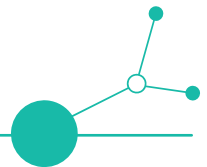


# x-Inno Radar simple survey report

## overall evaluation



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# SIMPLE SOFT SKILLS SURVEY

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# 1. Introduction / x-Inno Radar Project

Soft skills - i.e. interdisciplinary, non-technical skills such as communication, teamwork or problem-solving skills - are highly in the modern working world. They describe character and interpersonal skills that determine how effectively someone interacts with others. Soft skills therefore complement technical hard skills and are closely linked to the concept of emotional intelligence. In times of rapid technological change and automation, these "soft" skills are becoming even more important: global surveys show that for nine out of ten managers, soft skills are more important today than ever before. For example, according to LinkedIn 2024, communication skills, teamwork and problem solving are among the top skills employers are looking for worldwide. Soft skills are therefore no longer just "niceties", but essential success factors in professional life.

At the same time, recent studies indicate that many companies lack suitable soft skills. In one study, 75% of employers stated that they could not find talented people with the necessary soft skills. This highlights a soft skills gap in the labour market. Without targeted development of these skills, there is a risk of performance losses - according to a study by StepStone/Kienbaum, companies with adequately trained employee skills achieve a 23% higher performance. Conversely, the promotion of soft skills can bring considerable benefits: A field experiment in India showed that a soft skills training programme achieved a return on investment of 250% within a few months (mainly through productivity gains). In addition to companies, employees also benefit personally - for example through increased self-confidence and better career opportunities.

With this in mind, the x-Inno consortium conducted a comprehensive survey in eight European regions. The aim was to ascertain the status quo and the needs relating to soft skills in order to design measures for skills development on this basis. The regions include *Upper Austria (AT)*, the *Province of Limburg (BE)*, *Zahodna Slovenija/Western Slovenia (SI)*, *Chemnitz (DE)*, *Veneto (IT)*, *Śląskie/Silesia (PL)*, *Severozápad/North-West Bohemia (CZ)* and *Východné Slovensko/Eastern Slovakia (SK)*. Adults from different occupational groups and sectors were surveyed. This report presents the results of the survey and derives scientifically sound but practical recommendations for the promotion of soft skills in the respective regions.

First, the method and sample are briefly explained, followed by a presentation of key findings. These include the soft skills considered important, preferred learning locations, development needs, perceived challenges in the working environment and attitudes towards the importance of soft skills. Regional characteristics are worked out in order to identify specific needs for action. Based on this, the report formulates concrete recommendations - from further training opportunities and awareness - raising campaigns to the involvement of companies and educational institutions - with the aim of strengthening the soft skills of the population in all participating regions. A concise conclusion summarises the most important points.

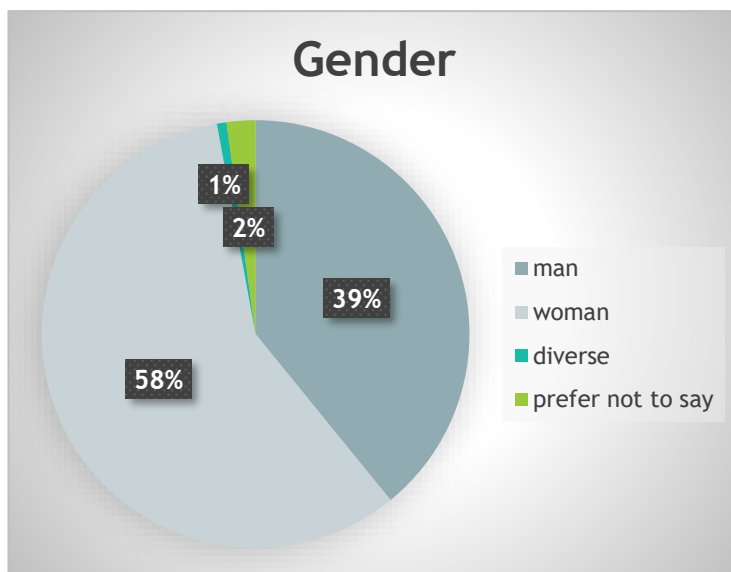
## 2. Methodology of the survey

The survey was conducted in spring 2025 as an online questionnaire in the respective national languages. It was aimed at people of working age and was conducted via regional networks, social media and multipliers. A total of N = 138 valid questionnaires were evaluated. The participants



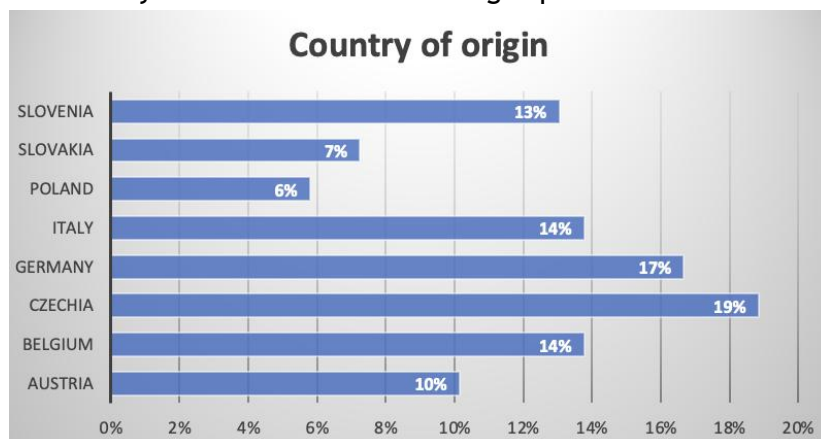
were distributed relatively heterogeneously across the eight regions (between 8 and 26 people per region) and covered various professional areas.

Sample composition: Around 58% of respondents were women, 39% men; 1 person identified as diverse, 3 did not want to state their gender. The age distribution was predominantly in the middle of the working age range: around 61% were in the 31-50 age range, 13.8% were younger (15-30), 23.2% between 51-65, and only ~2% older than 65. The education level of the participants was high: two thirds (~65%) had a university degree, a further ~16% had a high school diploma, ~7% had vocational training, only 2% compulsory schooling; around 9% stated "other" qualifications. The respondents came from various professional fields, most frequently from the arts/culture/creative industries (~33%), public administration (~14%), trade/services (~14%) and management consultancy (~10%), as well as education (~9%), production/industry (~5%), IT (~2%), research (~1.5%), social sector (~2%), etc. Within the companies themselves, 24.6% held leadership positions (managers), 15.2% were CEOs, 18.8% clerical/administrative, 7.2% in production, 16.7% self-employed, and ~17% in other roles. This structure indicates that many participants hold managerial or qualified positions - their perspectives therefore also partly reflect employer or management views. At the same time, certain groups (e.g. unskilled workers, very young career starters) are largely missing, which must be taken into account when interpreting the data.



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The survey was conducted in the eight partner countries with the aim of generating at least 15 responses per country in order to be able to produce a meaningful evaluation for each country and to generate summary ideas and suggestions for the regions of the participating countries. A total of 138 people responded to the survey. 14 surveys were completed in Austria, 19 in Belgium, 26 in the Czech Republic, 23 in Germany, 19 in Italy, 18 in Slovenia, unfortunately only 8 in Poland, and only 10 in Slovakia. The percentage distribution of the survey is shown in the graph. The exact regional distribution can be found in the region-specific report.



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**Questionnaire content:** The questionnaire comprised both closed multiple-choice questions and open free-text fields. Central topic blocks were: (1) Important soft skills in the career to date (respondents selected the 5 most important from a list of ~12 skills), (2) Origin of these skills (multiple choice, where these skills were mainly acquired - e.g. "at work", "at school", etc.), (3) Soft skills that one would like to develop (up to 3 entries from an extended list), (4) Reasons why one would like to develop them (motivations, up to 3 from list), (5) Experience with soft skills training (whether ever participated in training, and if so, what type of course and provider), (6)



Particularly valued qualities in colleagues (up to 5 from list of qualities), (7) Most pressing challenges in the company (up to 3 from list), (8) Ideas on how to overcome these challenges (open question), (9) Measures to improve skills in the work environment (suggestions, multiple choice), (10) Attitudes towards statements about soft skills (4 Likert statements, e.g. "Soft skills are just as important as the other skills", "Soft skills are just as important as hard skills", agreement on a scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree"), as well as socio-demographic information (region, gender, age, education, professional field, role).

The evaluation was carried out descriptively and statistically. Multiple answers were evaluated both in terms of the frequency of responses and the proportion of people who selected an option. Open responses were categorised according to content and interpreted qualitatively. Due to the relatively limited sample size and the unevenly distributed number of participants per region, the results are not representative in a statistical sense. However, they provide valuable insights into patterns, needs and differences with regard to soft skills in the participating regions. The results are systematically presented below.

