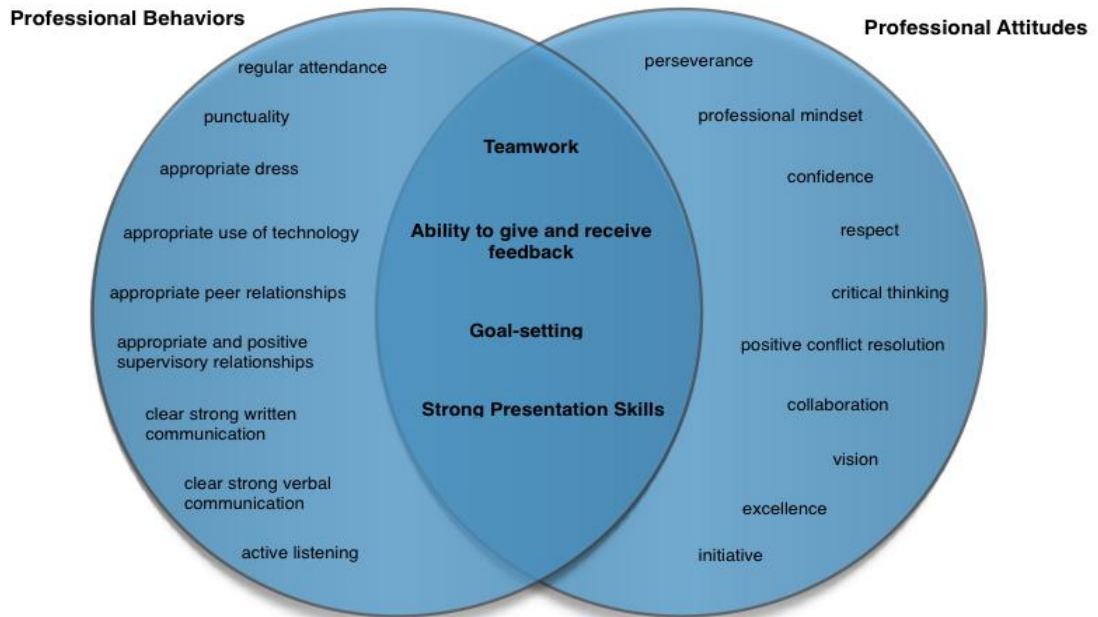
To begin with, the terminology for describing this skill set varies across the youth development and youth employment fields. In youth development and academic circles, these skills are loosely referred to as the "non-cognitive factors" necessary to academic or life success and are often tied into the Social-Emotional Learning movement happening within schools. In employment circles, these behaviors and attitudes are referred to as both "soft skills" and "job readiness skills".

In addition, both academics and program providers categorize these skills in different combination and with varying emphasis depending on their program mission or academic interest. While there are many helpful characterizations and explanations of these skills, we found it useful to categorize them as a set of one of the following:

1. Tangible behaviors such as punctuality or appropriate attire.

2. Attitudes necessary for success such as perseverance and responsibility.

3. <u>Activities</u> that sit at the intersection of these other two, such as teamwork or strong presentation skills. (Note: These activities appear to be those that require both a set of professional behaviors and the right attitude or approach.)

The following diagram illustrates, by the above categories, the range of skills we encountered in our review.

Professional Behaviors

regular attendance

punctuality

appropriate dress

appropriate use of technology

appropriate peer relationships

appropriate and positive supervisory relationships

clear strong written communication

clear strong verbal communication

active listening

Professional Attitudes

perseverance

professional mindset

confidence

respect

critical thinking

positive conflict resolution

collaboration

vision

excellence

initiative

Teamwork

Ability to give and receive feedback

Goal-setting

Strong Presentation Skills

Venn Circle A: Professional Behaviors
Regular attendance, punctuality, appropriate dress, appropriate use of technology (cell phones, email), appropriate peer relationships (if multiple youth on-site), appropriate and positive supervisory relationships, clear strong written communication, clear strong verbal communication, active listening

Venn Circle B: Professional Attitudes
Perseverance, professional mindset: "I belong here", confidence, respect, critical thinking, positive conflict resolution, collaboration, vision, excellence, initiative

