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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON THE NEEDED EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN POST-PANDEMIC

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Abstract:

A problem of skill mismatch has long been a global issue. The same is true for an emerging market like Cambodia where a large number of youths enter the job market every year. This study aims to investigate the most important employability skills in post pandemic viewed by students, employees and employers. The study also explores the needed skills at private, public and non-profit sectors, and the preparation of students on those competencies for making a comparison and synthesis. To fulfil the earlier objectives, the study applies survey questionnaires and in-depth interviews with 109 participants and 6 interviewees respectively. The findings demonstrate that Being professionally ethical, Being committed to work, and Technology Use are the three main employability skills demanded in the market. However, specific institutions may prefer other skills according to the nature of their work. The study also demonstrates that students possess a few limitations, namely Adaptability to change, Communication, Commitment to work and Advanced digital skills. These weaknesses would be a key message to students and other stakeholders to reconceptualize their current practice to fulfil the gaps.

Key words: *employability skills, soft skills, employment, undergraduate, COVID-19*

1. Introduction

The discrepancy between the employment and labor force has been an extensive debate (Chamorro & Frankiewicz, 2019; Nesaratnam et al., 2018; Succi & Canovi, 2020). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data in 2020, there is a significant increase of young people in the workforce every year that almost 70% of graduates are in the age between 25 to 34 in Korea, 50% in America and more than 45% in OECD states (OECD, 2021). The number of young labors is even greater in Cambodia in which every one of six Cambodian is in between 15 to 24 years old, and more than 25% of the population is in between 15-29, making the kingdom one of the largest young populations in Southeast Asia (MoP, 2019a). Education wise, student enrolling in Cambodia's higher education surges in the post war period rising from approximately 30,000 in 2005 to 255,791 students in 2012-2013 academic year (Un & Sok, 2019). While the number keeps growing, the job recruitment is far behind the labor force. In a similar context, fresh graduates represents for 23% of the total youth unemployment in Malaysia (Nesaratnam et al., 2018). In the national survey in 2019, unemployed young

labor forces in Cambodia from 15-29 years old were reported to be 58,764 accounted for 60% of the total unemployment (MoP, 2019b). Surprisingly, this shortage usually happens within highly-educated people that Sam (2017) termed it as education mismatch. Chamorro and Frankiewicz (2019) explains that unemployment exists because many university students lack soft skills while a degree alone would not impress recruiters. Even so, universities and education institutions argue that their curriculum has been continuously tailored to match the job market (Succi & Canovi, 2020). Thus, it is in dire need to comprehend what the needed skills are for employment.

As shown in many studies, the investigation of employability skills is found to be an interesting topic, particularly in business sector. Many have studied this, inter alia, in Italy, Germany, the UK and Malaysia (Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Nesaratnam et al., 2018; Succi & Canovi, 2020; Van Laar et al., 2017), albeit a dearth of study is done in Cambodia. What makes this topic even more prudent in the meantime is the outbreak of the world pandemic when all business activities are halted, and skills and competencies for employability are shifted along (Kelly et al., 2022; World Economic Forum, 2020). This study aims to provide an empirical study exploring what the needed skills are, the similarities and differences of working skills across sectors, and how well students have prepared for that employment, particularly in post-pandemic.

In the following part, the paper begins with the review of relevant literature on employability skills. It is followed by the presentation of methodology, findings, and discussions. The findings are separated into different sections including the result of needed skills from the survey and interviews with participants in different sectors. Finally, the article ends with conclusions and limitations.

2. Literature Review

a. The Working Situation during the Pandemic

Starting in Wuhan, China in late 2018, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has made an abrupt change to all activities ranging from education to work routine. To minimize the contraction, employees and students alike began to work and study from home; virtual communication was made more crucial for all, and digital skills became paramount. Although working from home (WFH) has become an alternative solution dealing with the outbreak of the virus, only a few roles would be able to work remotely. These people were mostly the management team, professionals or those working with finance, whose tasks were allowed to be completed virtually. Bloom (2020) reported further that this group of staff could even upgrade their skills and earn more income during online work. Notwithstanding, another group was required to work on-site regardless of the widespread of the virus. These employees were mostly working in retails, health care, transportation, or business services that required to fulfil the tasks in person.

