# University students' social skills performing their professional internships

# Habilidades sociales en universitarios realizando sus prácticas profesionales

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**Abstract**

The objective of this quantitative study was to identify the most used social skills by engineering students during their stay in the company to meet the training needs. The sample chosen through a non-random sampling consisted of 82 participants, 18 students (30%) of Engineering Technologies for Automation (ITA) and 41 (70%) of the Bachelor of Business Innovation and Marketing (LIN) of the Universidad Tecnológica del Sur de Sonora (UTS), and 9 students (40%) from ITA and 14 students (60%) from LIN, from the Universidad Tecnológica de Nezahualcóyotl (UTNEZA) aged between 21 and 33 years. Goldstein's Social Skills instrument (1989) was applied. The data was analyzed with the statistical program SPSS 23. The results showed that the social skills most used by the students of both institutions are those of planning, followed by the advanced ones, and the least used are those related to feelings and stress management. The rest report frequent use. It concludes with the proposal to design a program that allows promoting and developing social skills, among administrative and teaching staff through manuals and making a wide dissemination of these.

**Resumen**

El objetivo del presente estudio cuantitativo fue, identificar las habilidades sociales más utilizadas por los alumnos de ingeniería durante su estadía en la empresa para conocer las necesidades de capacitación. La muestra elegida a través de un muestreo no aleatorio estuvo formada por 82 participantes, 18 alumnos (30%) de Ingeniería Tecnologías para la Automatización (ITA) y 41 (70%) de Licenciatura en Innovación de Negocios y Mercadotecnia (LIN) de la Universidad Tecnológica del Sur de Sonora (UTS), y 9 educandos (40%) de ITA y 14 estudiantes (60%) de LIN, de la Universidad Tecnológica de Nezahualcóyotl (UTNEZA) con edades entre 21 y 33 años. Se aplicó el instrumento de Habilidades Sociales de Goldstein (1989). Los datos se analizaron con el programa estadístico SPSS 23. Los resultados mostraron que las habilidades sociales más usadas por los educandos de ambas instituciones, son las de planificación, seguidas por las avanzadas, y las menos utilizadas son las relacionadas con los sentimientos y para hacer frente al estrés. El resto, reportan uso frecuente. Se concluye con la propuesta de diseñar un programa que permita fomentar y desarrollar las habilidades sociales, entre el personal administrativo y docente a través de manuales y realizar una amplia difusión de éstos.

**Social skills, Students, Technological University**

**Habilidades sociales, Estudiantes, Universidad Tecnológica**

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## Introduction

The function of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is aimed at fostering an educational environment that, in addition to solving current social problems together with students, helps to train people for the future. In view of the above, it is thought that higher education is an excellent area of opportunity to train individuals who improve social contexts through harmonious coexistence (Guerrero & Faro, 2012).

Loera, López, & Teja, (2020), affirm that HEIs have a great responsibility in the training of professionals who meet the needs demanded by society and who contribute to reducing and preventing social problems. Several studies show that non-cognitive as well as cognitive aspects play an important role in people's success. It is necessary to highlight that both variables have an impact not only on the economic aspect, but are also related to the family, academic, work, social, etc.

Nowadays, large companies and institutions around the world focus on professionals who have been able to develop "soft" competences in parallel to their studies, highlighting the development of social skills. Large companies have stopped giving great relevance to the number of diplomas a candidate has; on the contrary, they focus on a profile in which communication skills, teamwork, empathy, assertiveness, conflict resolution, stress management, impulse control, among other social skills stand out (Torres de Barón, 2019).

Human beings are by nature social beings, who only resolve their basic needs in their relationships with others. One of its requirements is to build affective and social bonds (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport [MEC], 1998); these bonds could be strengthened if formal education strengthens the development of socioemotional skills, which could contribute to better coexistence. In this regard, the participation of higher education is not exempt (Trejo, 2019).