Overlap:
- Teamwork (Behaviors: communication, appropriate peer relationships; Attitudes: positive conflict resolution, collaboration)
- Ability to give and receive feedback (Behaviors: communication, regular attendance; Attitudes: respect, critical thinking, peaceful conflict resolution, excellence)
- Goal-setting (Behaviors: punctuality, regular attendance; Attitudes: vision, excellence, initiative)
- Strong Presentation Skills (Behaviors: Appropriate dress, strong verbal communication/Attitudes: confidence, critical thinking)

III. Operationalizing the Work

Generally speaking, the majority of programs in this sample felt the need for participating youth to be supported through a variety of wrap-around services – including strong case management. This approach was widely practiced among programs, and highly identified as necessary to good soft skill development. In some programs, this function is performed by program staff themselves; in other models it is "outsourced" as in the Summer Youth Employment Program in Jacksonville. In particular, interviewees were supportive of the role of caring adults that will be discussed in detail below.

Outside of the general directive to offer additional supports and resources, the organizations interviewed for this report evidenced four common programmatic ingredients necessary for developing job readiness skills.

Number One: Moving Away From a "Deficits" Model

To successfully build these skills – especially the attitude based skills like vision and grit **– programs have consciously moved away from a model that suggests students are *lacking* skills**, and it is the job of the program to supply them with these skills. **Rather, many of the programs seek to identify student strengths or talents** early in the program and then to build upon those strengths by formulating goals around them. As one program staff explained, "We are about trying to connect to the aspiration the of kid – to draw out their nascent passions and interests."
In addition, one inner-city youth employment program has adopted a trauma-informed "sanctuary" model in which students from severe poverty are understood as fundamentally injured, experiencing a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder, as opposed to willfully problematic or challenging. As the staff person explained:

We had one youth who was a master of interviewing; he knows what employers want. He would get jobs, and then girlfriend or mom would call, and he'd leave and he'd get fired. It happened again and again in his history. We could tell him you have to be there, the first two weeks are important, blah, blah, blah. He could quote it to you. But he had pattern of having a woman in his life call and he would drop everything and go. So the more important conversation is about coping – tell me about this pattern and how is that helpful to you? He can say, "I really want to please these women, and this is helpful to these relationships." Then I can say that this pattern is helpful to a point in past circumstances, but now it is going to get you fired.

Regardless of whether the orientation is talent or strengths-based, or trauma-informed, the basic notion is that soft skills flourish when programs move away from a deficit focus.

Number Two: Feedback, Feedback, Feedback

Each of the programs reviewed for this report puts a high premium on educating youth about giving and receiving feedback in the workplace regularly throughout the course of the employment experience.

A Question of Inputs

A critical issue for programs was the question of inputs – in other words, should youth employment programs seek to find promising or successful youth and work to move them forward, or should they serve all youth? This dilemma manifests most directly in the decision about who to admit to the program, and when to dismiss non-performers from the program. Programs run the gamut from "We seek to find highly motivated people who just need access to an opportunity" to "Our target is a D to C+ student." For programs that hope to reach a large range of youth, rather than just the most promising, one program director cautions, "Be explicit about [reaching all types of kids]. Otherwise there is mission split – you are kicking kids out who you really want to help. Many organizations are actually operating with an undeclared mission: we want kids who will succeed - in a few weeks."

This crucial practice not only serves as an important teaching tool, but also a way to programmatically incorporate many of the behaviors and attitudes named in the section above. It can take the form of regular reviews with supervisors and program staff, or feedback sessions with mentors or peers. As one Executive Director noted:

The way we continue to build on those three skills (attitude, behavior and communication), and professional skills, is that each week of the program students participate in sessions around giving feedback. They give each other feedback. This helps them receive feedback from supervisor, seeing it as it is – a person trying to prepare you vs. a personal attack. They can also give feedback to the organization – it helps them know how to talk to a supervisor.

This emphasis is reflected in the youth employment training materials. MHA Labs curriculum offers a five-step framework for delivery of specific, constructive feedback; OEDP's curriculum provides guided role plays to help students learn to process feedback.

