

Exploring the influence of line managers' generic skills on subordinates' performance at a higher education institution in South Africa

Mr Curtis Knight^{1,*} & Dr Johan Jordaan^{2,*}

¹ NWU Business School, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, Orcid: 0000-0002-9885-0243

² NWU Business School, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, Orcid: 0000-0003-0426-7290

Keywords

Generic skills;
Subordinates' performance;
Line managers;
Higher education institution (HEI).

Abstract

The playing field of higher education has developed immensely during the 21st century, with an increased focus on generic (“soft”) skills and less emphasis on technical skills. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this development because the generic skill set of students had to change rapidly. Also in the workplace, this shift has been demonstrated to affect the performance of employees and that of managers. Institutions such as universities are also subjected to this change in emphasis.

This study explores the influence of line managers' generic skills on subordinates' performance in a South African higher education institution. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach through 104 in-depth interviews and observations. The study found that generic skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, and time management, play a vital role in employee productivity and performance. The study's results provide valuable insights into how these skills can impact organisational outcomes. The study has implications for the training of managers and performance management in universities and other HEIs.

¹*Corresponding Author

* E-mail address: Jordaan.johan@nwu.ac.za

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The great resignation that occurred in April 2021 prompted many employees to quit their jobs, leaving organisations grappling with the challenges of retaining executive leadership and attracting new talent. The demand for generic skills has become crucial in the post-pandemic work environment, and their development in leaders begins with an acknowledgement of how others and self-awareness perceive them. The pandemic has accelerated the importance of generic skills including adaptability, flexibility, digital literacy, and communication skills. Furthermore, employee productivity can be synonymous with organisational performance, employee performance, or new product development performance. The use of generic skills has become imperative for effectively managing non-compliance in the workplace and counselling and leading employees through crises. The opportunity to develop generic skills among professionals has been overlooked despite their academic knowledge and expertise.

1.2. Problem Statement

In today's competitive and dynamic workplace, employees require both generic and hard skills to succeed. While technical and academic proficiency is essential, generic skills such as communication, problem-solving, and teamwork are also crucial. Especially amongst academics and support staff in academic higher education institutions, there seems to be a lack of understanding of the relationship between generic skills and employee performance, leaving managers unsure about investing in generic skills training.

1.3. Research objectives

This study explored the influence of line managers' generic skills on employee performance.

1.3.1. Sub-objectives

- To establish the understanding of generic skills among line managers and employees.
- To elucidate the link between generic skills and employee performance within the institution.
- To determine the need for generic skills training for managers and employees.

The study starts with a literature study and a discussion of the methodology followed, after which the results are given and discussed, managerial implications and conclusions are discussed and suggestions for further study are made. It concludes with acknowledgements and a reference list.

2. Literature Review

Generic skills are often referred to as soft skills, people skills, core skills, human skills, 21st-century skills, transitional skills, employability traits, and interpersonal skills (Yassin *et al.*, 2008:572). The three generic skills identified by Nabi and Bagley (Yassin *et al.*, 2008) are problem-solving, communication, and personal skills. Based on their study findings, Bennett, Dunne, and Carre (2000) claimed that generic abilities may be presented in four primary areas of management skills: information management, task management, self-management, and management of others. The eight generic skills—collaboration/teamwork, communication skills, initiative, leadership ability, people development/coaching, personal effectiveness/personal mastery, planning and organising, and presenting abilities—that every person needs are stated by (Yassin *et al.*, 2008:572).

Although some studies have found that communication skills are the most important generic skills for line managers, other studies have identified different skills as more essential for employee performance. For instance, a study by Krambia-Kapardis and Zopiatis (2019) found that problem-solving skills were the most significant determinant of employee performance. The study revealed that employees who possessed strong problem-solving skills were better able to identify and tackle workplace challenges, leading to improved performance and that managers who demonstrated strong leadership abilities were more likely to motivate and inspire their subordinates, leading to improved performance.

These conflicting findings highlight the need for further investigation into the most important generic skills for line managers and their impact on employee performance. More comparative analyses are necessary to identify any gaps or contradictions in the literature and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Further research could also explore whether the importance of generic skills varies across different industries, organizational cultures, and national contexts, as well as the extent to which generic skills can be developed and improved through training and development programs.

The Role of Communication Skills

A study already conducted by Carless and De Paola (2000) found that communication skills were the most important generic skills for line managers. The study revealed that managers who were effective communicators were more likely to have subordinates who were motivated and satisfied with their work, which led to improved performance. Furthermore, line managers who possess strong communication skills are better able to create a positive work environment, which is conducive to improved subordinates' performance. The study also highlighted the importance of communication skills in building trust and relationships between managers and subordinates.

Communication skills are regarded as an element of success in all systems, and the identification, development, and improvement of communication skills are components of successful and productive organisations (Pouragha *et al.*, 2020). The exchanging of ideas and information in different situations, whether written or spoken, dealing with clients or other employees, is the basis of communication (Hamid & Younus, 2021:4).

These skills have been the focus of numerous studies in various sectors and areas for decades. Clampitt and Downs (1993:8) demonstrated that departments with better communication skills have a lower turnover, fewer grievances, and higher productivity. Besides productivity, effectively communicating with other employees and supervisors boosts morale and increases job satisfaction (Cooks-Campbell, 2022). Group communication builds relationships and motivates employees towards a shared direction (Hamid & Younus, 2021:7).