While WFH is an immediate countermeasure for job during the pandemic, such a practice is possible to be imposed in a longer period. Previously, working onsite allowed employees to interact and help each other once they encountered problems. As the situation changes, when anyone has any issues during working online, he or she has no

one else to support immediately. Employees are reluctant to communicate virtually as they do not know what could be the right time to contact others (Roberts, 2020). In addition, WFH creates more chances of being in isolation, loneliness, tiredness and stress, which pressured employees to a great extent (Bloom, 2020; Roberts, 2020). The issue is now critical when a study has found that mental health and physical loads affected women employees in India (Sharma & Vaish, 2020), suggesting practice of new skills such as mindfulness and stress-control at home.

b. Employability Skills

While hard skill is already a need, it is yet to determine the success at work. This has been proved by Succi and Canovi (2020) who explored on soft skills for employability. In the first phase, Succi (2019) conceptualized twenty key soft skills and tested them with employers. The author found that soft skill was the primary part of the recruitment agenda of most Human Resource (HR) managers, mainly on *teamwork, communication, results orientation* and *learning skills*. Once the instrument was validated, it was adopted again in a larger scale with students, fresh graduates and other group employers in Italy and Germany. The study again revealed the same previous skills and *Being Committed to work* as the most important soft skills to enhance graduate employability. These findings are congruent with what Jackson (2013) has found within business undergraduate students' perception. It is also supported by Archer and Davison (2008)'s work, who surveyed 233 employers and found that good interaction skills (soft skills) were even more vital than most degree and technical skills. Unfortunately, employers were unsatisfied with the fresh graduates, as students commonly lacked earlier capabilities.

Succi and Canovi (2020) reported further that *Life balance skills, Leadership skills* and *Management skills* were not prioritized by managers and students, supported by Jackson and Chapman (2012)'s take. The piror authors also report that students/graduates perceived a few items of personal and social skills to be less important than employers. To be precise, the latter group emphasized more on personal skills such as *Being professionally ethical, Adaptability to change, Creativity and innovation, Customer/user orientation* and *Teamwork*, whereas students stressed the importance more on *Contact network and Conflict management skills*, reflecting the misunderstanding between the two groups.

Different from the early work, Jackson and Chapman (2012) conducted another empirical study with academics in Australia. Sixteen factors were used as indicators for employability assessment. The highest value were found on *Problem Solving, Decision management, Business principle* (Since the study was made in a business context) and *Critical thinking skills*, respectively. Meanwhile, the lowest skills determined by those scholars include *Self-discipline, Environmental awareness* and *Work ethic*. When the same scale was conducted with the educators in the UK, it did show similar result in which the highest factors were found in the earlier two top skills along with a new competency of *Working with others*.

By taking other factors into account, Jackson (2013), in the following year, examined skill development provided in business undergraduate program and found that

self-awareness was placed to be more important, particularly from students whose English was not their first language. *Developing initiatives* and *enterprise* were rated less important by these international students from Asia as well. Further examination of the data showed that international students, particularly those from Asia, and Africa, placed more value on *self-awareness* than Australian students.

c. 21st Century Skills

Similar to studies cited above, employability skills are also discussed as "21st century skills", especially in the educational context. According to Voogt and Roblin (2012), these twenty-first century skills consist of *Collaboration, Communication, Digital literacy, Citizenship, Problem solving, Critical thinking, Creativity* and *Productivity*. Van Laar *et al.* (2017) further developed this framework and identified seven digital skills and five contextual skills which are mostly similar to the earlier works. The authors suggested that there were limited empirical studies tested these frameworks, especially on soft or non-technical skills due to the difficulty to measure (Van Laar et al., 2017).

Added on the early work, Kelly, Moore and Lyons (2022) argue for school restructuring on the current assessment to enhance students' employability that revolves around three main skills: *problem solving, creativity* and *critical thinking*. The authors emphasized the necessity of these competencies that students have to possess mainly amidst the change of working environment made by COVID-19. This authors' take also go in line with the prediction of the World Economic Forum (2020) as the most needed skills in the future. However, another comparative study on employability skills in private and public sectors found that there was no significant difference between the two entities except the prior sector focused more on two soft skills- *self-responsibility* and *interpersonal skills* (Reddy et al., 2020). Even though the result informed so, industries had changed most of their daily practices during pandemic, and many job had lost in lower-skill roles such as those workers in retail, tourism, and hospitality (Kelly et al., 2022). Another forecast has also been made that employment in entertainment and recreation sector will be much displaced by technology while it will be less affected in insurance, finance and public sector (World Economic Forum, 2020).

It could be concluded that the early studies in different contexts have reported various results on the needed skills for employment inferring the need for further study in a specific context and time. Also, previous studies explored based merely on a quantitative approach, while leaving other approaches behind, particularly qualitative methods such as interviews. Thus, this study aims to examine the employability skills in different sectors, especially in post-pandemic period, to fulfil the early methodological and literary gaps.

