

Recognizing and improving Soft Skills in Social Work

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Abstract

Contemporary society, especially after the pandemic, is experiencing a profound transformation, characterized by an acceleration towards the digital transition, which represents great opportunities and new challenges.

Digitalisation is redesigning the methods of interaction, communication and support within communities, highlighting the need for a transition from the classic concept of welfare to a broader concept of well-being, which is not limited only to material support but also embraces dimensions psychological, social and relational promoting a holistic vision of well-being. Relational social work emerges as a response to new needs, placing emphasis on the importance of soft skills, also defined as transversal skills: empathy, communication, adaptability... are essential for operating in increasingly complex contexts. The approach is interdisciplinary, integrating knowledge from different areas to prepare professionals to manage change effectively and sustainably. Training at all levels must take this variable into account and the relational social work achieved allows for the activation of a proactive and inclusive process of co-construction of well-being.

The digital transition, which has the potential to improve the quality of life, represents the key to promoting a resilient and cohesive society, capable of responding to the challenges of the present and future.

Keywords

Soft Skills, Relational Social Work, Well Being, Resilience, Digital Transition.

Introduction

The evolution of society is influenced by phenomena such as digitalisation and globalisation, which have led to radical changes in the ways of working themselves, expanding the role of remote activity and promoting greater organizational flexibility. The transition towards digital is not only technological, but also has a profound impact on operational and social

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dynamics. Digitalization and AI are creating a new landscape, within which organizations must adapt to innovations that facilitate processes, but which also redefine roles and skills.

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated this process, making digital technologies indispensable to maintain operations and social interactions even remotely (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). We have already had the opportunity to verify how the adoption of digital technologies allows us to collaborate with talents from all over the world, creating virtual teams in which coordination and communication take place via digital platforms (Skare & Soriano, 2021). We can thus speak of a «new globalization» which, combined with the fourth industrial revolution, radically transforms working relationships.

Technological progress and globalization (Dominelli, 2011), therefore, are rapidly transforming society and the world of work itself, making the acquisition of skills defined as transversal, or «soft skills», essential to face current challenges.

Having made this indispensable premise, it is essential that, in order to implement good relational social work, responding not only to the classic welfare, a primarily material need, but also and above all to well-being, a relational need that changes from day to day (Sibilla, 2015), social professionals have both an adequate university education but also and above all continuous training, such as that requested by the Order of Social Workers, that is in step with the times capable of intercepting the multiple variables that post-modern society brings with it (Donati, 2021).

Soft skills, which first and foremost include relational skills, flexibility and communication, have become fundamental not only for the professional growth of every social worker, but also for the management and/or resolution of increasingly multifactorial and multidimensional social problems.

Relational skills are closely linked to transversal skills, which are abilities and knowledge that can be applied in different contexts and situations, such as effective communication, active listening, empathy...

As Deming (2017) observes, today social and interpersonal skills matter as much as, if not more than, technical skills, especially in rapidly evolving sectors where adaptability and collaboration are crucial: soft skills, therefore, represent a strategic requirement for deal with complexity and innovation.

Recent research shows that soft skills improve employability and facilitate entry into the world of work (Velásquez et al., 2024). Soft skills not only increase «personal productivity», but also help create a positive and collaborative working environment (Balcar, 2016): these are salient prerequisites for the implementation of a network approach in relational social work (Folgheraiter, 2004).

These skills allow us to better manage interpersonal relationships and deal with complex situations proactively, qualities that are increasingly required in a liquid society (Bauman, 2000). Soft skills such as resilience and self-control have long-term positive effects on work of all kinds, and even more so in social work, and are often even more reliable indicators of professional success than IQ alone: a lack of soft skills can hinder career success, regardless

of industry. The importance of soft skills can be seen in every context, from the social to the digital and globalized one, within which working even with internationally distributed teams requires intercultural communication skills and adaptability (Campos & Fagundes, 2020).

Recently, the adoption of the metaverse and extended reality technologies is opening up new opportunities for soft skills training and assessment. As an example, we can report what was done by the Lazio Association of Social Workers with the production of the video «Empaty»: the presence of digital in every context is undeniable, including the social one but the limits and the ethical implications for working with the person and for the person are numerous (Sibilla & Gorgoni, 2023).