Managers should focus on the quality of their communication (Pouragha *et al.*, 2020), fostering this generic skill to improve job performance and allow employees to counter obstacles effectively (Hamid & Younus, 2021:7).

The types of communication in the workplace can vary (Cooks-Campbell, 2022):

- Spoken or written.
- Through leadership; upward or downward.
- Updates, presentations, and meetings.
- Informal interactions.

Communication skills can be improved by establishing the goal of the communication in terms of who needs to hear this information and how the message is conveyed (Jolaoso, 2023). If employees and employees are clear and open-minded while encouraging one-on-one communication channels, two-way communication will foster active listeners and provide appropriate feedback (Jolaoso, 2023).

Productivity will be increased when employees better understand their roles and responsibilities, as their duties will be completed more effectively. When more tasks are completed, and collective goals are achieved, it reduces employee stress and contributes to organisational success (Cooks-Campbell, 2022).

A study by Wang *et al.* (2021) found that communication skills were the most important generic skills for line managers in the higher education sector. Effective communication skills allow managers to establish clear expectations, provide constructive feedback, and create a positive work environment for their subordinates. Moreover, a study by Griffiths and Smith (2020) found that effective communication between academic staff and professional services staff was crucial to enhancing student outcomes in the sector.

Leadership

Leadership is another critical generic skill for line managers in the higher education sector. A study by Day *et al.* (2020) found that transformational leadership, which involves inspiring and motivating subordinates to achieve higher levels of performance, was positively associated with academic staff job satisfaction and commitment. Moreover, a study by Chen *et al.* (2018) found that academic leaders who demonstrated strong leadership abilities were more likely to foster a positive academic culture and enhance student outcomes.

Teamwork and Collaboration

Teamwork and collaboration can be regarded as people using their individual and shared expertise and experience to solve a shared purpose in the workplace. These are seen as the main attributes of operational performance (Oteshova *et al.*, 2021:1).

The positive effects of a collaborative work environment are highlighted by (Fang *et al.*, 2021:92):

- Teamwork increases the need for collaboration and encourages group learning.
- A supportive network is created when teamwork is encouraged and upward problem-solving and decision-making increase.
- Attitudes in the workplace are improved when monotonous processes are done in teams, which increases productivity.
- Employee well-being is increased when employees feel part of a team, ultimately fostering trust between members.
- Multi-tasking and creativity are nurtured.

Collaboration in the workplace also improves contact between employees and their supervisors, increases cross-training, and enhances employee capacity, which ultimately improves productivity (Oteshova *et al.*, 2021:2). Teamwork and collaboration have become an essential workplace configuration (Khawam *et al.*, 2017:268), improving communication in exposing errors and concerns (Oteshova *et al.*, 2021:3).

Productivity is increased with teamwork, as it improves the technical and interpersonal skills of employees (Khawam *et al.*, 2017:268) and enhances performance and the overall success of an organisation (Oteshova *et al.*, 2021:2). Collaborative tasks often require creativity and innovation. They can be shaped by the employees' competitiveness, boosting productivity and achieving organisational goals (Fang *et al.*, 2021:107).

Teamwork and collaboration are essential for success in the higher education sector. A study by Van den Bossche *et al.* (2019) found that collaborative problem-solving increased student motivation and academic achievement. Moreover, a study by Hirst and Knight (2019) found that teamwork and collaboration between academic staff and professional services staff were critical for enhancing student satisfaction and retention rates.

Problem-solving and Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is an essential generic skill that allows employees to make informed decisions using information gathered from a broader perspective (Fraraccio, 2023). By understanding and addressing situations with information and facts (Herrity, 2023), critical thinking empowers employees to process the gathered information and develop effective solutions.

Reckmann (2023) quotes Jen Lawrence when defining critical thinking: “the ability to solve problems effectively by systematically gathering information about an issue, generating further ideas involving a variety of perspectives, evaluating the information using logic, and ensuring everyone involved is on board.”

The skills associated with critical thinking and problem-solving include (Herrity, 2023):

- **Observation:** By observing, employees can identify and predict present and possible future problems.
- **Analyse:** Analysing unbiased research will enable employees to enhance evaluation.
- **Inference:** By concluding, employees can conclude.
- **Communication:** Employees who can explain and discuss the issues they or the company face communicate efficiently.

Problem-solving will follow these steps as the situation’s solution is executed.

Employers must be determined to nurture their employees' critical thinking. In a team. The following steps can be taken to achieve this (Fraraccio, 2023):

1. Name, explain, and discuss the situation.
2. List all possible solutions.
3. Evaluate all possible solutions and narrow the list to the top three.
4. Take the top three solutions, further evaluate them (with their benefits and obstacles) and choose one.
5. Create a multi-step plan to implement the solution, with a timeline and in-depth steps.
6. Implement, track, and complete.

Critical thinking skills are important to build success for employees as new ideas are introduced, and hidden opportunities are revealed. This generic skill also improves decision-making, keeps objectives on track, and boosts employee well-being, as independent working conditions are empowering (Fraraccio, 2023). Reckmann (2023) states that critical thinking guarantees objectivity and reduces errors. This “outside-of-the-box thinking” often requires less supervision and will minimise inconsistencies in the workplace.

As critical thinking and problem-solving can be learned, employees can define these skills by actively listening, analysing problems from multiple perspectives, and questioning their biases (Fraraccio, 2023), ultimately leading to increased productivity.

