

Soft Skills: The Key to Success for Textile and Apparel Graduates in Bangladesh

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Bangladesh's apparel sector contributes significantly to the country's export earnings and provides employment opportunities for about 40% of the workforce, equivalent to over 4 million low and semi-skilled people (Bossavie et al., 2019). Contributing around 12% to the country's GDP, the Bangladeshi apparel sector had an export value of about \$35 billion, accounting for more than 80% of the country's national exports (BGMEA, 2021). It is worth noting that a large pool of low-cost workers propels this growth. But the industry is facing a severe shortage of skilled human resources, which is one of the possible reasons Bangladesh may not achieve further growth in apparel export (Amin, 2018). Islam et al., (2018) found that fashion companies hire foreign workers because they possess better skills and knowledge than textile graduates from within Bangladesh. Soft skills have become a crucial requirement for employers in Bangladesh (Alam et al., 2022). College graduates in Bangladesh often lack the soft skills employers require because of the insufficient efforts of educational institutes (Amin, 2018). Consequently, the future of college graduates in Bangladesh may be in jeopardy unless measures are taken to enhance their soft skills.

Enhancing soft skills is necessary due to the attractive career focus and intense competition in the global apparel market. In Bangladesh, there is a concern that foreign workers occupy positions that local graduates could have filled due to the skill gap in the domestic workforce (Islam et al., 2018). The skill gap occurs when job candidates lack the required skills, making it challenging for professionals to find suitable candidates. Alam et al., (2022) found that professionals are no longer satisfied with academic competence alone; college graduates must develop the necessary skills to secure future employment. Nusrat & Sultana (2018) also noted that employers prioritized their soft skills while employing graduates. Soft skills are a group of skills that people need to succeed in their personal, social, and professional lives (Rao, 2018). For professionals, Jacobs & Karpova (2022) divided soft skills into two groups: (a) interpersonal skills (communication, collaboration) that show how well they get along with other people, and (b) personal traits (adaptability, creativity) that are not technical but are unique to each person. Robles, (2012) states ten essential soft skills are crucial in the workplace. These include integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, a positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and a work ethic.

Sadachar et al., (2019) found that to remain relevant, apparel design and merchandising programs should produce industry-ready graduates with strong, soft skills, giving them a competitive edge in the workforce. Afroze et al., (2019) added that graduates are enormously employable and preferred by employers with communication, problem-solving, creativity, teamwork, leadership, professionalism, and adaptability skills. Gray et al., (2005) found that soft skills like communication are not only for employment but also for promotion prospects. Therefore, this study explores the soft skills possessed by Textile and Apparel

graduates in Bangladesh and if there is any association between those skills, job titles, and tenure in the profession.

This study followed an exploratory, descriptive survey research design. The target population was defined as apparel and textile graduates in Bangladesh. The sample entailed 122 graduates aged 23-41 working in different professional positions. The instrument was developed based on Communication, Collaboration, Work Ethic, Time Management, Goal Setting, and Leadership skills from pre-tested existing studies and used a Likert-type scale extending from Very Often to Never (Glaittli, 2018; Yeung et al., 2012). Data was collected from the graduates through purposive and snowball sampling techniques in the online survey distributed through Qualtrics; therefore, this study's findings are limited by sampling methods. The total number of participants solicited from snowball sample was 151, with 122 usable responses, yielding a usable response rate of 40.53%. General descriptive for demographic and target variables were conducted. One-way ANOVA was utilized to test for associations between Soft Skills categories with Job Title and Years of Experience.

Sample included five levels of response for Job Title: (i) Merchandisers ($n = 51$, 41.8%), (ii) Executive Officer ($n = 26$, 21.3%), (iii) Manager ($n = 19$, 15.6%), (iv) Academic Profession ($n = 17$, 13.9%), (v) Unemployed ($n = 9$, 7.4%). Respondents reported a variety of experience levels: (i) 1-3 years ($n = 44$, 36.1%), (ii) 4-6 years ($n = 37$, 30.3%), (iii) Less than a year ($n = 19$, 15.6%), (iv) 7-9 years ($n = 11$, 9%), (v) 9-12 years ($n = 8$, 6.6%), (vi) More than 12 years ($n = 3$, 2.5%). For each soft skill category, we report the most utilized skill. The *Communication* skill reported most often used was sharing messages with others ($n = 61$, 50%). The *Collaboration* skill reported most often used was allowing others to speak and share their opinions in group work ($n = 73$, 59.8%). Regarding *Work Ethic* skill, it was reported that most often used was making the best effort in their work ($n = 74$, 60.7%). *Time Management* skill reported often was used when they complete assigned work before moving on to other duties ($n = 68$, 55.7%). The *Goal setting* skill reported often was used to monitor their progress to achieve their goals and are confident about establishing personal objectives ($n = 59$, 48.4%). The *Leadership* skill reported often used was to decide in any situation and ensure that everyone in a group project understands the work role ($n = 61$, 50%).

A One-Way ANOVA test was performed to see any association between the Soft Skills with Job Title and Years of Experience as individual independent variables. ANOVA model, including Job Title (Merchandiser, Executive Officer, Manager, Academic Profession, Unemployed), significantly related to Collaboration Skills ($F(4, 117) = 3.304$, $p < .013$). However, the ANOVA model, including Job Title, was not found to be significantly related to any other soft skill categories (Communication, Work Ethic, Time Management, Goal Setting, Leadership) as a p -values were larger than .05. Additionally, ANOVA model including years of experience was not found to be significantly related to any of the soft skill categories as a p -values were larger than .05.

Based on the results, it was concluded that job rank or title is a significant factor in determining an individual's collaboration skills. Higher job ranks are associated with higher utilization of collaboration

skills. Therefore, organizations may need to take a more holistic approach to develop other soft skills required by workers; focusing on various factors such as training, mentoring, and creating a supportive work environment to improve employee's soft skills. Before that, tertiary educational institutes should focus on developing employable individuals with comprehensive skills rather than producing highly educated graduates. It is recommended that tertiary educational institutes use the findings from this study to improve their curriculum, focusing on developing student's soft skills. Also, this study can help industry recruiters identify what soft skills their employees utilize, serving as a baseline for what skills need to be trained which are not possessed by textile and apparel graduates.

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