The idea of fostering socioemotional skills in the higher education curriculum is based on the assertion of the Inter-American Development Bank ([IDB], 2017) that individuals do not and should not stop learning, and that the accumulation of skills during adulthood is an essential part of the development of skills in a person's life.

### Social skills

Bar-On (2006) mentions that social skills act as a vital prerequisite for human beings to survive and adapt to the environment in which they develop. For their part, (Caballo, 2007; Del Prette & Del Prette, 2008; Gismero, 2000; Patrício, Maia & Bezerra, 2015), state that social skills are the set of learned behaviours, of a situational and cultural, verbal and non-verbal nature, through which an individual expresses their needs, feelings, preferences, opinions and rights, thus favouring the establishment of interpersonal relationships and a healthy adjustment in their biopsychosocial environment.

Also, Betina & Contini de González, (2011), argue that, in everyday life, human beings establish different types of social relationships: at home, school, work, among others. It is essential to manage communication, attentive listening, the ability to initiate a conversation and different skills that allow the satisfaction of relationships. Currently, it has come to be considered that social skills are more important than cognitive skills in terms of the possibility of academic and professional success, and it is also stated that the lack of assertive social skills can lead to the appearance of dysfunctional behaviour, both in the family and in the school environment.

In the various stages of human development, the role of social skills is fundamental to intervene in attitudes, values, beliefs, cognitive abilities and interaction styles, such as establishing appropriate relationships with peers, forming a couple and participating in various social or academic groups and seeking solutions to problems. In addition, social skills influence a person's perception of themselves, others and society, and allow them to respond positively to stressful situations (Betancourth, *et al.*, 2017).

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Social skills are a set of habits (at the level of behaviours, but also of thoughts and emotions), which allow the individual to improve interpersonal relationships, feel good, get what they want, and ensure that others do not prevent them from achieving their goals. To promote these skills, different related elements such as assertiveness, self-esteem and emotional intelligence must be linked, and these elements are induced or proportional to the social skills that a person has (Duran, Parra & Marceles 2015). For his part, Monjas (1999) stresses that these skills must be related to cognitive factors (beliefs, values, ways of perceiving and evaluating reality) and their important influence on communication and interpersonal relationships.

**Social skills in higher education**

Trejo (2019) mentions that the promotion and development of socioemotional skills in HEIs favours a better coexistence, because they allow us to strengthen our affective and social ties with others, and with this, a better coexistence between people can be achieved.

For the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016), education can contribute to providing a diversity of skills that empower individuals to better face the challenges of everyday life. Social and emotional skills such as perseverance, emotional stability and sociability are also important for positive outcomes. These skills enable people to translate intentions into actions, establish positive relationships with family, friends and the community, and avoid falling into unhealthy lifestyles and risky behaviours (Trejo, 2019).

Similarly, Caldera et al. (2018) recognises the relationship between social skills and the way university students perceive themselves, so that if the self-concept is positive, it contributes to the improvement of their social skills and the prevention of some non-functional behaviours, allowing better interaction with their academic environment; otherwise interpersonal relationships are seriously affected.

It also highlights the importance of stimulating the development of social skills for life, which allows students to have the ability to assume solid criteria and with independence to incorporate skills that improve their interpersonal relationships in a society burdened with multiple social problems (Acevedo *et al*., 2017).

**Problem statement**

In the Technological Universities (UT), the student profile is as follows: they come from underprivileged families, they are "pioneers" in their families in pursuing higher education, they have few study habits, only some have family support and they have to work to support themselves. On the other hand, they show nobility, cooperation and solidarity.

The problems shown by the students are caused by unfavourable economic conditions, the limited cultural level of the family of origin, the incompatibility of the time dedicated to work and studies; in some, the responsibility that marriage implies, the insufficient attitude of achievement and social skills that facilitate integration into their socio-cultural environment, little knowledge and self-acceptance, for the construction of values, attitudes and positive habits that favour their school work and their integral formation.