The survey (<https://survey.x-inno-radar.eu/>) conducted records the state of soft skills in various European regions, with participants providing information on the following areas:

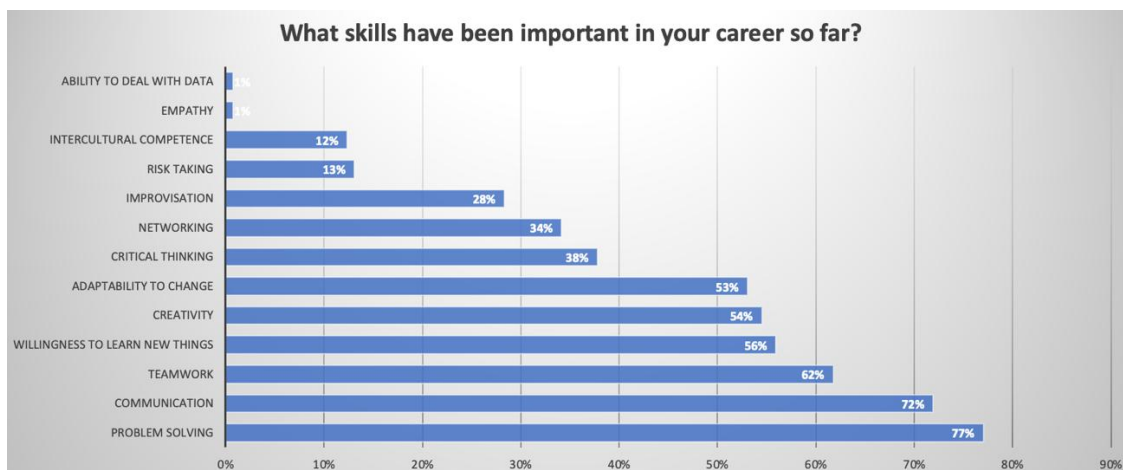
- Soft skills courses offered or completed
- Assessment of various soft skills from professional experience
- Skills with the greatest need for development
- Challenges for regional economic development
- Organisations offering soft skills development
- Available soft skills development formats
- Regional collaboration on soft skills development

## 3. Key findings of the survey

### 3.1. Most important soft skills in your professional life to date

The survey began by asking which soft skills had been the most important for the respondents' careers to date. Each participant marked the five most important skills for them from a list of predetermined soft skills (with the option to add any additional skills). The result paints a clear picture: problem solving, communication and teamwork lead the ranking. Almost 77% of respondents named "problem solving" among their top 5, followed by communication (72%) and teamwork (62%). The willingness to learn new things (56%), creativity (54%) and adaptability to change (53%) were also frequently mentioned. This means that the most important soft skills in everyday life largely coincide with those that are considered to be particularly in demand globally.

Slightly less, but still mentioned by a significant proportion, were critical thinking (around 38% of respondents named it among the top 5) and networking (networking skills, ~34%). Improvisational skills followed with 28%. The willingness to take risks (~13%) and intercultural competence (~12%) were ranked much less frequently among the most important skills. Only occasionally (1 person each) did respondents mention additional aspects such as "empathy" or "handling data" as a key career skill - these did not play a significant role in the overall sample.

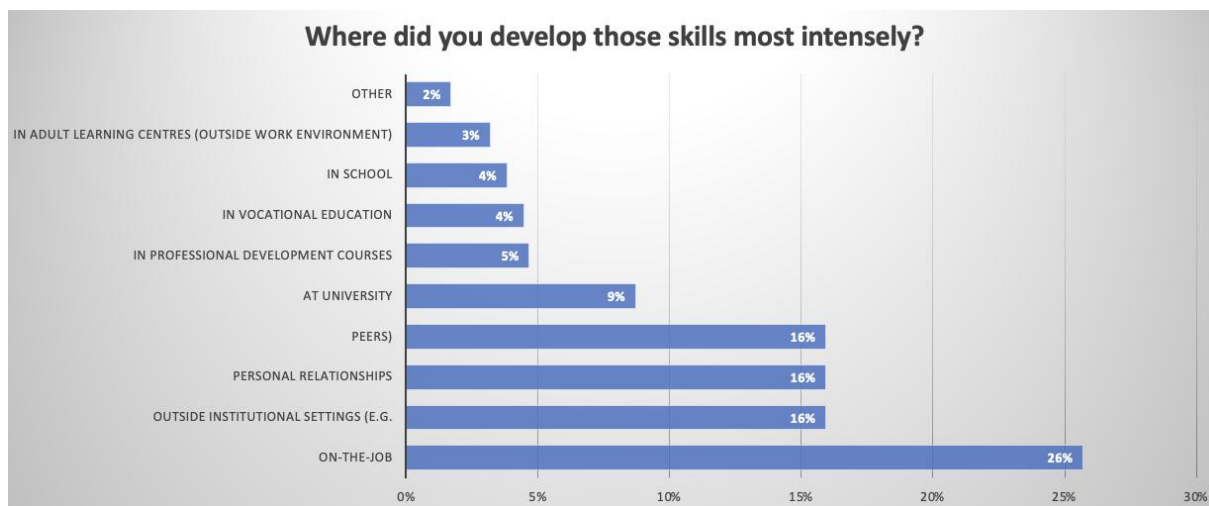


The ranking of this importance shows that it is primarily **social and cognitive soft skills** that have shaped people's success in their professional lives to date. **Interpersonal communication and collaboration** (communication, teamwork, networking) and **analytical-creative skills** (problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, improvisation) dominate. This underlines the fact that professional progress is not only based on specialist knowledge but is also largely driven by such interdisciplinary skills. It is also interesting to note that **the willingness to learn** - i.e. the meta-skill of constantly acquiring new knowledge - was rated very highly (over half of those surveyed). In view of the rapid changes in technology and the world of work, continuous learning is seen as a success factor, which fits in well with current forecasts that lifelong learning has become an indispensable reality.

Even if "hard" technical skills were not asked directly in the questionnaire, their importance is reflected indirectly: for example, some participants rated "ability to deal with data" or specialist knowledge as important. In the later questions (e.g. on valued colleague characteristics), it is also clear that **technical expertise** is definitely valued - but in combination with soft skills. Overall, however, this result confirms that **soft skills have a significant impact on a professional career** and are seen as an essential basis for day-to-day work.

### 3.2. Acquiring soft skills - where are they learned?

A key interest of the survey was how and where people acquired these important skills. Respondents were able to select all applicable learning locations. The result is clear: most soft skills are developed "on the job", i.e. directly in the workplace. Around three quarters (estimated ~26%) of participants stated that they had learned their important skills primarily through practical experience on the job. Informal learning "outside institutional contexts" was also mentioned very frequently - by around 16% - e.g. in personal relationships, through hobbies or in exchanges with friends (this was stated as a summarised point in the questionnaire).



This makes it clear that **experience and informal learning** are the main sources of soft skills. Traditional educational institutions play a lesser role: although around 9% of respondents said that they had acquired important soft skills at **university/college**, **school** was only mentioned by around 4% as well as **vocational training or further training** (e.g. apprenticeship/vocational school) by ~4% and **further education courses** outside the work of such as **adult education institutions** were mentioned even less frequently (3%). A few mentioned other sources of learning such as voluntary services, makerspaces or simply "through life experience".

This distribution suggests that the **formal education system has not yet taught soft skills systematically enough**, at least in the perception of those surveyed. Instead, people acquire soft skills primarily *in the work process* and *in everyday life*. This is in line with the assessment that soft skills are difficult to teach in formal courses and are rather developed through practical application and social learning. However, this entails the risk that soft skill development is left to chance or the individual environment - and that differences in corporate or regional cultures mean that some people have fewer opportunities to develop skills than others. Accordingly, many experts call for soft skills to be specifically integrated into the education system. Our later results on question 10 support this: Over 90% of respondents believe soft skills training should be explicitly embedded in schools and universities.

**Conclusion:** At the moment, **the workplace and everyday life are the "schools" of soft skills**. Companies act as places of learning - be it through *learning by doing*, through colleagues as role models or mentors, or through overcoming challenges on the job. On the one hand, this finding emphasises the responsibility of employers to create a working environment in which soft skills can grow (e.g. through a feedback culture, team projects, etc.). On the other hand, it also highlights the need to catch up in the formal education system so that young people start their careers with developed soft skills and are not "thrown in at the deep end".

### 3.3. Soft skills that need to be developed further

The survey also asked: **Which soft skills would the respondents themselves like to develop in the future?** Each respondent could tick up to 3 skills in which he or she sees a need for personal development. The picture here differs to some extent from that of the most important skills to date - the participants evidently perceive gaps, particularly in areas that will become more important in the future.

It is striking that a more **technical skill** is mentioned in first place: around 33% of respondents would like to acquire more **software skills** (software proficiency). This may come as a surprise,

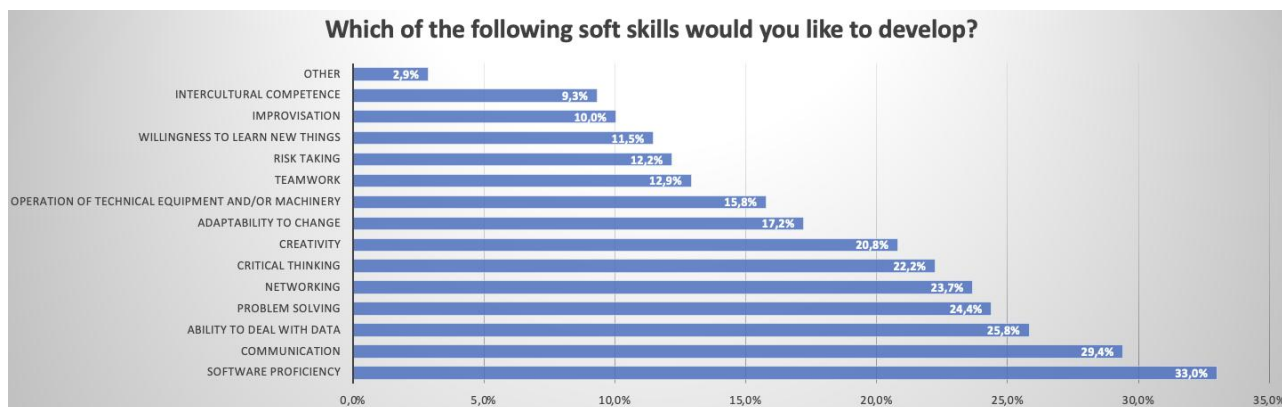


Figure 1: Desired further development - proportion of mentions for soft skills that respondents would like to develop. ( Each respondent could choose up to 3; therefore total >100 %).

as IT skills are strictly speaking hard skills - however, many participants evidently consider basic digital skills to be so essential that they were also asked about them in this context. Similarly high (in second place) is **improving communication** (~29%). Although communication was often mentioned as a strength, this also appears to be the area with the greatest desire for development - possibly because communication requirements are constantly increasing (e.g. due to international teams, virtual collaboration, etc.).

