INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Fostering Mental Wellness via the Inclusion of Soft Skills in Learning and DevelopmentProgram: Strategies and Impact

Dr. Pragati Shukla[1], Dr. Arpit Katiyar[2], Dr. Shazia Khatton[3], Dr. Chhaya Singh[4]

[1, 2]Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Engineering & Technology (A Constituent Institute of AKTU),
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, 226021, India
[3]Assistant Professor, Department of English, K.H.G.P.G. College, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, 226021, India
[4]Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Sciences and Humanities, Rajkiya Engineering College, Kannauj (Affiliated to AKTU),
Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh, 209732, India

Abstract: In today's world peoplehaverecognized the importance of mental health. Mental health is not related to any kind of mental illness or sicknessbut it is a state of well-being where people can deal with the challenges of day to day life.People can recognize their potential and can contribute to the society they live in.This paper discusses the role of mental health within the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals under Goal 3 and discusses the significance of integrating soft skills in learning and development programs in professional setting to enhance outcomes of the industry. As the whole world is making effort to achieve sustainable development, it is necessary to prioritize mental health as a fundamental element of our collective well-being.
Soft skills like personal attributes, social abilities, and emotional intelligence, play an important role when we talk of mental health as it improvesoverall well-being and foster healthy relationships. This paper proposes strategies for incorporating soft skills in educational programs in the organizations to promote emotional well-being of the personals. The findings of this paper highlight the importance of educating self-awareness, empathy, effective communication, and stress management skills among individuals to support mental health and personal growth that can enable them to thrive in various domains of life.
Keywords: soft skills, mental health, stress management, SDGs (sustainable development goals), well-being.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health asSDGsunderGoal 3 is essential for the overall well-being and progress of individuals, communities and nations.Mental health is about feeling okay inside so you can do your best, deal with hard days, and help your family and community. The World Health Organization calls it "a state where people know what they're good at, handle life's normal stresses, work well, and give back to their community" (World Health Organization, *Investing in Mental Health*). Countries around the world made a plan in 2015 called the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to fix big problems by 2030. One goal, number 3, wants to cut down sickness and help people feel better mentally (United Nations).

In recent years, we can see that mental health has emerged as a serious concern in various aspects of our lives especially in the professional area.The World Health Organization says 1 in 4 people worldwide deal with mental health problems (World Health Organization, "World Mental Health Report"). Our work environment plays a major role in shaping our mental well-being. The demands,pressures, and expectations of the professional world can have an intense impact on individuals which can lead to mental health challenges."A 2023 report by Prodoscore claimed that there was a rise in 'toxic productivity' during the Covid-19 pandemic, as remote workers started working on weekends to prove their commitment. This eventually led to a work culture which devalued work-life balance, and eventual burnout."(The Economic Times)

Several factors contribute to the increase of mental health issues within professional settings. Initially, the competitive nature of many companies promotes a high-pressure environment where individuals are insistently striving for success. This continuous pressure to perform can lead to stress, anxiety, burnout and depression, etc.A 2021 survey by the American Psychological Association asked 1,501 workers and found 79% felt stressed because of their jobs, with 19% saying it was really bad (American Psychological Association). After COVID-19, things got worse. A 2024 poll by NAMI asked 2,062 workers at big companies, and 34% said their mental health dropped because of work—up from 21% two years before (NAMI).

Furthermore, long working hours, heavy workloads and tight time limit can eat away at work-life balance, In addition, interpersonal dynamics, such as conflicts with colleagues, boss or superiors, can create a toxic work environment which further worsen mental health challenges, "According to a study published in The Lancet, areas hit hardest by the virus suffered huge increases in depression and anxiety. In all, the authors estimated COVID-19 generated an additional 53.2 million cases of depressive disorder and 76.2 million cases of anxiety disorder."(Garen Staglin,*Forbes*)

The consequences of mental health problems in professional settings are extensive. Firstly, the individual suffering from mental health challenges may experience a decline in productivity and job performance. Moreover, mental health conditions can weaken concentration, decision-making abilities, creativity, etc which can hinder professional growth and development. For example, sometimes, working from home makes people feel alone. A 2024 Headspace report asked 2,000 workers and found 77% said job stress hurt their bodies, and 71% said it broke up friendships or family ties (Headspace). Fighting with coworkers or bosses can make work feel unsafe too.Thus untreated mental health issues can lead to absence, workplace sickness and higher employee turnover rates which can result in significant financial loss for organizations.