As an example, among the limitations we could refer to accessibility and inclusion: not everyone has the requirements, perhaps due to their digital poverty, to access welfare platforms and this could generate forms of social exclusion. Among the ethical implications, however, in first place, is privacy which is often not respected in the management of the same «digital» social work.

Poláková et al. (2023) point out that, in the era of Industry 5.0, integrating social skills with digital skills is essential to improve both efficiency and job satisfaction. The advent of the metaverse is gradually «contaminating» social work too: it allows us to simulate realistic environments where operators can test skills such as problem-solving, leadership and adaptability.

Khan et al. (2023) adds that the metaverse facilitates immersive learning, offering interactive scenarios that reproduce the real challenges of the operational world. For the social sector, however, this must be considerably contextualized since the uniqueness and unrepeatability of the human being require from time to time an individualized intervention that is increasingly capable of taking into account the multiple intervening variables (Sibilla & Gorgoni, 2022).

In this article, therefore, we will identify the soft skills functional to the new relational social work, also placing emphasis on the need to modify the training paths of social workers which cannot in any way be retroactive and obsolete, but must take into account the inevitable changes and of the numerous challenges that the ecological and digital transition, much invoked by the 2030 Agenda, bring with them.

In this context, relational social work becomes new because, in light of the many technological innovations currently taking place (Parton, 2008), the very method by which the relationship is established is also modified (Donati, 2011a), no longer strictly or exclusively linked to the face-to-face relationship.

The transition towards transversal skills: soft skills

The value of soft skills is particularly evident in the era of hybrid and global work, where team cohesion and the ability to deal with continuous changes are fundamental.

The adoption of organizational models that emphasize these skills is not just a response to a need, but a change in professional priorities.

Organizations recognize that long-term success cannot be guaranteed by technical skills alone: soft skills, as highlighted by Barnes et al. (2024), are essential for creating work environments that promote both employee productivity and well-being.

Factors such as digitalisation, globalization and remote working require new approaches to communicate, collaborate and solve problems in virtual and multicultural contexts.

Transversal skills, known as soft skills, or relational skills are personal, interpersonal and cognitive skills that facilitate effective interaction and allow you to adapt to different working contexts.

If we were to categorize these skills, we could say that they mainly fall within the skills relating to:

- a) knowing how to communicate effectively;
- b) knowing how to work in a group;
- c) be able to cope with stress.

Digitalisation and globalization have made these skills even more necessary: in a context of digital transformation, skills such as adaptability and intercultural communication are essential for working successfully in multi-disciplinary teams. This is particularly relevant in the technology sector, where interconnected processes require strong communication and change management skills.

Soft skills also find application in education. According to Dias and Soares (2017), these skills represent a strategic bridge between academic curriculum and labour market needs, making it essential to include them in study programs to better prepare future professionals. The development of soft skills increases the competitiveness of graduates, making them more attractive to employers and improving their ability to adapt to different roles.

Relational social work, through an approach that emphasizes the relationship between the social worker and the service users (Donati, 2011b; Folgheraiter, 2004), focuses on assistance and support to vulnerable people, such as children and young people, elderly people, disabled people, immigrants, families, etc. Relational skills in this area are essential not only to establish a relationship of trust, but also to mediate conflict situations, address service users' emotional problems and collaborate with other professionals within multi-professional and intra- or extra-institutional teams to guide coping networks.

In a world increasingly oriented towards social innovation (Tracey & Stott, 2017) and global cooperation, technical skills can be updated or replaced, but soft skills remain a distinctive and lasting element.

Taxonomies of soft skills tend in some cases to give priority to communication and interpersonal relationship skills, such as the ability to express oneself clearly and work well with others, considering them the heart of soft skills.

The latter, therefore, are those skills that allow an individual to interact effectively with others, in this case with the user, to manage emotions, resolve conflicts and above all adapt to changes. These skills are fundamental in almost all professional fields, but they have particular relevance in relational social work (Folgheraiter, 2004), a field that involves direct interaction with people in contexts that are not only complex, but also very often vulnerable (Ranci, 2013).

