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Soft Skills for Entrepreneurship and Workforce Development

J-PAL and IPA Joint Research Agenda*

Last updated: January 2025

* The calls for proposals for this research agenda will be run through [J-PAL Jobs and Opportunity Initiative \(JOI\)](#) and [IPA Entrepreneurship & Private Sector Development \(EPSD\) Program](#).



I. Introduction

Job creation and access to decent work are immense global challenges. Entrepreneurship and firm growth play a vital role in promoting economic growth and social progress, providing jobs and the possibility to help people escape poverty by increasing their income. Building skills and improving job matching can help ensure that job seekers and workers find productive, gainful employment. Recent research has shown that one promising approach to support the development of successful firms and a more productive workforce is to better incorporate psychological, social, and behavioral abilities and mechanisms – i.e. soft skills – into labor markets and business support programs.

Overview

This call for research aims to support rigorous, policy-relevant projects investigating the intersections of soft skills, effective workforce development and entrepreneurship policies, and economic outcomes in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In theory, soft skills play a role in shaping people's preferences and aspirations, their ability to access resources, and how they seek jobs, improve their work performance, and start and grow businesses. Skills such as resilience, leadership, or communication can influence employment and business outcomes and alter the effectiveness of programs addressing other constraints on productive employment and enterprise growth. Research funded by this initiative will examine how soft skills impact labor market outcomes, enterprise performance, productivity, and worker wellbeing, along with broader effects on job creation, income growth, and economic empowerment. Ultimately, this research initiative aims to generate rigorous evidence that contains useful lessons and data to guide the implementation and scaling of effective solutions in these areas.

We welcome research on programs and policies that focus explicitly on soft skills interventions, such as soft skills training for various population groups. **We also encourage policy-relevant studies examining broader labor market and private sector development programs that incorporate significant elements or insights related to soft skills.** For example, such projects might explore effective methods for identifying and supporting high-impact entrepreneurs by using selection models that utilize psychometric measures to some degree; employment readiness training or employee management systems that incorporate a soft skills component; group trainings for those searching for work; comparing approaches for improving market access for enterprises, such as marketing training versus networking and attitudinal interventions; or identifying strategies to enhance safety for migrant workers by considering the psychological and social factors linked to labor mobility. Finally, research that explores innovative ways of more comparatively measuring these soft skills would be valuable to understanding their effectiveness in varied contexts and improving their implementation quality and scalability.

Scope and definitions

Geographic scope: This call for research is open to projects in low and middle-income countries (LMICs), including upper-middle-income countries. The research should address the needs of low-income populations, but does not need to be conducted only in low-income or lower-middle-income countries. Please review the [World Bank Group's country classification by income level for 2024-2025](#) for information on particular countries.

Defining and measuring soft skills: Soft skills encompass a diverse range of non-technical abilities, attitudes, and behaviors that enable people to navigate social and professional settings effectively. They include psychological traits such as conscientiousness and extraversion, social abilities like empathy and communication, attitudes such as optimism, beliefs such as growth mindset, and work-related competencies such as leadership and teamwork. While soft skills are often assessed at the individual level, they can also be studied as elements of relationships and social interactions, such as bargaining abilities, networking skills, management practices, relationship quality, and collaboration in organizations and markets. We encourage researchers to be intentional and consistent about which soft skills or attributes are part of the intervention or design¹, and considerations of context.

Outcomes: Funded research should measure relevant economic and employment outcomes. Researchers may look at productivity, job search and hiring outcomes, firm performance including sales and profits, business practices, entrepreneurship activities like starting and growing a business, hours worked, earnings, income, turnover, etc. Projects may also record outcomes such as wellbeing, aspirations and other psychological measures, business and social networks, household behaviors (e.g. within-household bargaining, spouse's economic outcomes), program participation, or skills and knowledge.

¹ For example, Duckworth and Yeager, "Measurement Matters."; Laajaj, Rachid, and Karen Macours, "Measuring Skills in Developing Countries."