Adaptability and Resilience

Adaptability involves reformulating goals and strategies to align with reality, and resilience is the capability to bounce back from workplace disruption (Seibert *et al.*, 2016:245). Unexpected and unforeseen circumstances, such as positive or negative shocks, will arise in organisations. Organisational transitions require adaptability and resilience, whether the circumstance is a promotion, retrenchment, or a mentor leaving the company.

Work resilience is fostered by ensuring the health and well-being of employees while maintaining productivity (MacEachen *et al.*, 2008:1027). Thus, ensuring the well-being of employees will increase their ability to be resilient and more productive. The following aspects have been suggested to improve employee well-being (MacEachen *et al.*, 2008:1027):

- Comfortable offices and work attire, as well as welcoming office designs.
- Group activities and stress support.
- Deadline assistance.
- Flexibility with working hours, work-from-home opportunities, and an environment that encourages balance between work and private life.

Strategies to enhance employee adaptability and resilience, on a personal level and in a professional setting, are suggested by Seibert *et al.* (2016:247-253). In terms of behaviour, these recommendations included building an effective relationship with a mentor or supervisor, taking advantage of training opportunities, and actively seeking challenges within a job. Psychologically, the employee and employer should manage distracting emotions, nurture a growth mindset, and balance goals.

When employees are taken care of, adapting to new and stressful situations builds resilience and makes them more productive.

Time Management and Organization

Effectively using time management is a generic skill that enables users to control and use time properly (Amiri *et al.*, 2014:246). Whether this skill is used effectively depends on both the employee and their management team, as this valuable resource and its importance will determine the success of the workplace.

Enhancing time management skills can be done with ten principles, outlined by Amiri *et al.* (2014:246)

- Planning: Planning the daily workday will enable employees to focus more on what needs to be done.
- Objectives identification: Identifying the most important objectives that need to be completed will allow employees to determine which tasks are the most important.
- Daily scheduling of tasks: Scheduling tasks or projects in a workday timeframe will encourage employees to divide their time appropriately according to the most essential tasks.
- Task preferences: Employees have different abilities and strong suits, and tasks should be assigned to people with the expertise and experience to complete them in the designated timeframe.
- Energy levels of employees: Employees have fluctuating energy levels that could be an obstacle or a driver to complete tasks. Their emotional and physical abilities should be considered.
- Deadline determination: Communicating and structuring tasks according to deadlines will assist in time management.
- Flexibility: Time management should be flexible, as more important tasks with stricter deadlines could arise.
- Individual management: Employees should be able to manage their own time independently.
- Evaluation: Evaluating the effectiveness is important.
- Control: Control is needed to implement and revise time management strategies.

Time management entails employees accurately doing what is the most pressing; increasing its effectiveness will increase productivity.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is intelligence about self-awareness, the management of emotions and reactions, balancing motivations, and the ability to influence others (Ahad *et al.*, 2021:16). Employees with high emotional intelligence can be more productive with less manpower than those who lack emotional intelligence (Suleman *et al.*, 2020:2). Supervisors who foster their emotional intelligence can make quality strategic decisions (Alzoubi & Aziz, 2021:1) which will lead an organisation to success.

As technology has been advancing, the gap between productivity perception and accuracy has been narrowing (Alzoubi & Aziz, 2021:2), and organisations should focus on job satisfaction as it directly impacts an employee's emotional intelligence. Attitudes of employees foster their commitment, and a high commitment to the organisation will ensure a higher emotional intelligence. Leaders in organisations with higher emotional intelligence will gain loyalty from their subordinates more easily (Suleman *et al.*, 2020:3), and is regarded as an essential tool for leadership (Alzoubi & Aziz, 2021:1).

Emotional intelligence is a valuable variable in the workplace that directly affects productivity (Suleman *et al.*, 2020:12) as it plays a vital role in motivating an employee to commit to their job. When employees have a good attitude towards their job, their emotional intelligence will increase and create a more productive worker.

Training and Development

Employees play a pivotal role in an organisation's success, and investing in employees will upskill them and expose them to new opportunities (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:6256). Developing the human capital that an organisation has will increase productivity, whether it is in a technical or conceptual aspect (Okon & Gemson, 2022:93), and training and developing employees has become a driving force for success (Khan & Abdullah, 2019:37).

Employees who stay current on the changes in the industry and industry trends and who refine their skills will increase productivity (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:6256). As organisations invest in these programs, their competitive edge will also increase (Kumar *et al.*, 2023:6259).

Improves performance has been linked directly to the training and development of employees, both on an individual level and in groups. Job satisfaction also increases as job knowledge and competency grow; employees can refine their work habits, and these factors increase productivity (Khan & Abdullah, 2019:38).

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study made use of various sources when conducting the literature review. The literature review formed an integral part of the research and assisted in gaining insight into prior related research and developed trends (Kumar, 2019:58; Saunders *et al.*, 2019:74).

For this study, the epistemology underlying the study is rooted in constructivism. An inductive approach was followed to conduct the study using a qualitative approach. The theory of the study focused on the possible advantages of implementing generic skills development, aiming to conclude whether interpersonal skills influence the productivity of subordinates. The data collected were analysed using Atlas.ti software.

3.2. Study context

The entity under investigation is a single higher education institute in South Africa with branches in the Gauteng and North-West Province regions of South Africa.

3.3. Population and Sampling

The participants of this study included academic and support employees of a single higher education institute in South Africa, who consequently comprised the study population.