In third place comes the desire to be able to **handle data** better (~26%). This is also a semi-technical skill that is becoming increasingly relevant in the age of big data and AI. There is therefore a **strong interest in digital and data-related skills** in our sample. In addition, many want to further develop their traditional soft skills: **Problem-solving skills** (~24%), **networking** (~24%), **critical thinking** (~22%) and **creativity** (~21%) are close behind. These results indicate that the respondents believe they still have room for improvement in these areas - although they also know how important these skills are (see above).

Development goals were mentioned less frequently: **Adaptability** (~17%), **handling technical equipment/machinery** (~16%; mainly relevant in industrial contexts), **improving teamwork** (~13%), **risk-taking** (~12%), **willingness to learn** (~12% - it is already relatively high, but apparently some would like to cultivate this meta-skill further), **improvisation** (~10%) and **intercultural competence** (~9%). Very few chose "other" and specifically mentioned, for example, *gamification methods*, *self-motivation* or (once in Flemish) "*Leiding geven*" (leading) as a desired skill. These individual cases show individual characteristics, but do not reveal a broad pattern.

Overall, the development wishes reflect the advancing **digitalisation** on the one hand - basic digital skills and data literacy are apparently seen by many as a personal construction site. On the other hand, the **core soft skills of communication, problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity** remain highly relevant - apparently no one is "perfect" in these areas, but there is still room for improvement.

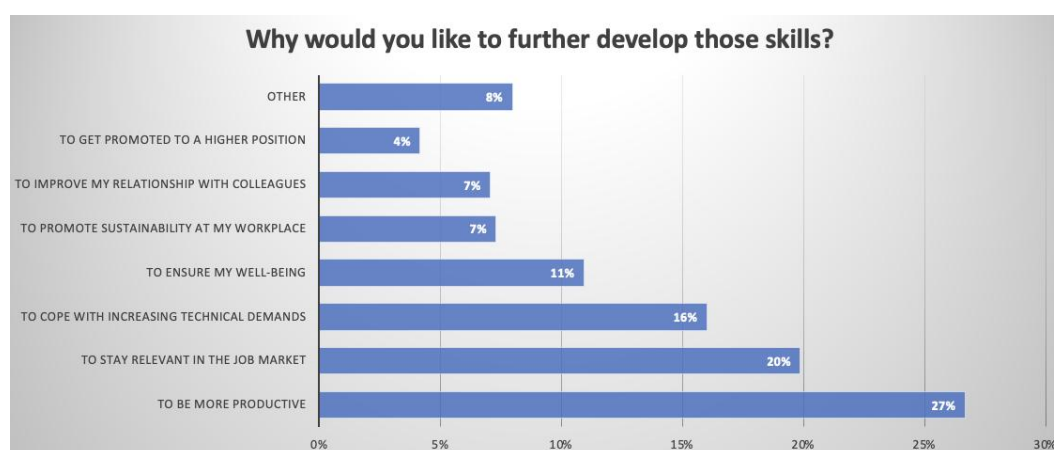
There is always room to become even better. This speaks for a **culture of lifelong learning**, which is implicitly accepted by the respondents. It is interesting that leadership was not explicitly asked about as a category; it is possible that it is indirectly included in other skills (communication, teamwork, etc.). As our sample includes many managers, it could be assumed that they are already good at leadership - or that they do not prioritise it as a development area.

### 3.4. Motives: Why develop soft skills?

Following the desired areas of development, respondents were asked **why** they would like to develop these soft skills further. Up to 3 reasons could be selected here. The answers provide an insight into the **anticipated benefits** of better soft skills from the participants' perspective:



The most frequently cited motivation is **"to be more productive"**. Around **27%** of all reasons given were related to increasing their own productivity. This suggests that many see a direct link between better soft skills (e.g. more efficient communication, better self-organisation) and their work performance. In second place is **"to stay relevant in the job market"** (~20%). Especially in a changing job market - keyword digitalisation, AI - many believe that they can secure their employability through soft skills. Soft skills are regarded as *transferable skills* that can be used in various professions and make people adaptable. This view is in line with forecasts that many employees will have to change jobs by 2030 and that soft skills will then determine employability.



Around **16%** of mentions were **"to cope with increasing technical requirements"**. This once again emphasises the link between soft skills and technology: adaptability, the ability to learn and perhaps also stress management are seen as a means of coping with technical dynamics of respondents cited the desire to **"ensure their own well-being"** as a reason for developing soft skills - for example by dealing better with stress (work-life balance, resilience) or reducing conflicts. Just under **7%** stated that they were interested in **"promoting more sustainable practices in the workplace"**. This group may see soft skills (such as communication, problem solving, critical thinking) as key to driving change towards sustainability. A similar proportion (~7%) want to use soft skills to **"improve relationships with colleagues"**, suggesting pro-social motives (e.g. better empathy or teamwork for a more pleasant working environment). Only **4%** of the motives mentioned were **career-oriented in the narrower sense ("to get promoted")** - most are therefore more concerned with day-to-day work effectiveness and long-term employability than with immediate promotion. Around cited other reasons are personal curiosity or specific plans.

In summary, **intrinsic career motives** dominate: increased performance, employability and the ability to cope with new challenges. **Extrinsic incentives** such as salary or position play a lesser role in the perception. The recognisable **link between soft skills and technology** is interesting - soft skills are seen as a prerequisite for keeping pace with technical changes. This confirms the assumption that in a working world characterised by technology, *human* skills are becoming a distinguishing feature.

### 3.5. Participation in soft skills training

Given the importance of practical learning, it is not surprising that **only a minority** have attended formal soft skills training. In response to the question "Have you ever had soft skills training?", **85%** answered **"no"**. Only **15%** (21 people) stated that they had participated in soft skills training.



This illustrates a great **opportunity to catch up**: obviously, the offer or willingness to participate has been rather low so far. Soft skills have mostly been learned implicitly "on the job" - few have attended specific courses to train communication or leadership techniques, for example.

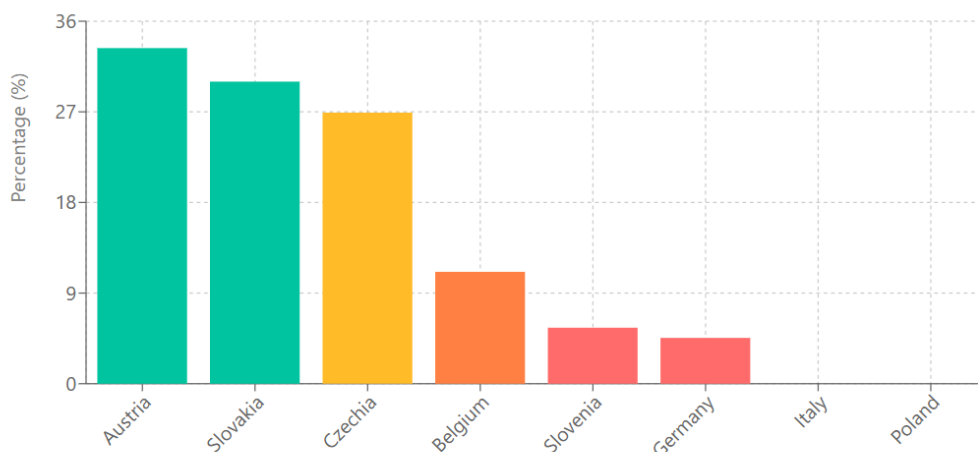
The approximately 15% who completed training courses mentioned very different course formats and topics, which shows that there is no uniform standard. For example, they mentioned **communication training, conflict management workshops, negotiation training, design thinking workshops,**

courses on **presentation skills or non-violent communication, leadership training** ("7 habits of highly effective people" was mentioned) and individual specialised seminars. Both **internal courses offered by employers** and **external training institutions** were mentioned as providers. For example, Austrian participants mentioned the WIFI and BFI (vocational training institutes), while others mentioned private trainers, NGOs, universities of applied sciences or EU programmes (Erasmus training). This diversity indicates that there is no comprehensive public offer for soft skills, but rather selective initiatives.



It was noticeable that the participation rate in soft skills training varies from region to region: In Upper Austria, for example, around 33% of respondents had already attended a course - so there seems to be comparatively more opportunity or interest there. The rate was also above average in eastern Slovakia (30%) and north-western Bohemia (27%). In the Chemnitz region, on the other hand, only 5% had attended training (only one person in 20), in western Slovenia around 6% - so there is a particularly great need to catch up or little experience with formal soft skills training here. In Veneto, none of the participants had ever undergone training. Overall, this suggests that **in some regions soft skills training is still hardly widespread**, while others already rely more heavily on it. Possible causes could lie in the regional further training landscape (e.g. more offers in Upper Austria) or in different corporate cultures (some companies promote it, others do not).

Training Rate by Country



These results show **great potential for future training measures**: Most employees have so far acquired soft skills *without* formal courses. In view of the high subjective relevance (both



importance and desire for further development), an expansion of training courses could meet with broad interest. It will be important to lower the inhibition thresholds - as many have obviously not seen any access or reason to attend such courses. This will be returned to in later sections (measures and recommendations).