3. Methodology

This study adopts mixed methods for data collection. Initially, judgmental sampling is used to select six participants (denoted as P1-P6) from different institutions to partake in the semi-structured interview. This includes representatives from private sector, non-profit sector (non-governmental/social solidarity economy organization-NGO/SSE), and public

sector (government). Then, two other students are also selected to be part of the interview to explore in-depth on their preparation for employment in post-pandemic. For quantitative design, the study applies online survey questionnaires by sending to students, employees, employers at different institutions in Cambodia through convenient sampling. Participants are asked to provide their perception on the importance and evaluate their current employability skills. The result from the survey then is used to indicate the most and least important skills at work and comparison across sectors. The instrument is adapted from *Employability Framework* developed by Succi and Canovi (2020); Jackson (2012); Laar et al. (2017), and piloted with four volunteers to ensure its validity. After that, data received from respondents is inserted into statistical software SPSS-v26 for further analysis.

4. Findings

a. The Importance of Employability Skills

Table 1 demonstrates descriptive statistics of employability skills in descending order. Each participant was asked to evaluate on a five-point Likert scale (1 Not Important-5 Very Important) on the necessity of employability skills selected from previous literature. The result shows that all attributes received a higher mean score than the theoretical mean (*M*=3) showing the agreement on the importance of these skills. *Being Committed to Work* received the highest mean score (*M*=4.40), followed by *Being Professionally Ethical* (*M*=4.37), and *Technology Use* (*M*=4.33), indicating that professionalism and working ethic are the core components for employees in fulfilling their career.

Table 1. The importance of employability skills evaluated by participants

Attributes	*n*	Mean	*SD*
Being Committed to Work	107	4.40	0.889
Being Professionally Ethical	109	4.37	0.835
Technology Use	105	4.33	0.873
Communication Skills	108	4.3	0.92
Critical Thinking Skills	107	4.26	0.872
Team-Work Skills	106	4.24	0.9
Self-Awareness Skills	109	4.22	0.886

Continuous Improvement Skills	109	4.21	0.893
Management Skills	108	4.13	0.897
Being Tolerant to Stress	103	4.12	1.041
Creativity/Innovation Skills	108	4.12	0.817
Conflict Management & Negotiation Skills	109	4.12	0.95
Cultural Adaptability Skills	107	4.12	0.949
Decision Making Skills	107	4.12	0.929
Learning Skills	105	4.11	0.913
Life Balance Skills	109	4.10	0.871
Contact Network Skills	107	4.10	0.941
Leadership Skills	107	4.07	0.904
Information Management	108	4.0	0.886
Analysis Skills	109	3.96	0.892
Adaptability to Change Skills	107	3.93	0.959
Customer/User Orientation Skills	107	3.91	0.875
Results Orientation Skills	109	3.83	1.067
Numeracy	107	3.69	0.905

Table 2. The importance of employability skills divided by sectors

Attributes	University Students			Private Sector			Public Sector			Non-profit Sector		
	Mean	*n*	*SD*	Mean	*n*	*SD*	Mean	*n*	*SD*	Mean	*n*	*SD*
Personal Skills												
Being Committed to Work	4.4*	63	0.96	4.32*	25	0.95	4.64*	11	0.51	4.29	7	0.49
Being Professionally Ethical	4.43*	65	0.88	4.24	25	0.93	4.27	11	0.47	4.29	7	0.49
Being Tolerant to Stress	4.13	61	1.09	4.13	23	0.92	3.73	11	1.10	4.43	7	0.98
Creativity/Innovation Skills	4.02	64	0.86	4.12	25	0.78	4.36	11	0.67	4.71*	7	0.49
Learning Skills	4.05	65	0.99	4.04	23	0.77	4.55*	11	0.82	4.4	5	0.55
Life Balance Skills	4.05	65	0.86	4.16	25	0.99	4.36	11	0.81	4	7	0.82

