THE UTILIZATION OF SOFT SKILLS IN RETENTION OF PROFESSIONALS: AN EXPLANATORY SEQUENTIAL MIXED METHODS INQUIRY

A Dissertation

by

FERNANDO CORTEZ

BS, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, 2001
MS, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, 2002

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This dissertation meets the standards for scope and quality of
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

Kamiar Kouzekanani, PhD
Chair

Bryant Griffith, PhD
Committee Member

Awni Zebda, PhD
Committee Member

Ethan Thompson, PhD
Graduate Faculty Representative

December 2014

ABSTRACT

The human resource profession has transitioned from its early inception of human relations into the proliferating revamped department it has become in the 21st century. Because of this change, organizations have employed resources to guide them. One such change is that of creating a training and development specialist position that is geared towards addressing employees' training needs.

For this reason, the primary purpose of the study was to examine the utilization of soft skills in the retention of professionals. The study examined the importance and training availability of 10 soft skills, namely, 1) communication, 2) courtesy, 3) flexibility, 4) integrity, 5) interpersonal skills, 6) positive attitude, 7) professionalism, 8) responsibility, 9) team work, and 10) work ethic. The study employed an Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design. The researcher collected and analyzed the quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of the qualitative data, and concluded by interpreting and synthesizing all results. For the quantitative component of the study, there were 113 human resource professionals who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Data were collected from a survey questionnaire completed online or in person. For the qualitative component of the study, there were seven human resource professionals who agreed to participate in a focus group and share their perspectives regarding the usefulness of soft skills in retaining professional employees.

The quantitative results showed that the 10 soft skills were perceived as very important by both the new and experienced professionals; however, there was little to no training available for the overwhelming majority of the skills. Analysis of qualitative data resulted in three themes: Implicit Learning, Formalized Learning, and Continuum Learning. The themes were

categorized according to the capability of learning a soft skill through observation, enhancing a soft skill through training, or a combination.

Therefore, training and development specialists must create educational opportunities to address the soft skills. There are some skills that can be taught, while others are learned. Although human resource professionals can facilitate these trainings electronically, it is suggested that audience participation, role playing, and interactive training sessions can be more beneficial in mastering the skills.

DEDICATION

I dedicate the dissertation to my family who has unconditionally supported me throughout my educational endeavors. To my father, the late Fidel A. Cortez, my mother, Juanita B. Cortez, and my siblings, Florencio, Esmeralda, Fidel, Ercilia, Filiberto, Evangelina, Ema, and Fermin, I extend a sincere thank you for believing in me and for all your guidance and words of encouragement.

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Chapter I

Introduction

Background and Setting

The late 1700s in England, a time period referred to as the Industrial Revolution, brought significant change in the practices of production. In the early human resource profession, also known as Industrial Relations, the main focus was to assist immigrants in the process of adjusting to their jobs and the 'American' way of life, which became the foundation for human resource profession, as it is known today. Within this early production period, programs were created to assist immigrants in learning English and acquiring housing and medical care. In addition, the need for supervisory training to assist them in increasing their productivity was established. This new development fortified the foundation for an intricately woven department which ultimately became the driving force of structural organization (Pace, 1991).

In the 1790s, as a result of the increase in laborers and employees, 'Labor Unions' were established, increasing the power of employees, which continued at a rapid pace during the 1800s and early1900s. As employees began to increase in numbers, there was the need to oversee, evaluate, and address the concerns which manifested during their employment. With the promotion of employees within organizations, it became evident that a department would be needed to oversee the proper training and evaluation of newly appointed supervisors and their employees. There were two companies who set precedent for the new department that was needed, namely, B.F. Goodrich and National Cash Register. These innovative entities were credited for the initial design of the human resource department. In 1902, B.F. Goodrich and National Cash Register established an internal department with the intention to handle

employees' grievances, record keeping, wage management, and other employee-related issues (Khilawala, 2013).

In 1913, the United States Department of Labor was established to promote the welfare of the workforce by providing for current and future employees to work in a safe and regulated environment. The Wagner Act of 1935, also known as the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 and the Fair Labor Standards Act, provide employees with on-the-job security and assist in increasing the standard of employer's organizational behavior. These laws provided a rubric of how and what an employer could and could not do with their employees (Gale, 2005). Human resource professions gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s after the passing of laws which outlined the safety and protected rights of employees. During this era, the Equal Pay Act of 1963, the Civil Rights Act of 1974, and the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 came into existence. Furthermore, employees with disabilities were protected under the American with Disabilities Act of 1990. Under this act, individuals with physical or mental impairments were protected from discrimination, during pre-employment or existing employment activities.

Due to the increase in new law enactments affecting employment, corporations placed significant importance in the human resource profession which would ultimately deal with law interpretation and regulations stipulating the rights of employees and employer behavior. By the end of the 1970s, almost all new companies and existing corporations had created a department responsible for recruiting and training employees as well as employee relations and compensation (Khilawala, 2013). The human resource profession continued its rapid growth during the 1980s. In addition to its initial creation of support for employees and managers, its responsibilities included training and development of employees, regulating compliance,

dismissal of employees, and recruiting skilled labor. The department was also tasked with the additional challenges of hiring and retaining employees (Khilawala, 2013).

Although human resource professionals are not able to assist with rule enforcement, they may assist in shaping an employee's behavior; thus, influencing the organization's culture (Cabrera & Bonache, 1999). Furthermore, more and more organizations are investing in training as a means to increase desired employee behavior and employee competitiveness (Jones, 2002). Today, human resource provides the foundation, direction, and structure of a corporation. The recruitment, management, and retention of professional employees are vital in maintaining the day to day operations; thus, embodying the organization to perform in an effective and efficient manner. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there is a projected growth in human resources job categories by 22% between 2008 and 2018, in which training and development are among the top five. In general, training and development specialist assists in training managers, employees, and supervisors to analyze employee development by documenting performance improvement measures, conducting department meeting and training sessions, and arranging on-the-job training to help employees maintain and improve their job skills (Buhl, 2008). The training and development specialists are tasked with the analysis of the companies' training needs, the extent of training, the delivery and method used, and the overall employees' achievement or lack thereof of their deficiencies.

To accomplish the task of and succeed in becoming a training and development specialist, individuals would need to understand the adult learner. This is where an educational background comes into action. Educators are an intricate part of the development, design, and facilitation of training programs throughout the human resource profession. As the need for training development specialist proliferates, the need for educators to train, develop, and prepare

professional employees for the workforce increases too. A great deal of attention in adult education programming efforts is given to workforce development entities, which include formal job training, employee development skills, and literacy assistance (Jordan, 2010). Human resource management includes training employees, which improves job performance and a better understanding of the organizations' needs; educating employees to prepare them for an opportunity for advancement within the organization; and the development of employees in an attempt to assist them in meeting future organizational growth by 1) defining their deficiencies and 2) addressing them early on in their career.

The training and development of professional employees is not the only concern employers are facing. There is a great concern among human resource professionals that high school graduating seniors do not have the soft skills needed to be successful in the workplace (Gewertz, 2007; National Union of Students, 2011). Human resource professionals look for soft skills such as communication, courtesy, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, responsibility, team work, and work ethic in recruiting new hires (Robles, 2012). The Stanford Research Institute surveyed CEOs from Fortune 500 companies and found that 75% of the long-term job success depends on people skills and only 25% on technical knowledge (Console, 2008).

Soft skills, also known as people skills, are an intricate part in the success of obtaining and maintaining a professional career in a competitive work environment. A recent 2012 survey conducted in partnership with American Express examined the essentialness of soft skills and its impact on workplace promotion or dismissal. The study reported that over 60% of managers agreed that soft skills are needed to be promoted into a management role. The study also listed the top three soft skills that management felt were essential in becoming a successful, namely,

ability to prioritize work (flexibility), having a positive attitude, and team work skills (Schawbel, 2013).

In 2013, the Workforce Solutions of the Coastal Bend surveyed local businesses to identify additional resources, if any, that businesses needed in their search to find quality employees. According to Monika De La Garza, Communications and Outreach Coordinator, survey results suggested that there was a need for training of soft skills; specifically, communication, team work, interpersonal effectiveness, and work ethic. In response to meeting the demands, the Workforce Solutions created a four-day workshop to train current and future employees in specific soft skills that organizations had reported to be an integral and necessary part of everyday business (Workforce Solutions of the Coastal Bend, 2013). To meet the needs of the employees who cannot attend the training session in person, the Workforce Solutions created an online soft skills training program.

According to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the elements for a core curriculum include objectives that address the following soft skills: communication, team work, and personal and social responsibility (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2009). According to the coordinating board, there must be changes in the core curriculum to allow students gain a foundation of knowledge of human cultures and personal responsibility.

As students prepare to enter the workforce, employers have noticed certain weaknesses among college graduates. The lack of work experience, unrealistic expectations, and poor written communication skills are perceived by employers as weaknesses of many college graduates. Therefore, educators play an intricate part in preparing and developing future and existing employees. The role of an educator is to train and develop students and employees for the workforce by preparing them with the necessary soft skills that will be utilized throughout

their career. Soft skills ultimately determine a companies' overall productivity and are required of all employees regardless of the level of experience.

Since the primary motive of every business organization is to earn profits, every decision from planning to staffing is taken for long term sustainability of the organization. Human resource is the most important and vital factor for economic development. In addition to hiring professional employees, the ability to improve their skills is essential in properly performing occupational assignments. Therefore, companies face a variety of challenges to invest on human capital and retain employees. They are faced with decisions on whether an employee is salvageable or would require additional investment, which may not be in the company's best interest. It is not surprising that companies devote a great deal of resources to train, develop, and retain newly hired employees whose departure will likely result in financial losses. The aim of human resource development is to produce competent and qualified employees. Those who perform their assigned jobs and contribute to the company's development and goals will likely become an intricate part of human capital investment; thus, maintaining internal organization while earning profits.

Statement of the Problem

As corporate administration invests in its professional employees, there are noticeable, yet emerging challenges in managing the workforce. Employee performance and retention are two of the issues which are driven by the reorganization of the company's departments and the utilization of recruiting efforts needed to attract and maintain the qualified key talents the company needs (Kreisman, 2002). If organizations are unable to retain highly qualified professional employees, they will be left with an understaffed and less qualified workforce that

will ultimately hinder the ability to remain competitive and productive in their line of work (Rappaport, Bancroft, & Okum, 2003).

Retention, like employee performance, is a critical element of an organization's general approach to talent management, which is "the implementation of integrated strategies or systems designed to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes for attracting, developing, retaining, and utilizing people with the required skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs" (Lockwood, 2006).

In 2006, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conducted a poll and the results were alarming. For example, it showed that approximately 76% of those currently employed were either somewhat likely or very likely to begin job search as they began to notice an improvement in the economy and job market; thus, suggesting that there was little commitment on the part of many employees' loyalty to the organization. It appears that companies are concerned with retention and the need for new approaches to reduce employees' intention to quit. In the Workplace Forecast of 2006, employers reported a greater emphasis on the development and retention strategies for their current and future workforce to be the top employment trend (SHRM, 2006). This anticipated trend exposes the need for training and development specialist, as previously forecasted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, to have a major impact on or cause a radical restructuring for future employment of professional employees.