Figure 1: A framework for the types of soft skills included in interventions and measures²

What are Soft Skills? <i>non-technical abilities, attitudes, and behaviors that individuals use to understand themselves and manage emotions, decisions, and relationships to achieve their goals</i>		
Socio-Emotional Skills ESTEEM framework		Higher Order Thinking Examples: Executive Function, Organization Character, Beliefs, Values, & Attitudes Examples: Self-Esteem, Growth Mindset, Optimism, Open-mindedness, Integrity Motivation Examples: Goal Orientation, Aspirations
Intrapersonal	Interpersonal	
Awareness	Self Awareness Examples: Emotional Awareness, Mindfulness, Self Awareness, Self-Reflection	
Management	Self Management Examples: Emotional Regulation, Self Control, Dependability, Personal Initiative, Perseverance, Resilience, Problem Solving & Decision-Making, Creativity	Relationship Management Examples: Expressiveness (clarity, assertive communication), Interpersonal Relatedness (networking, maintaining relationships), Influence, Negotiation, Collaboration

² Background on the ESTEEM framework can be found at www.poverty-action.org/ses.

II. Research priorities

1. Identifying which soft skills matter, for whom, and under what conditions

Recent research shows that capacity-building interventions focused on soft skills or non-technical skills, such as tailored training programs for entrepreneurs, job seekers, or employees, can drive measures of productivity, business growth, and entrepreneurship, along with wellbeing. For example, alternative training methods for microentrepreneurs that focus on soft skills show promise for improving firm sales and profits more than traditional business training programs,³ and at moderate costs.⁴ In formal employment sector settings, soft skills training for garment manufacturing employees in India has generated large returns for both workers and the firm.⁵ However, there is also evidence that soft skills interventions had different impacts on different population groups such as self-employed women and young people,⁶ and some psychology-based programs had only short-lived economic impacts.⁷

One challenge to making conclusive recommendations about the effectiveness of soft skills interventions for entrepreneurship and workforce development is that programs vary greatly in which soft skills they focus on, and who they target, as well as their content. Interventions are often designed for entrepreneurs or employees within specific industries or sectors. Thus, mindset training for entrepreneurs may emphasize psychological traits of self-starting and persistence,⁸ while a program intended for female garment workers draws on teamwork and communication skills as central components.⁹ Many training programs also combine multiple aspects of soft skills, and research would be valuable to disentangle which dimensions result in the greatest impacts for various population groups. Given these challenges, understanding which soft skills matter, for whom, and under what conditions, could be essential to help scale up relevant cost-effective programs in LMICs.

³ Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), "Teaching Business Skills to Support Microentrepreneurs."

⁴ Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), "Best Bets: Emerging Opportunities for Impact at Scale."

⁵ Adhvaryu, Kala, and Nyshadham, "Returns to On-the-Job Soft Skills Training."

⁶ Acevedo et al., "Living Up to Expectations"; Campos et al., "Long-Term and Lasting Impacts of Personal Initiative Training on Entrepreneurial Success"; Honorati, "The Impact of Private Sector Internship and Training on Urban Youth in Kenya."

⁷ Ubfal et al., "The Impact of Soft-Skills Training for Entrepreneurs in Jamaica"; Campos et al., "Long-Term and Lasting Impacts of Personal Initiative Training on Entrepreneurial Success."

⁸ Campos et al., "Is Personal Initiative Training a Substitute or Complement to the Existing Human Capital of Women?"

⁹ Adhvaryu, Kala, and Nyshadham, "Returns to On-the-Job Soft Skills Training."

The skills that matter most for economic and employment outcomes may depend on people's demographic background¹⁰, the local job market, individual aspirations, industry or sector, and social norms and expectations, among other conditions. In addition, soft skills may be underprovided or underinvested in a given context. Examining whether there is a market failure of soft skills provision, and if so, its causes can help identify effective approaches for enhancing those skills.

2. Leveraging soft skills to increase the effectiveness of broader labor markets and private sector development policies and programs

In addition to their role in tailored training programs, soft skills may serve as an underlying factor or additional program component to enhance the effectiveness of broader employment and enterprise growth interventions. We encourage policy-relevant studies examining the effectiveness of broader labor market and private sector development programs that are not exclusively focused on soft skills but incorporate elements or insights related to soft skills. In such studies, researchers will examine the impact of a labor market or private sector development program with and without soft skills insights incorporated.