Self-Awareness Skills	4.18	65	0.92	4.2	25	1.00	4.27	11	0.65	4.57	7	0.54
Social Skills												
Communication Skills	4.3	64	0.92	4.2	25	1.04	4.18	11	0.75	5*	7	0.00
Conflict Management & Negotiation Skills	4.09	65	1.00	4.12	25	1.05	3.91	11	0.54	4.71*	7	0.49
Contact Network Skills	4.13	63	0.92	3.88	25	1.05	4.18	11	0.87	4.71*	7	0.49
Cultural Adaptability Skills	4.02	63	0.98	4.16	25	0.94	4.55*	11	0.69	4.43	7	0.98
Leadership Skills	3.97	63	0.95	4.12	25	0.93	4.36	11	0.81	4.29	7	0.49
Team-Work Skills	4.14	63	0.95	4.4*	25	0.96	4.2	10	0.63	4.57	7	0.54
Methodological Skills												
Adaptability to Change Skills	3.77	65	1.00	4	25	0.91	4.36	11	0.81	4.4	5	0.55
Analysis Skills	3.89	65	0.89	3.88	25	0.97	4.09	11	0.83	4.71*	7	0.49
Continuous Improvement Skills	4.17	65	0.91	4.2	25	0.91	4.18	11	0.98	4.71*	7	0.49
Customer/User Orientation Skills	3.98	65	0.88	3.88	25	0.97	3.73	11	0.65	3.2	5	0.45
Decision Making Skills	4.06	63	0.93	4.08	25	1.00	4.09	11	0.94	4.71*	7	0.49
Management Skills	4.05	64	0.90	4.2	25	0.96	4.18	11	0.75	4.43	7	0.98
Results Orientation Skills	3.66	65	1.11	4.24	25	0.97	3.82	11	1.08	4	7	0.82
Critical Thinking Skills	4.18	65	0.90	4.24	25	0.88	4.6*	10	0.84	4.67	6	0.52
Technological Skills												
Technology Use	4.22*	63	0.92	4.48*	25	0.87	4.55*	11	0.69	4.6	5	0.55
Numeracy	3.65	63	0.88	3.8	25	1.12	3.64	11	0.81	3.71	7	0.49
Information Management	3.91	65	0.88	4.24	25	0.97	4	11	0.78	4	6	0.89

Note: Three (or more) attributes that received the highest mean scores are remarked *

To understand the necessity of employability skills by sectors, it is worth separating the data into different categories. The result reveals that the four groups have a little similarity in terms of key employability skills. For student group, it is believed that *Being Professional Ethical* (*M*=4.43), *Being Committed to Work* (*M*=4.4), and *Technology Use* (*M*=4.22) are the needed skills for employees in post-pandemic. This premise is

supported by employees in private sector who also evaluated these earlier three skills as the highest, with just a matter of ordering, *Technology Use* (*M*=4.48), *Team-work* (*M*=4.40), *Being Committed to Work* (*M*=4.32), and *Being Professionally Ethical* (*M*=4.24). In public sector, the most important employment skills are found to be *Being Committed to Work* (*M*=4.64), *Critical Thinking Skills* (*M*=4.60), *Technology Use* (*M*=4.55), *Cultural Adaptability Skills* (*M*=4.55), and *Learning Skills* (*M*=4.55). Interestingly, the responses from participants in non-profit sector show that *Communication skills* (M=5.0), Creative/*Innovation Skills* (*M*=4.71), *Conflict Management & Negotiation Skills* (*M*=4.71), *Contact Network Skills* (*M*=4.71), *Analysis Skills* (*M*=4.71), *Continuous Improvement Skills* (*M*=4.71) and *Decision Making Skills* (*M*=4.71) received the highest mean scores. This result contradicts to students' views who rate *Adaptability to Change, Analysis Skills* and *Numeracy* the least importance skills.

Table 3. University students' employability skills

Attributes	University Students		
	Mean	*n*	*SD*
Team-Work Skills	4.05	65	0.98
Being Professionally Ethical	4.03	64	0.89
Self-Awareness Skills	3.95	62	0.91
Conflict Management & Negotiation Skills	3.89	63	0.94
Cultural Adaptability Skills	3.87	63	1.04
Being Committed to Work	3.85	65	1.06
Continuous Improvement Skills	3.84	63	0.94
Communication Skills	3.81	63	1
Contact Network Skills	3.79	63	1.02
Leadership Skills	3.79	62	0.99
Decision Making Skills	3.78	63	0.85
Being Tolerant to Stress	3.7	63	0.99
Learning Skills	3.7	63	1.16
Management Skills	3.69	65	0.87
Critical Thinking Skills	3.69	65	0.98
Creativity/Innovation Skills	3.65	63	1.12
Life Balance Skills	3.65	65	0.87
Technology Use	3.65	63	1.1
Information Management	3.63	65	0.98

Analysis Skills	3.59	59	0.93
Results Orientation Skills	3.57	65	0.95
Adaptability to Change Skills	3.55	65	0.92
Customer/User Orientation Skills	3.55	65	0.87
Numeracy	3.51	65	0.94

To understand current employability skills of the university students, another set of questionnaires was used, and participants had to rate them based on a five-point Likert scale (1-No level of competence, 2-Low level of competence, 3-Average level of competence, 4-Moderately high level of competence, 5-High level of competence). Table 3 illustrates that students' competencies lie with *Team-work Skills* (*M*=4.05), *Being professionally ethical* (*M*=4.71), and *Self-awareness Skills* (*M*=3.95). Surprisingly, a few technical skills such as *Technology Use* (*M*=3.65), *Information Management* (*M*=3.63), *Analysis Skills* (*M*=3.59), and *Numeracy* (*M*=3.51) are found somewhere at the bottom of students' competencies, signifying a dire attention from practitioners to reinforce such abilities at school. In addition, the other two soft skills-*Adaptability to Change Skills* (*M*=3.55) and *Customer/User Orientation Skills* (*M*=3.55)-received the lowest mean scores, indicating the inefficiencies of many students in adapting to new working environment and working with people.