Number Three: Caring Adults

Without exception, successful soft skill development is built through relationships with caring adults who are part of these programs. For about half of the programs interviewed, program staff themselves play this role for youth. In these programs, the staff to youth ratio is typically small (e.g. 1:10), and program staff works to process the employment experience with participants, drawing out the soft skills in more explicit ways. In the case of the program working from a trauma-informed standpoint, caring adults use the S.E.L.F. model (Safety, Emotions, Loss and Future) to talk youth through a healing process that leads to soft skill development.

In other programs, the role of a caring adult is filled by a mentor who is either at their worksite or distinct from the adults at their worksite or program. **Again, these adults play an important role in communicating and translating skills to youth**. As one program director explains, "The main thing is the conversation between the mentor and the kid about the skill." Often times, programs believe the best teaching tool is caring adults willing to share their own stories about more abstract concepts as the best way to make them concrete. In one Chicago-based program, regular guest speakers are given a weekly theme to explore with youth, such as "taking initiative."

Number Four: Realistic Employers

The 2007 "Making Connections" paper from Chapin Hall[2] observed that the programmatic disconnect for many employers lies in their motivations for hiring youth. First of all, while open to helping youth succeed in the work place, those working directly with youth are not prepared to foster soft skill development with the youth working for them. Moreover, they found that while most youth employers report being motivated by a sense of corporate mission and civic responsibility, deeper probing revealed this to be a hunger for broader recognition and positive public relations. Finally, the paper reports that most employers in their sample were not interested in hiring younger high school youth.

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[2] Decoursey Jan and Ada Skyles, "Making Connections: Engaging Employers in Preparing Chicago Youth for the Workforce" Chapin Hall Working Paper, 2007
http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/old_reports/341.pdf

These findings are particularly notable as they mirror the findings emerging from the Summer Youth Employment Initiative 2013 evaluation. Jacksonville employers reported the same motivations and concerns. Given this starting point, it is important to note that many programs find appropriate employer preparation crucial to the kind of job readiness work needed for this demographic. While most interviewees acknowledged that students need to learn to function in all sorts of "real world" environments, many believe that helping employers develop a sense of the kind of support youth need is critical. **Most of the organizations in our sample indicate that the nonprofit youth programs take on the bulk of the soft skill instruction – rather than the employers. However, they work to educate employers on the unique needs and challenges of youth new to the workforce**. Finally, the literature suggests that employers who are involved in workforce preparation in other ways (job shadowing opportunities, active volunteer mentor programs, etc.) can be more hospitable hosts to youth still in this nascent phase of employment.

IV. Evaluating Soft Skill Development

"There is no consistent industry gold standard to which goals are most important. I don't think it is helpful as an industry to think about what those exact goals are. The point is – what do you want your kids to look like, your behaviors to look like, at the end of the program."
- Youth employment program staff member

> **Relationship of Soft Skills to Youth Academic Performance**
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> Programs have different relationships to academics, depending on their ultimate program goal. One youth employment program that engages junior high and high school youth, uses youth employment to achieve an academic end of getting youth to college; another Chicago-based program accesses and works with youth through schools in order to achieve an employment end of cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset.

In keeping with the lack of consensus around soft skill definition, there is not currently agreement in the youth development or youth employment fields about a universal set of indicators or data collection tools for measuring soft skill acquisition. There is, however, is a great deal of emerging research and discussion targeted at gaining insights into how soft skills are developed in youth, and how progress can most effectively be captured.

Interestingly, the majority of organizations implementing programs are focused on shorter-term indicators of success - looking at how the youth participants are making gains over the course of their program experience (typically 10-12 weeks among the organizations we interviewed). Less emphasis was placed on the longer-term impact of these program interventions on the youth. As will be described below, the specific skills that

were measured varied largely by organization and context, and as mentioned in the introduction, there does not appear to be any consensus, either among researchers or program staff, about a set of "proven predictors" of workplace success.