Job seekers, entrepreneurs and firms in LMIC contexts often face multiple barriers to growth—common constraints are managerial skills gaps, difficulty accessing critical resources like credit and market information, and small networks or limited market access. Soft skills curriculum may be effectively incorporated into existing programs such as training programs involving other components and outcomes, gender-focused economic development programs tackling barriers to female entrepreneurship, and financing support or market access policies for firms and entrepreneurs. Recent studies are also assessing how innovations incorporating soft skills and personal and interpersonal factors shape employment-focused interventions. These include using psychometric models to identify individuals likely to emerge as high-impact entrepreneurs or effective managers to increase business performance.¹¹

3. Do soft skills interventions require tackling other constraints to be effective?

Effective soft skills programming may require addressing related barriers to employment. Certain populations or contexts may face additional barriers that require the complementary interventions for the training to be effective. Soft skills training, for example, may only be effective if using these skills is socially acceptable or made to be with norms interventions, if these skills are combined with training on business or hard skills, if they are offered in combination with capital, or if these improved soft skills can be leveraged to improve access to capital,

¹⁰ Cassidy et al., "Do Men Really Have Greater Socio-Emotional Skills Than Women? Evidence from Tanzanian Youth."

¹¹ Adhvaryu, "Impacts of Soft Skills Management Training on Productivity and Worker Retention and Welfare."

markets, or work opportunities. In such studies, researchers will examine the impact of a soft skills intervention with or without a complementary intervention.

Preliminary evidence suggests a complementarity between hard- and soft-skills training in vocational education.¹² In Uganda, teaching adolescent girls both vocational and life skills increased self-employment.¹³ However, evidence from Jamaica suggests that while intensive soft-skills training had significant effects, a combined training approach—integrating soft skills with business practices—did not yield better results.¹⁴ We encourage studies assessing whether soft skills are effective when integrated with other complementary interventions. Studies in Niger¹⁵ and Nigeria¹⁶ have suggested the potential complementarity of soft skills interventions and norm-changing community-level interventions.

4. Improving implementation quality and scalability of soft skills interventions

Successful scaling of soft skill training programs depends largely on understanding the implementation landscape, including the technical expertise needed and the operational capacity of implementing organizations, along with securing reliable and sustainable funding sources. While a few studies have highlighted the promise of soft skills for economic empowerment, there is mixed evidence on the effectiveness of soft skills training. Important work must be done to understand how these skills can be effectively improved. As with other training programs, there are key systematic questions on dosage, recruiting effective trainers, and whether alternative delivery methods can make training scaleable. However, there are several questions that are particularly important for delivering training on skills that are as nebulous and transferable as soft skills: how important is it that intervention is adapted to a particular culture, teaches mindsets and tools or offers specific applications to practice using them, uses trainers who have these skills themselves, involves the employers or family members who may not accept the behavioral changes of participants, and offers long term opportunities to reinforce these skills, particularly given the short term impacts observed in several studies. Very little research has also examined the temporal evolution of impacts and the ideal timing for interventions.

¹² Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), "Vocational and Skills Training Programs to Improve Labor Market Outcomes."