Considering that relational social work is characterized by its focus on relationships and interactions between individuals and their coping networks, transversal skills play a fundamental role in supporting social workers in their daily work. They are not isolated, but intersect and influence each other, creating a set of skills and «knowledge» that allow working effectively with users and their social networks. Specifically, for example, leadership could be managed in a relational way (Cabiati, 2021) emphasizing the importance of collaboration and participation of service users and their coping networks; creativity and negotiation could be used to find innovative and personalized solutions to users' needs (Folgheraiter, 2016).

Among the many existing transversal skills, in this context we will refer to effective communication; networking; problem solving; adaptability; relational leadership; time management; emotional intelligence; creativity, negotiation and feedback ability.

Effective communication

Effective communication is one of the most appreciated transversal skills in the relationship with the user, since it is the vehicle through which the social need and/or problem is decoded, managed and satisfied. Social workers must implement forms of active listening in order to be able to provide appropriate responses, which cannot be pre-established and standardized, but must take into account various elements such as non-verbal language and multiple implicit messages. This is very often not considered.

According to Rogers and Farson (2021), active listening and empathy are essential to establishing trust, which is the foundation for effective intervention.

In an increasingly complex and globalized context, knowing how to communicate clearly and appropriately facilitates the flow of information and reduces misunderstandings and conflicts, improving team cohesion and individual motivation.

With the increase in remote working, for the social sector which began mainly with the pandemic, although we try in every way to reduce it to a minimum, considering the delicacy of the relationship with the person, the importance of communication is even more evident, since helps maintain a sense of belonging and avoid situations of isolation, increasing resilience (Alietti & Padovan, 2024).

Effective communication enhances active listening: a practice that promotes inclusiveness. When the person who turns to the service feels welcomed, listened to and understood, their active participation in the help process increases and this is a fundamental element in fully guaranteeing self-determination.

Islam and Das (2024) note that communication is particularly crucial for those with a background in the humanities and social sciences, where knowing how to communicate and interact is essential to building appropriate relationships with professionals and users.

Networking

Networking is one of the most appreciated transversal skills in today's social work, where interconnection and complexity are the order of the day (Donati, 2009). It is significantly applied within one of the multilevel governance tools, namely the area plan.

More than simple collaboration, team work implies the ability to work towards a common goal, enhancing communication, mutual respect, shared responsibility and adaptability to the roles and dynamics of the group. This skill is fundamental because it allows you to integrate individual skills in a collective context, making the most of the team's potential (Rovai & Zilanti, 2023).

Numerous studies demonstrate that teamwork is particularly useful for enhancing other soft skills, such as communication, problem-solving and emotional intelligence (Ranieri, 2004), all essential skills in environments that require constant interaction and adaptation. The ability to work in a team is combined with leadership and collaboration skills, making the multidimensional analysis of the problem in question crucial. Leadership, in fact, requires coordination and empathy towards team members, which are essential to achieve common objectives.

An innovative method for developing teamwork in new generations is Project-Based Learning (PBL). This educational approach, which involves students participating in group projects on real-world problems, offers a practical opportunity to practice cooperation, communication and conflict management. Especially within university courses, it is important to educate students to know how to collaborate with each other, laying the foundations for future social work.

Studies show that PBL not only improves academic learning, but also strengthens soft skills, preparing students for the professional dynamics they will encounter.

If you intend to perfect the operating methods of every job, and specifically relational social work, you must first plan and not act exclusively here and now: starting from the training of those who will be future professionals is essential in order to achieve long-term changes.

Problem Solving

Problem solving, the ability to manage and/or solve problems by working in a team, is a fundamental and indispensable transversal skill in social work, because it represents

the ability to face and solve complex problems in an effective and innovative way. The problematic realities in which social workers are involved are often complex and require a multidisciplinary approach. Collaborating with colleagues from different fields (psychologists, educators, doctors, lawyers) and with families or people followed by services is essential to reach effective solutions. All this also requires leadership, negotiation and conflict management skills (Nardone, 2009). Often, problem solving is integrated into interdisciplinary courses, which combine different skills to solve real problems. Project-based learning and group activities help students develop practical solutions to complex problems, improving their ability to work in teams and adapt to new situations (Tramma, 2024).