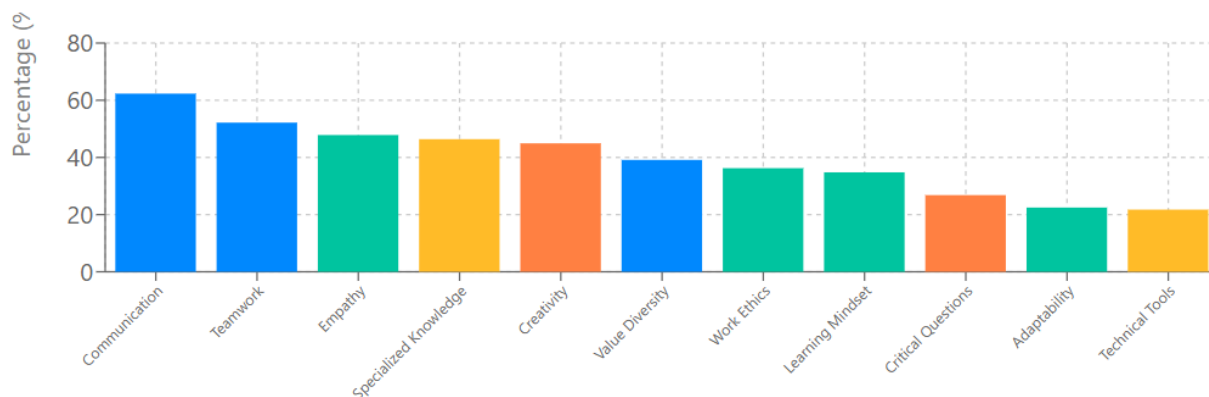
### 3.6. Valued qualities among colleagues and employees

Another question looked at **which characteristics the respondents value most in the people they work with**. This question aimed to indirectly understand which soft skills are perceived as particularly positive in the working environment - and whether professional strengths are also valued. Everyone could select up to 5 qualities that they find most important in colleagues/employees. The list included both soft skills (e.g. ability to work in a team, creativity, empathy) and hard factors (e.g. professional expertise, technical tool knowledge).

The top answer - in line with previous results - was **good communication skills**. Most of the respondents chose **"ability to communicate effectively"** as one of the most valued qualities of their colleagues. This was followed in second place by **the ability to work in a team** ("work well together in teams"), chosen by around 52%. This duo reflects the fact that smooth cooperation in day-to-day work is the most important thing for many. **Empathy** or "being empathic towards others" landed in 3rd place (mentioned by ~48%). This means that **social sensitivity and understanding** are highly valued in everyday working life - colleagues should be human and considerate.

Interestingly, a **hard skill** ranked almost on a par with empathy: **professional expertise** ("specialised knowledge in their field") was named as a valued quality by around 41%. This indicates that although the focus is on soft skills, colleagues also appreciate **professional expertise**. Good **specialist knowledge** and **skills in one's own field** are obviously seen as valuable - which is plausible, as teams naturally benefit from the expertise of their members. This result underlines **the fact that soft and hard skills should ideally go hand in hand**. A competent expert who is both communicative and a team player is considered particularly valuable. This is also consistent with personnel decisions: Employers are looking for applicants with a **good combination of hard and soft skills**.

All Qualities Comparison



This was followed by **creativity** and "unconventional, original thinking" (~45%), as well as **openness to different opinions** (~39%). The latter shows the appreciation of **tolerance and diversity competence**: colleagues should be able to respect and integrate different perspectives. A **willingness to learn** (35) and a **strong work ethic** (~36%, e.g. reliability, diligence) were also



frequently mentioned. **Critical inquiry** (a culture of questioning) was valued by 27%. **Adaptability** was cited by around 22%, as was **knowledge of specific technical tools**.

This response pattern illustrates an idealised image of the *perfect team member*: people want people who are **communicative, team-oriented, empathetic, creative and willing to learn**, but who are also **technically skilled and reliable**. In other words, **character counts, but so does competence**. It is noticeable that pure tool knowledge (e.g. being able to operate special software) ranks relatively low - the ability to communicate and work together is more important. This does not mean that technical competence is unimportant (it is in 4th place), but isolated technical skills without soft skills are obviously less valued. This assessment is also reflected in literature: in times when technical knowledge quickly becomes obsolete, soft skills often make the difference in performance and satisfaction.

For the development of soft skills, this means that **workplaces should offer an environment in which valued qualities can be practiced**. A culture of open communication, team orientation, mutual respect and knowledge sharing is desired by the employees themselves. Professional training should also not be neglected - soft skills complement hard skills, but do not replace them. This result underpins the demand for a **holistic skills model** in which both soft and hard skills are continuously promoted.

### 3.7. Most pressing challenges in the working environment

An important part of the survey was the question about the **biggest current challenges** in the respondents' organisation. Respondents could select up to 3 problem areas that their company or workplace is particularly struggling with. This question links the topic of soft skills with the organisational context: if we know which challenges are seen as urgent, we can deduce which skills would be needed to overcome them.

The top answer - chosen by around **55%** of respondents - was "**managing communication within the organisation**". This means that **internal communication** is by far the most widespread problem. This can mean many things: poor information flows, misunderstandings between departments, a lack of feedback culture or inefficient meetings. In any case, it shows that **communication deficits** are a key issue across all sectors. This result is consistent with the fact that although communication is highly valued and important, it is clearly not yet running optimally in many places. It underlines the urgency of addressing this (e.g. through communication training, transparent information policy, etc.).

The challenge of "**adapting to new technologies**" follows in second place with around **41%** of responses. **Digitalisation** therefore poses problems for many organisations - be it the introduction of new software, automation or the digital transformation of processes in general. Closely related to this (5th place with ~33%) is "**keeping pace with digital transformation**" - it can be assumed that respondents selected these two similar points interchangeably in some cases. Overall, it is clear that companies everywhere are struggling with the pace of technological change. Soft skills such as *adaptability, inquisitiveness* and *problem-solving skills* are becoming particularly relevant here in order to successfully shape this change.

"**Managing the work-life balance of employees**" is also mentioned very frequently (3rd place with ~38%). The topic of **work-life balance and overload** is therefore present - many see the balance between workload and private life as a pressing challenge in their organisation. This can indicate high stress levels, staff shortages or inefficient working time management. Soft skills that could help here are, for example, *self-management, stress management* and *empathy on the part of managers* in order to recognise overload. However, structural solutions (flexible working hours,



clear prioritisation) are also required - soft skills alone do not solve work-life problems, but they are part of the solution (e.g. good communication about expectations, etc.).

Close behind (4th place ~35%) is "**attracting and retaining talent**". The **shortage of skilled workers** and employee turnover are therefore also of concern to many. This implies that companies need to be attractive - which in turn is closely linked to **corporate culture** and leadership. Soft skills on the management side (appreciative communication, leadership skills) play a role here, as does a culture of employee development so that talented employees see growth prospects. The fact that this is one of the top 5 challenges is in line with the current labour market, where good employees are scarce and companies have to make an effort to offer a positive working environment.

In sixth place is "**achieve sustainability goals**" (~20%). It appears that around a fifth of the organisations in our sample are under pressure to operate more sustainably - either of their own accord or due to external requirements. Seeing this as a challenge means that change is needed. Soft skills such as *creative thinking* (to find sustainable solutions) and *persuasiveness* (to get everyone on board) are helpful here.

"**Keeping pace with legal requirements**" is almost on a par (approx. 15%). Bureaucracy and regulation are therefore also topics, albeit less universal. This is about *constant learning* (understanding new regulations) and *precise, conscientious work* - more technical or mental skills. Soft skills such as *organisational talent* and *attention to detail* would be in demand here.

Only very few (less than 10%) chose the "don't know/no response" option - most were therefore able to identify specific challenges. Some free responses mentioned additional points that did not fit into any of the above categories: **customer loyalty** was mentioned once (in German), as was **fundraising** (English), and two Italian participants mentioned things like "*survive economically and culturally*" in the face of ongoing crises. These specific mentions point to sector-specific or regional problems (e.g. in the cultural sector or for small businesses in Italy).

Overall, the top challenges paint a fairly consistent picture across the regions: **Internal communication, technology change, work-life balance and talent management** are the main construction sites. These coincide with many current studies and headlines: Communication problems and digitalisation are among the biggest upheavals in companies, as are the battle for skilled workers and the struggle for a sustainable but also human way of working. The results suggest that soft skills can be **part of the solution** to these challenges - but often in combination with organisational changes. Either way, the findings make it clear *where* the shoe pinches from the employees' perspective.

### 3.8. Suggestions for overcoming the challenges (free text)

The list of challenges was followed by an open question: "*How do you think these challenges can be overcome?*" Here the participants were able to describe possible solutions in their own words. 37 people responded, some of them in great detail. A qualitative analysis of these responses reveals some **recurring themes**:

- **Better communication & leadership:** Many cited **open, regular communication** within the company as key. For example, "honest and regular communication" was suggested, as well as "open communication and respect for every opinion". It was also emphasised that **management** plays an important role in communicating with employees ("proper communication from leadership to employees and adequate management"). Overall, the responses call for an **improvement in internal coordination**, breaking down silos and transparent exchange between departments. Some mentioned **common goals** and



"sensitivity in working together" - which aims to create a culture of mutual understanding and clarity.

- **Further training & opportunities for experimentation:** Many responses included the suggestion to expand **further training opportunities**. Specific mentions included *training courses and workshops* on relevant topics (e.g. digital skills or time management). In Upper Austria, one participant suggested creating "**spaces for experimentation (in terms of time, space, organisation)**" as well as "time resources for further training" - in other words, free spaces in which employees can try out and learn new things without any immediate pressure to perform. This points to the desire for a **learning culture** in which further training is seen as an integral part of work.
- **Team cohesion & personnel development:** Several contributions highlighted **team measures**, e.g. team-building activities, **putting together compatible teams**, promoting cooperation between colleagues (e.g. through mixed project groups). This aims to **improve cooperation** and reduce conflicts. The **involvement of all employees** was also mentioned - for example in Italy: "Involvement and constructive participation of all". What resonates here is that participation and co-determination help to overcome challenges together. Furthermore, some responses mentioned the need to **increase productivity and focus on the essentials**, including through delegation - which points to better *work management* and efficiency.
- **Resources & funding:** In Veneto in particular, it was mentioned that it would help to **better fund projects and expand teams** - in other words, simply to provide more resources to overcome challenges (e.g. overload or pressure to innovate). This aspect shows the limits of soft skills alone: without sufficient financial and human resources, even the best skills reach their limits.
- **Culture & values:** Some answers (implicitly) emphasised the development of an **open corporate culture**. Terms such as *honesty, respect, openness to criticism* appeared in various languages. This suggests that respondents consider a cultural change towards more trust and transparency to be necessary in order to solve the problems mentioned (communication, etc.).