Permanent academic and support staff members with a tenure of at least one year were specifically chosen as part of the non-probability sampling procedure. A pilot interview was conducted to ensure that the data collection tool semi-structured interview guide was sufficient and that any necessary adjustments were made before the commencement of the data collection process.

The intended sample consisted of four interviews conducted with each faculty within the higher education institute and four interviews within each support department. However, sampling continued until saturation was reached in the two main groups (academics and support staff), which happened after ten interviews in each of the two groups. Add some references to support your sample size here. It will give more academic rigour and depth to the study

An email was sent to all staff members of the higher education institute, inviting them to participate in the study. A total of 104 participants agreed to participate in the study. Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were provided with research and informed consent forms containing the necessary information to decide whether they wanted to participate in the study or not.

Primary data was collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions were adapted to distinguish between the responses of line managers and subordinates, to achieve a measure of triangulation between the two groups. Most of those participants that indicated that they are managers also commented that they conduct the interview in their dual capacity as managers and staff/academics.

Thematic analysis was done, where data was coded, grouped into code groups and, from this, themes were identified. The themes covered in the interview guide were: Employment position and responsibilities (all participants), level of generic skills and how they have developed over time, rating of subordinates' performance and the extent of the contribution of generic skills to this performance, relationship with direct superior and the contribution of their level of generic skills to performance and Influence of generic skills of managers on the performance of subordinates (for line managers), and description of the direct line manager's level of generic skills, development of manager's level of generic skills over time, rating of personal performance and that of fellow workers, and the extent of contribution of manager's generic skills to this performance, contribution of the personal level of generic skills to subordinates' performance, and influence of generic skills of managers on the performance of subordinates (for subordinates). Since the most challenging part of the study was to compare generic skills to *actual* performance of subordinates, perceived performance was measured in the interviews. The results were evaluated, and a relationship between generic skills and employee productivity was established.

3.4. Trustworthiness of the data

Several measures were taken to enhance the study's credibility, including establishing a trusting relationship with participants, using an impartial coder to reach a consensus during data analysis, and carefully editing the data to ensure accuracy. Additionally, efforts were made to prevent the researcher's preconceived expectations from influencing the data, further enhancing the study's credibility. These measures contribute to the overall trustworthiness of the study's findings (Saunders *et al.*, 2019).

Conformability refers to the neutrality of the researcher in the study, which was ensured by ensuring that the researcher's personal biases and preconceived notions did not influence the data collection, data analysis, or interpretation of the results. In our study, we ensured conformability by employing an objective and systematic approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the study's findings can be applied to other settings or groups of people. In our study, we ensured transferability by being transparent about the methods used in the study, providing detailed descriptions of the participants and context of the study, and using appropriate sampling techniques to ensure that the sample was representative of the population.

Dependability refers to the consistency and stability of the data, which is ensured by using appropriate methods to ensure that the data is reliable and consistent over time. In our study, we ensured dependability by using standardised data collection tools and procedures, ensuring that the data was collected and analysed consistently, and involving multiple researchers in the data analysis process to ensure that the results were consistent and reliable.

3.5. Ethical considerations

The study received approval from the relevant research ethics committee, with ethics approval number NWU - 00682 - 23 - A4. Permission was also obtained from the institution's management to conduct the study. Moreover, consent from the interviewees was sought to audiotape and record sessions using the platform of their choice. The participants' rights, interests, and well-being were upheld throughout the entire research procedure.

Creswell, (2012:261) identified six interrelated steps to analyse and interpret qualitative data. These steps include gathering and organising data for analysis, exploring and coding the data, coding to develop themes and descriptions, reporting and representing the findings, interpreting the results, and verifying the findings' accuracy. Data was cleaned, coded, sorted into code groups and from these, themes were identified to be used to draw final conclusions.

4. Results and Findings

The 104 people who responded were equally distributed amongst staff members and academics, with a roughly equal distribution between managers and subordinates and interviews were held with an equal number of academics and support staff. Most of those that indicated that they are managers also commented that they conduct the interview in their dual capacity as managers and staff/academics. It was notable that the responses by members of the different groups were virtually identical, and no notable differences could be seen between the different groups. Data saturation was reached with only nine individuals.

Support staff roles varied between office staff, IT support, and laboratory assistants, while academic staff were professors, researchers and other instructors. It is important to note that both academic and support positions are essential in creating a healthy and successful academic environment. In line with the nature of the sample, most participants had at least an honours degree.

4.1. Presentation of themes

Three themes emerged as prominent

4.1.1. Theme One: Line managers' generic skills do influence subordinates' perceived performance.

Note that, due to confidentiality constraints, formal performance management data could not be obtained. The perceived performance from the interviews was the only measure that could be used for the analysis. Originally this was regarded as a constraint, but it ensured that the data for the independent (generic skills) and dependent (subordinate performance) variables were consistent and congruent. This is also consistent with evidence from the literature, as already discussed in paragraph 2. Based on the analysis of the data collected when conducting the interviews, it is evident that a line manager's level of generic skills influences subordinates' performance. The theme presented in the statement, "The generic skills of line managers have an impact on the performance of their subordinates", is that the abilities and competencies possessed by managers can significantly affect the output of their team members. This highlights the importance of generic skills such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving in the role of a manager. It emphasises the need for managers to possess a well-rounded skill set to effectively manage and motivate their subordinates towards achieving the desired goals and objectives. This theme also highlights the interdependence between managers and their subordinates, as the former's actions and abilities can directly impact the latter's performance. Figure displays various codes associated with generic skills, followed by quotes by participants that support these relationships.