Human resource management professionals can make an important contribution to the creation of meaningful work experiences that impact performance behaviors and retention. These professionals are in the position because they are responsible for or influence the activities that constitute much of the work experience. They make decisions regarding compensation and

other benefits which affect the degree by which the job provides the employee with valued performance outcomes. They make decisions regarding the design of the job and work, which influences employees' perceptions of and attitudes towards the work itself. Often, human resource management professionals are involved in the recruitment and selection process by making decisions regarding the degree of fit between applicants and jobs. Research consistently indicates that organizational fit is related to perceptions and attitudes related to employees' work experience in the post entry stage of employment (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Human resource management professionals are an important part in the development and retention of employees. Therefore, the investigation of methods utilized in training, developing, and retaining employees may have practical and theoretical implications.

Theoretical Framework

The study focused on the retention of professional employees. Employees' behavior towards job performance affects the company's interests and investments. Likewise, employers' approach in developing employees affects its attrition rate. The study is guided by Kurt Lewin's Field Theory, a three-step model. Lewin believed that in order for change to take place, the total situation had to be taken into account. If only one part of the situation is considered, a misrepresented picture is likely to develop (Neill, 2004). According to Lewin, the first step in the development of changing behavior in an organization is to unfreeze the existing situation or status quo. Why is this necessary? Unfreezing is necessary to overcome the strains of individual resistance and group conformity (Robbins, 2003). In order to unfreeze the existing status quo, human resource professionals may increase the driving forces that direct behaviors away, decrease the restraining forces that negatively affect the movement, or use a combination of both methods (Robbins, 2003).

Lewin's second step in the development of changing behavior is movement. In this step, it is necessary to move the organization to a new level of stability (Robbins, 2003). Human resource professionals and their employees need to view the problem from a fresh perspective, work together, and connect the views of the group to those in authority (Robins, 2003).

The third step of Lewin's model is refreezing. This step needs to take place after the change has been implemented in order for it to be sustained over time. If this step is not initiated, it is highly likely that the change will be short lived and employees will return to their old behavior. It is the actual integration of the new values into the community values and traditions that will ultimately strengthen the change (Robbins, 2003). During this step, human resource professionals reinforce new patterns and institutionalize them through formal and informal mechanisms, including policies and procedures through active training and development of employees. Behavior is a result of the individual and the environment. Lewin's theory has had a major impact on social psychology, supporting the notion that our individual traits and the environment interact to cause behavior (Cherry, 2013).

When an employee leaves an established organization, the relationships that were created, whether internally or externally, are impacted in such a way that the behaviors of existing employees are affected. The common reaction to an employee's departure, from an employer's perspective, is what went wrong? Why did he/she leave? What could the employer have done differently? According to Lewin, the entire situation, from the inception of employment through the development of the employee within the organization, would have to be taken into account rather than reacting to an isolated incident.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of the study was to measure the importance and availability of soft skills which may be instrumental in the retention of new and experienced professional

employees. The secondary purpose of the study was to document the perspectives of the employers regarding the usefulness of the soft skills in retention of new and experienced professional employees. The study took place in the Coastal Bend region of Texas, which includes rural, urban, and suburban areas along the Gulf of Mexico. The region is culturally mixed. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the level of importance of soft skills in retention of professional employees as perceived by employers?
2. What is the level of availability of soft skills for professional employees as perceived by employers?
3. What are the perspectives of the employers regarding the usefulness of soft skills in retaining professional employees?

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of the study, the levels of importance and availability of soft skills were measured by the respondents' responses to the Human Resource Soft Skills Survey (HRSSS) questionnaire. The perspectives of the employers were documented by the qualitative data obtained from a focus group.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

The study was delimited to soft skills of communication, courtesy, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, responsibility, team work, and work ethic; the outcome measures of importance and availability of the soft skills; and professional employees. Due to non-probability nature of sampling, external validity was limited to study participants. Due to non-experimental nature of the study, no causal inferences will be drawn. It was assumed that the study participants provided accurate quantitative and qualitative data. It

was assumed that the researcher will remain academically rigorous with objectivity and subjectivity in both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study, respectively.

Significance of the Study

The Bureau and Labor Statistics has projected a growth in human resource job categories by 22% between 2008 and 2018; one of those being training and development of employees (Buhl, 2008). Results from the study could provide additional information in retaining professional employees through training and development. Retention, like employee performance, is a critical element of an organization's general approach to talent management (Lockwood, 2006). Improved employee retention rates are likely to increase the commitment and loyalty to employers; thus, affecting the overall impact in a corporation's success. The study's implications for educational leadership and/or higher education are the changes in curriculum and roles that higher education institutions may have to address. In addition to meeting college students educational course needs, education leaders and higher education institutions may need to provide additional courses and/or training for soft skills; thus, meeting future employees' social and personal development.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The study focused on soft skills which may influence the retention of professional employees. The following databases at the Mary and Jeff Bell Library at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi were used to identify the relevant literature: ABI/Inform Global, Academic Search Complete, Business Searching Interface, E-books, ERIC (EBSCO), JSTOR, LexisNexis Academic, PsycInfo, and Worldcat.

Employee's behavior towards job performance affects the company's interests and investments. Likewise, employer's approach in developing employees affects the attrition rate. The study was guided by Kurt Lewin's Field Theory, a three-step model of unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Kurt Lewin, who is known as the father of human relations, developed this behavioral change model which assists in addressing the skill, changes that are needed to acquire the skills, and mastering the skill, which may be referred to as adoption.

Due to the increase in training and development, there is a proliferating need for subject matter experts (Romans, Frost, & Ford, 2006) who provide specific skills and interventions at early stages of one's career (Cafolla, 2006; Dalby, 2009). A recent National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) study (NACE, 2008) noted that employers value good communication skills, ability to work in teams, a good work ethic, and initiative. Ingbretsen's findings (2009), complemented the ones reported by the NACE that organizations seek employees who have the necessary communication skills, a strong work ethic, and teamwork capabilities.

As corporate administration invests in its professional employees, there are noticeable, yet emerging challenges in managing the workforce. Employee performance and retention are two of the issues that are driven by corporate restructuring efforts and tight competition for key talents (Kreisman, 2002). Organizations that fail to retain highly qualified professional employees would be left with an understaffed and less qualified workforce that would ultimately hinder the ability to remain competitive and productive (Rappaport, Bancroft, & Okum, 2003). Expenses incurred during the on-boarding process, also known as the new hire orientation, remind the businesses the importance of recruiting the most qualified and readily skilled employee that would be instrumental in enhancing the well-being of the organization. Therefore, when and if such employees are acquired, their retention and loyalty to the company becomes pertinent (Rappaport, Bancroft, & Okum, 2003).

Retention, like employee performance, is a critical element of an organization's general approach to talent management, which is "the implementation of integrated strategies or systems designed to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes for attracting, developing, retaining, and utilizing people with the required skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs" (Lockwood, 2006, p. 6). "Research, conducted with Fortune 500 CEOs by the Stanford Research Institute Inter-national and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation, found that 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills, while only 25% on technical knowledge" (Klaus, 2010, p. 15).

Theoretical Framework

The father of human relations, Kurt Lewin, is known for his ability to adhere to behavioral changes in his three-step model, which served as the study's foundational lens for examining the soft skills that employers are looking for in their employees. The skills were

further examined to determine the best ways by which they can be mastered. According to research, in order for a skill to be acquired, there has to be a behavioral change and recent literature supports the emphasis on the adult professionals and their ability to improve their work-related skills (Metso & Kianto, 2014). Behaviorists, such as BF Skinner, stated that reinforcement plays an important role in the theories that require change; hence, the development of a desired behavior or skill would require reinforcement through training (Hershey & Blanchard, 1988). During the training process of professional workers, the human resource professionals would reinforce the desired skill.

After researching the field theory of change, the development of employees takes place during the transition change. During this stage, Lewin's theory suggests that the employer would be able to refine the existing skills or train the employee in the skills which the company values in order to compete in the business sector.

According to Lewin, the first step in the development of changing behavior in an organization is to unfreeze the existing situation or status quo. Why is this necessary? Unfreezing is necessary to overcome the strains of individual resistance and group conformity (Robbins, 2003). Lewin's second step in the development of changing behavior is the transition (movement). In this step, it is necessary to move the organization to a new level of stability (Robbins, 2003). Human Resource professionals and their employees need to view the problem from a fresh perspective, work together, and connect the views of the group to those in authority. The third step of Lewin's model is refreezing. This step needs to take place after the change has been implemented in order for it to be sustained or "stick" over time. If this step is not initiated, it is highly likely that the change will be short lived and employees will return to their old behavior. It is the actual integration of the new values into the community values and traditions

that would ultimately strengthen the change (Robbins, 2003). Lewin's theory is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1- Kurt Lewin's Field Theory

The soft skills examined in this study are attributed to the individualized personal characteristics and the social situation and/or environment in which an individual has gained experiences. Therefore, it is pertinent that any future training to address lacking soft skills would need to include the dismantling of the current mind set by providing a training that would utilize the problem acknowledgment first, followed by having the participants come up with possible solutions. After the participants have realized that there is a lacking soft skill and a possible solution has been obtained, the facilitator assists in developing new behaviors, applying solutions, and transitioning attitudes towards the fulfilment of resolving the problem. The final step, freeze, brings the participants to the acceptance that the proposed solution may allow them to successfully perform their job duties; thus, creating an effective employment experience with little to no friction with other employees (Jordan, Anil, & Munasib, 2010).

Training and Development

Companies face a variety of challenges to whether invest on human capital and how to retain the employees. Companies invest an enormous amount of time and money in order to train, develop, and retain newly hired employees. The departure of such employees means financial loss. The aim of the human resource development is to produce competent and

qualified employees who well-perform the assigned job and contribute to the company's development and goals accomplishment efficiently and effectively (Jordan et al., 2010).

Research has shown that training and developing employees are instrumental in providing a positive step in the direction in which both the company and the employee benefit. According to Robert Reich, past Secretary of Labor and accomplished author, "employees like being explorers on the frontiers of the knowledge economy. And as apprentices have known for centuries, it's easiest to learn on the job, by working directly with people who can teach you and who are committed to the same goals you are" (Rappaport, Bancroft, & Okum, 2003, p. 57).

Employee training programs vary from company to company, and may depend on the size of the company, demographics, and longevity. Sometimes, an in-house training program can be pulled together quickly to get the employees up to speed (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2004). Or maybe employees can be trained by a consulting firm, specializing in human resources development. Overall, the training success depends on the method that is utilized to achieve the desired outcome (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2004).

As a company begins to invest in its employees by creating an in-house training and development program, it needs to take into consideration the cost. Training expenses represent a substantial investment in human resource (Eichmann, 2009). The decision to employ a training specialist, hire an external source, or have current employees do the training depends on the amount of training needed, the skills needed, and the overall direction of the company's long range goals (Eichmann, 2009).