In summary, the open answers call for **more communication, more training and better cooperation**. Many of the solutions mentioned relate directly to soft skills: communication, teamwork, leadership, willingness to learn. This confirms that the respondents see the relevance of soft skills as *a means of organisational development*. However, it is also addressed that organisational framework conditions are needed (time, money, personnel resources) for soft skills to be effective. These qualitative findings are incorporated into the subsequent recommendations - e.g. the need to train managers, introduce mentoring programmes or establish a culture of open communication.

### 3.9. Measures to improve soft skills in the working environment

Finally, in a closed question (question 9), participants were asked to indicate **which measures they thought would help to improve skills in their own working environment**. There were several specific suggestions to choose from, some of which were based on the previous open question. Again, everyone could select several (up to 3). The results show a **great willingness to take active measures** - very few believe that nothing needs to be done.



The most common suggestion was **"regular workshops or training"**. Almost **47%** of respondents chose this option. Obviously, many see traditional training formats as the most important lever for promoting soft skills. This figure corresponds with the low level of training diagnosed above - so there is a need to catch up and a desire for more training to be offered. In second place, **33%** mentioned **"peer mentoring and coaching"**. This shows that learning should not only take place formally in seminars, but also informally **from colleague to colleague**. Mentoring programmes in which experienced employees pass on their knowledge and soft skills to others or coaching by colleagues on an equal footing would be very popular.

This was closely followed by **"more cross-functional, joint projects"** with ~28%. This means that many believe that the best way to improve soft skills *on the job* is by deliberately creating opportunities for cross-functional collaboration. Such projects force you to get out of your comfort zone, communicate with new people and solve problems together - classic training for teamwork, adaptability and communication. This desire fits very well with the open answers above for more cooperation.

Around **20-23%** (in total) of participants are also in favour of **"integrating soft skills into employee appraisals"**. Specifically, ~20% were counted in favour of this option. This means that a fifth would support **including soft skills in target agreements, feedback and appraisal systems** in the workplace in order to make their promotion more binding. This idea was particularly popular in the Belgian region of Limburg (~44% in favour), which could indicate a culture of making soft skills measurable and rewardable.

Only **8%** of respondents (11 people) said **"no action needed"** - in other words, the overwhelming majority of ~92% see a need for action. In some regions, however, this "no action needed" proportion was slightly higher: in western Slovenia, around 22% (4 out of 18 people) said that no special action was required. This could indicate that some people there do not see the status quo as sufficient or do not (yet) consider the problems to be serious. In all other regions, this figure was below 13%.

The distributed responses also reveal regional differences in priorities. For example, **80%** of participants in eastern Slovakia were in favour of more **cross-sector projects** - significantly more than the average (28%). Similarly, they were in favour of mentoring and workshops. This indicates a strong desire for *practical learning opportunities* and exchange in this region, may be indicative of previously silo-like structures. In Upper Austria and Limburg, on the other hand, workshops were top of the list (~71-74% agreement each), while in Western Slovenia, for example, in addition to workshops and mentoring, a relatively large number (22%) said that no further actions were necessary (as mentioned). The Limburg region stood out with a high level of interest in **performance involvement** (42% vs. ~20% overall), while Chemnitz had a very low level (only there). This could mean that people in Limburg are willing to formally embed soft skills, whereas in Chemnitz more informal approaches are preferred (or soft skills are seen less as an assessment criterion there).

Overall, however, there is a clear consensus on the *need to take active steps*: Further training, mentoring and collaboration are seen as key measures. These results are in line with research findings that **soft skills can definitely be trained** - most effectively in **workshop formats** with practical exercises and through **experiential learning in a team**. It is important that such measures are supported by employers. The survey also shows that **87% of respondents agree that employers should create more opportunities to promote soft skills in the workplace** (see next section). With the proposed measures, the participants have already clearly outlined what they specifically have in mind - this input is valuable for deriving targeted interventions.



### 3.10. Attitudes towards soft skills and responsibilities

Finally, four theses were presented to determine the **respondents'** general **attitude towards soft skills** and the question of who is responsible for promoting them. The statements and the approval ratings were:

- **"Soft skills (e.g. creativity, problem solving, adaptability) are just as important as hard skills (e.g. programming, operating machines)."** Over 90% of respondents agreed with this statement (44% "strongly agree" and 46% "agree"). Only 5% were undecided, disagreed and less than 1% (one person) "strongly disagree". There is therefore a virtual **consensus** that soft skills are of equal value to specialist skills. Interesting: In *no* region did a majority disagree - most of the differences were in how many "strongly agreed" rather than just "simply agreed". Western Slovenia had the relatively highest number of critical voices (22% there disagreed or were undecided), while in Poland, Italy and Slovakia there was agreement. Overall, however, the message is clear: **soft skills are recognised as essential**, not as a mere add-on. This underpins statements such as those made by LinkedIn CEO Ryan Roslansky that we are at the beginning of a *"more human working world"* in which soft skills are central.
- **"Employers should create more opportunities to promote the development of soft skills at work."** As many as **88% agreed** with this (approx. 59% "agree" + 28% "strongly agree"). Only ~3% disagreed. The **mandate to companies** is clearly formulated here: Workforces companies to active measures to promote soft skills - be it through training, mentoring or simply giving employees the freedom to develop personally. There was a particularly high level of agreement in Slovakia, Italy and Belgium (almost 100% in favour), while in Chemnitz, 9% actually disagreed and 13% were undecided - an indication that some there may think it is primarily an individual matter or that there are already enough. Nevertheless, 78% were in favour there too.
- **"Soft skills development should be included in curricula (e.g. school, university)."** This was the area with the highest level of agreement at **over 91%** (53% "strongly agree", 38% "agree"). Hardly anyone disagreed (<2% disagree overall). This is a strong vote in favour of **anchoring soft skills in the education system**. The respondents - many of whom are academically educated - obviously see gaps in their own education in this regard. In their view, more emphasis should be placed on communication, teamwork, problem solving etc. at school and university. This demand corresponds exactly to what experts are calling for: soft skills need to be taught from *an early age*, not just on the job. Our data therefore provides a clear justification for educational reforms or pilot projects to integrate soft skills training into curricula.
- **"Well-developed soft skills would benefit my working environment as a whole."** Around **93%** also agreed here (47.8% "agree", 45.7% "strongly agree"). Virtually no one disagreed (less than 2%). This means that the participants are convinced that it not only benefits them personally, but also **the entire team/company** if everyone has better soft skills. This probably includes more efficient processes, fewer conflicts, greater innovation, etc. This confirms that soft skills are seen as a **collective success factor**. According to one study, a company can significantly improve its overall performance if the skills of its employees are sufficiently developed - our respondents seem to intuitively agree.

These four statement results provide important guidelines: Firstly, soft skills are undisputedly important (on a par with hard skills). Secondly, both employers and the education system are seen



as having a duty to do more for soft skills. And thirdly, this is seen as a win-win for both the individual and the organisation. So there is broad public support for soft skills development measures - from school to the workplace. Such an attitude base is ideal for tackling concrete actions, as little resistance or cynicism is to be expected.

## 4. Regional differences and needs

Although the general trends were similar in all regions, there are some **regional peculiarities** to highlight. Differences can be seen above all in the priorities set by the regions - be it in terms of the most important soft skills, the greatest challenges or the preferred measures. In the following, striking aspects per region are summarised in order to derive specific **needs and starting points**. (Note: Due to different numbers of participants, these regional results are sometimes less robust; nevertheless, they provide indications of regional context factors).

- 1. Upper Austria (AT) - *Regional soft skills pioneers*:** The Upper Austrian participants (N=14, predominantly from the greater Linz/Wels area) largely confirmed the general trends. Communication and problem solving were mentioned most frequently as important skills, as was a willingness to learn. It is striking that **many** in Upper Austria **had already attended soft skills training** (38% had attended courses - the highest figure of all regions). This suggests that there is already a **culture of further training** in this area, e.g. through courses offered by WIFI, BFI or other institutes, which have a strong presence in Upper Austria. Attitudes towards soft skills were almost unanimously positive in Upper Austria (61.5% "strongly agree", 38.5% "agree" for equality with hard skills). **Challenges:** Internally, Upper Austrians, like everyone else, cited communication in first place. Technological change was also an issue, albeit to a lesser extent (only ~15% mentioned "keeping pace with digitalisation", possibly because many companies are already well positioned in this area). **Measures:** There is a strong focus on workshops (71%) and coaching (57%). Hardly anyone said that nothing was necessary. Upper Austria therefore has a high level of awareness - the region could **play a pioneering role** in soft skills development. The main need for action here is to further expand the existing offers to other regions as best practice. **Recommendations** for Upper Austria: Continuation and promotion of the extensive further training opportunities, increased involvement of companies (many Upper Austrian companies - e.g. industry - could set up internal soft skills programmes), as well as use of the existing openness to pilot new formats (e.g. digital soft skills training, experimentation rooms).
- 2. Province of Limburg (BE) - *focus on formal anchoring*:** The Belgian participants (N=19, Limburg region) also showed high approval rates for soft skills. Their top soft skills so far were communication, teamwork and empathy - the latter was emphasised more often here than in some other regions. Challenges in Limburg were strongly communication (as everywhere) and work-life balance; technological adaptation was also mentioned but felt somewhat less acute than elsewhere. What stands out is that **42% in Limburg suggested including soft skills in employee evaluations** - significantly more than in other regions. This signals a willingness to **make soft skills measurable and firmly integrate them into the corporate culture**. At ~17%, participation in training was close to average. Many (over 74%) are in favour of workshops, while less in mentoring (26%). No participant was explicitly against employers becoming active here. Limburg therefore appears to have an environment in which soft skills are **systematically promoted**. **Recommendations** for Limburg: Development of **company programmes** that make soft skills an integral part - such as 360° feedback with a soft skills component, integration into target agreements,



etc. **Peer learning groups** could also be established to the moderate demand for mentoring. The strong emphasis on empathy in Limburg suggests that the focus here is particularly on the **social quality of work** - initiatives on diversity, inclusive communication or conflict resolution could be well received.

