

SOFT SKILLS AS A SYSTEM OF PERSONALITY META-COMPETENCIES: PSYCHOLOGICAL NATURE, STRUCTURE, AND FUNCTIONAL ROLE

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Abstract. *The article examines the psychological nature of soft skills and substantiates the necessity of considering them as a system of personality meta-competencies. In contemporary psychology and occupational sciences, soft skills are often interpreted as separate universal skills ensuring successful communication and professional adaptation. However, such an approach does not fully explain the systemic, integrative, and regulatory nature of soft skills within personality functioning.*

The study argues that soft skills should be conceptualized not as isolated competencies but as an integrated system of meta-competencies that regulate cognitive, emotional, motivational, communicative, and behavioral processes. Theoretical analysis demonstrates that soft skills possess trans-situational, supra-professional, and regulatory characteristics typical of meta-competencies. Their functional role extends beyond specific actions and includes coordination of behavior, adaptation to uncertainty, organization of interaction, and self-regulation of activity.

An empirical study involving university students was conducted to examine the structural interrelations among key soft skills components. Correlation analysis revealed stable interconnections between communication, self-regulation, adaptability, emotional intelligence, leadership, and analytical thinking, confirming the systemic organization of soft skills. The findings indicate that soft skills function as an integrated psychological system rather than as independent fragmented abilities.

The article concludes that interpreting soft skills as meta-competencies significantly expands the theoretical understanding of professional effectiveness and provides new methodological foundations for psychological diagnostics, education, and personnel development.

Keywords: *soft skills, meta-competencies, personality psychology, self-regulation, emotional intelligence, adaptability, professional effectiveness, psychological regulation, competency approach*

Introduction

In the context of rapid social transformation, digitalization, professional uncertainty, and increasing psychological demands on specialists, the problem of developing universal personality competencies has become particularly relevant. Modern professional activity increasingly requires not only specialized knowledge and technical preparedness but also the ability to adapt to changing conditions, regulate emotional states, interact effectively

with others, solve non-standard problems, and maintain psychological stability under stress.

Within this context, growing attention has been directed toward the phenomenon of soft skills. In scientific literature, soft skills are commonly described as communication abilities, leadership, emotional intelligence, teamwork, adaptability, time management, stress resistance, analytical thinking, and self-regulation. These competencies are considered universal because they ensure effectiveness across different professional domains regardless of specialization.

However, despite the widespread use of the concept, the psychological nature of soft skills remains insufficiently defined. Many studies describe soft skills as a collection of separate competencies or behavioral abilities. Such an approach significantly simplifies the phenomenon and does not explain why different soft skills demonstrate stable interrelations, mutually reinforce one another, and jointly determine the effectiveness of personality functioning.

From a psychological perspective, soft skills cannot be fully understood as isolated behavioral competencies. Communication skills, emotional regulation, adaptability, leadership, self-control, and analytical thinking rarely function independently. In real activity, they form a unified regulatory system through which the individual organizes behavior, adapts to environmental demands, and achieves goals.

This creates the need to reconsider the theoretical status of soft skills. The present study proceeds from the assumption that soft skills represent not a simple set of competencies but a system of personality meta-competencies.

Meta-competencies differ from ordinary competencies in that they regulate, coordinate, and organize other psychological processes and behavioral mechanisms. They function at a supra-functional level, ensuring the integration of cognition, motivation, communication, emotional regulation, and activity organization. Unlike narrow professional skills, meta-competencies possess universality, transferability, and adaptability across situations.

The purpose of this article is to substantiate the psychological necessity of considering soft skills as a system of personality meta-competencies and to empirically confirm their systemic and integrative nature.

Theoretical foundations of soft skills as meta-competencies. The psychological nature of soft skills

Traditional competency models usually divide competencies into hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills are associated with specialized knowledge and technical procedures, whereas soft skills relate to interaction, self-regulation, communication, and adaptation.

However, the distinction between hard and soft skills reflects only the external functional side of activity and does not explain the psychological mechanisms underlying soft skills.

A psychological analysis demonstrates that soft skills possess several important characteristics: universality across different activities; transferability between situations;

regulatory influence on behavior; integration of cognitive and emotional processes; connection with personality self-organization.

These characteristics indicate that soft skills operate at a higher regulatory level than ordinary competencies.

For example, analytical thinking affects decision-making, problem-solving, communication style, planning, and stress management simultaneously. Emotional intelligence regulates interpersonal interaction, conflict resolution, leadership, and adaptability. Self-regulation influences persistence, time management, emotional stability, and goal achievement.

Consequently, soft skills function not as isolated reactions but as organizing psychological mechanisms.

Meta-competencies as regulatory systems

The concept of meta-competence emerged within cognitive psychology, educational psychology, and occupational psychology as an attempt to explain competencies that regulate other competencies.

Meta-competencies are understood as higher-order integrative formations that determine:

- the organization of activity;
- adaptation to new conditions;
- behavioral flexibility;
- learning effectiveness;
- self-regulation;
- management of cognitive and emotional resources.

Unlike ordinary competencies, meta-competencies are not limited to specific tasks. They provide the psychological architecture through which other competencies become functional.

From this perspective, soft skills correspond to the characteristics of meta-competencies because they:

- coordinate behavior across situations;
- regulate interaction between cognitive and emotional systems;
- ensure adaptation under uncertainty;
- determine effectiveness of goal realization;
- influence the use of professional knowledge.

A specialist may possess extensive professional expertise but remain ineffective in the absence of developed meta-competencies such as emotional regulation, adaptability, communication, and self-organization.