Training and developing employees require an understanding of an adult learner, which is the role of educators. In order to have and in-house training and development program, the

training specialist must understand how the learner learns and have teaching strategies that would achieve the program objectives. Whether it is an interdisciplinary degree in education to graduate education in adult learning, the educator needs the educational foundation, curriculum, and resources to develop employees (Lockwood, 2006).

The literature review showed that there are benefits for training and developing employees. Managers can learn to apply motivational techniques which would ultimately improve their employees' work performance. The employees would practice and own self-development, accept more responsibility; thus, aligning themselves with the organizational structure of their place of employment. Managers and supervisors would also learn skills that can be applied to their own performance management techniques and improvement plans for employees by using positive approaches (Rappaport, Bancroft, & Okum, 2003).

To further understand the components of training and developing employees, the literature was researched to identify specific attributes that may influence the development and performance of employees. The soft skills of 1) communication, 2) courtesy, 3) flexibility, 4) integrity, 5) interpersonal skills, 6) positive attitude, 7) professionalism, 8) responsibility, 9) team work, and 10) work ethic were found to be the ones that employers tend to look for and expect of prospective employees to have after completing college.

Communication

Communication is an important interpersonal skill in today's global business environment (John, 2009; Timm, 2005). It is generally assumed by many companies that communication is a fundamental skill that everyone knows and does well. Unfortunately, that assumption is usually not a reality. Communication, or the lack thereof, has been the reason for

many tragedies and disasters that have taken place within the financial industry, health care, and the wider environment in recent years (Jelphs, 2006).

A recent study published in the Journal of Business Communication (2013) explored the verbal communication behaviors that are used in the workplace. “A wide review of the organizational literature across different types of resources resulted in more than 300 tasks to consider as verbal communication workplace behaviors; through analytical refinement the list was reduced to 166. The 10 most frequently identified verbal communication workplace behaviors were (in order): listening, asking questions, discussing, sharing information, agreeing, suggesting, getting feedback, seeking feedback, answering questions, and explaining” (Keyton, Caputo, Ford, Fu, Leibowitz, Liu, Polasik, Ghosh, & Wu, 2013, p. 14).

Courtesy

An average professional worker spends approximately 40 to 50 hours each week performing work for his/her company. Since so much time is spent in the workplace setting, employee work experience is a powerful contributor to the overall quality of life, which makes communication with coworkers vitally important. Employees create the climate of their working environment. If communication in the workplace is “marked by discourteous, rudeness, impoliteness, failure to treat others with at least minimal respect, it distracts employees from assignment or tasks, increases their stress level, and infects the organizational climate. This negative contribution to the work environment creates a toxic matrix of distrust and cynicism that transforms enthusiasm into reluctant resignation and daily routines into drudgery” (Fritz, 2011, p. 16). Studies have suggested that in order to counteract the communicative vice of being discourteous, people may choose to practice the communicative virtue of civility in their places

of employment (Fritz, 2011) Both employers and customers are affected when the impoliteness is exuded from the employee.

Andersson and Pearson (1999) examined incivility in the workplace and identified behaviors that were expressed in both new and senior employees. The readings further showed that the behavior of incivility was not shown in new employees but was portrayed by experienced employees who were not courteous and had been this way for years throughout their employment. It also revealed that within time, the incivility could potentially spiral into intense aggressive behaviors.

Flexibility

Galinsky, Sakai, and Wigton (2011) explored *Workplace Flexibility: From Research to Action* and reported "the continuing sense among employees of not having enough time to manage the multiple responsibilities of work and personal and family life" (p. 147). There were a vast amount of employees who reported feeling the need for greater workplace flexibility. This exploration of flexibility study used the 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce as its primary source of data. It tracked the employees with access to various flexibility options, as well as the extent by which they were used. Findings from the study indicated " that the majority of employees want flexibility but that access to it varies, with more advantaged employees - those who are well educated, have high salaries, and work full time, for example - being doubly advantaged in having greater access to flexibility" (Galinsky et al., 2011, p. 153).

Skorstad and Ramsdal (2009) explored four definitions of flexibility, namely, numerical, working time, wage, and functional**.** For the purpose of their study, the researchers further defined the types of flexibility that were deemed as being important for both the current and future employees, of which functional flexibility provided the focus of the current study, which

is defined as the ability to move employees around and between jobs and functions (Skorstad & Ramsdal, 2009, p. 22).

Integrity

As the work place environment evolves, it incorporates the involvement of individual and departmental responsibility to carry on the task needed to complete the company's objective. C.S. Lewis (1996) said it best, "Integrity is doing the right thing, even when no one is looking" (p. 14). According to Merriam-Webster (2014), integrity is defined as a firm adherence to a code of moral or artistic value. More often, integrity is categorized under the closely related headings of conscience and, more broadly, good character (Audi & Murphy, 2006). The 2008 NACE study revealed that integrity was ranked as the most important employee attribute, followed by work ethic. This is probably a reflection of the relatively recent corporate scandals involving World Com, Enron, and Tyco, and more recently the scandals involving mortgages and derivatives in the financial industry. Therefore, it is to no surprise why human resource professionals or the companies searching for new employees look for individuals who possess integrity (Audi & Murphy, 2006).

Interpersonal Skills

Various studies have been conducted to examine the role of interpersonal skills in the work environment. For example, it was reported that because humans are social beings, their attitudes and behaviors are significantly influenced by the quality of interpersonal relationships (Frone, 2000). A construct that measures the quality of interpersonal relationships at work is interpersonal conflict. In the workplace, interpersonal conflict can range from minor disagreements with coworkers to heated arguments and physical violence. Business

communication vendors have tapped into this field by providing training courses and videos for companies dealing with interpersonal conflict (Frone, 2000).

Dekay (2012) conducted an informal experiment in order to understand the significance of interpersonal communication skills in work-related environments. He collected e-mail messages received from vendors of business communication training for a five-month period. During that period, he received 38 offers from service providers. The results, arranged by the type of training offered and the percentage of total offers represented by each specific type were Having Difficult Conversations (44.70%), Speaking as a Leader (18.40%), Giving Presentations (13.30%), Coaching/Motivational Speaking (10.60%), Communicating with Customers (7.80%), and Facilitating Meetings (5.20%).

The most popular training topic, "Having Difficult Conversations," consists of a blend of courses, each focusing on very specific problems. For example, reducing drama in the workplace, giving and receiving criticism, dealing with insubordination, resolving conflicts, dealing with rude employees, disciplining workers, handling terminations, avoiding bad boss behaviors, and repairing relations with other departments (Dekay, 2012).

Positive Attitude

The literature suggests that employees' perceptions and/or attitude affect the overall success of the company. Because organizations interact with individuals on daily basis, the support of the employees is needed to reach desired outcomes, sales profits, and most importantly, effective communication. Research has shown that in order for business entities to accomplish these outcome measures, they would need to acknowledge employees' time, effort, and contribution, promote their well-being and healthy life style, and provide the opportunity for them to participation in the company's future growth/reduction plans and other organizational

changes and/or processes. These key elements, as perceived by employees, would ultimately shape their attitudes toward the organization (Ali, Rehman, Ahmed, Ghafoor, & Umer, 2010).

Stone III and Josiam (2000) focused on five dimensions of work attitudes, namely, positive and negative work attitudes, the value of work, involvement, motivation, and ethic. The authors created a negative and positive work attitude scale, consisting of 31 items (Stone III & Josiam, 2000, p. 545), conducted a study, and found students to be largely positive in their attitudes to work, which in turn made a significant impact of the overall production and profit. Furthermore, the study found that with increasing age and work experience, students' positive work attitude was enhanced; suggesting that the retention of experienced employees is of the utmost importance. As students prepare to enter the workforce, both higher education and hiring organizations have a better understanding of their employees' needs to effectively address or prevent any human resource management issues. The study provided an insight and understanding of these potential, yet important work related issues, which could be constructively utilized before and throughout the employment and retention of the prospective employees.

Professionalism

The literature suggests that recent college graduates need to refine the skill of professionalism. Although students have the core curriculum and education required for various careers, a recent survey found that the overwhelming majority of the respondents reported the need to educate prospective employees to conduct themselves professionally at the work place (Stone III & Josiam, 2000, p. 545). Russell, Owen, Leibach, Meaders, Stone, and Kraj, (2011) did a survey of students, focusing on professionalism in their choice of career. The researchers measured student attributes across many career disciplines. The primary goal of the study was to

identify specific professional behaviors expected of students and ensure that a professional presence would be maintained throughout their work environment. The study found that there was a need to develop common course objectives focusing on professionalism and continued professional development. Although professionalism was maintained during employees' first year of employment, it slowly declined as employees adjusted to the company and its work expectations. Professionalism would need to be maintained throughout the years of employment with the organization. The researchers also suggested systematically monitoring and evaluation of employees' level of professional behavior.

Responsibility

Responsibility is a characteristic that employers are looking for because it is ultimately and synonymously associated with trust. Clouder (2009) studied perceptions of students who took on responsibilities at work associated with their professional roles. The researcher identified that responsibility is a complex concept because it is ultimately connected to issues of trust. The study suggested that giving an employee responsibility may be empowering and concluded that there was a "strong indication that the extent to which students are allowed responsibility in the workplace appears to have a fundamental impact on their perceptions of personal efficacy and professional development" (Clouder, 2009, p. 290).

Being responsible is not only a good quality to have while working for any organization but also is a determining factor that most companies look for in their employees when either downsizing or restructuring. According to Cascio (2002), this key soft skill is one that employers seek in their employees that will ultimately determine if they are kept on during a downsizing event. In his book, Casico suggested that companies need to view employees as

assets, rather than cost. If a company perceives employees as assets, it will invest in them by developing their skills; thus, improving their work effectiveness.

Team work

As businesses hire team members, they are faced with compiling a team that has the potential to be productive and self-sufficient. Literature shows that team work is another essential component in the success of an organization. A team is a group of individuals who interact interdependently and who are brought together or come together voluntarily to achieve certain outcomes or accomplish particular tasks. Teams and team work are an essential part of getting work done in almost every organization (Hackman, 2002). Businesses have invested in their teams to increase productivity. Some research studies claim that the use of teams increases responsiveness and flexibility within organizations (Griffith, Sawyer, & Neale, 2003). Research also suggests that connections and an underlying understanding are created among team members who have different types of expertise, experience, or knowledge (Grimshaw & Kwok, 1998; Klein & Kleinhanns, 2003).

Team work not only affects individual productivity, it is also a predictor of the attitude towards ability to trust upper management. Kiffin-Petersen and Cordery (2010) investigated 218 professionals in their study of the predictors of employee performance and its consequences on team work. The study confirmed that sometimes there is employee resistance which in turn results in constraint on business productivity. It also revealed that the lack of trust in management proliferated when team work was required from fellow coworkers, yet was not modeled by upper management. The further constraint on business productivity reduces the ability to work in teams.

