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The Influence of Hard and Soft Skills as well as Career Coaching on the Career Path for HR Managers

SUMMARY

At organizations, having a successful and predictable career path is essential. Employee motivation is increased, and both organizational performance and employee accomplishment are enhanced. In addition to their own career path, human resources managers are typically in charge of creating and carrying out programmes for employees' career growth, career promotion, welfare, and education. They are also affected by the problems and challenges of career planning. Our study examined the influence of soft skills, hard skills and career coaching of HR managers' career pathways. Our research has shown that skills development and career coaching can be a successful tool in career planning.

Keywords: soft and hard skills, career path, attitude, motivation, HR managers, career coaching

JEL-codes: M12, M53, M54

INTRODUCTION

Career planning is essential in all occupations in order to help employees, including early-career professionals and senior professionals, match their skills, ambitions, and aspirations with the organization's goals and meaningful work (Reardon et al., 2021). With goal-setting and progress tracking, skill and personal development, adapting to changes and new challenges, boosting confidence and self-awareness, and strengthening career longevity and stability – rather than merely pursuing new and attractive job opportunities – career planning is crucial, and has a significant impact on how employees design their professional and personal lives (Burnett & Evans, 2016).

Career planning is essential for all positions because it gives workers – from early-career professionals to senior professionals – focus and direction, enabling them to match their goals, aspirations, and abilities with the organization's objectives and meaningful work (Reardon et al., 2021). Career planning is

crucial and has an impact on how employees design their professional and personal lives (Burnett & Evans, 2016). It helps employees set goals, track their progress, develop their skills and personal qualities, adjust to changes and new challenges, become more confident and self-aware, and strengthen their career longevity and stability rather than just taking advantage of new and attractive job opportunities (Reardon et al., 2021).

While having a fulfilling and well-paying job is crucial to employees, it is just as important for them to develop professionally and plan their future career pathways based on their own and the organization's goals, values, and talents. Employees must develop and learn cutting-edge workplace skills, acquire competencies and knowledge, and have a clear career vision in order to meet the objectives of career planning. Attending training sessions, acquiring soft skills, coordinating personal and professional career objectives, advancing up the job ladder, obtaining a new position, and more are all examples of career planning (Chlebikova et al., 2015, Gould, 2006).

In order to prevent employees from feeling disappointed, losing motivation, and experiencing a decline in their performance and productivity, organizations should ensure that all career routes are designed and promoted to provide a sense of job security, respect, and importance (Baruch, Y., 1996). In order to accomplish personal and organizational growth, boost profitability, and improve job satisfaction, management and HR departments must align the interests, needs, and goals of the company and its people. Key players in the planning and execution of employees' career paths include management, human resources departments and managers, and the employee themselves. They also design their own career paths, implement their own career goals, and support their professional development (Setiawan and Liestiwati, 2024).

A method of career planning: coaching

There are several methods and ways to develop and design the career path of employees, career coaching is one these (Stevens, 1998).

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) is a renowned international organization for coaches. ICF defines coaching as follows: 'Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires clients to maximize their personal and professional potential. The process of coaching often unlocks previously untapped sources of imagination, productivity and leadership. We all have goals we want to reach; challenges we are striving to overcome and times when we feel stuck. Partnering with a coach can change the client's life, set-

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ting the client on a path to greater personal and professional fulfilment.’ (<https://coachingfederation.org/about>)

The client or coachee and the coach engage in a collaborative, supportive, and dynamic two-way process during the coaching session. The coachee will identify a course of action in which he takes specific steps to solve his problem and find solutions on his own after becoming aware of his inner self, cognitive resources, and true desire, which removes the client’s mental barriers related to the session’s topic.

The fundamental beliefs, skills, and conduct of an ICF coach have been established by ICF. Every value, skill, and behaviour are equally significant, aspirational, and complementary to the others. These competencies and principles serve as a framework for comprehending and applying ICF standards during the coaching session. To be successful and effective, ICF coaches must adopt and exhibit ICF core competencies in their coaching sessions, as well as embody ICF fundamental values. The coach