b. Employability in Private Sector

According to the interview with a middle manager at one multinational corporation (MNC) based in Cambodia, it reveals a few key findings related to employability skills. Soft skills at work is reported to play a crucial role for employees, particularly new entrants (Per interview with P1). In the commercial department where staff has to work mostly with customers and retailers, employees over there have to possess good attitude and interpersonal skills. They also have to be efficient with communication, negotiation and understanding customers' needs. The same is true for customer service at the convenience store, where a manager addresses that interpersonal skills and honesty are the priorities for his recruitment (P4). In addition, this manager added that new employees have to interact not only with customers but also staff across departments.

Another key component for employees is the commitment to work (P4). At the convenience store, the manager found that many new recruited staff lack commitment and perseverance at work. Despite having limited education (some are high school graduates, and others are currently university students), they do not put all effort at work. The manager encounters a high turnover rate at the convenience store which could be as high as one person per month, making her look for recruitment continuously. There are many unreasonable excuses that those employees have raised such as personal illness, family issues, or studying schedule, but the manager asserts that those reasons do not make senses to her. Rather, it relates more to their work commitment (P4).

When it comes to digital competency, a participant indicates that daily digital skills such as the use of online platform-Zoom, MS Teams-or other virtual communication technology, have become the common tasks for all employees meaning that they have mastered this since the outbreak of COVID-19 (P1). Nevertheless, more advanced skills such as data analysis, numeracy or other advanced information management are not compulsory for current employees or new entrants except the technical department, or senior levels who need these abilities for business analysis.

c. Employability in Non-profit Sector (NGO/SSE)

In post pandemic, working environment in NGO/SSE organizations has become less strict on physical attendance. All employees can either work on-site or online with flexible schedule (P2). To ensure the progress and task completion, all employees are demanded to have high responsibility and commitment on their own assignments. To check the progress, a centralized software "*Air Table*" is used. In response, staff have to know how to use that collaborative working platform, and it becomes compulsory after the outbreak of the pandemic. Moreover, employees at this organization are required to improve on basic technological skills, namely conducting online meetings, communicating via instant messaging, just to name a few. Similar to other context, elder (old) employees are found struggling with using technological tools. They need the assistance from technical team that is why the organizations have to prepare internal trainings continuously. Those additional trainings include formal email writing, using collaborative online platform, project management, how to use virtual meeting, outlook, and new updated online platform.

Furthermore, the project coordinator asserts the need of employees to understand the way that organization works (standard of procedure, culture). In response, the organization provides more opportunity to inexperienced employees to do internship. This platform allows them to engage and adapt to organizational culture as well as practicing professional work like meeting with donors and government officials. In addition, the interviewee (P2) agreed on the needs of other personal skills in which the organization evaluates during the interview. Potential employees should be good at personal introduction, have high motivation towards their job, and understand their goals very well. Besides these personal skills, technical skills are another criterion for recruitment, but it is varied according to the specific job and position they apply.

From previous recruitment experience, the project coordinator found that some interviewees appear without doing research on the organization's background, especially students who seek internship opportunity. They give little attention to non-paying job, but this plays a crucial role in determining one’s ability at work. In addition, many new staff are found reluctant to ask for assistance from higher level and supervisor. In general, they have difficulty working with organization hierarchy. Sometimes, they concern too much when seeking for help worrying that it would interrupt others’ work. But once the trouble occurs, it could impact on the organization’s process as a whole.

d. Employability in Public Sector

Correspondingly, working condition in public sector has become less rigid compared to pre-pandemic period. People are now good at using digital platforms, including conducting online meeting and communication, especially elder staff who were not competent previously. As their digital skills improve, public officers are now able to work from distance for non-mandatory tasks such as attending online meeting. This new practice has been widely adopted to prevent the contraction of the virus.

According to the fieldwork, it is found that many skills are still necessary for officials at public sector. Those required skills, besides technical competencies that are the main requirement for job completion, are networking, communication, creativity, critical thinking, adaptability and work management. The office manager confirms that communication with people is crucial for all. While the lockdown period has prevented people from interacting for some time, now it becomes prudent for all employees to rebuild the connection. As people here are working with hierarchy, communicating and building strong connections within and beyond working place is a must. It would not only relieve the difficulty in working process, but it is also a chance to lobby on any decision at work.