Work Ethic

The final soft skill that was researched is work ethic. Ezigbo (2012) recently addressed this topic via a study of work ethics in the workplace. He stated that the importance of ethics helps employees decide how best to respond to the interests of various organizational stakeholders. Employees, specifically those in management, often experience an ethical dilemma when they are confronted with a situation that affects both the employee and the organization. Furthermore, the study revealed that employees have a more difficult time in deciding to do what is in the best interest of the company if the employee is a long time employee or if there is sense of connection with the employee. The study also identified the length of time the employee spends with the organization, the loyalty to others, and the professionalism were variables that affected their decisions. "Sometimes, making a decision is easy because some obvious standard, value, or norm of behavior applies" (Jones & George, 2003, p. 89).

A 1974 study was revisited in 2002 to determine the generational differences and their causes, when pertaining to work ethic. The study confirmed that as the generation grew older, the work ethic improved; whereas the younger generation failed to provide an adequate work ethic and their loyalty to the organization diminished. In addition, the study revealed that the value of work increased as the generation grew older (Smola & Sutton, 2002).

Summary

Since its inception, human resource professionals have had an intricate part in developing employees. As the demand of training specialist and its expectation to grow within the next 10 years, coupled with studies and research conducted which identified "that 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills, while only 25% on technical knowledge," it is evident that

employees would need continuous training and development in order to perform to organization's standards. The soft skills of 1) communication, 2) courtesy, 3) flexibility, 4) integrity, 5) interpersonal skills, 6) positive attitude, 7) professionalism, 8) responsibility, 9) team work, and 10) work ethic are the skills which employers look for and expect of prospective employees to have after completing college. The human resource professional is the individual who ultimately leads companies through vigorous training and development of professional workers to obtain the 10 soft skills that prospective employers are looking for in recent college graduates as well as other potential employees.

Journals, articles, and studies have suggested that these soft skills are necessary in order to be productive and/or successful in any organization. The human resource profession, specifically employee training and development, anticipates a steady growth of 22% between 2008 and 2018, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Therefore, the need for employee training and development of these soft skills relies on the human resource professional to address these needs.

Despite continuous training and professional development of employees, businesses are suggesting that there is a need to address the lacking soft skills in recent graduates or to enhance the skills in existing employees. Their responses to surveys depicted in the literature review showed inadequate level of mastery of these soft skills.

Chapter III

Method

Introduction

Chapter Three describes the procedures that were implemented to meet the objectives of the mixed methods inquiry. The following research questions guided the study:

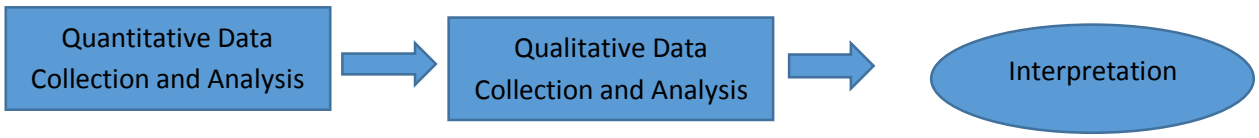
1. What is the level of importance of soft skills in retention of professional employees as perceived by employers?
2. What is the level of availability of soft skills for professional employees as perceived by employers?
3. What are the perspectives of the employers regarding the usefulness of soft skills in retaining professional employees?

Research Design

The study employed an Explanatory Sequential mixed methods design, which is a two-step process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The researcher collected and analyzed the quantitative data, followed by the collection and analysis of the qualitative data, and concluded by interpreting and synthesizing all results. The design is depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Explanatory Sequential Design



Quantitative

For the quantitative component of the study, the researcher utilized a descriptive research approach. Descriptive research is the exploration of an existing topic. There are no independent or dependent variables. The primary purpose is to collect and analyze data to better understand the topic of interest. The proposed study was conducted to describe and document the perceptions of human resource professionals regarding the importance and training availability of the 10 soft skills.

Qualitative

For the qualitative component of the study, the researcher conducted a focus group of human resource professionals, utilizing the theoretical perspective of interpretivism. Specifically, coding and inductive analysis was utilized to organize the data based upon common patterns or themes (Mertler, 2006) to document the perspectives of human resource professionals. Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips, and Davidson (2007) stated that focus groups enable the researchers to synthesize and validate the ideas and/or concepts while discovering participants' perspectives.

Subject Selection

The study took place in the Coastal Bend region of Texas, which is culturally mixed and includes rural, urban, and suburban areas along the Gulf of Mexico. The major cities in the region are Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Kingsville, Port Lavaca, Victoria, and Houston. The subjects for the study were identified, using 1) Corpus Christi Human Resource Management Association (CCHRMA) and 2) Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), who were contacted and asked to provide the researcher with the names and email addresses of all human resource professionals in the Coastal Bend. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from

the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi on December 4, 2013.

Quantitative

For the quantitative component of the study, all human resource professionals (i.e., directors, managers, administrators, trainers, coordinators, and generalist) were invited to participate in the study (N = 350). The total number of participants who responded to the Human Resource Soft Skill Survey (HRSSS) was 113 (32.30%).

Qualitative

The subjects for the qualitative component of the study were recruited from those who had participated in the quantitative component of the study and agreed to take part in the focus group interview. A recommended sample size for a focus group is 6 – 10 (Krueger, 2009). The total number of participants who agreed to attend and participate in the focus group was seven.

Instrumentation

Due to mixed methods nature of the study, quantitative and qualitative data were needed to answer the research questions.

Quantitative

For the quantitative component of the study, the 3-part Human Resource Soft Skills Survey (HRSSS) was developed by the researcher (Appendix A). Part I included the 10 soft skills, namely, 1) communication, 2) courtesy, 3) flexibility, 4) integrity, 5) interpersonal skills, 6) positive attitude, 7) professionalism, 8) responsibility, 9) team work, and 10) work ethic. The respondents were asked to indicate the levels of importance and availability of training opportunities for each skill for newly hired professional employees. Part II followed the same format and the respondents were asked to complete it while focusing on experienced professional

employees. A four-point Likert-type scaling was used to measure the level of importance (4 = very important, 3 = important, 2 = somewhat important, and 1 = not important) and the level of availability of the training (4 = a lot, 3 = some, 2 = a little, 1 = none). Part III was designed to gather data to describe the sample. The following demographic data were collected: age, gender, ethnicity, highest education level, years of managerial experience, and years at the current position. Those who wanted to take part in the qualitative component of the study checked the last section of the survey questionnaire and provided the researcher with contact information. Additionally, success in retaining new and experienced professional employees was measured on a continuum, ranging from zero to 10. The dissertation committee examined the content validity of the instrument and feedback was used to modify the HRSSS. The on-line survey instrument was pilot-tested to examine its utility.

Qualitative

The perspectives of the employers regarding the usefulness of soft skills in retaining professional employees were obtained from a human resource professional focus group. The lead questions were:

1. What lacking soft skill is prevalent among new professional employees?
2. What lacking soft skill is prevalent among experienced professional employees?
3. Which of the 10 soft skills is most prevalent among new professional employees?
4. Which of the 10 soft skills is most prevalent among experienced employees?
5. Which of the 10 soft skills is the most difficult to train and/or develop? Why?
6. What barriers, if any, have you encountered in training and developing new employees?

7. What barriers, if any, have you encountered in training and developing professional employees?
8. What changes, if any, would you like to see in higher education curriculum to assist in preparing and developing future professional employees?

Data Collection

Quantitative

An online version of the HRSSS was used to collect the quantitative data. The PI's contact information and voluntary consent was included in the survey instrument. The study participants were contacted via email, provided with access to the HRSSS, and asked to complete it. With the exception of those who agreed to participate in the qualitative component of the study by completing the last section of the HRSSS, all study participants remained anonymous to the researcher. On January 7, 2014, the HRSSS survey was sent out to human resource professionals previously identified, using 1) Corpus Christi Human Resource Management Association (CCHRMA) and 2) Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM). One week later, a second email was sent to all subjects, thanking those who had already completed the survey and encouraged the others to complete the HRSSS. The third and final email was sent four weeks after the initial email. The consent to participate in the quantitative component of the study was obtained electronically and via the HRSSS.

Qualitative

A focus group was conducted to collect the qualitative data. The PI was the moderator. Prior to beginning the focus group, the participants were provided with a review of the study. All participants signed a consent form (Appendix B). The session was audio-taped and later transcribed by the researcher (Appendix C).

Data Analysis

Quantitative

The data were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Upon completion of data checking, descriptive statistics were used to summarize and organize the data. Skew coefficient (Field, 2013) was used to examine the normality of the data. Frequency and percentage distribution tables, as well as appropriate measures of central tendency and variability were reported. For the skewed distributions, median was reported as the most appropriate measure of central tendency.

Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha (Crocker & Algina, 1986) was employed to estimate the internal consistency of the 10 soft skills. Specifically, $\alpha = [k / k - 1] [1 - (\Sigma\sigma_i^2 / \sigma_x^2)]$, where k is the number of items on the tests, σ_i^2 is the variance of the item i, and $\sigma_x^2$is the total test variance (sum of the variances plus twice the sum of the covariance of all possible parts of its components, that is, $\sigma_x^2 = \Sigma\sigma_i^2 + 2\Sigma\sigma_{ij}$), was used to compute the reliability coefficient, which may range from 0.00 to 1.00.

At the item level, Wilcoxon rank-sum test (Field, 2013), a non-parametric statistical technique, was used to examine differences between importance and availability of each soft skill. The test assumes random samples from continuous populations and that data are at least ordinal. It is analogous to t-test for independent samples. When both sample sizes are greater than 10, an approximate Z is computed. The z-to-r transformation (Field, 2013) was used to compute effect sizes and examine the practical significance of the findings. Specifically, the effect size was computed by $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$, where N is the total number of subjects in both samples. The effect sizes are characterized as .1 = small effect, .3 = medium effect, and .5 = large effect (Cohen, 1988).

Qualitative

The transcripts of the focus group interview were content analyzed. Specifically, the following steps were performed: 1) getting a sense of the whole by reading the transcription carefully; 2) identifying text segments with brackets; 3) assigning a code word or phrase to describe the meaning of the text segment; 4) making a list and grouping the code word; 5) reviewing the transcription; and 6) reducing the codes to themes, which are similar codes put together, forming the major ideas of the transcription (Creswell, 2005).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The primary purpose of the study was to examine the importance and availability of soft skills in retention of professional employees in the Coastal Bend region of South Texas as perceived by human resource professionals. The secondary purpose of the study was to document the perspectives of employers regarding the importance of soft skills in retention of professional employees. The study was delimited to 10 soft skills, namely, 1) communication, 2) courtesy, 3) flexibility, 4) integrity, 5) interpersonal skills, 6) positive attitude, 7) professionalism, 8) responsibility, 9) team work, and 10) work ethic. The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods model (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by collection and analysis of qualitative data.

Quantitative Results

The quantitative component of the study was guided by the following research questions:

- What is the level of importance of soft skills in retention of professional employees as perceived by human resource specialists?
- What is the level of availability of soft skills for professional employees as perceived by human resource specialists?