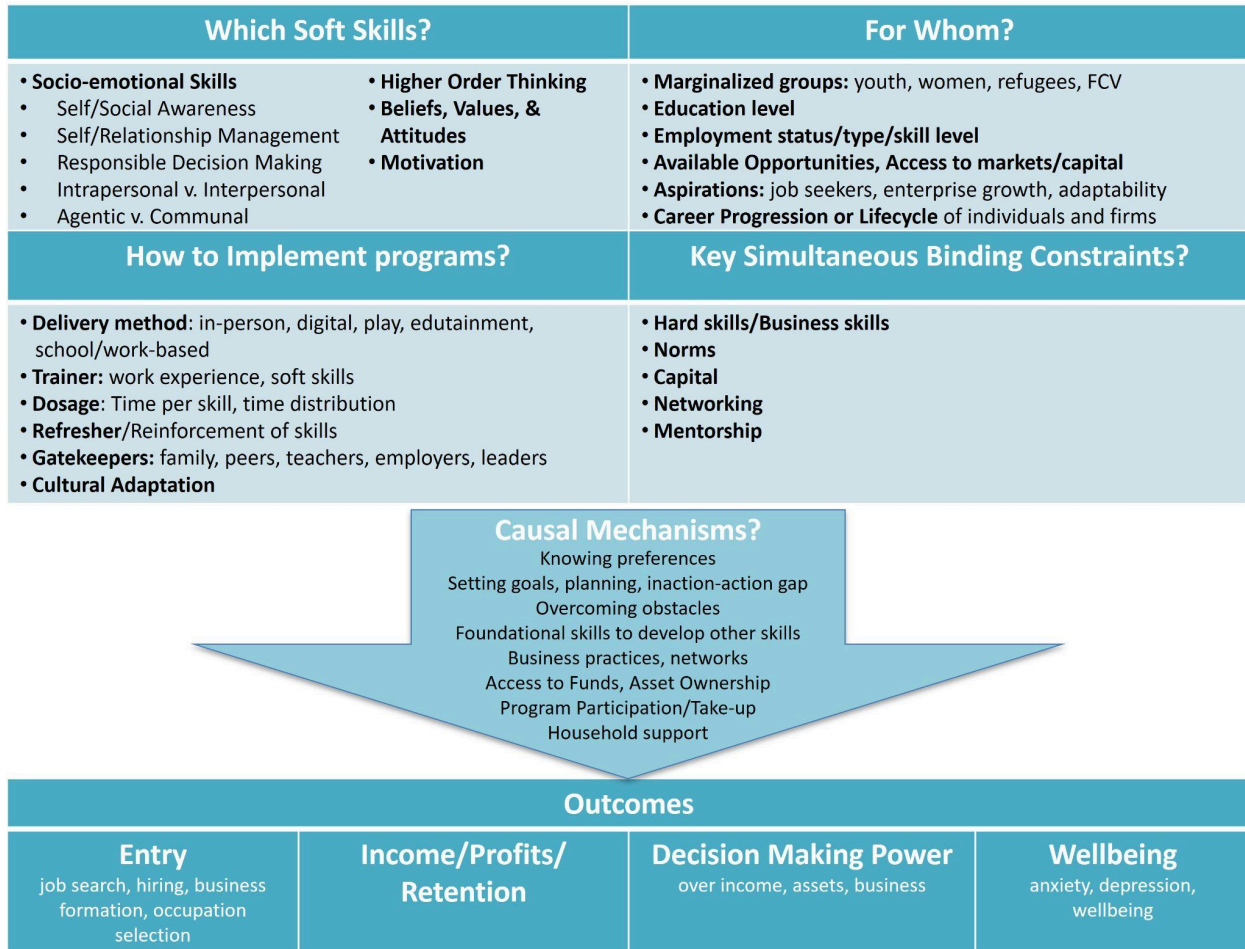
¹³ Bandiera et al., "Women 's Empowerment in Action."

¹⁴ Ubfal et al., "The Impact of Soft-Skills Training for Entrepreneurs in Jamaica"

¹⁵ Bossuroy et al., "Tackling psychosocial and capital constraints to alleviate poverty."

¹⁶ Das et al., "Occupational sex segregation in agriculture: Evidence on gender norms and socio-emotional skills in Nigeria."

Figure 2: A visual illustration of research priorities



III. Cross-cutting considerations

There are several key aspects of soft skills research that are relevant across research projects. We encourage researchers to take them into consideration as they develop research projects, though they are not required:

- **Measuring soft skills:** There is limited evidence on soft skill measures that are psychometrically validated in LMIC contexts and even less evidence on the predictive validity of measures. Future research and program development will benefit from the public availability of measures that have demonstrated both reliability and validity, examine the association between soft skills measures (levels and changes in measures) and labor outcomes (levels/changes in outcomes) – particularly in this rare body of research where soft skills may be shifted exogenously.