In the UT, students study six semesters to obtain a Higher University Technician (TSU) degree, with the option of studying five more semesters to obtain an Engineering degree. In both academic levels, the last four-month period is spent in a company for a period of between ten and fifteen weeks, with a tutor appointed by the company with which the stay is agreed, an academic tutor appointed by the university and a methodological tutor, who supports the student in writing their "stay" report, which is compulsory for their degree, at the end of the stay. During the stay, the student develops an internship project related to professional functions and equipment management, based on case studies and a special project commissioned by the company (Institutional Development Plan [PLADI], 2004-2015).

Professional internships are intended to contribute to the comprehensive training of students, enabling them to consolidate their professional competences by confronting them with real situations in the practice of their profession; to develop problem-solving skills; and to reaffirm their social and ethical commitment. As well as being a source of relevant information for the adaptation and updating of study plans and programmes and strengthening the link between the university and the social and productive environment (Jiménez, *et al.*, 2014).

In their professional training, students must develop various social competences that will characterise them in their professional practice, in such a way as to guarantee a positive influence on the citizens of tomorrow in favour of socially skilful conduct (Torres de Barón, 2019).

Therefore, the importance of fostering social skills in students is highlighted, since a balance between academic learning and social skills will allow the promotion of competent students who are not only prepared to face cognitive challenges, but also to manage comprehensive solutions through the application of negotiation skills, teamwork, assertiveness and conflict management, among others, characteristics that are widely valued in the professional world to which they will later be integrated (López, 2008).

Taking the above into account, the following problem arises:

What soft skills are most used by engineering students during their stay in the company to identify training needs?

Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the soft skills most used by engineering students during their stay in the company to identify training needs.

**Method**

*Sample*

The present study was conducted at UTS, and UTNEZA, during the period from January to March 2022, with students doing their professional practices of Engineering and Bachelor's Degree, in a company.

The sample was chosen by convenience through a non-randomised instrument and consisted of 82 participants, 18 students (30%) from ITA and 41 (70%) from LIN at UTS, in addition to 9 students (40%) from ITA and 14 students (60%) from LIN at UTNETZA. The age ranged from 21 to 33 years. The sample students have a mean age of 22.9 years with a standard deviation of 2.6 years.

*Instrument*

Goldstein's (1989) Social Skills instrument was used, composed of 50 items and a 4-point Likert-type scale: (4) always, (3) often, (2) sometime, (1) never. It assesses 6 categories: I. Early social skills, II. Advanced social skills, III. Alternative to aggression skills, V. Coping with stress skills, VI. Planning skills.

*Procedure*

The instrument was sent to the students by e-mail, explaining how important it was to know which social skills they used most in the company. They were also asked to read each of the items carefully and to mark the number of the answer that most closely matched their way of acting. The mailing included access to the form, the students answered and the captured data were stored in a repository for classification and study.

*Data analysis*

The data obtained were captured and analysed using the SPSS version 23 statistical software.

**Results and discussion**

The results obtained show the social skills most used by UTS and UTNEZA students, in descending order (Table 1).

| Categories | Average | Standard deviation |
|---|---|---|
| First skills (basic) | .91 | .16 |
| Advanced skills | .92 | .13 |
| Skills related to feelings | .62 | .28 |
| Alternative to aggression skills | .86 | .15 |
| Stress coping skills | .76 | .23 |
| Planning skills | .93 | .15 |

**Table 1** Use of social skills categories by UTS and UTNEZA students
*Source: Questionnaire of the use of social skills categories*

Article

Table 1 shows, in descending order, that the categories of social skills most used by UTS and UTNEZA students are planning skills (M=.93), with a standard deviation of .15, the results show that students have highly developed this skill, i.e., they tend to make decisions based on the problems they face, managing to engage with others, an interaction of their ideas, thoughts, and critical participation in the development of tasks (Torres de Barón, 2019).