Technology is playing an increasingly important role in the development of problem solving skills, both in the educational and professional sectors. For example, the use of artificial intelligence in higher education offers students advanced simulations, which allow them to experiment and improve problem solving skills in a safe and controlled environment. Even in university education, the application of more flexible and adaptive educational systems and teaching methods is essential: the emphasis must be placed on students' ability to develop innovative solutions and apply critical thinking in a context that reflects social changes and technologies of the post-pandemic era. Training and updating in this direction play a crucial role for the social worker, therefore it is important not only to review the study plans of the different degree courses, primarily that for social workers, but above all to direct continuous training in this direction.

Adaptability

In 2025, in an increasingly digitalized and globalized context, the demand for soft skills has increased and has also diversified, with some skills becoming more crucial than others.

Among the most sought-after transversal skills is adaptability, an indispensable quality to deal with continuous technological and organizational transformations. The increase in complexity of digital systems and the introduction of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence and the metaverse, make the ability to continuously adapt and learn essential. Ehlers (2024) underlines how adaptability is considered a fundamental skill for every professional who works in sectors where change is the order of the day and social change can only have primacy.

This skill represents the ability to face and respond effectively to sudden changes and new and complex situations, in a constantly evolving environment, driven by technological transformations, globalization and economic uncertainties. Social work, therefore, requires considerable adaptability: social workers must be able to respond to sudden changes (the pandemic has also put social workers to the test), whether they are linked to changes in social policies, in available resources or in the needs of assisted people (Lazzari & Gui, 2013).

Adaptability is crucial to guarantee both individual and collective resilience (Castelli, 2015), i.e. the ability to implement effective and efficient actions despite the difficulties that challenges bring with them. Even in the education sector, adaptability is a key competence: teachers and students must be able to respond to changes in the school system and new teaching methods, such as digital and blended learning. Studies show that teachers who integrate new technologies can make the learning process more effective, helping students develop adaptability as a skill for the future.

Relational Leadership

Leadership is an essential soft skill in today's business environment. Being a leader today means not only managing a team and making decisions, but also knowing how to motivate, guide and inspire collaborators in a complex and interconnected environment. A good leader must be able to communicate effectively, show empathy, solve problems and positively influence group members.

Effective leaders are those who know how to create an environment of trust and collaboration, encouraging knowledge sharing and promoting a culture of continuous improvement (Avença et al., 2024).

Relational leadership refers to the ability to guide and motivate workers and users' social networks. It focuses on building strong and meaningful relationships with others, rather than on the exercise of power or authority. This type of leadership is particularly useful in relational social work, where building relationships with users and their social networks is critical to the success of interventions. It focuses on relationships, empathy, active listening, collaboration and sharing...the main challenge that arises from it is that it requires more time and effort than it should (Clarke, 2018).

Time management

Time management is a key transversal skill in today's world of work, where the ability to adapt at rapid pace, digitalisation and organizational flexibility are the order of the day. It's not just about organizing your calendar or meeting deadlines, but about mastering a complex set of skills: effective planning, the ability to set priorities, stress management and delegation when necessary. Time management is closely linked to other soft skills, such as rapid decision-making and the ability to maintain focus on long-term goals, even under pressure.

Recent studies, such as that of Windapo et al. (2024), show how time management is considered one of the most important soft skills: for project management, this skill is crucial. Knowing how to manage time resources precisely allows you to avoid delays and respect deadlines and budgets if, for example, the social worker is carrying out project activities.

In managerial roles, good time management allows you to balance operational activities with strategic ones, facilitating the achievement of both short and long-term objectives.

Time management also impacts the well-being of professionals. Ahmed and Musaed (2024) state that knowing how to balance time between work and private life is essential to prevent burnout and ensure a sustainable work environment: it is functional not only to improve efficiency, but also to promote the psychophysical well-being of the employee social worker.

In this regard, we cannot fail to mention the much requested work life balance, i.e. the conciliation of treatment times and work times which is sometimes connected with flex security, with smart working and in some cases also with the possibility of making use of the short week (Da Empoli & Salerno, 2024). Being able to carry out your duties remotely allows you to better reconcile your profession and private life, with benefits, considering gender equality, especially for female workers who have traditionally suffered the consequences of a lack of role recognition more than men. Although smart working can be seen in a positive way for the reasons stated above, with regard to social work in the strict sense, it represents a gordian knot that is not easy to untie since in direct work with the user, the face-to-face relationship is always the one to prefer.