1. exhibits the values and principles of coaching;
2. exemplifies, cultivates, and upholds an open, inquisitive, adaptable, and client-centred coaching attitude;
3. establishes and upholds the coaching agreement regarding the coaching relationship, process, plans, and goals;
4. fosters a relationship of mutual respect and trust by providing a safe, supportive environment in which the client can freely share;
5. maintains presence by being fully aware and present with the client and using an open, flexible, grounded, and confident style;
6. communicates effectively, listens intently, and focuses on what the client is and is not saying to fully understand the client;
7. evokes awareness of the client by facilitating client insight and learning through the use of tools and techniques like powerful questioning, silence, metaphor, or analogy;
8. fosters and facilitates client growth and learning;
9. and encourages client autonomy during the coaching process. (<https://coachingfederation.org/credentials-and-standards/core-competencies>)

Career coaching

The purpose of career coaching (Gasparovich et al., 2023, Kauffeld et al., 2022, Spurk et al., 2015) or transition coaching (Terblanche, 2020) is to assist employees in determining their career path, choosing a training program, a school, or a university, choosing or changing a job or organization, improving job communication, resolving organizational conflicts, and increasing motivation. Career coaching is a set of coaching approaches that assist employees in making the best career decisions by removing mental barriers and environmental workplace challenges, such as disability (Rutigliano and Hyland, 2013).

Mental barriers are unpleasant memories and experiences from the past, such as unfulfilled needs, negative emotions, stigmatization, lack of personal commitments, unpleasant memories and experiences at work, and outdated values. These can lead to the development of a number of beliefs and values that limit and demotivate an employee’s ability to pursue a successful career path. The employee is therefore unable to tackle

obstacles related to their profession and workplace, make wise judgments, and find solutions (Islam et al., 2020).

Environmental workplace barriers can also make it difficult and demotivating for an employee to find the right workplace solutions for his career. These include non-standardization of organizational processes, inappropriate job descriptions and job assessment centres, organizational culture, organizational behaviour, traditional management, inappropriate recruiting and hiring processes, organizational conflicts, reporting system defects, etc. (Islam et al., 2020, Rutigliano and Hyland, 2013).

The role of soft skills

In the contemporary knowledge economy, the value of soft skills – non-technical interpersonal and cognitive skills – has gained increasing recognition in both education and the labour market. As industries undergo rapid technological advancements, and globalization reshapes workforce dynamics, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, and emotional intelligence have become critical for career success and personal growth. This part of our secondary research explores the pivotal role of soft skills, with a focus on recent developments between 2020 and 2025, highlighting their significance in educational settings and their impact on employability and workplace productivity.

Soft skills are the foundation of effective communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. They allow individuals to navigate complex social environments and respond to challenges with creativity and empathy. These skills, while often considered intangible, have measurable impacts on productivity and job satisfaction, as evidenced by numerous studies conducted in the last five years. In education, soft skills prepare students not only for academic success but also for lifelong learning and adaptability in an ever-changing world.

Research conducted from 2020 to 2025 underscores the growing emphasis on soft skills. A report by the World Economic Forum (2023) identifies soft skills as integral to navigating the Fourth Industrial Revolution, where automation and artificial intelligence are reshaping job requirements. Studies, such as those by Smith et al. (2021) and Zhang & Lee (2022), emphasize that while technical competencies remain essential, employers increasingly prioritize soft skills when making hiring decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated the recognition of soft skills. As remote work became the norm, skills such as adaptability, digital communication, and self-management emerged as critical for maintaining productivity. Johnson & Nguyen (2023) highlight the role of digital literacy as a key component of soft skills in the modern workforce, arguing that the ability to navigate online tools is now as important as traditional communication skills.

Educational frameworks have responded by integrating soft skills development into curricula. For instance, Anderson and Perez (2024) analyse the shift towards competency-based education, which incorporates teamwork, problem-solving, and communication skills into learning outcomes. Moreover, hybrid learning models – accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic – have highlighted the importance of adaptability and digital literacy as part of soft skills education (Johnson & Nguyen, 2023).

Soft skills on the labour market

The labour market's demand for soft skills reflects broader economic and social trends. Employers seek candidates who can thrive in diverse, interdisciplinary teams and adapt to dynamic work environments. According to a Deloitte survey (2022), 92% of executives consider soft skills equally or more important than technical skills.

Key industries, including healthcare, technology, and creative sectors, illustrate this trend. For instance, healthcare professionals require empathy and effective communication to provide patient-centred care, while tech professionals benefit from teamwork and innovative thinking in collaborative projects (Miller et al., 2023).