Profile of Respondents

The non-probability sample consisted of 113 human resource professionals who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Data were collected via an online survey questionnaire as well as in person. The study participants were members of either the Corpus Christi Human Resource Management Association (CCHRMA) or the Society of Human

Resource Management (SHRM), or both. The respondents were predominantly Hispanic (65.50%), female (70.80%), and with undergraduate degrees (60.20%). They performed in various capacities in their organizations (being a manager was the mode). Results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Profile of Respondents, Categorical Variables, n = 113

Variable	F	%
Gender		
Female	80	70.80
Male	33	29.20
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	74	65.50
White, Non- Hispanic or Latino	27	23.90
Black or African American	12	10.60
Education		
Bachelor's Degree	68	60.20
Master's Degree	45	39.80
Occupation		
Administrator	22	19.50
Coordinator	17	15.00
Director	22	19.50
Generalist	12	10.60
Manager	28	24.80
Other HR Professional	12	10.60

The average age was 45.57 years (SD = 7.58). A typical participant had 9.49 years (SD = 5.86) of managerial experience and 6.45 years (SD = 3.25) in the current position. A typical organization had six new professional employees. The distribution for the total number of

experienced professional employees was positively skewed; the median was 35. On a continuum, ranging from zero to 100, success in recruiting and retaining new professional employees was 65.91 (SD = 15.61) and 68.02 (SD = 14.38), respectively. Results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Profile of Respondents, Continuous Variables, n = 113

Characteristic	Mean	Median	SD
Age	45.57	47.00	7.58
Total Years of Managerial Experience	9.49	8.00	5.86
Total Years in Current Position	6.45	6.00	3.25
Total Number of New Professional Employees	6.00	5.00	3.75
Total Number of Experienced Professional Employees	41.94	35.00	30.07
Success in Recruiting New Professional Employees*	65.91	65.00	15.61
Success in Retaining New Professional Employees*	68.02	65.00	14.38

* 0 – 100 scale

New Professional Employees

The respondents were asked to focus on new professional employees and report the importance of the 10 soft skills. A 4-point Likert-type scaling was used: 4 = very important, 3 = important, 2 = somewhat important, and 1= not important. The “somewhat important” and “not important” options were not reported for any of the skills. The “very important” was the option

reported the most for all skills. The reliability coefficient for the 10-item questionnaire was .71. Results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Frequency and Percentage Distributions of Importance of Soft Skills for New Professional Employees, n = 113

Soft Skill	Response	F	%
Communication	Very Important	98	86.70
	Important	15	13.30
Courtesy	Very Important	87	77.00
	Important	26	23.00
Flexibility	Very Important	82	72.60
	Important	31	27.40
Integrity	Very Important	105	92.90
	Important	8	7.10
Interpersonal Skills	Very Important	60	53.10
	Important	53	46.90
Positive Attitude	Very Important	91	80.50
	Important	22	19.50
Professionalism	Very Important	85	75.20
	Important	28	24.80
Responsibility	Very Important	113	113.00
	Important	0	0
Team Work	Very Important	88	77.90
	Important	25	22.10
Work Ethic	Very Important	104	92.00
	Important	9	8.00

The means of the respondents' responses were computed and used to rank the importance of the 10 soft skills for new professional employees from the highest to the lowest.

“Responsibility” was the soft skill which received the highest important, followed by “integrity” and “work ethic.” “Interpersonal skills” received the least importance. Results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

The Ranking of the Importance of Soft Skills for New Professional Employees, n = 113

Soft Skill	Mean*
Responsibility	4.00
Integrity	3.93
Work Ethic	3.92
Communication	3.87
Positive Attitude	3.81
Team Work	3.78
Courtesy	3.77
Professionalism	3.75
Flexibility	3.73
Interpersonal Skills	3.53

* 4 = very important, 3 = important, 2 = somewhat important, 1 = not important

The respondents reported the training availability of 10 the soft skills for new professional employees. A 4-point Likert-type scaling: 4 = a lot, 3 = some, 2 = a little, and 1 = none was used. The “none” or “a little” were the most reported options for all soft skills. The reliability coefficient, as estimated by Cronbach’s Coefficient Alpha, for the 10-item questionnaire was .94. Results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Frequency and Percentage Distributions of Training Availability of Soft Skills for New Professional Employees, n = 113

Soft Skill	Response	F	%
Communication			
	None	40	35.40
	A little	23	20.40
	Some	27	23.90
	A lot	23	20.40
Courtesy			
	None	79	69.90
	A little	5	4.40
	Some	28	24.80
	A lot	1	.90
Flexibility			
	None	73	64.60
	A little	10	8.80
	Some	27	23.90
	A lot	3	2.70
Integrity			
	None	67	59.30
	A little	16	14.20
	Some	28	24.80
	A lot	2	1.80
Interpersonal Skills			
	None	56	49.60
	A little	29	25.70
	Some	24	21.20
	A lot	4	3.50
Positive Attitude			
	None	54	47.80
	A little	28	24.80
	Some	29	25.70
	A lot	2	1.80
Professionalism			
	None	58	51.30
	A little	10	8.80
	Some	44	38.90
	A lot	1	.90

Table 5 (cont'd)

Soft Skill	Response	F	%
Responsibility			
	None	68	60.20
	A little	16	14.20
	Some	27	23.90
	A lot	2	1.80
Team Work			
	None	0	0
	A little	15	13.30
	Some	57	50.40
	A lot	41	36.30
Work Ethic			
	None	66	58.40
	A little	16	14.20
	Some	31	27.40
	A lot	0	0

The means of the respondents' responses were computed and used to rank the availability of the training for the 10 soft skills, from the least to the most, for new professional employees. As can be seen in Table 6, training for the overwhelming majority of the skills was either none or a little. Specifically, training was available the least for "courtesy," followed by "flexibility," "responsibility," "work ethic," "integrity," "interpersonal skills," "positive attitude," "professionalism," "communication," and "team work."

Table 6

The Ranking of the Training Availability of Soft Skills for New Professional Employees, n = 113

Soft Skill	Mean*
Courtesy	1.57
Flexibility	1.65
Responsibility	1.67
Work Ethic	1.69
Integrity	1.69
Interpersonal Skills	1.79
Positive Attitude	1.81
Professionalism	1.89
Communication	2.29
Team Work	3.23

* 4 = a lot, 3 = some, 2 = a little, 1 = none

Experienced Professional Employees

The respondents reported the importance of the 10 soft skills pertaining to experienced professional employees by using the Human Resource Soft Skills Survey (HRSSS), using a 4-point Likert-type scaling: 4 = very important, 3 = important, 2 = somewhat important, and 1 = not important. The participants did not use “somewhat important” or “not important” for any of the skills and “important” was reported only once. The reliability coefficient for the 10-item questionnaire was .94. Results are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7

Frequency and Percentage Distributions of Importance of Soft Skills for Experienced Professional Employees, n = 113

Importance of Soft Skill	Response	F	%
Communication			
	Very Important	113	100.00
	Important	0	0
Courtesy			
	Very Important	113	100.00
	Important	0	0
Flexibility			
	Very Important	113	100.00
	Important	0	0
Integrity			
	Very Important	113	100.00
	Important	0	0
Interpersonal Skills			
	Very Important	112	99.10
	Important	1	.90
Positive Attitude			
	Very Important	113	100.00
	Important	0	0
Professionalism			
	Very Important	113	100.00
	Important	0	0
Responsibility			
	Very Important	113	100.00
	Important	0	0
Team Work			
	Very Important	113	100.00
	Important	0	0
Work Ethic			
	Very Important	113	100.00
	Important	0	0

The means of the respondents' responses were computed and used to rank the importance of the 10 soft skills. As can be seen Table 8, all were rated as "very important."

Table 8

The Ranking of the Importance of Soft Skills for Experienced Professional Employees, n = 113

Soft Skill	Mean*
Responsibility	4.00
Integrity	4.00
Work Ethic	4.00
Communication	4.00
Positive Attitude	4.00
Team Work	4.00
Courtesy	4.00
Professionalism	4.00
Flexibility	4.00
Interpersonal Skills	3.99

* 4 = very important, 3 = important, 2 = somewhat important, 1 = not important

The respondents reported the training availability of the 10 soft skills for experienced professional employees (4 = a lot, 3 = some, 2 = a little, 1 = none). The reliability coefficient for the 10-item questionnaire, as estimated by Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha, was .98, attesting to the internal consistency of the scale. With the exception of "team work," for which "some" was the mode, "none" or "a little" were the options reported the most for the other soft skills. Results are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9

Frequency and Percentage Distributions of Training Availability of Soft Skills for Experienced Professional Employees, n = 113

Training Availability	Response	F	%
Communication			
	None	55	48.70
	A little	26	23.00
	Some	19	16.80
	A lot	13	11.50
Courtesy			
	None	79	69.90
	A little	2	1.80
	Some	32	28.30
	A lot	0	0
Flexibility			
	None	79	69.90
	A little	2	1.80
	Some	32	28.30
	A lot	0	0
Integrity			
	None	80	70.80
	A little	2	1.80
	Some	31	27.40
	A lot	0	0
Interpersonal Skills			
	None	73	64.60
	A little	8	7.10
	Some	31	27.40
	A lot	1	.90
Positive Attitude			
	None	61	54.00
	A little	21	18.60
	Some	31	27.40
	A lot	0	0
Professionalism			
	None	61	54.00
	A little	20	17.70
	Some	32	28.30
	A lot	0	0

Table 9 (cont'd)

Training Availability	Response	F	%
Responsibility			
	None	80	70.80
	A little	2	1.80
	Some	31	27.40
	A lot	0	0
Team Work			
	None	14	12.40
	A little	29	25.70
	Some	42	37.20
	A lot	28	24.80
Work Ethic			
	None	74	65.50
	A little	7	6.20
	Some	32	28.30
	A lot	0	0

The means of the respondents' responses were used to rank the availability of the training for 10 soft skills from the least to the most. Results were similar to those found for new professional employees. The training opportunities were available the least for "integrity" and "responsibility," followed by "courtesy," "flexibility," "work ethic," "interpersonal skills," "positive attitude," "professionalism," "communication," and "team work." Results are summarized in Table 10.

Table 10

The Ranking of the Training Availability of Soft Skills for Experienced Professional Employees, n = 113

Soft Skill	Mean*
Integrity	1.57
Responsibility	1.57
Courtesy	1.58
Flexibility	1.58
Work Ethic	1.63
Interpersonal Skills	1.65
Positive Attitude	1.73
Professionalism	1.74
Communication	1.91
Team Work	2.74

* 4 = a lot, 3 = some, 2 = a little, 1 = none

Comparison of Importance and Training Availability of Soft Skills

The data were treated as ordinal in nature and a series of Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test was used to compare the importance and training availability of the soft skills for new professional employees. As can be seen on Table 11, all differences were statistically significant, showing that the availability of training for all soft skills was significantly lower than the level of importance. The effect sizes, as computed by z-to-r transformation, were all large.