Emotional intelligence/empathy

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a complex soft skill that concerns the ability to recognize, understand and manage one's own emotions and those of others. It includes skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. In particular, empathy, the ability to understand and respond to the emotional needs of others, is fundamental to building effective professional relationships and a positive work climate.

In the work context, emotional intelligence and empathy facilitate strong interpersonal relationships and open communication. Espinosa Ortega (2024) highlights that EI allows professionals to confidently face complex situations and manage relational challenges. In relational social work it is important to certainly come into contact with others, without however getting entangled in the problematic situation while maintaining the right «professional distance».

This is absolutely not easy since when one is faced with people who are sometimes the bearers of real human dramas, both emotional intelligence and empathy itself are put to the test (Sicora, 2021). Additionally, sensing the user's emotional tone but also understanding colleagues' reactions to changes can help leaders maintain a motivating environment. Emotion management is crucial not only for the social worker, but for all those who work in a team, since emotional regulation and understanding of interpersonal dynamics reduce conflicts and improve the effectiveness of the group.

Mentoring and coaching programs, specifically, allow one to gradually improve one's ability to self-regulate and empathize: this is the reason why professional supervision has

been given greater emphasis within the new code of ethics for social workers (Allegri 1997; Bini *et al.*, 2017), as well as having been included in the new LEPS.

Creativity

In a fluid social context, the ability to think creatively has become a fundamental resource for the social worker who must quickly adapt to new scenarios and solve increasingly complex problems. Creativity is not limited to the generation of new ideas, but represents a mental approach that combines flexibility and originality, stimulating innovative solutions that increasingly involve the active involvement of the entire network.

Creativity is closely linked to social innovation, for example the ability to develop new responses for the management and/or solution of problems by increasingly involving the activation of multiple nodes in the network.

Recent studies also highlight that creativity can be further enhanced through the integration of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence, which automates repetitive processes, leaving more space for human ingenuity to tackle complex problems.

Negotiation

Negotiation is expressed in managing interactions and conflicts, promoting collaboration and reaching win-win solutions for all parties involved. With the onset of globalization and the growth of multicultural teams, the ability to negotiate has become fundamental to ensuring a productive and inclusive work environment.

Negotiation is closely linked to «inclusive leadership», an approach in which the leader does not simply give directives, but creates an environment in which every voice is heard and valued. This leadership style, which integrates negotiation with empathetic communication, improves team involvement (Rodina, 2023).

An inclusive and respectful environment not only promotes efficiency, but also the well-being of people, who feel more motivated and available to actively collaborate in the helping process.

Critical thinking and feedback skills

In a context in which technological and organizational changes occur at great speed, it is essential to have professionals capable of analysing information in depth, making informed decisions and providing constructive feedback functional to the creation of improvements at both an individual and collective level.

These skills not only promote personal growth, but contribute to creating work environments oriented towards management and/or problem solving and collaboration, making organisations, social workers and people themselves more resilient (Domingo et al., 2024).

Conclusions

The social changes that have occurred in recent years and the effect of the pandemic crisis have increasingly highlighted the need for social workers to improve their skills to deal with the many intervening variables, whether ordinary or extraordinary.

Networking represents the cornerstone for social work that can be effective and efficient, increasingly using the glocal perspective, capable of safeguarding local specificities by inserting them into the general and global context.

It is necessary to abandon institutional and self-referential solipsism, acquiring increasingly innovative *modus operandi*, capable of pursuing the objective of improving the quality of life of all citizens, going beyond welfare and reaching well-being.

Soft skills, therefore, are essential to achieve this within relational social work, where human interactions and the management of complex and sometimes emotionally charged situations are the order of the day.

Communication, empathy, problem solving, conflict management and adaptability are skills that not only improve the quality of work, but also contribute to the well-being of users and professionals themselves. The daily challenges that social workers face require constant refinement of these skills, which represent added value not only for the people served by the services, but for society as a whole.

From all this, also arise real practical, operational considerations, substantially pertaining to an improvement that is expressed in the relationship with users; in the collaboration between social workers and in their professional development and in the effectiveness and quality of the services themselves.

Furthermore, technological innovation cannot be ignored since it represents not occasionality but ordinariness and also the social worker, compatibly with the type of work he finds himself carrying out, must know how to «manage new things».

Fundamental in this process is not only initial but also continuous training since it represents the turning point for achieving true social innovation.

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