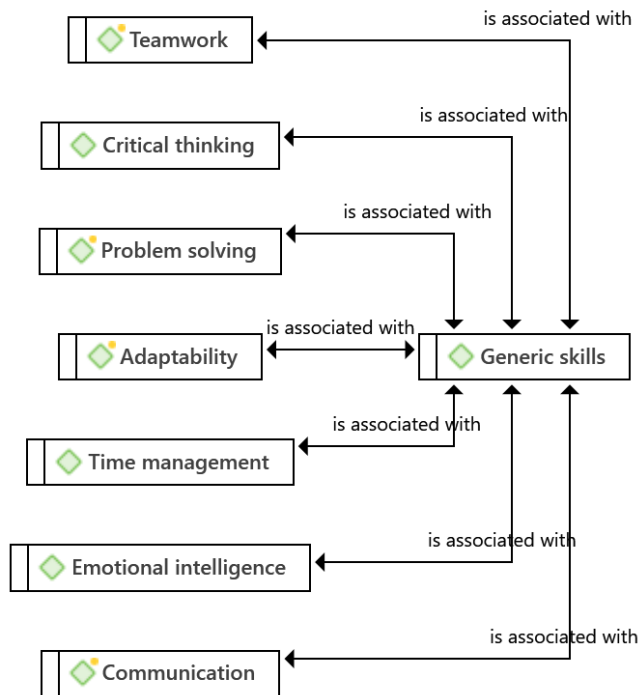


Figure 1: Generic skill association

“I believe that a manager's generic skills have a significant impact on the performance of their subordinates. This is because I have worked with different managers, and I have noticed that if a manager takes pride in their work and is a critical thinker, it reflects positively on their team. They become problem solvers and are on top of their game. On the other hand, if a manager has poor communication skills or time management, it trickles down to their team. Getting responses from their team or getting them to take action on requested tasks becomes difficult. In my opinion, the level of generic skills of the manager does correlate to how well their team performs, but it's not a guarantee. We are different people; having a bad manager does not mean one is bad. However, most of the time, a manager's skills do reflect on their team.”

“Feeling supported, trusted, and safe with your line manager can greatly impact your performance. When your line manager understands that mistakes can happen, it fosters an environment where you feel free to learn, explore, and make mistakes. On the other hand, if you constantly worry about how your line manager will react, your performance can suffer. If your line manager can't regulate their emotions and handle situations appropriately, it becomes difficult for you to do your job effectively. Therefore, having a line manager with good generic skills can greatly affect your performance and the overall work environment.”

“I strongly believe that performance relies on goodwill, particularly in academic environments where individuals have a fair amount of freedom. People are motivated to perform to the best of their abilities when there is goodwill. I have observed colleagues who lack goodwill, and as a result, they perform their duties grudgingly, adopting a work-to-rule approach. This attitude creates a poor work environment and hinders problem-solving, decision-making, and creativity. Conversely, when there is goodwill, performance follows. I have seen this in good and bad managers alike. This principle applies to the relationship between me and my superior, as well as between me and my supporters, and it is a universal experience.”

“We are all working under the same line manager. Unfortunately, we have been experiencing a lot of resignations among employees due to a lack of generic skills from our manager. This problem is causing a lot of senior employees to leave the company, and it's affecting all of us in the same way. The root of the problem is the lack of conflict resolution and generic skills training for the line manager. Unfortunately, the manager is so powerful

that no one can advise them, and there seems to be no resolution. As a result, many people feel they have no choice but to resign and find employment elsewhere.”

4.1.2. Theme Two: A line manager’s emotional intelligence influences the work environment.

A line manager’s emotional intelligence can be crucial when creating a positive work environment. Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognise and understand one's own emotions, as well as the emotions of others, and to use this knowledge to guide behaviour and decision-making. A line manager with high emotional intelligence is more likely to manage their emotions effectively and respond appropriately to the emotions of their team members. This can help create a work environment that is supportive, collaborative, and respectful. On the other hand, a line manager with low emotional intelligence may struggle to manage their emotions, leading to outbursts or other negative behaviours that can create a tense or hostile work environment. Additionally, they may struggle to recognise or respond appropriately to the emotions of their team members, leading to feeling dismissed or undervalued. Overall, a line manager’s emotional intelligence is key in shaping the work environment. Investing in developing emotional intelligence skills can significantly impact team morale, productivity, and engagement. Figure displays the interlink between generic skills and emotional intelligence as well as the components thereof: Supporting quotations follow.

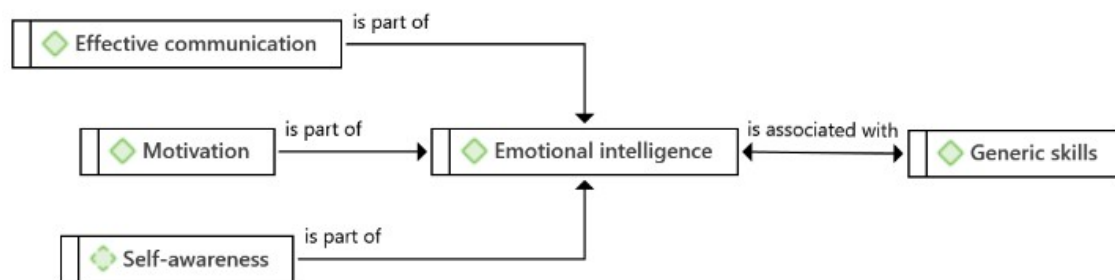


Figure 2: Emotional Intelligence

“I would rate my current line manager’s generic skills a 10 out of 10. I feel very fortunate to have an exceptional line manager with great generic skills such as empathy, patience, kindness, and tolerance towards different personalities. She is a good listener and takes the time to know the people she works with. I cannot stress enough how amazing her generic skills are; they are one of her greatest strengths, in my opinion.”