Table 11

Comparison of Importance and Training Availability of Soft Skills for New Professional Employees, n = 113

Soft Skill	Importance Mean[a]	Training Availability Mean[b]	Z[c]	p	Effect Size[d]
Communication	3.87	2.29	8.21	<.01	.55
Courtesy	3.77	1.57	9.25	<.01	.62
Flexibility	3.73	1.65	9.24	<.01	.61
Integrity	3.93	1.69	9.35	<.01	.62
Interpersonal Skills	3.53	1.79	8.65	<.01	.58
Positive Attitude	3.81	1.81	9.27	<.01	.62
Professionalism	3.75	1.89	8.98	<.01	.60
Responsibility	4.00	1.67	9.43	<.01	.63
Team Work	3.78	3.23	5.52	<.01	.38
Work Ethic	3.92	1.69	9.39	<.01	.62

[a] Scaling: 4 = very important, 3 = important, 2 = somewhat important, 1 = not important
[b] Scaling: 4 = a lot, 3 = some, 2 = a little, 1 = none
[c] As calculated by the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test
[d] Effect size as computed by r, .1 = small, .3 = medium, .5 = large

The same statistical procedures were followed to compare the importance and training availability of soft skills for experienced professional employees. Findings were similar to those found for the new professional employees, suggesting the importance of the soft skills while indicating the lack of adequate training opportunities. Results are summarized in Table 12.

Table 12

Comparison of Importance and Training Availability of Soft Skills for Experienced Professional Employees, n = 113

Soft Skill	Importance Mean[a]	Training Availability Mean[b]	Z[c]	p	Effect Size[d]
Communication	4.00	1.91	8.89	<.01	.59
Courtesy	4.00	1.58	9.67	<.01	.64
Flexibility	4.00	1.58	9.67	<.01	.64
Integrity	4.00	1.57	9.68	<.01	.64
Interpersonal Skills	3.99	1.65	9.54	<.01	.63
Positive Attitude	4.00	1.73	9.44	<.01	.63
Professionalism	4.00	1.74	9.44	<.01	.63
Responsibility	4.00	1.57	9.68	<.01	.68
Team work	4.00	2.74	8.17	<.01	.54
Work Ethic	4.00	1.69	9.59	<.01	.64

[a] Scaling: 4 = very important, 3 = important, 2 = somewhat important, 1 = not important
[b] Scaling: 4 = a lot, 3 = some, 2 = a little, 1 = none
[c] As calculated by the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test
[d] Effect size as computed by r, .1 = small, .3 = medium, .5 = large

Qualitative Results

The qualitative component of the explanatory sequential mixed methods model (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) was utilized for the purpose of addressing the study's third research question (What are the perspectives of human resource specialists regarding the usefulness of soft skills in retaining professional employees?) and explaining the quantitative results in greater depth. The quantitative data were analyzed and the results were used to formulate the lead

questions for the focus group which was conducted to obtain the qualitative data. The lead questions were:

- What lacking soft skill is prevalent among new professional employees?
- What lacking soft skill is prevalent among experienced professional employees?
- Which of the 10 soft skills is most prevalent among new professional employees?
- Which of the 10 soft skills is most prevalent among experienced employees?
- Which of the 10 soft skills is the most difficult to train and/or develop? Why?
- What barriers, if any, have you encountered in training and developing new employees?
- What barriers, if any, have you encountered in training and developing professional employees?
- What changes, if any, would you like to see in higher education curriculum to assist in preparing and developing future professional employees?

Profile of Subjects

The focus group consisted of human resource professionals who agreed to share their perspectives regarding the usefulness of soft skills in retaining professional employees. There were six females and one male. Four were Hispanic and three were White.

Focus Group Process

The focus group was conducted in the afternoon of March 14, 2014, in the conference room of a human resource professional's company in Corpus Christi, TX. Prior to the interviews, the researcher provided a review of the research study and explained the 10 soft skills that were the focus of the discussion. The soft skills were the same ones which had been included in the quantitative component of the study. The participants signed a consent form, were assured of confidentiality, and were informed that they could withdraw from participating

at any given time. The researcher served as the moderator and encouraged open dialogue. The transcript of the focus group is in Appendix C.

The Coding Process

In order to analyze the qualitative data, the researcher utilized a three-step coding process which consisted of transcribing, analyzing, and clustering the data. The first step was to transcribe the focus group's responses. The next step was to read the transcribed text, analyze and, assign codes to the text. According to Saldana (2009), a code is a word or short phrase that assigns a summative attribute to certain language-based data. The final step was to look for codes similar in meaning and group them into broader categories to identify themes. Creswell (2007) stated that themes are clusters of meaning that form central ideas form the focus group responses. Table 13 shows the codes that were utilized to derive the themes.

Table 13

Codes for Human Resource Professional Qualitative Data

Code 1 Employee Deficiency
Code 2 Employee Plus
Code 3 Employee Contrast
Code 4 Employer Role

Focus Group Results

There were three themes that emerged from analyzing the qualitative data codes, namely, *Implicit* Learning, *Formalized Learning*, and *Continuum Learning*.

The first theme, *Implicit Learning*, was emerged as the researcher began to review the codes that were assigned to the human resource professionals' perspectives regarding the lack of

soft skills among both the new and professional employees. The theme was named *Implicit Learning*, because these skills could be acquired independent of conscious attempts via, for example, modeling, parenting, role playing, and observation (Smith, 2003). For new professional employees, "flexibility," "work ethic," "interpersonal skills," and "communication" were reported as the most prevalent deficiencies. Among experienced employees, the deficiencies that the focus group participants reported were "positive attitude," "flexibility," and "courtesy." For example, with respect to "interpersonal skills" and "communication," one respondent said ".... this is something that is taught in your early years, during your manner years." The respondent further elaborated "when you're taught about not interrupting someone, greetings, saying excuse me, that sort of stuff." Another example was the soft skill of "courtesy;" one participant said, "I don't recall having a training specifically titled, How to be Courteous." Theme 1 is summarized in Table 14.

Table 14

Human Resource Professionals' Perspectives, Theme 1: Acquisition Learning

Theme 1
Implicit Learning
Employee Deficiency
• "there is a need to be more flexible"
• "adapting to a new idea or environment is necessary"
• "work ethic is lacking….show up to work on a continual basis"
• "respect others, their property, and their opinions"
• "this is intrinsic"

As the researcher continued to analyze and review the data, the second theme, *Formalized Learning*, was emerged. It was apparent that there were some soft skills that could be learned through training, education, or experience. The theme was named *Formalized Learning*, because these skills may represent conscious learning that is facilitated through guided instruction (Smith, 2003). For example, "responsibility," "team work," and "courtesy" are the soft skills for which new professional employees can be trained. One respondent said, "I can count on them to take charge." For experienced professional employees, the focus group participants agreed that "integrity," "communication," "professional," "team work," and "flexibility" were the soft skills that they could have learned via various training and/or educational opportunities; for example, "I get a lot of yes ma'am, no ma'am…." Theme 2 is summarized in Table 15.

Table 15

Human Resource Professionals' Perspectives, Theme 2: Formalized Learning

Theme 2
Formalized Learning
Employee Attribute
• " they will see it through, I can count on them"
• "I get a lot of yes ma'am, no ma'am"
• "they work well in teams"
• "they know right from wrong"
• "communication….detailed and thorough documentation"

The third theme, *Continuum Learning*, was developed as the researcher finalized the data analysis and encountered some of the soft skills that were in both the *Implicit Learning* and *Formalized Learning* themes. The theme was named *Continuum Learning*, because the learning of these skills may take place in contrasting ways, requiring both *Implicit* and *Formalized Learning;* thus, the range of learning differs, existing between two different possibilities (Smith, 2003). For example, the soft skills of "communication" and "flexibility" were found to be deficient among new professional employees, but a plus among experienced professional employees. Theme 3 is summarized in Table 16.

Table 16

Human Resource Professionals' Perspectives, Theme 3: Continuum Learning

Theme 3		
Continuum Learning		
Soft Skill	Employee Deficiency	Employee Attribute
Flexibility	New Professional	Experienced Professional
Communication	New Professional	Experienced Professional
Courtesy	Experienced Professional	New Professional

Additionally, the qualitative data were analyzed to examine the employer's role in training and developing these soft skills, which was found to vary from company to company. Results showed that while some companies have in-house trainings, others may outsource the training needs. It was also found that the method of delivering the training differs. One focus group participant said, "..... some of the employees would need hands-on training or visual training, while others might need auditory and visual."

The analysis of the data showed that there were a few barriers, of which, technology and time were the most noteworthy ones. The lack of being computer savvy was a barrier for experienced professional employees. "Technology for our experienced employees has hindered our way of training them. We've had to have computer and email/text training for them so that we can include them in our other trainings." As for the time being a barrier, human resource professionals felt that there was not "enough time to train employees because they had work to do and the company needs to go on." "What we could take care of in a half a day of training has to be done in increments of 30 minutes."

Employers would like to be included in higher education curriculum; human resource professionals stated that the hard-to-train soft skills (i.e., courtesy, integrity, work ethic, and flexibility) must receive attention in appropriate courses at the college/university level. A focus group participant said, "I would like the university curriculum to include a mandatory course, one made a part of each college's degree plan, which would encompass courtesy, work ethic, integrity, and flexibility."

Summary of the Results

Quantitative results showed that the 10 soft skills were very important as perceived by both the new and experienced professionals; however, there was little to no training available for the overwhelming majority of the skills. Analysis of qualitative data resulted in three themes: *Implicit Learning, Formalized Learning,* and *Continuum Learning.*

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND DISCUSSION

Human resource has transformed from its initial inception of assisting immigrant employees' transition to the American way of life to the underlying foundation of a department that trains, develops, and retains qualified employees. Coupled with federal and state mandates, the human resource professionals' duties have proliferated, yet ever changing; thus, requiring an individual who is capable of managing all aspects of an employee, even after the selection process.

In a recent survey conducted by the Workforce Solution of the Coastal Bend (Workforce, 2013), companies responded to the need of training current and future employees on soft skills. On the basis of a critical review of the literature, the study focused on the soft skills of communication, courtesy, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, responsibility, team work, and work ethic, and the role they may play in retention of professional employees. A mixed methods inquiry was designed and conducted, which required the collection, analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of quantitative and qualitative data. The study was descriptive and exploratory in nature. No hypotheses were tested and no causal inferences were drawn. The external validity was limited to the study's participants due to non-probability nature of sampling. The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What is the level of importance of soft skills in retention of professional employees as perceived by employers?
2. What is the level of availability of soft skills for professional employees as perceived by employers?

3. What are the perspectives of the employers regarding the usefulness of soft skills in retaining professional employees?

Summary of the Results

The quantitative data were obtained from 113 human resource professionals who completed the Human Resource Soft Skills Survey (HRSSS). A typical participant was 45 years old with an average of 9.5 years of managerial experience. Nearly 71% of the participants were female, 66% Hispanic, and 60% had undergraduate degrees. Upper management roles defined the majority (80%) of the professional occupations; specifically, 25% were managers, 20% were directors, 20% were administrators, and 15% were coordinators.

In terms of the importance of soft skills for new and experienced employees, human resource professionals reported that the 10 soft skills, namely, 1) communication, 2) courtesy, 3) flexibility, 4) integrity, 5) interpersonal skills, 6) positive attitude, 7) professionalism, 8) responsibility, 9) team work, and 10) work ethic, were very important. However, the level of training availability for these skills was little to none. Non-parametric examination of the differences between the importance and training availability responses were all statistically significant and effect sizes were large.