Safe and healthy working environments are not only a fundamental right but are also more likely to minimize tension and conflicts at work and improve staff retention, work performance and productivity. Conversely, a lack of effective structures and support at work, especially for those living with mental health conditions, can affect a person's ability to enjoy their work and do their job well; it can undermine people's attendance at work and even stop people getting a job in the first place.("Mental health at work",World Health Organization)

Furthermore, mental health challenges can also have a harmful impact on personal relationships. Individuals may struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance, which can lead to damageon family life, social isolation, and can diminish overall happiness.In the U.S., a 2024 report said mental health troubles cut work output by 35%, costing $210.5 billion a year (SHRM). Another study from 2024 found workers took 22% more days off for mental health than for being sick in their bodies (SHRM).Ifthese consequences are left unaddressed it can have worst effect, not only impacting the individual but also affecting team dynamics and organizational culture.As Jim Yong Kim points out, "This is not just a public health issue; it's a development issue. We need to act now because the lost productivity is something the global economy simply cannot afford**. ("**Investing in treatment for depression and anxiety leads to fourfold return",World Health Organization)
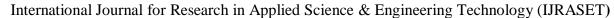
Before discussing the role of soft skills in mental health, it is important to know what mental health is.According to World health Organization in the report *Investing in Mental Health*summarizes,"…mental health can be defined as a state of well-being enabling individuals to realize their abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and make a contribution to their communities. (pg, 4)" So if a person is not able to do his or her work with normal stress and anxiety. He does not know his capabilities; he cannot identify the problem and overcome of it. He is unable to manage his day to day task, personal and professional relationships and does not know what's going on in the society, and in the community; it means he/she has poor mental health.According toWorld Health Organization:

• More than 150 million persons suffer from depression at any point in time;

• Nearly 1 million commit suicide every year;

• About 25 million suffer from schizophrenia;

• 38 million suffer from epilepsy; and

• More than 90 million suffer from an alcohol- or drug-use disorder. The number of individuals with disorders is likely to increase further in view of the ageing of the population, worsening social problems and civil unrest.[1]

Mental health plays a key role within the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). United Nations memberapproved 17 global goals under the SDGs in 2015 to address the various social, economic, and environmental challenges faced by the world by 2030. While the goals cover a wide range of issues, mental health is directly linked to several of them such as 'Good Health and Well-Being', 'No Poverty','Reduced Inequality','Quality Education','Gender Equality','Decent Work and Economic Growth','Sustainable Cities and Communities','Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions','Partnerships for the Goals', etc.[2]In the U.S., a 2024 report said 23% of adults—about 60 million—had mental health issues in 2021-2022, especially younger people (SHRM). Hard times like fights in communities or getting older will make this bigger. The SDGs want to help, and we think soft skills are a way to do it.

---

[1]*Investing In Mental Health*. World Health Organization.pg.4 Geneva. 2003. Web. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42823/9241562579.pdf

[2] Sustainable-Development-Goals<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

Today's workplace demands not only technical expertise but also a holistic set of interpersonal abilities called 'soft skills'. As organizations and educational institutions has started recognizing the intense impact of mental well-being on overall productivity and success, there is a shift in progress towards integrating soft skills into learning and development programs. This approach aims to empower individuals in the professional setting so that they can find ways to handle the challenges of the digital age by developing a culture in organization that prioritizes mental health as an essential aspect of personal and professional growth.

