

How a Soft-Skills Training Program Can Facilitate Female Employment

By Alex Domash, May 2017

Project: Assessing Socio-Emotional Skill Needs and Providing Socio-emotional Training to Vocational College Students In Saudi Arabia

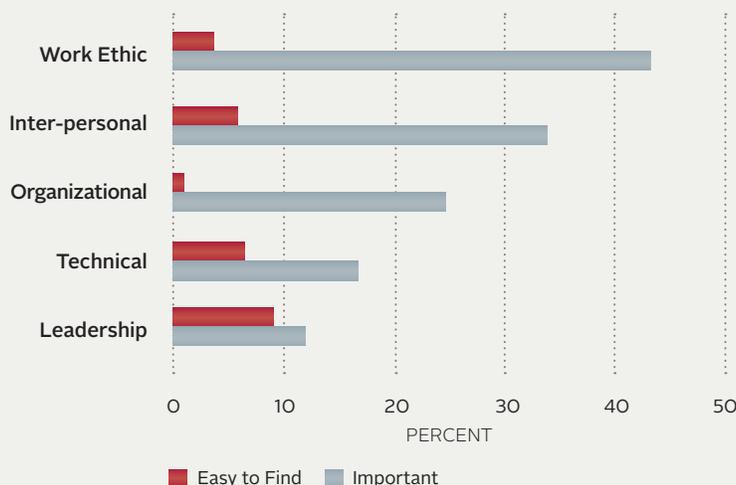
KEY INSIGHTS

- **A recent survey confirmed a large gap between the skills employers demand and the skills job-seekers possess.** Employers report that work ethic, inter-personal skills are among the most important skills in the workplace but also among the hardest to find in new hires.
- **Innovative blended learning course has demonstrated potential to improve soft skills in female students.** Preliminary analysis showed that the new course improved female students' work ethic scores by 50 percent and their organizational skills scores by 67 percent.
- **This reveals a promising opportunity to address the skills mismatch problem.** Scaling up the delivery of this and other similar courses while continuing to refine them, based on rigorous evidence, would help to develop critical soft skills in job-seekers, increasing employment opportunities.

Female students' work ethic scores increased by 50 percent after participating in the blended learning soft-skills course

Employers have trouble finding important skills in female job-seekers

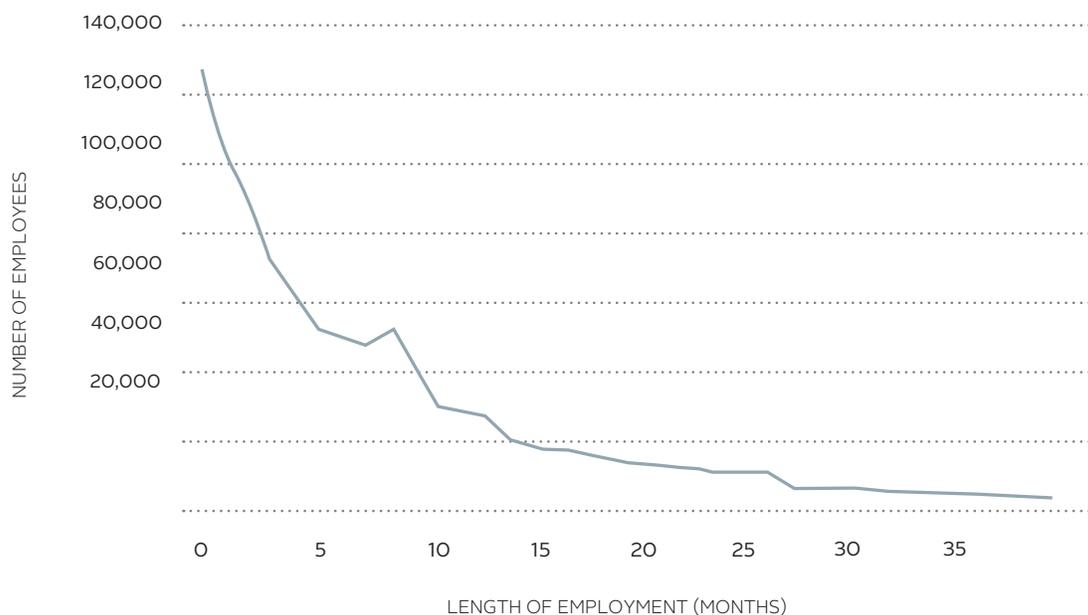
Survey results show that 44% of employers report that it is extremely important for female employees to have skills related to work ethic, yet only 3.7% of employers report that it is easy to find female job-seekers with a strong work ethic.



IMPORTANCE OF SIGNALING SOFT SKILLS

According to GOSI private-sector employment data, more than 76% of female Saudi workers leave their jobs after less than one year. One of the primary reasons for these short job tenures is low-quality matches between employers' needs and job-seekers' abilities. This is closely related to the skills mismatch, but slightly more complicated: Even if a job-seeker has the right skills and is a good match, he or she may have trouble "signaling" or demonstrating these skills to a potential employer. Thus, to solve the matching issue in the labor market, two things must happen: **1) job-seekers must develop the skills that are most demanded in the workplace, and 2) employers must be able to credibly assess whether or not job-seekers have them.**

Short job tenures for female workers



INNOVATIVE COURSE SUCCESSFULLY DEVELOPS SOFT SKILLS IN FEMALES

A research team led by Professor Adriana Kugler set out to address this matching constraint. Their initial baseline survey showed that work ethic, interpersonal, and organizational skills are the three most important skills for employers, yet among the hardest to find among job-seekers. Motivated by these results, the research team designed a unique 12-week blended online/classroom course using the Doroob platform that focused on socioemotional skills. The course was administered in three colleges in Alkharj, Alkhobar, and Jeddah. Using a rigorous empirical methodology (propensity score matching), **the research team found that the course improved female students' work ethic scores by 50 percent and their organizational skill scores by 67 percent. It also improved the work ethic of students who come from low-income households by 30 percent.** Next, the research team plans to track the job status of the graduates of the program to examine how to maximize impact on future employment and wages.

What does this mean for policymakers?

The preliminary findings of this study highlight an opportunity for policymakers to reduce matching problems in the Saudi labor market.

Saudi policymakers could utilize the Doroob platform in coordination with the Colleges of Excellence (CoE) to scale up this 12-week course, while simultaneously using rigorous data analysis to refine the model. This process could yield a certification program for soft skills that 1) is proven to effectively develop the desired skills in female students, and 2) credibly signals to employers which job-seekers have the skill-sets that they require.

This could increase employment by helping employers find strong female job applicants, improving employer-jobseeker matches, and by lengthening average job tenure.