The qualitative data were obtained from a focus group of human resource professionals (n = 7) to document their perspectives regarding the usefulness of soft skills in retaining professional employees. Analysis of the data resulted in three themes*: Implicit Learning, Formalized Learning,* and *Continuum Learning.*

Conclusions

Based on the quantitative results, it was concluded that for new and experienced professional employees, “responsibility” is the most important soft skill, followed by “integrity”

and “work ethic.” For both new and professional employees, it was concluded that other than “team work,” training availability is none or a little for the soft skills which were investigated in this study. Based on the qualitative data, it was concluded that although there are skills that do not necessarily require formal training as they are learned during the formative years of individuals (e.g., courtesy), there are some which benefit from training and development (team work), and that there are soft skills which fall in both categories (e.g., interpersonal skills).

Discussion

Businesses are searching for solutions in addressing the lack of soft skills in their current work force. They are turning to non-profit organizations, schools, and colleges to assist them in addressing their needs. Businesses throughout the South Texas’ Coastal Bend responded to a 2011 survey in which they were asked to report the trainings that would be needed for their employees. The overwhelming response was soft skills. As a result, in 2011, the Workforce Solutions of the Coastal Bend, in conjunction with Del Mar Junior College, conducted a 4-day Career Ready Workforce Certification training program. This partnership with higher education institution allows for graduates to receive 2.2 hours of Continuing Education Credit (CE). As of 2014, the program had graduated approximately 2000 students (Workforce Solutions of the Coastal Bend, 2014). The program received the Service to Business Texas Workforce Commission 2012 award. In addition, the Workforce Solution partnered with superintendent of the year, Dr. Arturo Almendarez, of the Calallen Independent School District, to deliver the Career Ready Workforce Certification to prepare students for the world of work. In 2012, the Workforce Solution of the Coastal Bend received the GOLD award from the Texas Association of Partners in Education Community Partnership (Workforce Solutions of the Coastal Bend, 2014).

Qualitative results from the focus group of human resource professionals demonstrated the need for training and developing employees. The employers' responses indicated that they would like their input to be included during the course creation and/or application of the higher education curriculum. Human resource professionals stated that the hard-to-train soft skills (i.e., courtesy, integrity, work ethic, and flexibility) must receive attention in appropriate courses at the college/university level. A focus group participant said, "I would like the university curriculum to include a mandatory course, one made a part of each college's degree plan, which would encompass courtesy, work ethic, integrity, and flexibility."

The study was based on Kurt Lewin's Three Step Change Model (i.e., unfreeze, transition, and freeze), who is regarded as the father of human relations. The soft skills examined in this study may be attributed to two factors, 1) the individualized personal characteristics, and 2) the social situation and/or environment in which an individual has gained some experience. Therefore, it is important to realize that if training opportunities are created to address the missing or inadequate soft skills, the dismantling of the current mind set (unfreeze) is needed which can be addressed by providing a suitable training for the given soft skill, followed by encouraging the participants to be actively involved in the planning and execution of the potential solutions. After the participants have realized that there is a lacking soft skill and a possible solution has been obtained, the facilitator must assist in developing new behaviors, applying solutions, and transitioning attitudes towards the fulfilment of resolving the problem. The final step, freeze, brings the participants to the acceptance that the new solution in dealing with the lacking soft skill will allow them to successfully perform their job duties; thus, creating an effective employment experience with little to no friction with other employees.

Implications

The study was conducted because there was a need to explore the usefulness of soft skills in order to retain professional employees. Literature suggests that these soft skills are necessary in order to establish successful employment with any hiring organization; however, the training for these soft skills was a requirement in order to develop the employees who lack the soft skills. The approach to training or developing these soft skills differs from organization to organization. Locally, the initiatives by Del Mar College, Workforce Solutions of the Coastal Bend, and Calallen High School have taken the necessary steps in addressing the soft skills for students and future employees.

The study results showed that there is little to no training for the 10 important soft skills. Therefore, training and development specialist must develop and implement educational interventions tailored at addressing each of these soft skills. Although human resource professionals can facilitate these trainings via video and power point presentations, the researcher suggests that audience participation, role playing, and including interactive training sessions used to model the desired behavior of these soft skills can be instrumental in enhancing the mastery of the skills.

Recommendations for Further Research

The study's limitations offer opportunities for further research: 1) the study was delimited to soft skills of communication, courtesy, flexibility, integrity, interpersonal skills, positive attitude, professionalism, responsibility, team work, and work ethic; 2) the outcome measures of importance and availability of the soft skills; and professional employees; 3) due to non-probability nature of sampling, external validity was limited to study participants; 4) due to non-experimental nature of the study, no causal inferences were drawn.

In order to enhance the results of the study, the researcher recommends: 1) the replication of the study in other geographical areas of Texas in particular and the nation in general; 2) the replication of the study with other professionals; 3) the inclusion of other soft skills; 4) conducting qualitative studies to document the perspectives of the new and experienced professional employees regarding the utility of the soft skills; and 5) obtaining quantitative and qualitative data from university and college personnel who teach/create curriculum which include these soft skills to better understand the role higher education can play regarding this matter.

Final Remarks

The study examined the utilization of soft skills in retention of professionals. Results showed that the soft skills were very important in the retention of both the new and experienced employees. The study also showed that there was very little to no training available to develop the employees who lacked the soft skills. The researcher suggested methods which can be included in training sessions in an attempt to assist with the mastery of the soft skills. A qualified human resource professional can create and facilitate these trainings. While the focus group participants urged university personnel to provide assistance in addressing these skills, every human resource department, whether in-house or outsourced, has the capability to tailor and facilitate trainings for its employees. Higher education institutions have provided the core curriculum for students' future employment and may need to modify the curriculum to include pertinent skills which recent graduating students may be lacking.

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APPENDIX A

HUMAN RESOURCE SOFT SKILLS SURVEY

You are kindly invited to participate in an online survey and provide the data that will be used to complete a doctoral dissertation study entitled, the Utilization of Training Methods in Retention of Professional Employees.

Please read the following. If there are any questions, you may contact the principal investigator, Fernando Cortez, at 361-290-3386 or email him at cortezf04@yahoo.com.

Description: I understand that the purpose of the study is to document the importance and availability of soft skills which may be instrumental in the retention of new and experienced professional employees.

Confidentiality: I understand that the identity of the respondents and individual responses will remain confidential. If the results are published or presented at a professional meeting, the identity of the participants will not be disclosed.

Compensation: I understand that the participation in the study will not cost anything and that I will not receive any money for my participation.

Risks and Benefits: I understand that completing the survey bears no risk and does not benefit me directly; however, my participation may benefit future human resource professionals.

Right to withdraw: I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and stop participating in the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits for which I am entitled.

Voluntary Consent: I certify that I have been informed about the study's purpose, procedures, possible risks, and benefits. Additionally, I know that if I have any questions about my rights as a research participant, I can contact Erin Sherman, Compliance Officer, at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, at 361-825-2497.

By completing this survey, I voluntarily agree to participate in the study and I am authorizing the use of my responses for research purposes. Completing the survey serves as an electronic signature.

PART I:

Pertaining to **NEW** PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES, please indicate the level of importance of the following soft skills:

	1= Not Important	2= Somewhat	3= Important	4= Very Important
Communication	○	○	○	○
Courtesy	○	○	○	○
Flexibility	○	○	○	○
Integrity	○	○	○	○
Interpersonal Skills	○	○	○	○
Positive Attitude	○	○	○	○
Professionalism	○	○	○	○
Responsibility	○	○	○	○
Teamwork	○	○	○	○
Work ethic	○	○	○	○

Pertaining to **NEW** PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES, please indicate the level of training availability for each of the following soft skills:

	1= None	2= A little	3= Some	4= A lot
Communication				
Courtesy				
Flexibility				
Integrity				
Interpersonal Skills				
Positive Attitude				
Professionalism				
Responsibility				
Teamwork				
Work ethic				

PART II: Pertaining to **EXPERIENCED** PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES, please indicate the level of importance of the following soft skills:

	1= Not Important	2= Somewhat	3= Important	4= Very Important
Communication				
Courtesy				
Flexibility				
Integrity				
Interpersonal Skills				
Positive Attitude				
Professionalism				
Responsibility				
Teamwork				
Work ethic				

Pertaining to **EXPERIENCED** PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES, please indicate the level of training availability for each of the following soft skills:

	1= None	2= A little	3= Some	4= A lot
Communication				
Courtesy				
Flexibility				
Integrity				
Interpersonal Skills				
Positive Attitude				
Professionalism				
Responsibility				
Teamwork				
Work ethic				

PART III: Demographic Data

What is the total number of new professional employees in your organization?

What is the total number of experienced professional employees in your organization?

In the scale of zero to 10, how successful has your organization been in recruiting new professional employees?

In the scale of zero to 10, how successful has your organization been in retaining new professional employees?

Which of the following most accurately describes your occupation within your organization?

- Director
- Manager
- Coordinator
- Administrator
- Generalist
- Administrative Assistant

How many years of managerial experience do you have?

How many years have you been in your current position?

What is your age?

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

What is your ethnicity?

- Hispanic or Latino
- White, Non-Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Asian
- Other

What is your highest level of education completed?

- High School/GED
- Associate
- Bachelor
- Master
- Doctorate

Would you be interested in participating in a focus group? If yes, please include email in your response.

APPENDIX B

Date: _____/_____/_____

Dear HR professional,

I, **Fernando Cortez**, am currently a Doctoral Candidate in the Educational Leadership program at Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi. For my dissertation research, I am investigating the utilization of training methods in retention of professional employees at the Coastal Bend region of Texas.

You are invited to participate in a focus group which will be conducted to collect qualitative data that will be used to complement the study's quantitative results. The focus group will be audio-taped and later transcribed by me. Only I and my faculty advisor will have access to the audio-tapes, which will be kept in a secure place and destroyed after the transcripts are analyzed. Your highly appreciated participation is entirely voluntary. All individual responses will remain confidential**.** If the results are published or presented at scientific meetings, identity of the participants will not be disclosed. There is no risk to participants in the study. Your participation will not cost you anything and you will not receive any money for your participation. You are free to withdraw your consent and stop participating in the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits for which you may be entitled.

Voluntary Consent: I certify that I have been informed about the study's purpose, procedures, possible risks and benefits; that I have been given the opportunity to ask questions before I sign; and that I can ask questions at any other time. Fernando Cortez may be contacted at cortezf04@yahoo.com (361.290.3386). Additionally, I know that if I have any questions about my rights as a research participant, I can contact Erin Sherman, Compliance Officer, at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi at 361.825.2497. I have received a copy of this form, and by signing it, I voluntarily agree to participate in the focus group.