Soft skillsinclude a wide range of non-technical competencies such as emotional intelligence, communication, empathy, adaptability, resilience, problem-solving and decision making, etc.These competencies play a pivotal role in shaping an individual's personality, emotional balance, and social connections, contributing significantly to overall mental health.. A 2020 World Economic Forum survey asked business leaders, and 94% said these skills matter a lot as machines take over some work (World Economic Forum 22). By acknowledging the inseparable link between cognitive and emotional well-being, the policymakers are recognizing the potential of integrating soft skills training into learning and development programs. Thisintegration equips individuals with strategies to excel a work place and also empowers them to cope with stress, anxiety, and the pressures of modern-day life. The cultivation of soft skills facilitates better communication, collaboration, reduces conflicts and encourages a supportive environment. As a result, learners become more adept at managing work-life balance, cultivating emotional flexibility, and in taking help when needed.A 2024 Lyra Health survey asked 250 work leaders, and 84% said teaching talking and strength skills made workers happier (Lyra Health). A 2023 Modern Health study with 1,000 people found group talks cut loneliness by 15% (Modern Health).Moreover, through incorporating mental health awareness and well-being initiatives into learning and development programs, organizations can directly deal with burnout and other mental health issues that may occur due to the persistent competitions and set targets, etc. In doing so, they promote a positive and inclusive work environment where employees feel valued, supported, and motivated to achieve their full potential.Hon'ble Mr. Justice Vijender Jain, former Chief Justice of Punjab and Haryana High Court, Chandigarh once said,

We need to reprogram our mindsets and prepare to play our roles as responsible global citizens. In this respect, a culture of change is vital, at all levels and in all spheres of life in the ways we learn, live and work. We have a long way to go. But I am convinced that we have no other option than to reinvent ourselves. Each and every one of us should become an agent of change…(Punjab and Haryana High court)

In today's competitive world, learning and development (L&D) programs have become an indispensable part of personal and professional growth. Organizations and individuals both spend in these initiatives to improvetheir skills, increaseefficiency, and accomplish career goals. While the primary focus of these programs is skill development but their influence extends beyond professional growth by encompassing mental health benefits and contributes to overall well-being.One of the fundamental outcomes of L&D programs is boosting confidence and self-efficacy among individuals. As individuals participate in these programs, they acquire new knowledge and skills, which leads to a sense of accomplishment, feeling competent and capable in one's abilities that enhances self-esteem and reduces feelings of failure.Here are some key reasons that highlight the importance of learning and development programs in organization:

- Learning and development activities allow individuals to acquire new skills, knowledge, and competencies. This sense of achievement and empowerment can boost self-confidence and self-esteem which leads to improved mental well-being.
- Continuous learning and intellectual challenges excites cognitive functioning of mind and helps individuals in maintaining brain health. Mental activities like problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity can contribute to reducing the risk of cognitive decline and certain mental health issues.
- Learning new things such as a new language, or a professional skill, can provide a sense of personal growth and fulfillment. These positive experiences contribute to a greater sense of purpose and overall life satisfaction, which are important factors in maintaining good mental health.
- Learning and development programs also teach valuable coping strategies that develops effective coping methods which enhances an individual's ability to manage difficult situations and emotions, reducing the risk of mental health problems.
- Many learning programs provide opportunities for social interaction and networking to the individuals so that theycan fightwith feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Learning and development activities can help individuals to build resilience which is an important factor in preventing and managing mental health issues by exposing them to new challenges and teaching them how to adapt and conquerObstacles.
- The concept of lifelong learning promotes ongoing personal development and growth throughout one's life.

Thus learning and development programs (L&D) provide a range of benefits that contribute to the improved mental health. Beforeformulating strategies for integrating soft skills in learning and development programs (L&D),organizations must figure outthe relevanceof soft skills program in the workplace. A 2019 Yale study asked 500 workers and found people good at understanding feelings had 30% less stress (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence 5). This fits with ideas from Lazarus and Folkman, who say handling stress well, keeps you healthy (Lazarus and Folkman 141). A 2021 study by the National Institute of Mental Health with 300 people showed strength training lowered stress stuff in your body by 15% (National Institute of Mental Health 8). But some, like Hyland and his team, say these skills don't always work the same everywhere because of different communities or jobs (Hyland et al. 45). A 2022 McKinsey study with 1,500 companies found soft skills raised happiness by 25% and teamwork by 20%, showing they can work if done right (McKinsey & Company).