“Creating a cohesive and productive work environment requires strong, general skills. In my experience, some people excel in this area while others struggle. Poor emotional intelligence or a lack of willingness to develop these skills can lead to miscommunication and conflict. One particular issue I have noticed is that people often take critique personally rather than seeing it as an opportunity to improve. This is where generic skills come into play. It is important to know how to give and receive feedback effectively. It is immature to view critique as an attack on one’s character. Maturity is demonstrated by the ability to separate critique from personal identity, a skill that not everyone possesses.”

“I believe managing people in an academic environment can be challenging, especially during high-pressure times of the year. It’s essential to provide support and motivation to keep everyone on track. However, if a manager or director lacks emotional intelligence or conflict management skills, they may struggle to diffuse situations effectively. To create a healthy and productive environment, it’s crucial to be properly equipped with

these skills. This way, you can encourage teamwork, recognise and address issues transparently, and find compromises when necessary. Emotional intelligence and conflict management significantly create a positive and productive work environment.”

4.1.3. Theme Three: Effective communication contributes to performance.

Effective communication is a key component of a successful and high-performing team. When team members can clearly and efficiently communicate with one another, they can collaborate more effectively and avoid misunderstandings that may lead to mistakes or delays. Furthermore, effective communication helps to build trust and understanding among team members. When individuals feel heard and respected, they are more likely to feel invested in the team's success and willing to go above and beyond to achieve common goals. Overall, it is clear that effective communication plays a critical role in team performance. Teams that prioritise communication and work to continually improve in this area are more likely to succeed and achieve their objectives.

Communication is vital to human interaction and crucial in our personal and professional lives. It involves exchanging information, ideas, and thoughts between individuals, groups, or organisations through various channels, such as verbal, written, or visual. Effective communication is essential for building strong relationships, fostering trust, and enhancing collaboration. It helps individuals and groups to share their perspectives, understand each other's needs, and work towards common goals. However, communication can also be a source of conflict and misunderstanding if not done properly. Poor communication can lead to confusion, frustration, and even hostility. It is crucial to ensure that the message is clear and concise and that the receiver understands it in the intended way. In today's fast-paced world, technology has revolutionised the way we communicate. With social media, emails, video conferencing, and instant messaging, communication has become faster and more accessible. However, it is also important to remember that technology should not replace face-to-face communication, which is still essential in many situations. Communication is one of the most important skills we can possess. It is essential for building relationships, conveying ideas, and achieving common goals. Effective communication requires active listening, clear and concise messaging, and understanding and respecting different perspectives. Figure depicts the codes for effective communication.



Figure 3: Effective Communication

“As a line manager, I realised that effective communication is crucial. In the past, I made decisions and solved problems without involving others or explaining the complexities of my thought process. However, now I understand that if I don't communicate effectively, my staff may feel inadequate and struggle to meet unattainable standards. Therefore, over the past two years, I have developed my communication skills to involve my team in decision-making and explain my thought process. This approach helps them critique my logic and

inform me of concepts I may not have considered. I have also become more sensitive and less direct in my communication style.”

“If I had to give her any feedback, I would recommend that she communicate more timeously regarding certain things. She's got excellent problem-solving skills and decision-making; I don't have an issue with that. She's an outstanding team player. She knows how to bring our team together, so I would say that she has a high level of generic skills, but I do feel that there is room for improvement in some areas.”

5. Findings of the study

In line with what the literature suggests, as discussed in paragraph 2, our research found that managers who possessed strong generic skills positively influence employee performance. The specific generic skills that were found to have the strongest influence slightly differ from the list that the literature highlights, possibly due to the specific work environment where the study was carried out. This warrants further research. The research also revealed that employees with a good understanding of generic skills were likelier to perform better in their roles. Additionally, the study found a positive relationship between line managers' communication skills and employee performance. The research findings confirmed the importance of generic skills training for managers and employees, highlighting the need for institutions to provide regular training opportunities to enhance employee performance. Overall, the study successfully achieved its primary objective of exploring the influence of managers' generic skills on employee performance and accomplishing its secondary objectives of establishing the understanding of generic skills among line managers and employees, elucidating the link between generic skills and employee performance, and determining the need for generic skills training for managers and employees. The study also achieved its secondary objectives.

Secondary Objective 1: To establish the understanding of generic skills among line managers and employees.

The study found that emotional intelligence is a crucial aspect of effective leadership, and line managers play a key role in promoting emotional intelligence within organizations. Generic skills such as communication, empathy, and self-awareness are important for line managers to possess to establish positive relationships with their subordinates, foster a sense of trust and psychological safety, and create a work environment conducive to emotional intelligence.

Secondary Objective 2: To elucidate the link between generic skills and employee performance within the institution.

Research has shown that line managers' generic skills, such as communication, empathy, and self-awareness, can significantly impact subordinates' performance. Line managers who possess these skills can help subordinates feel heard and valued by creating a safe space for open communication, improving their engagement and motivation. Additionally, line managers who demonstrate emotional

intelligence are better equipped to manage conflict and navigate difficult conversations with their subordinates, resulting in better employee performance.