3. **Zahodna Slovenija - Western Slovenia (SI) - *Scepticism despite high values***: In the western Slovenian region (N=18, Gorenjska around Kranj), slightly different trends are evident. Although most people here also agree with the soft skills theses, **SI had the highest proportion of rejection** for some statements (e.g. ~22% were unsure or denied that soft skills are equally important as hard skills; one person even rejected integration into curricula). A comparatively large number (22%) also said that **no additional measures were necessary**. At the same time, the Slovenian respondents named communication and creativity as the most frequent development requests - in other words, soft skills. The inconsistency could indicate **differences in the sample**: There may have been a mix of very soft-skill affine individuals and some sceptics in SI (perhaps traditionally oriented areas that prioritise hard skills). Challenges: Interestingly, **sustainability goals** were mentioned more frequently in SI than elsewhere. This could be related to local industries. **Measures**: Workshops (33%) and mentoring (33%) were desired, but also just some who do not want anything. Only 5.6% had previous training experience (one person). This indicates that Western Slovenia has had **little contact with soft skills programmes** to date - it is possible that persuasion is still needed here. **Recommendations for SI: Awareness campaigns** about the value of soft skills, especially to pick up the more sceptical group. For example, successful local companies that promote soft skills could serve as role models. Communication as a development - if the goal of the training was top, you could start there specifically with communication training and teamwork workshops to demonstrate the benefits. It is also important to involve managers, as they initiate cultural changes - possibly with special leader workshops. You should also build on the positive attitude of the majority and organise regional network meetings on soft skills topics to generate momentum.
4. **Chemnitz (DE) - *Need to catch up on awareness and training***: The Saxon region of Chemnitz (N=23, incl. Erzgebirge and Zwickau in our sample) stands out in several respects. **Only 5%** had ever attended soft skills training (lowest value). At the same time, at 4%, this was the only significant proportion of people - apart from SI - who doubted that employers should do more. This indicates that there has been **less focus on soft skills** in this region to date, possibly due to the strong industrial focus of the fields of work. The most important soft skills in Chemnitz were in line with the overall average (problem solving, communication), but empathy, for example, was hardly mentioned. Challenges: Here, participants particularly frequently reported a **shortage of skilled workers ("attracting & retaining talent")** and **internal communication** as problems. Technological change was also mentioned, but less frequently. **Measures**: In Chemnitz, workshops and cross-divisional projects (both 48%) and mentoring (39%) were particularly desired. In contrast, only wanted *integration into appraisals* - people are probably reluctant to formally assess soft skills here. 4% (one person) said that nothing was needed at all. Overall, Chemnitz shows a **need for groundwork**: the low training participation rate and the slight reluctance indicate that soft skills may have been undervalued here as "soft topics". **Recommendations for Chemnitz: Raise awareness of the benefits of soft skills**, especially in traditional sectors (e.g. production companies) - for example by presenting hard facts (such as ROI studies, which show that soft skills training is also financially worthwhile). **Pilot training sessions** in companies could demonstrate the difference that better communication or teamwork can make. An attempt should also be made to



persuade **employers in Chemnitz** to include soft skills in their personnel development. Cooperation with the Chamber of Industry and Commerce or Chamber of Crafts would be conceivable in order to offer more modules on soft skills in training and further education. In addition, **regional mentoring programmes** (possibly intergenerational) could be initiated, as this is supported by 39%. In Chemnitz, it is important to first raise **awareness of why soft skills are not a "luxury"** but help to alleviate specific problems such as a shortage of skilled workers and inefficient processes.

5. **Veneto (IT)** - a few observations on digital skills: They (N=19) cited problem-solving skills, creativity, networking, adaptability to change, and a willingness to learn new things as the skills that have been most important in their professional careers to date. This selection underscores the high value placed on creative, networking, and solution-oriented skills in a changing work environment. At the same time, there is a clear interest in further **developing digital skills**. The most frequently mentioned areas include data management, software skills, and the operation of technical devices and machines - the latter could be industry-specific (Veneto has a lot of manufacturing industry). Challenges that were mentioned freely were strongly related to the precarious economic situation ("surviving the ongoing economic and cultural crisis"). This suggests that at least some of the Italian respondents came from sectors that are struggling with fundamental existential issues (perhaps the cultural sector, small businesses). In such a context, soft skills may take a back seat to financial constraints. **Measures:** The majority supported workshops, half mentoring followed by collaborative projects and integration into assessments. Hardly no one said "no action needed". **Recommendations** for Veneto: Due to the economic challenges, soft skills development should be linked to business support measures. For example: training for small entrepreneurs in soft skills (communication, teamwork, initiative, innovative thinking), to help them to manage their business better. Networks among SMEs to share experiences could also bring benefits (networking was a desired skill). In addition, combined hard+soft skills programmes could be offered to promote digitalisation - e.g. training in new technologies and change management so that companies can think about technology and people together. Veneto should try to get more stakeholders on board and raise awareness of how soft skills can also help with "survival" (e.g. problem-solving skills to find innovative solutions in a crisis, communication to open up new markets, etc.).
6. **Śląskie - Silesia (PL)** - Technology and adaptation in the foreground: There were few responses from the Polish region of Śląskie (Bielsko-Biała and surrounding area, N=8). All Polish participants unanimously agreed with the statements per soft skills (equality hard/soft etc.). As far as can be seen from the data, the most important skills mentioned were communication, problem solving and teamwork. What stood out was that adaptability to new technologies was very central here: it certainly came up frequently in the challenges (Śląskie is an industrial and mining region in transition - this could explain the strong focus on technology). Training participation was ~12% (1 person out of 8 had attended a course). In terms of **measures**, 75% were in favour of workshops (6 out of 8) - so a clear desire for learning opportunities - and 38% for mentoring, for projects. **Recommendations** for Silesia: Digital change seems to be setting the tone here. Soft skills development should therefore be closely linked to digitalisation initiatives. For example, programmes could be set up along the lines of "Fit for Industry 4.0 - strengthening technical and interdisciplinary skills". Adaptability, problem solving and teamwork in the context of new technologies should be priorities. As the level of approval in PL was very high, it is possible to find open doors: It would be important to create further training infrastructure in Śląskie (e.g. training centres or e-learning offerings, possibly supported



by EU funds), as would like workshops. Cooperation with larger local companies (automotive suppliers, etc.) would also make sense in order to organise soft skills programmes across companies (possibly consortia). In addition, the topic of soft skills could be pushed at schools and universities in the region, as this region traditionally has a very technology-focused education - this could be a starting point, especially as 100% respondents are in favour of integrating soft skills into curricula.

7. **Severozápad - Northwest Bohemia (CZ)** - Open-minded and practice-oriented: Czech participants from the Severozápad region (Karlovarský kraj, N=26) were overwhelmingly positive about soft skills (88% agreed, for example, that employers should do more; 15% "strongly agree", 73% "agree"). The **equality of soft/hard skills** was also viewed positively by **96%**. Many (26.9%) had already attended soft skills training - which is quite high. This suggests that it was mainly younger professionals or project staff who took part, possibly through EU projects or similar. The most important soft skills were communication, teamwork, adaptability - adaptability in particular was often emphasised here, which fits in with the structural change (discontinuation of coal mining, etc.). Challenges: As elsewhere, mainly internal communication and technology adaptation, but also retaining skilled workers (important in a region of emigration). **Measures:** 54% want workshops, 35% mentoring, 31% cross-divisional projects, 23% integration in assessments. Only 2 people said no action needed. This means that Northwest Bohemia is ready to take action. **Recommendations:** Here it would be a good idea to build on existing training experience - e.g. regional soft skills days or regular training opportunities with the support of local training providers. In view of the brain drain problem, soft skills programmes could also be used to keep young people in the region (e.g. through career coaching, the soft skills training programme). The high level of approval for employer initiatives suggests that **companies** would be **willing to cooperate**. In CZ, companies, authorities and educational institutions should therefore jointly develop action plans to make employees fit for new tasks (e.g. in the service sector instead of industry) via soft skills. Mentoring (35%) is moderately in demand - partnerships could be established between experienced professionals and young professionals, as many older workers are affected by structural change and need to be retrained, while young people can benefit from the knowledge of older workers (and vice versa, share digital skills).
8. **Východné Slovensko - Eastern Slovakia (SK)** - Strong desire for cooperation: Eastern Slovaks (Košice region, N=10) showed a very high pro-soft skills attitude (agreement in all theses, many "strongly agree"). 30% had attended training courses (above average). Interestingly, among the most important skills (in addition to communication and problem solving), the ability to improvise was mentioned relatively often, which may indicate the need to be creative with limited resources - a situation that often occurs in structurally weaker regions. Challenges: in addition to communication and tech, work-life balance was mentioned particularly often (possibly due to long commuting times or multiple jobs). However, the choice of **measures** was particularly striking in SK: All respondents saw at least one measure as necessary; and 80% advocated cross-functional projects - the highest figure ever. Mentoring and workshops were equally desired by 70%. This indicates a very strong desire for networking and exchange. Perhaps work areas there have been isolated up to now, or there is a desire for more contact across organisational boundaries (possibly between different companies or sectors). **Recommendations** for Eastern Slovakia: This enthusiasm should be utilised by creating cooperation platforms - for example, regular regional innovation workshops where employees from different companies come together to work on problems (something like "cross-company labs"). Cross-cluster projects could also be initiated, possibly moderated by the Chamber of Commerce or education centre,



so that people can get out of their silos. Mentoring can be organised in SK both within companies (young/old) and between companies (e.g. exchange programme large corporation <-> startup). Since everyone is convinced, employers should also be brought on board quickly, so this drive does not fizzle out. Training courses for soft skills (communication, leadership, etc.) would certainly be well received in Eastern Slovakia; it would be a good idea to use EU funding programmes to set up corresponding projects.