What to Measure: Indicators

The organizations we interviewed are for the most part measuring <u>behavior change</u> as a proxy for soft skill development. Several organizations monitor observable behaviors, such as attendance, punctuality, persistence, and training completion rates during the program. There appears to be some agreement that **measuring progress is easiest to see when it is tied to specific workplace behaviors that are visible to mentors and employers**. One interviewee expressed that, "moving to observable behaviors and mentors' feedback has been most useful for us." Additionally, a staff member from a separate organization noted the importance of measuring outcomes related to behavior change, and noted that over the longer-term this could look like "job attainment and retention, college attendance and retention, and on-going program participation."

As in the nonprofit field more broadly, there does not seem to be a universal set of indicators that are recommended or agreed upon- but rather a somewhat broad set of outcomes and indicators for organizations to consider related to behavior and attitude change. Several research and policy organizations have developed resources to help youth-serving organizations consider key outcome areas and possible indicators to track around soft skill development. The Forum for Youth Investment identifies 4 core areas of attitudes and behaviors around which most measurement tools can be grouped: collaboration/relationships, initiative/self-direction, communication, critical-thinking/decision-making.[3] These closely mirror the MHA Labs model and other professional attitude and behavior frameworks outlined in the first section of this report.

Moving even more deeply into the "attitude" side of soft skills, research both from Penn's Angela Lee Duckworth (grit) and Stanford's Carol Dweck (growth mindset) is gaining traction in this conversation. These innovative ideas and research have created new ways for thinking about soft skill development, and for capturing specific behaviors and attitudes that can be more difficult to measure.

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[3] Wilson-Ahlstrom Alicia & Nicole Yohalem, "Soft Skills: Hard Data" The Forum for Youth Investment, January 2014. http://forumfyi.org/files/soft_skills_hard_data_0.pdf

What is "Grit?"
Duckworth's research focuses on a key traits that can be predictors of success in life: 1) "grit," a quality that enables individuals to value hard work and persistence, and sustain effort and interest in long-term goals, even in the midst of significant obstacles or failures; and 2) self-control, a shorter-term measure that is related to someone's ability to delay gratification and voluntarily regulate one's attention, emotions, and behaviors.

What is "Growth Mindset?"
Dweck distinguishes between individuals with a "fixed mindset" and those with a "growth mindset" – who believe abilities can be developed with dedication and hard work, love of learning, and resilience. They tend to be optimistic, and see intelligence as something malleable, rather than something fixed. Duckworth is currently investigating the relationship between growth mindset and grit, and both are continuing to conduct research to better understand these paradigms. Many in the field are beginning to leverage this research, and using it as the basis for their own measurement tools and approaches - some of which are shared on Duckworth's website. For a link, see the Tools section of the Bibliography in this report.

Measure: Approaches to Evaluation

In our interviews and review of field-level materials, a series of helpful insights emerged that are relevant to the Summer Youth Employment Initiative:

Tip #1: Use a Variety of Tools and Informants
Youth-serving organizations vary in their approaches to evaluation, and use different combinations of tools and informants to measure progress towards the indicators described above. While most tend to view external data sources (i.e. teacher, mentors, engaged employers) as more valid than feedback from youth themselves, the majority are using a combination of self-reports and direct observation. For example, one program uses an "employability matrix" (modeled after the MHA Labs) that is given by employers, as well as a student self-report that tracks Grit and Growth Mindset. Additionally, they also use a "character report card" that is implemented by teachers (before and after the program) to measure school behaviors, such as attendance and punctuality.

Tip #2: Weekly or Bi-weekly Evaluations are Beneficial
Many of the programs, monitor progress on a weekly or bi-weekly basis over the course of their programs. This is perhaps not surprising, given that most of these programs are monitoring observable professional behaviors that are easiest to track on an on-going basis. However, for some programs, the

curriculum is also built around the development of specific soft skills - and it is therefore particularly useful to measure progress as these new ideas and concepts are being explored. In the case of one program, each of the ten weeks of the program focuses on a different "skill of the week," with its own set of activities and strategies that will be reinforced by the youth's mentors.

Clearly these on-going assessments are only one component of the overall evaluation strategy, but they appear to be an important one.