Soft skills also play a critical role in leadership. Managers who demonstrate emotional intelligence, active listening, and conflict resolution skills foster more productive and cohesive teams. A study by Wilson and Harper (2025) found that organizations prioritizing soft skills in leadership development programs reported a 25% increase in employee satisfaction and retention.

The role of hard skills

Hard skills – technical, measurable abilities specific to particular tasks or industries – remain fundamental in education and the labour market. As the global economy becomes more specialized, the mastery of hard skills is essential for individuals seeking to secure employment and excel in their careers. This article examines the critical role of hard skills, focusing on developments from 2020 to 2025, and analyses their integration into educational frameworks and their influence on workforce demands.

Hard skills are the building blocks of technical proficiency. From coding and data analysis to carpentry and welding, these skills enable individuals to perform specific tasks with precision and efficiency. In an era of rapid technological advancement, hard skills are not only a requirement for entry into many professions but also a key driver of innovation and economic growth.

The importance of hard skills is reinforced by research from 2020 to 2025, which highlights their role in addressing skill shortages and advancing technological innovation. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022) identifies proficiency in digital technologies, data analysis, and specialized trades as crucial for economic competitiveness.

Educational institutions have adapted to these demands by revising curricula to include industry-relevant training. For example, studies by Davis and Singh (2021) emphasize the growing popularity of vocational education and training (VET) programs, which equip students with practical skills for specific careers. Similarly, the integration of artificial intelligence and machine learning into STEM education has expanded opportunities for students to develop cutting-edge technical expertise (Chen & Park, 2023).

Technological advancements have also reshaped the nature of hard skills. Fields such as cybersecurity, renewable energy, and biotechnology have emerged as high-demand areas, requiring specialized training and continuous learning. Research by Patel and Chen (2024) highlights the need for adaptive curricula that respond to evolving industry standards.

The incorporation of hard skills into education involves both theoretical instruction and hands-on practice. Vocational education and training programs play a pivotal role in preparing students for industry-specific roles. For instance, welding, carpentry, and electrical engineering courses provide practical skills aligned with employer needs (Hernandez et al., 2024).

Higher education institutions have also emphasized interdisciplinary approaches, combining hard skills with problem-solving techniques. Research by Green and Lopez (2023) demonstrates the effectiveness of internships and cooperative education programs in bridging the gap between academic learning and workplace application.

Apprenticeships and industry partnerships further enhance the relevance of hard skills training. Programs that integrate classroom learning with on-the-job experience allow students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. This approach not only improves technical proficiency but also fosters a deeper understanding of industry standards and expectations.

Hard skills on the labour market

Hard skills are essential for economic growth and innovation. Industries such as technology, manufacturing, and healthcare rely heavily on technical expertise. The demand for cybersecurity professionals, for example, has surged due to increasing digital threats, as noted by Jones et al. (2023).

Moreover, reskilling and upskilling initiatives have gained prominence as workers adapt to technological advancements. Government-funded programs and private sector collaborations aim to provide training in areas such as coding, robotics, and green technologies (Smith et al., 2024). These initiatives address skill mismatches and enhance employability.

Hard skills also play a crucial role in entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs who possess technical expertise in areas such as software development or engineering are better equipped to innovate and create market-disrupting solutions. Research by Tan and Wilson (2025) suggests that fostering hard skills in entrepreneurship education leads to higher rates of start-up success.

There is a lot of opportunity for using career coaching in organizations because it is a relatively new way to assist individuals in their careers. However, the effectiveness of career coaching has not been thoroughly studied due to its novelty. Research on career coaching for HR managers is generally lacking. It can be claimed that HR managers seem to be demotivated and unhappy regarding their career planning and future promotion. At the same time, coaching techniques proved to be useful to remove mental barriers and create a sense of empowerment and motivation in HR managers.

Findings and discussion

Coaching is effective for workplace outcomes

Workplace coaching produces small-to-moderate positive effects across several outcomes, including skill acquisition, performance, well-being and goal attainment (Cannon-Bowers et al., 2023). These findings support the study's central empirical claim that coaching produced meaningful changes in HR managers' motivation, perceived capability and behavioural intentions. The meta-analytic literature also highlights that effect sizes vary by outcome and intervention design; coaching pro-

duces larger effects on self-regulatory and attitudinal outcomes (motivation, self-efficacy) than on some objective performance metrics, which mirrors the study's pattern (stronger attitudinal and planning shifts than immediately measurable promotion outcomes).