In addition, the manager emphasized that new employees should possess specialized hard skills because many newcomers are very talented. However, that skill alone is not yet enough. In the technical department, as P3 suggested, it is more important for all officials to have creativity at work. They should be able to think critically about the issues and foresee the consequences. For instance, one of the departments, that the participant is now working at, has a very high responsibility for the services that it offers to the public (road construction).

It is found that newly recruited staff have difficulty adapting to new working culture. In public institution, civil servants have to be flexible and conform work hierarchy. These people have to limit their freedom in some aspects such as the way they communicate, and behave. Most of the work has to go through a specific process and level, and it needs agreement from all managers and directors. Such conformities normally require adaptation from new officers, especially those who have no experience working in the public sector before. Despite some weaknesses found within young generations, the head of the office still showed optimism on new generation. Young graduates are normally good at hard skills, creative at work, and have higher technology competencies than old people. With just a matter of time for them to adapt to new culture and absorb new soft skills from elders, they would be successful in the public sector (P3).

Table 4. Key employability skills required at different sectors from the interviews

Private Sector	Non-profit Sector (NGO/SSE)	Public Sector
- Communication (Interpersonal skills) - Negotiation - Commitment to work - Outgoing personality - Learning skills - Customer's oriented	- Work Responsibility - Commitment to work - Goal-oriented - Flexibility - Technological skills - (Online) Work Collaboration	- Networking - Communication - Adaptability - Creativity - Critical thinking - Flexibility

e. Students' Preparation for Employment in Post-pandemic

Some students are found motivated and well-prepared before entering the job market while a few others are not. A participant expressed that he as well as many of his friends have started volunteering since they were freshmen (P6). They believe that doing volunteering work would not only prepare them for employment afterward, but also provide a chance for them to explore their passion and purposes in life. Volunteering work also helps them to develop personal skills by meeting with new people and building networks. However, the outbreak of the world pandemic has prevented them from doing such activities in the last two years. As the situation gets better, the participant (P6) plans to begin his career by doing internship at one insurance company.

With different commitment, another participant has been studying online in the last two years without taking any opportunity to develop the working skills (P5). While distance learning has made him improved digital skills such as the use of online platforms for learning, the participant admits that this period has also made him lost a great opportunity to develop himself. Despite spending the whole pandemic time at home, the participant also takes some spare time starting his own online business. That participant confirms that these basic online skills are not enough for job recruitment. As his future plan, P5 aims to develop more skills. Not only does he have to develop digital competency, but also soft skills, namely communication (interpersonal skills) and problem-solving. However, the participant does not have any ideas on how to master those skills. But he expects to learn it from co-workers and seniors.

5. Discussions

a. The Most Needed Employability Skills

To gauge exact key employability skills in post-pandemic is perplexing as this is varied according to nature of institutions and sectors. What could be concluded is that they all require several common key employability skills to fulfil job requirements. The survey with students and employees indicates that personal soft skills, namely *Being professionally ethical, Being committed* and technological skill-*Using technology*- are the most needed employability skills. This reflects the change of working condition in post-pandemic when much work can be done from distance and working condition is no longer limited to the office. This demands strong commitment, professionalism and digital competencies from all employees when they shy away from central management. The result works in tandem with the study of Succi and Canovi (2020) who studied students and employers in two European countries and found that *Commitment, Communication* and *Team works*, are the key competencies for employability. In addition, this finding is also supported by the interviewees in private and public sectors who perceive the change of working routine at their respective entities. Now, video conferences and collaborative software have been widely used, and even elders staff are now required to master digital skills (P1,P3,P4). Technology use is now become the 21st century skills and is set as mandatory in many works (UNDP, 2020; Voogt & Roblin, 2012; World Economic Forum,

2020). Interestingly, *Work ethic* is found the least important by Jackson and Chapman (2012), showing different results of working contexts between the Australia and Cambodia. Yet, it should not be forgotten that the result could also be influenced by the nature employment. Valuing professional ethic would be much related to what their occupations are, and how rigid the work is. And the shifting work during world pandemic could also partly influence on this evaluation.