**Regional summary:** Despite broad similarities in the results, there are regional nuances in the demand situation. Some regions (Upper Austria, CZ, SK) are already quite active or open-minded, others (DE, SI) are still sceptical or lagging behind. **The economic situation** of the region obviously influences which soft skills appear to be the most important - e.g. in industrial zones there is a strong focus on technology-related skills, in peripheral regions there is a desire for collaboration and securing skilled workers, in more affluent areas there is a greater emphasis on work-life balance and culture. These differences need to be taken into account when implementing measures in order to find **tailored solutions**. The next section develops recommendations based on this.

## 5. Recommended actions for soft skill development

Based on the survey results, several **areas for action** can be identified to further develop the soft skills of the population (and workforce) in the participating regions in a targeted manner. The recommendations are aimed at various stakeholders—educational institutions, employers, public authorities - and take into account both **general measures** and **regional characteristics**. A **holistic approach** is important: soft skills do not develop in a vacuum, but require supportive structures and a culture that promotes their growth. The following recommendations are made:

### 5.1. Integrate soft skills into the education system

The survey clearly supports the call for soft skills to be promoted in schools, vocational training, and higher education. **Educational institutions** should include soft skills modules in their curricula. Specifically, **school projects and workshops** on topics such as communication, teamwork, problem solving, or creativity could be introduced - for example, through project work, debate clubs, or team challenges in class. Teacher training should provide tools to strengthen social and emotional skills in students. Universities and vocational schools could offer **compulsory courses on key competencies** (e.g., rhetoric, teamwork, time management). It is important that these are not purely theoretical, but experience-based (role-playing, group work). Since 91% of our respondents are in favour of this, it would also be well accepted. Regions with traditionally strong subject-oriented education (e.g., Silesia, Northwest Bohemia) should particularly promote this integration in order to broaden the skills base of the future workforce.

Best practice examples could help: Some countries already have school programmes for “social and emotional learning” (SEL), which have been proven to promote empathy, communication skills, and teamwork among young people. Such approaches could be tested on a pilot basis in individual schools in the regions. Similarly, universities could offer soft skills certificates that students can acquire in addition to their degrees, which would also increase their attractiveness on the job market and motivate students [investopedia.com](https://www.investopedia.com).



## 5.2. Raise awareness and communicate success stories

**Awareness campaigns** should be conducted in regions or industries where soft skills are still underestimated. This can be done through **workshops, lectures, or media reports** that highlight the importance of soft skills for professional success. For example, local entrepreneurs who are successful thanks to a good team culture could be given a platform to speak, or experts could be invited to present study results (such as the 23% performance increase or 250% ROI mentioned above).

In the Chemnitz region and western Slovenia in particular, where some scepticism was evident, it would be important to **dispel reservations**. Here, chambers of commerce, industry associations, and employer organisations could act as multipliers by putting soft skills on the agenda (e.g., as a topic at business conferences, in newsletters, etc.). **Regional politics** and administration can also provide support by including soft skills in economic development programmes, for example, and publicly emphasising that it is not only infrastructure and expertise that bring location advantages, but also “soft” factors.

Another approach is to **educate managers**: Since attitudes are often shaped from the top down, managers in more sceptical regions should be specifically targeted. For example, with **short seminars for managers** that show how coaching, feedback, and role modeling can strengthen soft skills in teams and how this benefits key performance indicators (productivity, innovation). Once managers are convinced, they will spread the message organically. In western Slovenia, for example, well-known companies in Gorenjska could be approached and internal communication campaigns launched in collaboration with them to demonstrate the added value.

## 5.3. Targeted expansion of training opportunities

The majority of respondents have not yet experienced any soft skills training - this represents a significant opportunity. There should be an expansion of training opportunities that are tailored to the needs of the participants in terms of content and format. Specifically:

**Regular workshops/seminars:** These should cover the most requested topics, such as **communication training, problem solving and creativity workshops, critical thinking training, time and self-management** (for work-life balance), and **digital literacy combined with soft skills** (for technological change). The combination of hard and soft skills in training courses can be particularly attractive, such as a course on “Data analysis and effective team communication in projects.” Many respondents want to improve their software and data skills - training providers could take this as an opportunity to supplement IT courses with soft skills modules (e.g., “How do I present data in a comprehensible way?”).

**On-site and online:** Formats should be flexible to enable broad participation. Face-to-face workshops can be more intensive and directly promote networking; e-learning or blended learning enables scalable participation, especially in more remote regions. In regions such as eastern Slovakia or northwestern Bohemia, where distance could be an issue, **digital learning offerings** are useful. However, online training must be interactive (e.g., with video conferencing and breakouts for role-playing) so that soft skills can be practiced in a practical way.

**Offers via existing structures:** Existing continuing education infrastructures can be built upon, such as economic development agencies (WIFI and BFI in Austria), adult education centres, Chamber of Industry and commerce training centres in Germany, vocational training centres in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, or programmes offered by employment agencies. These could include targeted soft skills courses in their programmes. EU-funded projects (ERASMUS+, ESF) could also



finance cross-border training series that bring together participants from several regions (this would also promote intercultural competence).

**Certifications and incentives:** To increase participation, *certificates* could be awarded (e.g., “Soft Skills Basics”) that are useful in the workplace. Employers could reward course participation, for example by taking such certificates into account in internal applications. In Belgium (Limburg), for example, it would be conceivable to link this to performance management: those who complete soft skills training could receive bonus points in their annual performance reviews - this would implement the desire expressed there for integration into appraisals.

**Take regional specifics into account:** Each region has different priorities, so the courses offered should be tailored accordingly. In industrial regions (Silesia, Chemnitz, Veneto), the focus could be on **change management** and **adaptability training** to prepare the workforce for technological change. In regions with a high proportion of administration/public service (Upper Austria, western Slovenia), **communication**, **citizen contact**, and **teamwork** would be key topics. In creative and cultural fields (also Upper Austria, possibly Italy), **project management** and **entrepreneurial soft skills** (networking, negotiation) could be in demand so that creative people can successfully implement and finance their projects. A **needs analysis** for each region - for example, through short surveys or workshops with local stakeholders - can help to set priorities for training.

#### 4. Promote learning in the workplace: mentoring and projects

Since soft skills are primarily developed *through practice*, employers and organisations should ensure a learning-friendly work environment. Based on the survey feedback, two approaches are obvious: **peer mentoring** and **cross-functional projects**.

**Peer mentoring programmes:** Companies - but also administrations, NGOs, etc. - should introduce formal mentoring programmes. This could involve assigning new or junior employees or an experienced colleague as a mentor who is not their direct supervisor. In regular meetings, the mentor can provide feedback, answer questions, and also demonstrate specific soft skills (e.g., how to communicate effectively, how to question critically, etc.). However, mentoring can be hierarchical, but also **mutual (“peer coaching”)** or **in groups**. For example, small interdisciplinary groups could be set up to exchange ideas on a monthly basis and work on case studies - similar to a quality circle. In eastern Slovakia and northwestern Bohemia, where there was a strong desire for mentoring, cross-industry mentoring clubs could be set up, possibly moderated by an external body, where people from different companies could coach each other (this would also be good for networking in the region). Special formats could also include **reverse mentoring**: young, digitally savvy employees mentor older colleagues in areas such as technology, while the older employees share their experience and soft skills (conflict resolution, leadership). Such mutual learning relationships promote respect and understanding between generations and develop soft skills on both sides. This would be particularly beneficial in regions with a strong age mix (many older employees), such as Chemnitz or Silesia.

**Cross-divisional and cross-company projects:** Companies should create opportunities for employees to *work together across team and departmental boundaries*. This can be achieved through **internal cross-departmental projects**, such as task forces on specific issues, mixed innovation groups, or even simple job rotation for short periods. This enables employees to learn to communicate with new colleagues, quickly familiarise themselves with unfamiliar topics (problem solving), and appreciate other perspectives. Eastern Slovaks have sent a strong signal here - 80% want such projects - which suggests that team isolation is an obstacle in some organisations. Employers could, for example, organise “Innovation Days” where employees from different departments work together to develop ideas (and then possibly implement them). In addition, cross-company collaborations moderated by regional initiatives are also conceivable: In



Limburg or Upper Austria, for example, clusters of SMEs could hold joint workshops where employees from different companies work on a specific topic (e.g., sustainability in business) - this promotes soft skills and at the same time creates regional benefits. EU projects (e.g., INTERREG) could finance this type of exchange. External cooperation is a good solution, especially for smaller companies that do not have the internal staff resources for cross-functional work.

For the implementation of these workplace learning measures, it is crucial that **management and HR** actively support them. This means that mentoring and project work must not be considered a waste of time, but must be recognised as *part of the job*. Managers should take on mentoring roles or at least allow mentees the time to do so. Perhaps mentoring could be incorporated as a criterion in promotion processes (those who commit to mentoring earn points for leadership).

## 5.4. Embed soft skills in corporate strategy and culture

The sustainable development of soft skills can only succeed if companies and organisations recognise soft skills as strategically important. This includes embedding soft skills in **HR processes and management principles**:

**Recruitment and promotion:** Employers should look for soft skills when hiring - according to studies, many already do (57% of managers rate soft skills higher than technical skills when hiring). Our respondents see it similarly. Companies could incorporate structured **soft skill assessments** (e.g., team exercises, case study interviews) into their application processes. Internally, soft skills should play a role in promotions; for example, a candidate's teamwork and communication skills can be taken into account, not just their professional achievements. This would signal to employees that soft skill development is "worthwhile."