- **Heterogeneity of impact:** Understanding which soft skills work for whom can also be examined in projects where this is not the core focus. This call encourages grant winners to examine variation by demographics, education, employment type, aspirations, available opportunities, norms, and lifecycle of an individual or business.
- **Spillovers:** As soft skills are transferable across occupations and contexts, there may be spillovers that occur between work and home settings, or between occupations. This is a particularly nascent area of research.
- **Implementation details:** Even if implementation is not the primary research question, this call encourages all projects to report on key aspects of implementation (delivery methods, dosage, trainers, cost-benefit analysis, timing, and cultural adaptations), and use them to evaluate when programs are most effective. We further encourage research teams to share curricula and training materials, and which design aspects may have made projects particularly effective or ineffective, even based on qualitative feedback.
- **Causal Mechanisms:** Understanding the causal mechanisms by which soft skills impact economic and employment labor outcomes can provide insights into which specific skills should be considered in policy design, and how this could differ with a given population. Soft skills may improve economic empowerment through a number of mechanisms: knowing preferences and goals, planning and addressing the inaction-action gap to overcome internal and external obstacles, improving networks¹⁷ and business practices or participation in economic programs and financial opportunities, obtaining support from household members, organizations, or community, or by developing other skills that are key to employment. If the relationship between soft skills and outcomes is driven by understanding preferences and setting goals, training on self-awareness and aspiration building may be particularly important. If soft skills training improves women's earnings by way of higher intrahousehold resource allocation, training may benefit from focusing on negotiation ability and inclusion of household members. Moreover, by understanding these causal mechanisms, programs could then target the short-term intermediate outcomes, rather than waiting for long-term data on employment to evaluate their effectiveness.

¹⁷ Brudevold-Newman and Ubfal, "Soft-skills, networking, and workforce entry: Impacts of a training program for recent graduates in Rwanda."

IV. Example research questions

A non-exhaustive list of possible research questions under each of the three research priorities is provided below. This list aims to suggest examples of the type of work that we are looking to support and should only be viewed as a guiding resource.

1. Identifying which soft skills matter, for whom, and under what conditions

- Which soft skills matter most for particular groups, such as women, youth, microentrepreneurs, or low-income populations? Which combinations of soft skills are most predictive of improved economic outcomes for workers and entrepreneurs in a given context?
- Which specific soft skills are most predictive of long-term labor outcomes across different industries, sectors, or occupations?
- How do the types of soft skills that are most important evolve throughout the lifecycle of firms (e.g., startup phase vs. scaling phase) or the career progression of workers (e.g., frontline production roles vs. managerial positions) or with entrepreneurial experience?
- How can policymakers encourage firms to provide more soft skills training to their employees?
- Under what conditions do soft skills training for entrepreneurs lead them to hire more workers (job creation), in addition to productivity gains and entrepreneurial success?
- How do psychosocial and non-technical training in work settings shape people's behavior outside of work, such as in household bargaining dynamics, community participation, consumption and saving? Can they influence labor outcomes via these mechanisms?
- How do pre-existing beliefs or biases (such as perceptions of gender differences in skill levels) among employers, spouses, or others influence the outcomes of skills training programs?
- How can soft skills better enable women to participate in the labor market? How do soft skills reduce barriers faced by women to participate in the labor market?
- How do soft skills training programs for vulnerable groups like refugees, marginalized groups, and communities affected by violence, shape economic outcomes? How can soft skills training be designed to be accessible and culturally relevant for rural populations?

- Under what conditions (e.g., access to finance, market opportunities, restrictive social norms, fragile and conflict-affected settings) do certain soft skills (e.g., negotiation, resilience) become critical for labor outcomes?
- Why soft skills may be underprovided, and is there a market failure in soft skills provision?
- Are there conditions under which using particular soft skills can face backlash for particular groups, or costs to teaching certain soft skills to certain groups? If there are, what are effective ways to mitigate them?