b. Employability skills across sectors

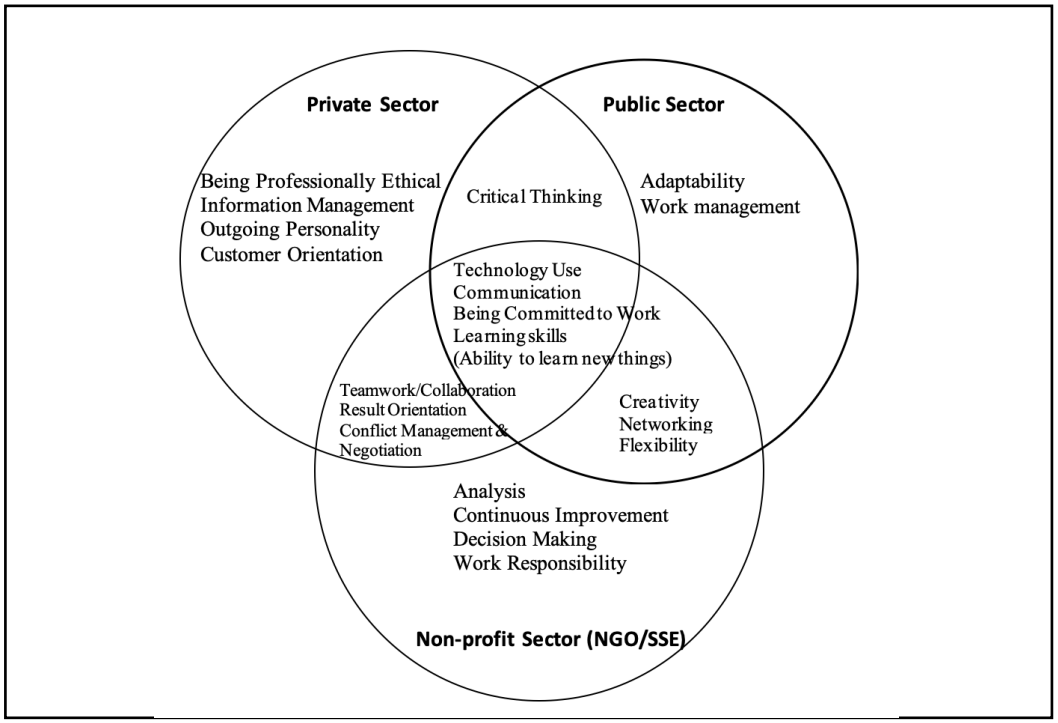


Figure 1. The synthesis of employability skills in post-pandemic by sectors

The synthesis of the employability skills in post-pandemic at three main sectors reveals four common skills. According to figure1, these include two of the earlier skills *Technology use* and *Being committed to work* combining with *Communication* and *Learning skills*. Communication is deemed important because this ability helps employees to sell themselves in the interview (P1). Also, to ensure high performance while working from distance, as P2 mentioned, it would be necessary for staff to communicate well with one another. Dealing with customers, public or donors, are all related to good verbal skills and it play a big part of private, public and not-profit institutions. In addition, since the situation is now uncertain, many workplaces would need someone who acquires new skills in no time. As reported in the Wolrd Economic Forum (2020), many jobs will be obsolete in the future, and people are prone to be replaced by machine if they cannot develop other competencies. And mastering new online applications during WFH is a testimony of this learning skill.

Besides the earlier common skills, it is found that different sectors require slightly different competencies. Similar to Reddy, Sharma and Chaudhary (2020)'s work, the finding shows that in private sector, employers demand staff to possess social or people skills which are *Teamwork, Negotiation, Interpersonal and Customers' orientation skills*. This has been concretized by the middle managers in the interviews arguing that individual work would not lead to success. Corporate needs people who can work as a team and achieve the business target. Such requirements are made because most of the work involve negotiating with customers, retailers and collaborating with people across departments (P1). This also reflects previous standpoint of managers who contend that the earlier soft skills are the key criteria for job selection (Jackson, 2013; Succi, 2019).

When it comes to non-profit organizations, employers tend to raise other components of employability. The qualitative study demonstrates that responsibility at work and result-orientation would be the core skills for staff in post-pandemic. This is true for what people are currently applying, which is working from home (Bloom, 2020). Without such skills, employees may reduce working quality as they stay outside the office. Furthermore, participants in the survey also acknowledge result-related skills such as *Creativity, Negotiation, Networking, Analysis* and *Decision making* which are all corresponding to their project-based works. Normally, NGOs work with different partners including government agencies, and donors which demands good teamwork, negotiation, analysis and problem solving. They need to build good relationships with all stakeholders and make positive impact on the communities.