I agree to be audio-taped. _____

I do not agree to be audio-taped. _____

_____

Signature of the Participant Date

_____

Printed Name of the Participant

_____

Signature of Principal Investigator Date

_____

Printed Name of Principal Investigator

APPENDIX C

Focus Group Transcript

Researcher	Respondent
First of all, I would like to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in this focus group. Today, we are meeting with seven human resource professionals who agreed to share their perspectives regarding the usefulness of soft skills in retaining professional employees. There are six females and one male. Four are Hispanic and three are White. The first question I'd like to ask is what lacking soft skill is prevalent among new professional employees?	
	I'll go first. I've been in this business for over 16 years and I have seen that there is a need for being more flexible. It seems to me that new employees tend to stick with a structured way of thinking, which is not a bad thing, but when they are asked to try some new approach in performance monitoring, for example, they most of the time seem to be hesitant and don't really want to try something new. Part of adapting to a new idea or environment is necessary in this profession as you are well aware of. They need to adapt to the changes that every business days may bring. Another example is I might ask some of them to stay a little longer than normal hours, they will be compensated for this, and still I don't have the 100% effort while they working for me. So I

	would say that this is a major soft skill that would need improvement.
	I would agree with you------ because I have had several new employees who don't like change in their department and have referred to their initial job description, that it didn't contain this when they were hired. All it takes is for me to refer to the phrase in all job descriptions that states "and other duties as assigned" and that seems to bring some flexibility out of them. But I would also have to add to another skill that I have noticed. I would say that work ethic is lacking, due to them missing out on work a lot. I was reading your definitions and I felt that this fell under a moral principle that exert strength or in this case the lack of strength to show up to work on a continual basis.
	You're right and I'm glad you mentioned that because I think most of these new employees....this is their first real job, not just a part-time where you do your time, but where you actually have to be a part of the company in order to make it work.
	I'd like to say that I have seen the inability to get along with others, the cohesiveness that I had when I first started my profession, is just not there for some of these employees.
	I would agree with what you guys have said and I would say that new employees come with knowledge based or textbook savvy information but don't really have the communication skills. What I am referring to is they don't have the verbal ability to share their thoughts, concerns, dislikes, what's working or what's not working. I want to speculate and say this is probably cuz they are the new guys and don't want to create waves

	or just want to get the job done without any friction. I always encourage them to tell me what can be improved on or what's working because they are typically the outsiders looking in and they don't really have an attachment to any program or method that we are using in our department.
Does anyone have anything else they'd like to add? Ok lets move on to the next question. What about experienced professional employees? What lacking soft skill is prevalent among them?	
	Positive attitude. The more senior employees tend to know everything and you really can't teach them anything new. They become negative at new ideas and tend to carry a grudge until they get heard or unless they have a reason to buy into new ideas. Maybe flexibility too, because they don't adapt well. I hear this all the time "I've always done it this way and it's never failed me".
	I don't see stubbornness in this list.
	Couldn't you add courtesy to your experience? It sounds like there is a fine line connecting positive attitude with courtesy.
Would you care to further elaborate on it?	
	Sure. We are talking about employees who are experienced and are generally older, career minded, and on a one track mind. A response from an employee could be perceived as either positive or negative. If a negative response is given, it usually follows

	an explanation or some experience which justifies why he or she doesn't think it will work. During their explanation, the perception of being discourteous, not respecting each other's view point, is evident. So I think that these are intertwined, in my opinion.
	I would say that they are usually grouchy and are not really pleasant to be around when we are trying innovative ideas. So they certainly lack being positive.
	I don't see any of these soft skills that experienced employees lack.
Any other comments? Ok, going back to new professional employees, which soft skill is most prevalent?	
	Responsibility. I know I can count on them to take charge of a department or assignment and they will see it through. They have this drive to do things well and know that they are entrusted and accountable for completing the assignment.
	I get a lot of yes ma'am, no ma'am from new employees. Even though I ask my employees to call me by my first name, they will add Ms. to it. They are definitely very courteous.
	Exactly. I get that too.
	I don't know if it is to their youthfulness or competitive nature, but I see them working well in teams and are usually the ones that can help another new employee out.

	I would have to agree with what has been said but most of all I see them being more courteous than older employees.
Does anyone have anything else they'd like to add? Ok. What about experienced employees? Which soft skill is most prevalent?	
	Hands down. Integrity. They know right from wrong, stick to their moral values and will let you know if and when you are doing something that is wrong or that offends them in anyway.
	Yes you're right. But they also have great communication and work ethic. This communication comes in handy when it comes to documentation of employees in the department. I can always count on my senior employees to have a thorough documentation of an incident or occurrence with detail and analysis in written form. Also their work ethic is what I wish new all employees had. I don't have to worry about them calling in on Fridays or Mondays or taking extended lunch breaks or even running late every other morning.
	I want to say that all of these skills are found in experienced employees. It just depends in which department or position they work in that shows their stronger skill. For example I have two senior employees. One works in an office and one works in the shop. Both are in management, just in different environments. My director of technology exemplifies communication and professionalism to his department. I'm not saying he's lacking the

	other skills, it's just that these are the most evident. While my senior shop manager exemplifies team work and flexibility. It seems like there is always something breaking down in the shop and without hesitation----- is on it while adhering to his employees and encouraging them to help each other out.
	This is a tough question because they all seem to be prevalent in my encounter with experienced professional. I would say though that communication is definitely up there because they will no qualms in expressing their ideas of improvement or how they are feeling about the change or direction of the company.
	I agree.
	Definitely communication.
Any other comments? Ok. Now comes the training part. Pertaining to training, which soft skill is the most difficult to train and/or develop. Why?	
	In all my years in human resource, I've never seen courtesy training, by itself. I have seen it used inside other trainings and referred to as respect, but this is usually a policy based rule in the employee handbook. Respect others, their property, and their opinion. I would imagine that this would be the hardest to train or develop because this is something that is taught in your early years, during the manner years, I call it. You know, when you're taught about not interrupting someone, greetings, saying excuse me, that sort of stuff.

	As far as training is concerned, we have chosen a contract out source training for now. But when we did in house training, I felt this specific training would be difficult to develop.
	Just to reiterate, I too haven't had a training specifically titled, "How to be courteous" But closely related to having a difficult training is that of work ethic. I think this is an intrinsic principle that one has and it can be refined, but through experiences that change the undesired outcome. So I personally would find it hard to develop employees who needed this type of training.
	Don't you think that work ethic is pretty close to integrity? I know integrity deals with values while work ethic deals with principle, but both have moral guidance.
	Yes, both are moral, yet intrinsic. That's why I mentioned that it wouldn't be easy to target these because this is something that is learned from early years, based on previous experiences and over all life and upbringing.
	You guys are right. The other soft skills are not that difficult to train. Although you may have to use pictures, role play, and audience participation to get your point across, I do think that those mentioned before would be extremely difficult to develop in employees.
Does anyone have anything else they'd like to add? Ok. The next question is what barriers, if any, have you encountered with training new or experienced employees?	

	I wouldn't say that it is a barrier, but could be for many trainers, but what I am talking about is finding out what are their best learning styles so that they can grasp what is being trained better. Some of the employees, for example shop employees, would need more of a hands-on training or visual training, while other employees might need auditory and visual. The one thing that comes to mind with more experienced employees is having them use technology; email, iPad, voicemail, and text, because this is something they did not have during their younger profession, while the new employees who have just graduated high school or college have this down pact.
	For the most part, the training department does very well in reaching most of the needs of the company. The one barrier that our company has come across is not having the up to date courses or training videos that are applicable in today's era. Our new employee orientation video is so old that you can tell by the way they are dressed, 70s type. I've ordered new training videos but they don't seem to have the simple do and don'ts of the workplace.
	I agree with-------. Technology for our experienced employees has hindered our way of training them. We've had to have computer and email, text training for them so that we can include them with our other trainings. But once they get this training, it's no longer a barrier, just an additional training for them prior to them being exposed to other future trainings. So what we have done is have all employees attend basic computer training and then work with those who need additional assistance.

	All these soft skills are not easy to train. Some, like was mentioned before, are hard to train or develop in new or experienced employees. The one barrier that comes to my, since I am the one who directs our training for the company, is time. We don't have enough time to train them and develop them because they have work to do and the company needs to go on. I think this time constraint is the most problem. What we could take care of in half a day of training has to be done in increments of 30 minutes. So for a trainer, he or she would have to have at least eight trainings throughout the month in order to train for one topic. So the lack of time doesn't allow us to fully train them in the manner that would allow the employee to learn and make it stick
	A lot of them feel that trainings waste their time and keep them from doing their work. But I do think that time is barrier in training.
	Someone mentioned the need for updated training videos, I believe it was you. In today's age of technology which is ever changing, I find it hard to believe that there aren't many reputable training companies that provide these up to date training videos. Yes the information is up to date, but the over-all content of these videos doesn't fair well with our employees.
Does anyone have anything else they'd like to add?	
	I have one more thing that I'd like to add before we move on to your next question. It's in reference to the younger employees. I find the lack of motivation to attend and participate in trainings sessions usually comes from them. My guess would be that they are

	new college graduate so they know everything and don't need training just yet. So I would say that this is a barrier that I've seen throughout my years in this profession.
	I agree with you.
	Me too.
	I'm glad you said that. You know I didn't think that was a barrier, just thought it was an individual thing, since we don't have very many new employees. But now, I see that the lack of motivation in the new employees that I have had in the past, I did notice their participation in all my trainings, most of them did not think that they needed it. The one new employee we just hired this past year, she did not sign up for the trainings even though they were mandatory. We give employees the option to attend mandatory trainings either in the morning or afternoon. I had noticed she hadn't signed up for either session. I asked her when she planned on attending, she replied "I already know it, do I still have to attend"? She attended the training but was only there physically….she lacked interest.
Does anyone have anything else they'd like to add? Ok. This is the last question. What changes, if any, would you like to see in higher education curriculum to assist in preparing and developing future professional employees?	
	I don't recall ever having a course on how to act or get along at work. I do recall an ethics course, but nothing that dealt with different personalities, and what employers are looking for in and expecting from new employees. I

	would like university curriculum to include a mandatory course, one made a part of each college's degree plan, which would include the trainings that are harder for us employers to develop or teach. A course that would encompass courtesy, work ethic, integrity, and flexibility.
	Maybe these courses could be offered to first year students.
	You know that other professions have staff development, professional development, and continue education credit units for licensure or certification. Why not have these courses available on a quarterly basis so that companies can send their employees?
	I think universities do a great job in preparing our employees with textbook knowledge. I don't know if they can provide the training that is pretty learned from their experiences, whether positive or negative, and time is the only factor that can help. I would most certainly encourage them to create a course, or if there is a course in place, to include these most difficult soft skills. This will help our businesses to focus on company related trainings, such as policies and procedures, strategy, and structural reorganization.
What difficult soft skills?	
	The soft skills that were mentioned earlier. Courtesy, integrity, work ethic.
	And flexibility.
Any other comments?	

	I agree with what has been said. If colleges or universities don't have a course, create one and help us.
Does anyone else have anything else they'd like to add? I'd like to thank, once again, for participating in this focus group and for sharing your thoughts and perspectives regarding the usefulness of soft skills in retaining professional employees.	