**Employee appraisals and feedback:** As desired (especially in Limburg), soft skills can be part of regular employee appraisals. This must be done sensitively - not in the sense of "punishing" people, but rather to agree on development goals. For example, in the annual appraisal, you could ask: "Which cross-functional skills would you like to improve next year? How can the company support you in this?" - and then agree on appropriate measures (courses, mentoring, project experience). This makes soft skill development plannable. Managers should also provide regular feedback on soft skills, both positive and constructive. Important: Establish a **feedback culture** in which it is normal to give feedback on communication behavior, teamwork, etc. without taking it personally. This requires training managers in **non-judgmental, constructive communication**.

**Corporate culture:** Soft skills thrive in an environment that values **openness, trust, and respect**. Companies should therefore work on their culture - e.g., by formulating leadership guidelines that emphasise empathy and good communication skills. Some companies introduce "soft skill champions" - employees who are particularly concerned with team cohesion - or reward cooperation between teams. Anything that **breaks down silo thinking and rewards cooperation** promotes the use of soft skills.

**Give time and space:** An often overlooked factor is that employees need **time** to train or apply soft skills. When the pressure at work is very high, there is no room for reflection or new behaviors. Companies should therefore consciously plan for buffers - such as a fixed afternoon for training each month, or experimentation rooms as suggested in Upper Austria. Physical spaces (meeting zones, lounges for informal exchanges) also support soft skill interaction. Modern office design focuses precisely on promoting encounters and facilitating communication.

**Share best practices:** Teams within a company can learn a lot from each other. It is advisable to publicise success stories from departments that, for example, communicate in an exemplary manner or have found innovative solutions through teamwork, throughout the company (e.g., on



the intranet or at staff meetings). This motivates others to develop similar soft skills. Similarly, employees who have improved their soft skills can be visibly recognised—for example, by having someone who has undergone coaching present what they have learned. These peer learning mechanisms cost little and have a big impact on the culture.

## 5.5. Strengthen regional networks and cooperation

Many soft skill challenges transcend the boundaries of individual organisations—issues such as **skills shortages and digital transformation** affect entire regions. Regional players should therefore work together to promote soft skills on a broad basis:

**Regional soft skills forums:** Institutions such as trade associations, universities, employment services, etc. could organise regular meetings (e.g., annual conferences or round tables) on the topic of soft skills. There, companies can share their experiences, education providers can present new course concepts, and politicians can announce support programmes. This creates an **ecosystem** in which soft skill development is seen as a joint task.

**Focus groups and pilot projects per region:** Our eight regions could each form **working groups** to discuss specific results and initiate tailor-made pilot projects. For example, the group in eastern Slovakia could decide to launch a cross-sector project between two large employers (such as a joint innovation incubator), while in western Slovenia a campaign entitled “Soft skills for a successful Gorenjska” could be developed to win over sceptics. In Upper Austria, the group could focus on how to attract more participants to existing programmes or integrate soft skills into teaching. These focus groups should include representatives from businesses, the education sector, and possibly also employee representatives (trade unions) in order to take all perspectives into account.

**Involvement of public funds:** Soft skills are ultimately a *public good*, as they increase the employability of the population and promote innovation. Accordingly, **regional subsidies** (or EU funds) should be used. For example, regional development funds could sponsor workshops or mentoring programmes for SMEs. In weaker regions (northwestern Bohemia, eastern Slovakia) in particular, there are often EU programmes to combat brain drain—soft skills training should be incorporated into these programmes (because it increases the attractiveness of jobs).

**Cross-regional learning:** Since our project covers several regions, we should take advantage of the opportunity to learn from each other. Differences are opportunities: Upper Austria can share best practices with Chemnitz, Limburg can learn from Eastern Slovakia's enthusiasm, and vice versa. Specifically, exchange programmes could be established: managers or trainers from one region visit another to hold workshops or present concepts. Or joint online platforms could be set up where materials, success stories, and course concepts can be shared. This would create a **community of practice across regional boundaries**.

## 5.6. Specific priority measures in each region

Finally, here are some *targeted recommendations for each region* to address the specific characteristics analysed above:

**Upper Austria:** Here, the already good foundation should be used to test **innovative formats** – e.g., virtual reality soft skills training (for managers), hackathons for communication solutions, etc. In addition, Upper Austria should be established as a **model region**, i.e., experiences should be systematically documented and passed on to others (exchange programmes with Chemnitz, for example).



**Limburg (Belgium):** Integrate soft skills into HR systems, as there is a willingness to do so. Possibly create a regional “Soft Skill Employer Limburg” certificate that companies can obtain if they implement soft skill promotion in an exemplary manner - this creates incentives. Focus on **empathy and diversity training**, as empathy is highly valued here; i.e., offerings on intercultural competence, inclusive leadership, etc.

**Western Slovenia:** Launch an awareness campaign, e.g., “Mehke veščine za trdo kariero” (Soft Skills for a Strong Career) with local champions. Possibly offer soft skills workshops in combination with sustainability topics (since sustainability is a challenge), e.g., “Creativity & Sustainability” labs to demonstrate tangible benefits. Small steps: perhaps start with something less controversial - such as foreign language communication (this is recognised as a soft skill and is useful) - and then raise awareness for communication in general.

**Chemnitz (Saxony):** Establish a **soft skills business network** supported by the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, where companies commit to doing more. Present best practices from western Germany or Upper Austria. Promote **in-house training**: Larger companies in Chemnitz (such as Siemens branches, etc.) could offer internal training and allow external guests to participate in order to get SMEs on board. Focus on hard facts and emphasise the link to **securing skilled workers** (“Those who offer soft skills retain employees”).

**Veneto:** Here, link soft skills training with SME resilience programmes: i.e., training that teaches both business and personal skills. Since all Italian participants agreed, it can be assumed that there is openness - only the reach is limited. Therefore, organise **information events** specifically for small companies (crafts, tourism) where, in a short, practical format, topics such as “5 soft skills that will increase your sales” are taught. A partnership with the Veneto Chamber of Commerce would be helpful.

**Śląskie (Silesia):** Digital & Soft: e.g., a large-scale programme called “Śląskie 4.0 - People and Technologies,” possibly financed by the Polish Development Fund, where workers from mining/industry are trained in soft and digital skills to prepare them for new jobs (services, IT). Also due to brain drain: cooperation with universities (e.g. Silesian University) to set up **Career Skills Centres** that teach students soft skills and involve regional companies (so that graduates are more likely to stay in the region).

**Severozápad (NW Bohemia):** Here, build on the existing training culture: check which courses the 27% of participants had attended and **expand** this. This may have been an ESF project - extend it or relaunch it. Focus on skills shortages: **employer branding through soft skills** - i.e., encourage companies to advertise their good working atmosphere and development opportunities. This could be done through a regional employer initiative. Promote mentoring between old industries (e.g., coal) and new ones (tourism) to generate knowledge transfer and soft skills.

**Východné Slovensko (Eastern Slovakia):** Harness enthusiasm: propose making the region a **pilot region for modern human resources development**. Perhaps an EU model project could be set up to test cross-sector cooperation. Concrete idea: “**Košice Innovation Lab**”, where employees from various IT companies, universities, and government agencies work together on social innovation projects - funded by the state - to train soft skills and create added value for the community. In addition, inter-company mentoring, as mentioned above. Eastern Slovakia also has a young start-up scene; there, **entrepreneurship programmes** could be enriched with soft skills modules (team leadership, agile working, etc.) to ensure that start-ups remain successful in the long term.

Of course, these regional measures must be planned in detail with local stakeholders. It is crucial that **all relevant stakeholders** (companies, employees, education, politics) are brought on board so that the measures are accepted and have an impact. Our recommendations primarily point in certain *directions*; the specific details should be worked out in a participatory process with the



people on the ground - in line with the soft skills (communication, cooperation) that we want to promote.

## Conclusion

The survey and analysis clearly show that soft skills are recognised as essential in all regions surveyed - both for individual success and for the prosperity of teams and organisations. Skills such as communication, problem solving, teamwork, and willingness to learn form the foundation of a modern working world that relies more than ever on human strengths. At the same time, the results show that there is still room for improvement in practice: Soft skills are often learned incidentally “on the job,” formal training is still the exception, and many organisations struggle with deficits in precisely those areas (communication, adaptation to change, collaboration) that could be improved through soft skills.

On a positive note, the respondents expressed **great motivation** to work on their soft skills and broad support for corresponding initiatives, whether in companies or in the education system. This willingness is a key success factor: measures do not fall on deaf ears, but can build on individual initiative. Differences between regions mainly lie in the *level of maturity* of soft skills management and in the most acute needs, but no region falls completely outside the scope. This means that both **common European strategies** can be derived and **region-specific priorities** can be set.

Specifically, the report recommends a combination of **educational reforms**, **company programmes**, and **cultural changes** to systematically promote soft skills. From integration into school and training curricula, workshops, mentoring, and cross-functional projects in companies, to embedding them in HR processes, a bundle of measures has been outlined that responds to the findings. It is important to always keep the **practical benefits** in mind: promoting soft skills is not an end in itself, but rather a means of enabling people to better master the challenges they face today - be it technological upheaval, competition for talent, or the pursuit of sustainable business practices. Numerous studies and our survey feedback indicate that investing in soft skills *pays off* - both in terms of hard metrics (productivity, ROI) and soft factors (working atmosphere, employee satisfaction).

The report can now serve as a basis for **further in-depth analysis** in the eight regions. The proposed measures should be discussed and prioritised in local focus groups made up of employers, employees, education representatives, and possibly political decision-makers. Each region can then develop its own action plan that fits its culture and makes use of existing resources. Ongoing exchange between the regions (within the project or beyond) can also create a learning loop that benefits everyone.

In conclusion, it can be said that strengthening soft skills is a joint task that requires cooperation between many parties - appropriately, an exercise in soft skills itself. Our study shows that people in the regions are willing to go down this path. Now it is time to set the course and turn the numerous ideas into concrete actions. After all, investing in soft skills is ultimately an investment in the future viability and humanity of our working world - and this benefits both the economy and society in equal measure.



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*Otelo eGen, 2025-05-12, Martin & Hannelore Hollinetz*

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