Next, advanced skills (M=.92) with a standard deviation of .13, (table 1), the students report that they use them at a high level. Rodríguez, Cacheiro, & Gil (2014) comment that these are social development skills that involve a more elaborate interaction and the combination of social behaviour norms. They refer to the ability to ask for help, to integrate into a group, to apologise and to persuade, to follow instructions and to provide explanations about specific tasks.

In descending order, in table 1, are the first social skills (M=.91), with a standard deviation of .16, the study showed that the sample uses this resource at a high level, Torres de Barón (2019) states that they are skills that mostly seek to generate a first contact with the rest of the people, showing interest in getting to know and maintaining a conversation between peers and superiors.

Next, the skills alternative to aggression (M=.86), with a standard deviation of .15 (table 1), the students stated that they apply this skill moderately, Rodríguez et al., (2014) mention that they are social interaction skills that involve the search for different ways of approaching to achieve the desired effect.

Next in table 1, the skills to cope with stress (M= .76), with a standard deviation of .15, the respondents said that they use them at a low level. These skills are of great importance because the control of emotions will enable people to have greater tolerance to frustrations and anger management, thus allowing them to better manage stress (Torres de Barón (2019).

Finally, the least used are the skills related to feelings (M= .62), with a standard deviation of .15 (table 1), the interviewees considered that they use them at a low level, Rodriguez et al., (2014) state that they are skills related to an adequate management of their own emotions and their socially accepted expression, in accordance with the norms of behaviour of a given society or social group.

The results obtained from the joint UTS and UTNEZA sample for each category of social skills are also presented.

| Level of mastery | | Frequency | Percentage | Percentage Valid | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 | 1 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| | 2 | 4 | 4.9 | 4.9 | 6.1 |
| | 3 | 19 | 23.2 | 23.2 | 29.3 |
| | 4 | 58 | 70.7 | 70.7 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 82 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

**Table 2** First skills (basic)

In table 2, it is observed that 70.7% of the sample revealed that they always use the first skills, while 23.2% often. The rest of the sample (4.9%), and (1.22%), never. These are skills that allow for elementary or basic social skills; they allude to the minimum politeness agreed upon in a society. They include basic aspects of communication, establishing the first interpersonal links, identifying and expressing one's own interests, as well as ways of showing gratitude for favours received (Rodríguez et al., 2014).

| Level of mastery | | Frequency | Percentage | Percentage Valid | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 2 | 2 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 2.4 |
| | 3 | 23 | 28.0 | 28.0 | 30.5 |
| | 4 | 57 | 69.5 | 69.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 82 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

**Table 3** Advanced Skills

Table 3 reveals that 69.5% of respondents reported always using advanced social skills, while 28% often. Only 2.4% reported ever. No one reported no use of this category. That is, the interviewees manage to interact with others, with positive participatory actions, using requests, willingness to perform tasks and share with others (Torres de Barón, 2019).

| Level of mastery | | Frequency | Percentage | Percentage Valid | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 0 | 3 | 3.7 | 3.7 | 3.7 |
| | 1 | 16 | 19.5 | 19.5 | 23.2 |
| | 2 | 19 | 23.2 | 23.2 | 46.3 |
| | 3 | 27 | 32.9 | 32.9 | 79.3 |
| | 4 | 17 | 20.7 | 20.7 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 82 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

**Table 4** Skills related to feelings

In table 4, it can be seen that, only 20.73% revealed to always use feeling-related skills, while 32.9% often, 19.51% sometime, and 3.7% never, express feelings with others, recognise feelings, and are able to interact with others despite the anger they may recognise at a medium level, indicating that they manage to achieve this only sometimes (Torres de Barón, 2019).

| Level of mastery | | Frequency | Percentage | Percentage Valid | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 | 1 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| | 2 | 5 | 6.1 | 6.1 | 7.3 |
| | 3 | 43 | 52.4 | 52.4 | 59.8 |
| | 4 | 33 | 40.2 | 40.2 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 82 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