Soft skills are not only essential for building harmonious work environments but are also instrumental in improving a company's growth. Hence, a clear understanding of how these skills contributeto the organizationalsuccess will drive commitment and enthusiasm towards their integration.An organization can employ the following strategies to effectively integrate soft skills into their learning and development initiatives:

1) Assessment and Skill Gap Analysis: Conducting a systematic need based assessment and skill gap analysis is central for identifying the specific soft skills that need to be integrated into learning and development programs. This involves surveying workforce, managers, and stakeholders to find out the existing skill set and areas that require upgrading. The collected data provides a foundation for designing training programs to address the identified gaps.Ask people what they need to learn. A 2024 LinkedIn Learning report asked 1,200 leaders and 68% said talking skills were missing (LinkedIn Learning). NAMI's 2024 poll of 2,062 workers found 92% want help with mental health (NAMI).

2) Customized Training Programs:One size does not fit all when it comes to soft skills training. Organizations should create customized training programs thatare in a line with their unique culture, industry, and workforce. These programs should be designed to connect learners through interactive workshops, simulations, case studies, and role-playing exercises, etcso that employees can relate more effectively to the lessons being taught.Build classes just for your team. For example, A 2024 Spring Health program with 2,000 workers at 50 companies cut burnout by 18% with understanding-feelings classes (Spring Health).

3) Integration with Technical Training:Incorporating soft skills training with technical training helps workforce apply their newly acquired skills in practical circumstances. For instance, combining communication training with project management workshops can improve an individual's ability to lead cross-functional teams. It will ensure that technical skills are complemented by the ability to collaborate and communicate effectively.For example, 'Help Each Other: Pair workers with guides'. A 2024 Headspace survey of 2,000 people found 60% felt better with kind bosses (Headspace). Deloitte's 2023 program with 3,000 workers raised strength by 22% (Psychology Today).

4) Mentoring:Implementation of mentoring programs can significantly support in soft skills development. Experienced employees or external coaches can guide individuals through real-life challenges by providing feedback and insights on how to navigate complex interpersonal situations. This approach not only sharpens soft skills but also fosters a culture of continuous learning and growth.

5) Gamification and E-Learning:Soft skills' training becomesmore engaging and accessible if you use gamification and e-learning platforms. Interactive scenarios, quizzes, and virtual mock-ups can createa real-world situation that allows employees to practice and refine their skills in a safe environment. These platforms also offer the flexibility for employees to learn at their own pace. A 2024 TalentLMS report with 1,000 learners said game-style training had 70% finish it, twice as many as old ways (TalentLMS). Lyra's 2024 online help for 5,000 workers cut stress by 17% (Lyra Health).

6) Assessments and Feedback Mechanisms:Regular assessments and feedback mechanisms are necessary to track the progress of the staff and classify the areas that need further improvement. Self-assessment tools, close evaluations, and supervisor feedback can provide employees with valuable insights into their strengths and areas for growth, motivating them to continuously enhance their soft skills.A 2024 SHRM study with 2,500 workers at 100 companies cut burnout by 19% with full-circle feedback (SHRM).

Thus in today's interconnected and people-centric workplaces, the integration of soft skills into learning and development programs is no longer optional but it's vital. By applying given strategies such as understanding the relevance of soft skills, conducting needs assessments, integrating with soft skills training with technical training,creating customized programs, implementing coaching and mentoring, utilizing technology, etc organizations can nurture a workforce that is equipped with the essential interpersonal skills required to excel in their roles and take organizational success in the dynamic business landscape.These ideas could lower stress by 15-20% and help work go up by 10%, says a 2023 UN report (United Nations, "SDG Progress Report").