Similarly, people who seek opportunity to work in public sector have to understand well the organization hierarchy, build strong network and adapt to change and culture. Networking is deeply rooted in public institutions. Any decision would not possibly reach a deal without co-workers' supports. This responds to Un and Sok (2019)'s work which reported that working condition in public higher education institutions in Cambodia is bureaucratic and hierarchical with cumbersome processes. Therefore, new employees have to be flexible and adaptive at work (P3). These soft skills are the key components in this entity, as the World Economic Forum (2020) predicts that there would be not much changed in this field, despite technology innovation.

c. Undergraduate Students' Preparation and Missing Skills

According to the survey, university students have taken common needed skills into account namely *Being committed to work, Being professionally ethical, Technology use* and even *Communication skills* (table 2), which confirms the demanding competencies in private sector. Meanwhile, students' perception also reveals some similarities abilities needed in public and non-profit institutions such as *Problem Solving,* and *Networking skills,* which is a positive sign for them to further develop their capabilities before entering those sectors. Furthermore, it could be seen that the important skills perceived by students are not much different from the early findings (Jackson, 2013; Succi & Canovi, 2020). The ability to use technology and communicate well at work are emphasized by Voogt and Roblin (2012). And the perceived value on communication skills also reflects the

interaction problems at work during the pandemic raised by Bloom (2020) and Roberts (2020).

Although university students are found understanding well on the employability skills, the extent to which they have prepared for work remains doubtful. Similar to the answer of other Asian students found by Jackson (2013), the three highest competencies rated by students- *Team-work, Professional ethic* and *Self-awareness*-are not really the predominant competencies assessed by recruiters (except *teamwork* that is found the most needed skill in private sector).

When comparing students' current competencies and common skills in the three sectors, it also draws a big concern. Although students give high value on *Being commitment to work* (it is opposite to what employer has raised), they rate less on their current *Communication, Learning* and *Technological skills* (*M*=3.81, *M*=3.7 and *M*=3.65 respectively). In the interviews, these university students admitted that COVID-19 has prevented them from volunteering or upgrading their skills. Hence, hardly have they developed on these proficiencies, except some improvements on functioning basic tools for online learning. This is so unfortunate for youth, as previous findings suggest that internship and other kinds of trainings play a big role in employability (Nesaratnam et al., 2018).

Furthermore, *Adaptability* is reported to one of the challenges among new employees, especially those who are just enter the public sector (P3). The argument aligns with the survey result, as shown in table 3, in which adaptability is found one among the three lowest skills of students. Undergraduates are also reported having low *Commitment to work*. In previous study, HR managers in Italy and Germany emphasize the necessity of this skill during recruitment (Succi, 2019). The same challenge is also raised by the store manager (P3) where turnover rate is quite high at his workplace. And it reflects the lack of work commitment from young employees in Cambodia. Sam (2017) explained that employees tend to take a (new) job even it does not meet their education background. This can be understood by the high employment rate in Cambodia which is as high as 99.4% in 2021 (The World Bank, 2022), that provides the opportunity for employees to move from one company to another with ease. However, this career switch presents big negative image in the business sector, hindering investment and development.

Lastly, albiet technology is widely adopted at school, students are found not taking advanced digital skills into account, namely data numeracy and information management, as shown in table 3. Even though the early studies show that many employers would look at these technical skills preceded by soft skills (Archer & Davison, 2008), this premise may no longer be true in the digital context, especially in post-pandemic. These skills are the key component for data analysis in the digital market. Many works now can be done from distance and illiteracy in the 21st century is no longer the ability to read and write, but the ability to evaluate, create new insights from information via digital tools (Reddy et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study fulfils the gaps in the literature methodologically and theoretically. The findings on employability skills in post-pandemic would not only add new insight on the employment in an emerging market like Cambodia, but also provokes the discussion on the needed skills in the current situation. This study has found three most important skills in post pandemic which are *Being professionally ethical, Being committed to work,* and *Technology use.* In addition, the ground work also reveals other two skills that would be in high demand from employers across three sectors including *Communication and Learning Skills*. Students' perceptions on the needed skills are well aligned with the market demand; nevertheless, their current skills have not met those requirements yet. The majority of students have not developed their competencies, while it is partly resulted from the impact of the pandemic. To succeed at their employment in post-pandemic, it is compulsory for students and all employees to develop their digital competence, fostering their commitment and communication skills to a great extent.

While this study is hindered by limited number of participants, future studies could expand this to a larger group of people. It would be another great insight as well if it is applied in different settings and contexts.

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8. Appendices

Appendix 1. Participants' Background Information

Profile	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	60	55.0
Female	47	43.1
Others	2	1.8
Total	109	100
Employment		
Student	65	59.6
Private Sector	25	22.9
Public Sector	11	10.1
Non-profit Sector	7	6.4
Entrepreneur	1	.9
Total	109	100

Appendix 2. List of interviewees

	Position	Date
Participant 1	Middle manager (Private sector)	14-07-22
Participant 2	Project coordinator (Non-profit sector)	16-07-22
Participant 3	Head of the office (Public sector)	16-07-22
Participant 4	Store manager (Private sector)	17-07-22
Participant 5	University student	17-07-22
Participant 6	University student	17-07-22