Secondary Objective 3: To determine the need for generic skills training for managers and employees.

The study highlights the importance of line managers developing and honing their skills to promote emotional intelligence within organizations. As organizations prioritize emotional intelligence as a critical component of effective leadership, line managers need to receive training to improve their generic skills such as communication, empathy, and self-awareness. This training can create a positive work environment that promotes productivity, engagement, and overall success.

6. Managerial Implications

The finding that line managers' generic skills impact subordinates' performance has significant managerial implications. It suggests that organisations should focus on developing and on enhancing their line managers' skills to improve their subordinates' performance. Managers should be trained and provided with the necessary resources to develop communication, leadership, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. This would not only benefit the subordinates but also the organisation, as it would lead to better performance and increased productivity. Additionally, managers should be encouraged to provide regular feedback and support to their subordinates to enhance their skills and knowledge. This would create a positive work environment and foster a culture of continuous learning and development.

Managers with high emotional intelligence positively impact the work environment and their team's productivity. They can understand and manage their own emotions, as well as the emotions of their team members. This helps them to effectively communicate, resolve conflicts, and build strong relationships with their employees. As a result, employees feel supported, valued, and motivated to perform their best. On the other hand, managers with low emotional intelligence may struggle to manage their own emotions and those of their team, which can lead to a negative work environment and decreased productivity. Therefore, organisations need to invest in developing emotional intelligence among their managers to create a positive and productive work environment.

Effective communication is crucial for the success of any organisation. Managers who understand the importance of communication can create a more productive and efficient workplace. They can ensure that employees have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, as well as the goals and objectives of the organisation. This can help to align everyone's efforts towards achieving the organisation's overall mission. Managers who prioritise communication can also create a workplace culture of openness and transparency. By encouraging employees to share their ideas and concerns, managers can identify potential problems early on and work to resolve them before they escalate. This

can help to build trust and foster a sense of collaboration among employees. Effective communication can also help managers build stronger relationships with their employees. By actively listening to their concerns and providing feedback on their performance, managers can help employees feel valued and supported. This can lead to increased job satisfaction and a lower turnover rate.

7. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

Based on the analysis of the data collected, it is recommended that organisations should prioritise training and development programs that aim to improve the generic skills of their line managers. These skills include communication, leadership, problem-solving, and other interpersonal skills that can help managers manage and motivate their subordinates to achieve their goals and objectives. By investing in such training programs, organisations can help their managers develop a well-rounded skill set that will not only benefit their subordinates but also the organisation as a whole. This will ultimately result in improved performance, increased productivity, and a more positive work environment.

Invest in emotional intelligence training for line managers to help them better understand and manage their own emotions, as well as the emotions of their team members. This helps create a positive work environment and leads to better communication, stronger relationships among team members, and increased productivity. By being aware of their own emotions and those of their team members, line managers can respond appropriately and build trust with their team. Ultimately, investing in emotional intelligence training for line managers can significantly impact an organisation's success.

Based on our observation and analysis, we recommend that the organisation prioritises effective employee communication. Clear, concise, and consistent communication can contribute significantly to the team's overall performance. By encouraging open and honest communication, employees will be more likely to share ideas, ask questions, and seek clarification, which can lead to improved productivity, better decision-making, and, ultimately, higher levels of success for the company.

7.1. Limitations

The study's most important limitation is the fact that it was carried out in a single organisation, which could not be representative of all HEIs in South Africa and beyond. However, the fact that the literature study confirms the importance of the issues that emerged from the studies, does mean that the conclusions could at least partially be extrapolated to other HEIs. Also, the study was carried out in 2022 and 2023. In the era directly after the COVID-19 pandemic results could be skewed due to a disruption of the work environment of staff during COVID-19. Since most participants had primary and line-management responsibilities, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between these two roles while analysing the data. However, the results were consistent enough that this limitation does not negate the importance of generic skills among managers. Finally, although saturation was reached

very early during the study, the sample might not represent the academic and support staff fraternity at the specific HEI.

7.2. Suggestions for further studies

The following suggestions for further studies were made:

- Investigating the effectiveness of various generic skills training programs for managers and employees.
- Exploring the impact of generic skills on employee retention and job satisfaction.
- Examining the relationship between generic skills and leadership effectiveness.
- Investigating the impact of generic skills on team dynamics and collaboration.
- Exploring the effectiveness of different methods for assessing employees' generic skills.
- Investigating the role of organizational culture in promoting the development of generic skills.
- Comparing the impact of generic skills training on employee performance across different industries.
- Examining the impact of generic skills on innovation and creativity in the workplace.
- Investigating the relationship between generic skills and employee well-being.
- Exploring the impact of generational differences on the development and application of generic skills in the workplace.

In conclusion, investing in training and development programs that focus on improving the generic skills of line managers and emotional intelligence training can significantly impact an organisation's success. Additionally, prioritising effective organisational communication can significantly improve the team's overall performance. By implementing these recommendations, organisations can create a positive work environment, improve productivity, and ultimately achieve their goals and objectives.

References

- Alzoubi, H. & Aziz, R. (2021). Does Emotional Intelligence Contribute to the Quality of Strategic Decisions? The Mediating Role of Open Innovation. *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, 7:130. <https://://10.3390/joitmc7020130>
- Amiri, Z., Ghobadian, M. & Mirzaei, A. 2014. The study of time management factors and their influences on productivity. *Kuwait chapter of Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review*, 33(2543):1-7.
- Bennett, N., Dunne, E. and Carré, C., 2000. Skills Development in Higher Education and Employment. Taylor & Francis, Inc., 7625 Empire Dr., Florence, KY 41042.