Coaching reduces leader burnout and increases vigour – implications for HR managers

Recent controlled studies find that structured coaching interventions for leaders reduce symptoms of burnout and increase vigour and psychological well-being (Brooks et al., 2023). Because many study participants reported burnout, exhaustion and low family-support resources prior to coaching, the observed improvements in agency and reduced indifference are consistent with the literature that positions coaching as a psychosocial resource that buffers stress and restores motivational resources. This mechanism is particularly salient for HR managers, who frequently operate in emotionally-demanding roles with high expectations for supporting others while receiving little role-centred support themselves.

Coaching enhances leader effectiveness through identity and efficacy processes

Empirical work on leadership coaching indicates that coaching can improve leader effectiveness by strengthening authentic and change-oriented leadership behaviours and increasing managerial self-efficacy. Such mechanisms – insight, behavioural rehearsal, and strengthened self-efficacy – align with participants' reports of improved communication with senior managers and clearer action plans. For HR managers, whose remit often includes advising and influencing senior leaders, increases in coaching-related self-efficacy plausibly translate into greater effectiveness in negotiating career paths and process improvements for their functions.

Macro-level skill demands (WEF, Deloitte, sector reports) and the role of soft/hard skills

Recent policy and industry analyses (World Economic Forum Future of Jobs reports; Deloitte human capital publications) emphasise that the labour market increasingly requires a blended portfolio of cognitive, technical and socio-emotional skills. Employers anticipate substantial skill disruption and emphasise cognitive and interpersonal skills as critical complements to technical competencies. In that context, the study's emphasis on combining soft-skill development (communication, emotional regulation, negotiation) with upskilling in technical HR processes (data literacy, HR analytics, role design) is consistent with what employers and policymakers now identify as essential for career resilience and progression. For HR managers—whose role increasingly includes HR-analytics, strategic workforce planning and change management—the integration of hard and soft skill development is both necessary and urgent.

A recurrent theme in participants' reflections was the identification of concrete skill gaps after coaching (e.g., more assertive upward communication; basic HR analytics competence). Coaching thus appears to operate as a diagnostic-plus-motivational intervention: it increases clarity about which soft skills (communication, conflict management, emotional intelligence) and hard skills (data use in HR, process mapping) to prioritise. Integrating the study's findings with recent sector

reports suggests that targeted skill acquisition following coaching positions HR managers to: (a) advocate for role redesign, (b) document performance and business impact in data-driven language, and (c) assume strategic responsibilities – all of which improve career mobility.

Coaching as a normative lever inside organisations

Coaching also affected participants' capacity to navigate organisational constraints more effectively: improved communication with senior managers and clearer articulation of development requests reduced barriers rooted in organisational processes. In other words, coaching changed not only individual cognitions but also the interpersonal strategies HR managers used to negotiate institutional gatekeepers. This is consistent with literature showing that leader-coaching behaviours and coaching programmes can alter organisational climates for development (i.e., increase psychological safety for career conversations) and thereby amplify individual gains.

Differential effects: when coaching helps most

The study's results and the broader evidence base suggest several moderators that determine the magnitude and durability of coaching effects for HR managers.

Coachees who enter with some career-related goals and intrinsic motivation tend to derive more concrete skill plans and action steps. Coaching can jumpstart motivation in demotivated participants (as the study shows), but sustained progress requires ongoing engagement.

Coaching effects are amplified when organisations have transparent career frameworks, role ladders, or agreed CPD budgets. Lack of organisational pathways constrains how much coaching can translate into promotions or role changes.

Interventions aligned to core coaching competencies (ICF frameworks) and delivered by trained practitioners produced more consistent outcomes in the literature; poor fidelity reduces measurable impact.

Coaching that leads to concrete next steps for technical upskilling (courses, secondments, project assignments) is more likely to be associated with long-term career movement than coaching which addresses only attitudinal barriers.

Practical implications for HR practice and policy

From the empirical pattern and the wider literature, several actionable recommendations follow for organisations, HR functions and HR managers themselves.

Although HR personnel manage career processes for others, they often lack equivalent development support. The study demonstrates that targeted career coaching for HR managers improves clarity, agency and skills intent—outcomes that justify dedicated programmes and budgets. Organisations should therefore embed career coaching for HR as a standard element of talent management.