2. Leveraging soft skills to increase the effectiveness of broader labor markets and private sector development policies and programs

- What are effective methods for identifying and supporting high-impact entrepreneurs? Are psychometric measures in selection models, human judgments, or other methods more effective? Can such targeting methods also improve the effectiveness of credit programs?
- What combinations of technical and non-technical business skills training are most effective, for what types of entrepreneurs or firms?
- What combinations of soft and hard skills vocational curriculum contents are most effective for improving job outcomes? Can soft skills additions improve the sustainability of hard skills programs for students, apprentices, or other types of job seekers?
- Are marketing training, networking, or attitudinal interventions more effective as approaches for improving market access for groups such as women-owned enterprises or young businesses?
- How can soft skills training be effectively integrated into social safety net programs (cash transfers, public works, economic inclusion, graduation)? Can they be leveraged to improve take-up of other services?
- What are effective ways of incorporating soft skills into digital or AI training to improve employment and income for young people, or as part of an employee management system at a large firm? Are soft skills required to effectively interact with AI or to manage the integration of AI systems in the workplace?
- What are effective strategies to enhance economic opportunity and safety or wellbeing for migrant workers by leveraging psychological and social factors linked to labor mobility?
- How can programs targeting access to markets and technology, training on hard skills, improving social norms, offering access to child care, or providing access to capital, become more effective or sustainable with the inclusion of soft skills training?

- Especially in contexts with a shortage of formal sector jobs, what are effective ways to align young people's expectations with existing labor-market opportunities, including through mentoring and soft skills programs? Can soft skills programming improve individuals' flexibility and ability to consider long-term gains to experience as they make decisions?
- What interventions can help reduce bias among firms, entrepreneurs, and managers, so that outcomes such as job quality, productivity, and job growth improve?
- Can soft skills improve the ability of businesses to communicate with customers and partners across cultures and borders?

3. Understanding Complementary Interventions: Do soft skills interventions require tackling other constraints to be effective?

- Is soft skills training only effective for labor outcomes when offered in combination with an opportunity to use them, e.g. access to capital, markets, technology, or job placement?
- Do soft skills interventions need to address social norms to improve the acceptability of applying these skills in the workplace, at home, or within the community? Are there risks of backlash for particular groups (e.g. women) and effective methods of mitigation (e.g. social norms interventions)?
- What role do mentorship and peer networks play in enhancing the effectiveness of soft skills interventions for workforce development and entrepreneurship?

4. Improving implementation quality and scalability of soft skills interventions

- Do some interventions confer more transferable or lasting skills through specific design features?
- How can implementers of soft skills training best adapt and scale their impacts, for example by integrating into national programs or offering virtual training?
- Targeting/eligibility: How can program providers best determine eligibility or effective targeting strategy to ensure that programs are matched with participants who will benefit most from soft-skills programs?
- Program delivery methods: What types of training methods (school or training institute-based, workplace-based, or digital/mobile-based, etc.) are most effective to deliver soft skills training?

- Dosage: How does the frequency and dosage of soft skills training (e.g., time spent on each skill, frequency of sessions) influence outcomes for different target populations?
- Trainers: What trainer characteristics (e.g., education and professional background, gender, socioeconomic status, social networks) enhance the effectiveness of training interventions?
- Does reinforcement or refresher training improve the long-term effectiveness of skills programs?
- How can interventions be adapted and scaled effectively to work within national workforce development programs, informal work settings, and firm-based training contexts?
 - Is there a viable private market for labor market skills training in LMICs, and if so, how can public and private sectors collaborate to expand access?
 - How can simplified, adaptable versions of training programs be designed to fit the aspirations, cultural context, and implementation capacity of diverse target populations?
 - Training of trainers – what are effective methods of increasing the supply of effective trainers?
- Do incentives and other program designs improve the uptake and use of skills? For example, how can the involvement of “gatekeepers” such as parents, spouses, teachers, or employers improve participant engagement and outcomes in skills training programs?
- How can generative AI tools be used to develop or compare curricula for labor market training programs to optimize effectiveness and relevance?
- How can private sector partnerships be leveraged to co-design soft skills training programs that meet both employer needs and worker aspirations?

IV. Acknowledgements

J-PAL and IPA jointly developed this research agenda. We thank David Atkin, Marianne Bertrand, Jing Cai, Stefano Caria, Clara Delavallade, Laura Chioda, Paul Gertler, David McKenzie, Catherine Thomas, and Diego Ubfal as well as a number of J-PAL and IPA colleagues for their valuable feedback and insights. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

Suggested citation: Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) and Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA). 2025. “Soft Skills for Entrepreneurship and Workforce Development: J-PAL and IPA Joint Research Agenda.” Last modified: January 2025.

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