The integration of soft skills in learning and development programs has the potential to significantly impact mental health outcomes. Such asinvesting in the training of soft skills that facilitate enhanced 'emotional regulation' has become a valuable chase. Soft skills encompass a range of interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities that allow individuals to deal with various social and professional situations effectively. Among these skills, 'emotional intelligence' takes center stage. Knowledge about soft skills covers the awareness, understanding, and management of emotions, also the ability to understand and communicate effectively with others. Soft skills exercisestrainindividuals in way so that they can identifyroot of the cause, understand the patterns that are causing emotional issues and respond according to thatsituations. This type of training is very useful in high-pressure settingswhere a composed and empathetic personalitycan promote positive outcomes.The National Institute's body study (National Institute of Mental Health 8) proves it inside you, and McKinsey's happy workers (McKinsey &Company) show it pays off.NAMI's 2024 poll said workers with mental health help were 30% less likely to quit (NAMI), fitting the SDG job goal.

Soft skills' training 'encourages self-reflection' that allows individuals to assess their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for personal growth. This introspection cultivates self-awareness and helps individuals identify self-care practices that ally with their needs. Incorporating soft skills exercise into one's self-care routine can lead to holistic well-being. By enhancing communication, emotional intelligence, time management, stress management, boldness, active listening, problem-solving, and self-reflection skills, individuals becomes better in navigating life's complexities and in maintaining a healthier and more fulfilling lifestyle.As Indra Nooyi said in her interview,

So I think we are on an interesting point in the evolution of work, where we could actually evolve a new work style with humanity in the center. At the same time, we could also be viewed as ignoring the needs and the challenges of the working people who keep our economy going. So we're at an interesting fork in the road.

In conclusion, this paper shares insight on the vital role of integrating soft skills within learning and development programs to promoteenhanced mental health outcomes. The wideexamination of the interconnectedness between soft skillsdevelopment and mental well-being highlights the significance of a holistic approach to personal and professional growth. The discussion demonstrates that the nurturing of skills such as emotional intelligence, communication, adaptability, and resilience can empower individuals to navigate challenges, build meaningful relationships, and effectively manage stressors. By recognizing the relationship between soft skills and mental health, organizations and policymakers can collaboratively design and implement strategies that prioritize not only the attainment of technical knowledge but also the holistic development of individuals.

It is clear that an investment in programs that promote the attainment of soft skills can lead to not only professional success but also improved mental health and overall quality of life. As we move forward, it is crucial to continue exploring the complicatedmethods through which soft skills contribute to mental well-being, thereby paving the way for a more resilient, adaptable, and empathetic society.

WORKS CITED

[1]   American Psychological Association. 2021 Work and Well-being Survey. American Psychological Association, 2021, https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-well-being/compounding-pressure-2021.Accessed 22 June 2025.

[2]   Bandura, Albert. Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control. Freeman, 1997.

[3]   Headspace. 2024 Workforce State of Mind Report. Headspace, 2024, https://get.headspace.com/2024-workforce-state-of-mind.Accessed 20 June 2025.

[4]   Jain, Vijender. Speech. Punjab and Haryana High Court, Chandigarh, https://highcourtchd.gov.in/sub_pages/top_menu/about/events_files/judicialactivism.pdf. Accessed 28 June 2025.

[5]   Lazarus, Richard S., and Susan Folkman. Stress, Appraisal, and Coping. Springer, 1984.

[6]   LinkedIn Learning. 2024 Workplace Learning Report. LinkedIn Learning, 2024, https://learning.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/business/en-us/amp/learning-solutions/images/wlr-2024/LinkedIn-Workplace-Learning-Report-2024.pdf. Accessed 22 June 2025.

[7]   Lyra Health. 2024 Mental Health Trends in the Workforce. Lyra Health, 2024, https://www.lyrahealth.com/blog/workforce-mental-health-trends-2024/#:~:text=In%20our%202024%20mental%20health,2023%20mental%20health%20trends%20survey. Accessed 25 June 2025.