Coaching should be linked to specific hard-skill development opportunities (HR analytics training, project assignments, secondments) and supported with time/resources. Without such linkages, coaching may increase motivation but fail to create observable career movement. The WEF and industry reports underscore the importance of combining socio-emotional development with technical skill building.

Managerial coaching behaviour fosters a development climate and reduces turnover intention; training managers to coach and establishing transparent performance and promotion criteria will increase the return on coaching investments. The literature also suggests that managerial confidence in coaching is imperfect (only a portion of managers report confidence to coach for career development), so explicit training and accreditation for internal coaches is recommended.

To move beyond self-reported gains, organisations should collect multi-source evidence (self, peer, supervisor, behavioural metrics) and track participants over time to establish whether coaching-driven intentions produce sustained skill change and career movement. Meta-analytic reviews emphasise the need for more rigorous measurement strategies.

The study's empirical findings – that HR managers often enter coaching with low career clarity and motivation, but that coaching reliably increases agency, clarifies skill needs (both soft and hard) and improves strategy for navigating organisational barriers—are consistent with the broader, recent evidence base. Meta-analytic and targeted studies indicate that coaching produces meaningful improvements in self-efficacy, well-being and managerial behaviours; policy and employer reports emphasise that blended portfolios of soft and hard skills are essential for career resilience in the current labour market. Together, the evidence supports a model in which coaching acts as both a diagnostic and motivational catalyst: it reveals skill priorities, increases self-regulatory capacity, and, when linked to structural upskilling pathways and organisational support, materially improves career trajectories for HR managers.

For organisations this implies three concrete priorities: (1) allocate coaching resources deliberately to HR professionals as well as other leaders; (2) integrate coaching with concrete technical upskilling and career architecture; and (3) measure outcomes with multi-source, longitudinal designs to ensure that attitudinal gains translate into sustained career progress. These steps will help convert the promise of career coaching – clearly visible in the present study and the recent literature – into measurable organisational and individual returns.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of our study, we concluded that career paths for human resources managers should be planned to encourage and support their own professional and organizational development, as well as to remove organizational and mental obstacles in the process. Because coaching fosters awareness, helps eliminate organizational and mental barriers brought on by prior experiences and organizational traditions, and opens up fresh ideas to solve problems, it can be a useful tool in this regard. Coaching increases motivation to solve a problem on one's own by removing organizational and mental barriers.

The role of soft skills in education and the labour market is increasingly vital in an interconnected and rapidly evolving world. Educational institutions and employers must collaborate to bridge skill gaps, ensuring that students and workers are equipped with the competencies needed for success. By prioritizing soft skills, societies can foster more resilient and adaptable individuals, better prepared to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the future.

Investing in soft skills development is not merely an educational or economic imperative; it is a societal one. As technol-

ogy continues to advance, human-centric skills will define the future of work, enabling individuals to thrive in roles that machines cannot replicate. Policymakers, educators, and industry leaders must work together to ensure that soft skills are recognized and nurtured as a cornerstone of human potential.

The role of hard skills in education and the labour market is indispensable for fostering innovation and addressing workforce demands. By aligning educational programs with industry needs, stakeholders can ensure that individuals are equipped with the technical expertise required for economic development. As technology continues to evolve, the emphasis on hard skills will remain a cornerstone of educational and professional success.

In the context of a rapidly changing world, hard skills serve as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Policymakers, educators, and industry leaders must collaborate to create dynamic training programs that anticipate future skill requirements. By doing so, they can empower individuals to thrive in a competitive global economy and drive sustainable progress for society as a whole.

The study itself – like much of the coaching literature – faces several limitations that should temper interpretation and guide future work. The study yields robust attitudinal and intention data but limited long-term objective career outcome data (e.g., lower fluctuation, promotion, salary change). Future studies should adopt longitudinal designs with objective career markers. More research is needed on how coaching interacts with organisational structures (e.g., pay bands, promotion criteria, succession pipelines), with different cultural backgrounds and contexts, and whether certain structural reforms are necessary to harvest coaching gains. Coaching is resource-intensive. Future research should compare high-touch coaching with lower-touch scaled alternatives (group coaching, digital micro-coaching, AI-assisted coaching) in terms of cost, fidelity and outcomes. Recent discussions about AI augmentation of coaching indicate promise but require ethical and effectiveness evaluation.

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