This explains why professional success increasingly depends not only on intellectual or technical preparation but also on the development of systemic personality regulators.

Structural model of soft skills as meta-competencies

Soft skills can be conceptualized as a multi-level integrative system consisting of interconnected regulatory subsystems.

Cognitive-regulatory subsystem

Includes: analytical thinking, critical thinking, decision-making, planning, problem-solving. This subsystem ensures information processing and organization of intellectual activity.

Emotional-Regulatory Subsystem

Includes: emotional intelligence, stress resistance, emotional self-control, resilience. This subsystem regulates emotional states and psychological stability.

Social-Communicative Subsystem

Includes: communication skills, teamwork, leadership, conflict management, persuasion. This subsystem organizes interpersonal interaction.

Behavioral-self-regulatory subsystem

Includes: self-regulation, time management, adaptability, responsibility, persistence. This subsystem coordinates behavioral implementation of goals. The interaction of these subsystems forms an integrated meta-competency structure of personality.

Research design and methods

An empirical study was conducted to examine whether soft skills function as an integrated system of meta-competencies. Participants: the study involved 138 university students aged 17–23 years. The sample included, 74 males and 64 females. Participants represented first- to fourth-year students from different academic specializations.

Methods

The following psychodiagnostic methods were used: self-regulation Behavior questionnaire (V.I.Morosanova); diagnostic method of communicative and organizational abilities (V.V.Sinyavsky, B.A.Fedorishin); emotional intelligence assessment (N.Hall); stress resistance test (Yu.V.Shcherbatykh); adaptability diagnostics (A.G.Maklakov, S.V.Chermyanin); author-developed soft skills assessment scale.

The assessment included: communication, leadership, adaptability, analytical thinking, emotional regulation, self-regulation, teamwork, stress resistance, time management.

Statistical analysis

Statistical processing was conducted using SPSS software and included: descriptive statistics, pearson correlation analysis, factor analysis, student's t-test.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1. Mean values of soft skills indicators (n = 138)

Indicator	Mean	Standard deviation
Communication Skills	72.4	8.7
Leadership	66.1	9.5
Emotional Intelligence	70.3	8.2
Self-Regulation	68.7	7.9
Adaptability	71.5	8.1
Stress Resistance	64.9	9.3

Analytical Thinking	73.2	7.8
Time Management	67.8	8.6
Overall Soft Skills Level	69.8	7.4

The results indicate a moderate-to-high overall level of soft skills development among participants.

Correlation analysis

Table 2. Correlations Between Soft Skills Components

Indicators	r
Self-Regulation – Time Management	0.71
Emotional Intelligence – Communication	0.67
Adaptability – Stress Resistance	0.62
Leadership – Communication	0.64
Analytical Thinking – Self-Regulation	0.58
Adaptability – Emotional Intelligence	0.55
Overall Soft Skills Integration Index	0.73

All correlations are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$. The obtained data demonstrate that soft skills components are not independent variables but form a stable interconnected system.

The strongest relationships were identified between self-regulation and time management, as well as between emotional intelligence and communication abilities. This confirms that individual soft skills reinforce one another and function collectively.

Factor analysis

Factor analysis identified three major integrative factors:

Factor 1 — Self-regulatory meta-competence

Included:

- self-regulation;
- time management;
- adaptability;
- stress resistance.

Factor 2 — Social-Communicative Meta-Competence

Included:

- communication;
- leadership;
- teamwork;
- emotional intelligence.

Factor 3 — Cognitive-Analytical Meta-Competence

Included:

- analytical thinking;
- decision-making;

- problem-solving.

The factor structure confirms that soft skills are organized into broader integrative psychological systems rather than isolated competencies.

Discussion

The obtained findings support the hypothesis that soft skills should be interpreted as personality meta-competencies. First, the identified correlations demonstrate the systemic organization of soft skills. If soft skills represented isolated competencies, strong and stable interrelations between them would not emerge consistently.

Second, factor analysis revealed higher-order integrative structures combining cognitive, emotional, communicative, and behavioral processes. This corresponds to the theoretical characteristics of meta-competencies.

Third, the data confirm the regulatory function of soft skills. Their role extends beyond execution of individual actions and includes organization of personality functioning under changing environmental conditions.

The findings also explain why attempts to develop isolated soft skills often demonstrate limited effectiveness. Development of communication alone does not ensure professional effectiveness without emotional regulation, adaptability, and self-control. Similarly, leadership loses functionality in the absence of stress resistance and analytical thinking.

Therefore, soft skills development should be based on systemic psychological models rather than fragmented training approaches.

Conclusion

The conducted theoretical and empirical analysis demonstrates that soft skills cannot be adequately interpreted as a simple collection of separate competencies. Their psychological structure, functional characteristics, and interrelations indicate the existence of an integrated regulatory system operating at the level of personality meta-competencies.

Soft skills perform supra-functional regulatory roles: organization of behavior; coordination of cognitive and emotional processes; adaptation to uncertainty; self-regulation of activity; management of interpersonal interaction.

The empirical findings revealed stable interconnections between communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, self-regulation, adaptability, analytical thinking, and stress resistance. Factor analysis confirmed the existence of higher-order integrative structures corresponding to meta-competency systems.

From a theoretical perspective, the study expands the psychological understanding of soft skills and substantiates the necessity of considering them within the framework of personality meta-competence theory.

From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that effective development of soft skills requires systemic formation of personality regulation mechanisms rather than isolated training of separate competencies.

Professional effectiveness is determined not by fragmented behavioral abilities but by the degree of integration of cognitive, emotional, motivational, and self-regulatory systems into a unified personality structure.

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