**Table 5** Alternative skills to aggression

In table 5, it is exposed that 40.2% of the sample stated to always use alternative skills to aggression, while 52.4% often. 6.1% often and 1.2% never. These skills enable coexistence with others, as they establish links and forms of participation in the groups to which they belong. The pupils in stay, are able to be able to dialogue in conflict situations, relate with due self-control, and are able to avoid fights, achieving stable and lasting relationships (Torres de Barón, 2019).

| Level of mastery | | Frequency | Percentage | Percentage Valid | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 | 4 | 4.9 | 4.9 | 4.9 |
| | 2 | 12 | 14.6 | 14.6 | 19.5 |
| | 3 | 25 | 30.5 | 30.5 | 50.0 |
| | 4 | 41 | 50.0 | 50.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 82 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

**Table 6** Stress coping skills

In Table 6, the data show that 50% of the respondents reported always using social coping skills to cope with stress, while 30.5% often, 14.6% reported sometimes, and 4.9% never. Stress coping skills refer to the way in which a person can deal with equanimity and moderation in moments of tension, setbacks or disagreement, such as feeling rejected or embarrassed, facing one's own mistakes or injustice, receiving criticism and recognising the merit of others (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2014).

| Level of mastery | | Frequency | Percentage | Percentage Valid | Cumulative Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Valid | 1 | 1 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| | 2 | 4 | 4.9 | 4.9 | 6.1 |
| | 3 | 11 | 13.4 | 13.4 | 19.5 |
| | 4 | 66 | 80.5 | 80.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 82 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

**Table 7** Planning skills

Finally, in Table 7, 80.5% of the sample, stated that they always use planning skills, while 13.4% often, 4.9% some of the time, and 1.2% consider that they never use them. According to Torres de Barón (2019), these are skills that comprise critical and creative participation in decision-making, perseverance, a sense of organisation and a willingness to engage in dialogue.

**Conclusions**

The objective of this study was achieved: to identify the soft skills most used by engineering students during their stay in the company in order to identify training needs.

According to the results, planning skills are the most used, followed by advanced skills. Stress coping skills and feeling skills were the least used by the interviewees. The rest of the categories report frequent use.

It is planned in a second stage of this work, to train students in the development of social skills, Holst, Galicia, Gómez & Degante, (2017) mention that, given the unfavourable consequences of the lack of positive social skills, preparation and training of students is necessary, so that they have strategies that allow them to cope with the transition from the university environment to the workplace.

In addition to applying diagnostic evaluations to the entire university community in order to detect needs related to the development of social skills, it is recommended that a programme be designed to promote and develop social skills through manuals and that these be widely disseminated among administrative and teaching staff.

ALONSO-ALDANA, Ruth, FLORES-REYES, Alfonso, JIMÉNEZ-CALVO, María de Lourdes and BALLESTEROS-AUREOLES, Alejandra. University students' social skills performing their professional internships. Journal High School. 2022

The importance of social skills or interpersonal relationships lies in the fact that they allow for success in professional and life performance; due to the fact that as social beings, people are in constant interaction with their family, school and work environments, so it is necessary to adapt to them without interfering in the relationships that others have with their own environments (Holst, *et al.*, 2017).

According to Tapia, & Cubo (2017), teachers are of great importance to their students because if they do not explicitly teach aspects related to knowing how to be and living together, it will be difficult for university students to integrate these values and skills in their education, i.e., progress must be made in breaking a learning process that favours aspects related to knowing and knowing how to do in order to generate a virtuous circle that strengthens knowing how to learn, do, be and live together in university classrooms and thus contribute to the comprehensive education of students (Díaz, 2014; Montes & Torres, 2015).

Finally, for the achievement of integral university education, the inclusion of social skills is necessary because they have a personal utility in all contexts, where attitudes of respect for others and commitment to the common good are part of healthy social coexistence (Torres de Barón, 2019).

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