[8]   McKinsey & Company. Defining the Skills Citizens Will Need in the Future World of Work. McKinsey & Company, 2021, https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/defining-the-skills-citizens-will-need-in-the-future-world-of-work.Accessed 28 April 2025.

[9]   Modern Health. "What 2024 Taught Us: Trends to Shape Your 2025 Mental Health Strategy." Modern Health, 25 Dec. 2024, https://www.modernhealth.com/post/2024-learnings-for-2025-mental-health-strategy.Accessed 20 May 2025.

[10] NAMI. 2024 NAMI Workplace Mental Health Poll. National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2024, https://www.nami.org/support-education/publications-reports/survey-reports/the-2024-nami-workplace-mental-health-poll/.Accessed 12 April 2025.

[11] National Institute of Mental Health. Resilience and Stress Management Study. National Institute of Mental Health, 2021.

[12] Nooyi, Indra. "Former CEO of PepsiCo, on Nurturing Talent in Turbulent Times." Business and Society: Harvard Business Review, 5 Nov. 2021, www.hbr.org.Accessed 11 June 2025.

[13] Psychology Today. "2024 Year in Review: Mental Health in the Workplace." Psychology Today, 25 Dec. 2024, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/pioneering-perspectives-on-workplace-mental-health/202412/2024-year-in-review-mental-health-in.Accessed 08 February 2025.

[14] Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). "Transform Workplace Mental Health with a Skills-Based Approach." Society for Human Resource Management, 2025, https://www.shrm.org/in/enterprise-solutions/insights/transform-workplace-mental-health-with-skills-based-approach. Accessed 08 June 2025 .

[15] Spring Health. 2024 Workplace Mental Health Trends. Spring Health, 2024, https://www.springhealth.com/blog/2024-workplace-mental-health-trends#:~:text=In%202024%2C%20global%20mental%20health,depression%20in%20the%20global%20economy. Accessed 5 Apr. 2025.

[16] Staglin, Garen. "The Role of Mental Health in Global Sustainable Development." Forbes, 23 Feb. 2025, www.forbes.com/sites/onemind/2022/02/23/the-role-of-mental-health-in-global-sustainable-development.Accessed 5 Apr. 2025.

[17] TalentLMS. 11 Learning and Development Trends: Training in 2025 & Beyond.TalentLMS, 2025, https://www.talentlms.com/blog/learning-and-development-trends/. Accessed 12 Apr. 2025.

[18] The Economic Times. "'Productivity Anxiety' Can Harm Work-Life Balance: 5 Ways to Counter It." ET Magazines Panache, 10 July 2023, economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/productivity-anxiety-can-harm-work-life-balance-5-ways-to-counter-it.Accessed 5 Apr. 2025.

[19] World Economic Forum. Future of Jobs Report. World Economic Forum, 2020. E-book.

[20] World Health Organization. Investing in Mental Health. Evidence for Action. World Health Organization, 2013. E-book.

[21] ---. "Investing in Treatment for Depression and Anxiety Leads to Fourfold Return." World Health Organization, 13 Apr. 2016, https://www.who.int/news/item/13-04-2016-investing-in-treatment-for-depression-and-anxiety-leads-to-fourfold-return. Accessed 15 May 2024.

[22] ---. "Mental Health in the Workplace: Economic Impact." World Health Organization, 2019, https://www.who.int/newsroom/commentaries/detail/mental-health-in-the-workplace. Accessed 12 Sept. 2024.

[23] ---. "Mental Health at Work." World Health Organization, 2024, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-at-work. Accessed 12 Oct. 2024.

[24] ---. World Mental Health Report. World Health Organization, 2022.

[25] World Health Organization Philippines. "DOH, WHO Launch Philippine Council for Mental Health Strategic Framework 2024-2028." World Health Organization, 12 Oct. 2023, https://www.who.int/philippines/news/detail/12-10-2023-doh--who-launch-philippine-council-for-mental-health-strategic-framework-2024-2028. Accessed 12 Oct. 2024.

[26] Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace Study. Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2019.

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Call : 08813907089 (24*7 Support on Whatsapp)