Tip #3: Integrate Evaluation Efforts into Program Implementation
Evaluation is most integral to organizational learning and growth when it is integrated into the program planning and implementation process. The evaluation efforts are used to provide insights into the youth and the effectiveness of the program intervention, while at the same time feeding important learning back into the program to benefit the individuals and the program overall. One interviewee expressed that evaluation is working well when, "data becomes not something we just measure our program with – but it becomes our intervention. It is about using the behaviors we know, driving toward those skills, and using them in those contexts."

In particular, for many programs, the youth's self-assessment process plays more of a programmatic than evaluative role. In other words, **as youth work through tools to rank themselves on various scales, the conversation becomes a starting point for goal-setting as well as a kind of evaluative baseline**.

Tip #4: Pay Attention to Context and Program Goals
Some of the individuals we spoke with were hesitant to share their indicators and tools, because they felt that they were so specific to their own individual programs. While there was clearly much agreement in how to assess workplace behaviors and attitudes, interviewees stressed the importance of being mindful of program context, and considering: Who is the program's target audience? What is the end goal for these youth? And what are the environmental factors that may come into play, given the program design and the target audience?

V. Conclusion

The question of how to specifically define, teach and measure soft skills is an emergent one in the field of youth employment. Increasingly understood as more than just an opportunity to "get kids off the street" or to help them earn some money – youth employment is a now viewed as an important conduit to long-term financial and academic success. With these more significant ends in sight, mastery of these basic job readiness skills will become a defining feature of successful programs in the future.

VI. Bibliography: Helpful Resources and Tools

Below is a list of organizations and resources from youth development and youth employment fields that were consulted for this report.

Organizations Consulted:

- Year Up Chicago
- Spark
- StriveTogether
- Youth Organization Umbrella
- The Joyce Foundation
- Genesys Works
- Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship
- Hopeworks
- Curt's Café

  *Note: In some cases, multiple stakeholders from these organizations were consulted, and we also spoke with an independent consultant formerly of Chapin Hall Center for Children with relevant expertise.

Relevant Articles:

The Conference Board, "Are They Really Ready To Work?" 2006.
http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/FINAL_REPORT_PDF09-29-06.pdf

Decoursey Jan and Ada Skyles, "Making Connections: Engaging Employers in Preparing Chicago Youth for the Workforce" Chapin Hall Working Paper, 2007.
http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/old_reports/341.pdf

Farrington et al, "Teaching Adolescents to Become Learners: The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance: A Critical Literature Review" Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2012.
https://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Noncognitive%20Report.pdf

Lippman et al, "A Developmental Perspective on College and Workplace Readiness" ChildTrends, 2008.
http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Child_Trends-2008_09_15_FR_ReadinessReport.pdf

Wilson-Ahlstrom Alicia & Nicole Yohalem, "Soft Skills: Hard Data" The Forum for Youth Investment, January 2014.
http://forumfyi.org/files/soft_skills_hard_data_0.pdf

Tools:

- Angela Lee Duckworth's website provides tools that others have developed based on her research: https://sites.sas.upenn.edu/duckworth Of particular interest:
  - o "Grit scales" – self-reports about how confront challenges, set-backs, etc.
  - o KIPP's 'character growth scorecard" (for teachers)

- Carol Dweck's website also provides tools for assessing "growth mindset": http://www.mindsetworks.com/assess/ - of particular interest here may be the mindset tool for those ages 12-adult

- Genesys Works, a program interviewed for this report, developed a matrix that tracks student progress in the areas of soft skills such as. Available upon request.

- MHA Labs is a product of Leslie Beller, formerly of Chicago Public Schools. This site featuring her research offers tools and assessments to help youth acquire the basic building blocks for academic and workplace success: http://mhalabs.org/

- The Department of Education's Employability Matrix tracks progress in 4 key outcome areas [applied knowledge (academic skills, critical thinking skills), effective relationships (interpersonal skills, personal qualities), workplace skills (resource management – time, money, materials, information use), communications skills (systems thinking, technology use)]: http://cte.ed.gov/employabilityskills/

- The Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy recently developed a training curriculum focused on soft skills for workplace success. Its tools around providing feedback to youth are particularly helpful. http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/softskills.pdf