- Carless, S.A. and De Paola, C., 2000. The measurement of cohesion in work teams. *Small group research*, 31(1), pp.71-88.
- Chen, Y., Cheng, Y., & Chen, S. (2018). Transformational leadership and academic performance: The mediating role of organizational culture. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 56(6), 643-658.
- Clampitt, P.G. & Downs, C.W. 1993. Employee perceptions of the relationship between communication and productivity: A field study. *The Journal of Business Communication* (1973), 30(1):5-28.
- Cooks-Campbell, A. 2022. Communication is key in the workplace. Here's how to improve. <https://www.betterup.com/blog/why-communication-is-key-to-workplace-and-how-to-improve-skills> Date of access: 21 November 2023.
- Cresswell, J., 2012. Including social discourses and experience in research on refugees, race, and ethnicity. *Discourse & Society*, 23(5), pp.553-575.
- Day, C., Sammons, P., Hopkins, D., Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Gu, Q., & Brown, E. (2020). The impact of school leadership on pupil outcomes. London: Department for Education.
- Fang, T., Gunderson, M. & Long, R.J. 2021. Profit Sharing and Workplace Productivity Growth in Canada
- Fraraccio, M. (2023). Building Critical Thinking Skills to Solve Problems at Work. <https://www.business.com/articles/building-critical-thinking-skills-at-work/> Date of access: 21 November 2023.
- Griffiths, R., & Smith, A. (2020). Enhancing student outcomes through effective communication between academic and professional services staff. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(2), 211-220.
- Hamid, A. & Younus, M. 2021. An Analysis of Library Professionals' Communication Skills: Status and Effectiveness on Workplace Productivity. *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*, 4736,
- Herrity, J. 2023. 5 Top Critical Thinking Skills (And How To Improve Them). <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/critical-thinking-skills> Date of access: 21 November 2023.
- Hirst, A., & Knight, P. (2019). The importance of teamwork and collaboration in higher education. *Higher Education Pedagogies*, 4(1), 7-15.

- Jolaoso, C. 2023. 10 Tips For Effective Communication In The Workplace. <https://www.forbes.com/advisor/business/effective-communication-workplace/> Date of access: 21 November 2023.
- Khan, S. & Abdullah, N.N. 2019. The impact of staff training and development on teachers' productivity. *Economics, Management and Sustainability*, 4(1):37-45.
- Khawam, A.M., DiDona, T. & Hernández, B.S. 2017. Effectiveness of teamwork in the workplace. *International Journal of Sciences: Basic and Applied Research (IJSBAR)*, 32(3):267-286.
- Krambia-Kapardis, M., & Zopiatis, A. (2019). The most significant determinants of employee performance in the hospitality industry: Evidence from Cyprus. *Journal of Tourism Research*, 21(1), 39-56.
- Kumar, T.S., Rao, S.K., Chakravarty, H., Thyagaraju, N. & Soman, S.M. 2023. Examining The Effect of Training and Development Programs on Employee Productivity and Organizational Success. *Journal of Survey in Fisheries Sciences*, 10(1S):6255-6267.
- MacEachen, E., Polzer, J. & Clarke, J. 2008. "You are free to set your own hours": Governing worker productivity and health through flexibility and resilience. *Social Science & Medicine*, 66(5):1019-1033.
- Okon, E. & Gemson, E. 2022. Training and development protocols and employee productivity in First Bank Nigeria plc, Osogbo. *Global Journal of Education, Humanities & Management Sciences*, 4(1),
- Oteshova, A.K., Niyazbayeva, A.A., Prodanova, N.A., Sabirova, R.K. & Zayed, N.M. 2021. The effect of teamwork on employee productivity. *Academy of Strategic Management Journal*, 20:1-8.
- Pouragha, B., Keshtkar, M., Abdolahi, M. & Sheikhbardsiri, H. 2020. The role of communication skills in the promotion of productivity of health human resource in Iran: A cross-sectional study. *J Educ Health Promot*, 9:229. 10.4103/jehp.jehp_180_20
- Reckmann, N. 2023. Why Critical Thinking Matters in Your Business. <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/7532-critical-thinking-in-business.html> Date of access: 21 November 2023.
- Saunders, M.N.K., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. 2019. Research methods for business students. Eighth edition. Harlow, United Kingdom ;: Pearson.
- Seibert, S.E., Kraimer, M.L. & Heslin, P.A. 2016. Developing career resilience and adaptability. *Organizational Dynamics*, 45(3):245-257.

- Suleman, Q., Syed, M.A., Mahmood, Z. & Hussain, I. 2020. Correlating emotional intelligence with job satisfaction: Evidence from a cross-sectional study among Secondary School Heads in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11:240.
- Van den Bossche, P., Gijssels, W., Segers, M., & Kirschner, P. (2019). Collaborative problem-solving in higher education: A systematic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(3), 365-399.
- Wang, M., Li, Y., & Wang, X. (2021). Generic skills requirements for line managers in higher education: A comparative study of China and the UK. *Higher Education*, 82(1), 125-141.
- Yassin, S., Hasan, F.A., Amin, W. & Amiruddin, N. 2008. Implementation of generic skills in the curriculum. Blog