# Young Employees' Perceptions about Employability Skills for E-Commerce

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With the digital transformation of businesses, digital marketing has been a prominent feature of organizations in the 21st century. Changing consumer behavior has also created a need for versatile hard and soft skills for marketing professionals. Given the dynamic growth of the e-commerce market and the trends mentioned above, it is expected that the needs of the labor market will also change. University education aims to develop key competences. Understanding which competences are considered important could improve the motivation of students.

Keywords: employability skills; e-commerce; skills perceptions; young employees

## 1. Introduction

In the coming years, the global and European e-commerce markets are expected to continue to grow at a high rate (Statista 2021a, 2022). Moreover, according to the study conducted by The Centre for Market Insights, Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, within Europe, the regions with the highest turnover growth rates from 2019 to 2020 were Eastern Europe (36%), Central Europe (28%), and Southern Europe (24%) (Lone 2022). Changes in recent years and the impact of COVID-19 have also contributed to the surge in e-commerce (Rupeika-Apoga et al. 2022). By observing the current changes taking place in it, researchers have a unique opportunity to learn about the employability skills required in the field of e-commerce positions. The steady growth of the e-commerce market and the volatile changes in e-commerce technologies induce the need to develop transferable skills.

It is anticipated that online sales of physical goods to end consumers (business-to-customer, B2C) will steadily grow, and figures show that the proportion of the e-commerce market reached 15.9% worldwide in 2020, and 17.9% in 2021. Digitalization has made e-commerce a relatively mature market alongside traditional retail. Due to rapid growth in the Asian economies and fast-paced digital innovations, the e-commerce landscape is constantly evolving, and new shopping methods are being offered to consumers such as interactive shopping and metaverse. In 2020, China, the US and Europe were the three largest e-commerce markets, worth USD 1343.5 billion, USD 537.7 billion, and USD 460.5 billion, respectively. According to the e-commerce Report (Statista 2021a), desktop computers, including notebooks and laptops, represented 39.8% of the total share of digital channels in 2020. Due to growing purchasing power and internet penetration, more consumers are gaining access to e-commerce, especially through mobile devices. Mobile devices, including smartphones and tablets, accounted for 56.7% of the total share and is expected to rise. In the European market, the top revenues were coming from the segments of fashion (USD 184.4 billion) and electronics (USD 148.9 billion) in 2020. E-commerce has also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; while the revenue growth in 2019 was between 6.8% and 11.6% across the segments, while in 2020 it rose to between 26.9% and 59.9% (Statista 2021a, 2022). With a value of USD 14.9 trillion in 2020, the business-to-business (B2B) market was five times larger than the B2C market (Statista 2021b, p. 1).

Several technological trends shape the future of work requirements. As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to develop, it will have far-reaching effects on society and businesses. In upcoming changes, researchers can anticipate a variety of new ways in which businesses can organize labor and capital (Rudko et al. 2021). As the digital marketing and ecommerce marketing fields are rapidly evolving, the e-commerce workforce needs to focus on transferable employability skills, as job security can be more maintained by having marketable employability skills (Forrier and Sels 2003). Customer relationship management (CRM) and loyalty managers can gather large volumes of data and generate reports on various segments of customers to build loyalty platforms, strategies, and retention tools. Creative and content managers with backgrounds in copywriting, design, and art direction can optimize go-to-market strategies and bring brand authenticity to their organizations. The in-house management of creative control and content makes it easier for marketing teams to manage a project's full lifecycle, from the creative concept through to the final execution. In addition to managing

influencer partnerships, email campaigns, search engine marketing (SEM) and search engine optimization (SEO), paid advertising, and loyalty programs, digital marketing experts have broad expertise across all digital touchpoints, from social media to apps and platforms. With the shift to digital accelerating rapidly, the demand for experts equipped with ecommerce skills has risen even further. A successful e-commerce manager understands the various aspects of the online store, including content, product scheduling, digital data and marketing, identifying areas for improvement, planning cross-channel promotions and creating commerce calendars (Hays 2022, p. 1).

Fundamental soft skills are increasingly valued by employers and are influencing employment prospects in digital marketing, so to be successful in their careers, business graduates need to develop and balance hard and soft skills (Kovács 2021).

The digital marketing industry moves quickly, and employees change jobs frequently, making transferrable skills crucial for a successful career. By reviewing the literature, researchers' goal is to explore business managers' expectations to see what competencies to include in the curriculum of business universities. In terms of students' perspective, the importance of perceptions on employability skills is expected to vary between segments with and without work experience. Researchers' primary entry seeks to identify where the gap between manager and student perceptions in the skillset is the largest.

Given the dynamic growth of the e-commerce market and the trends mentioned above, it is expected that the needs of the labor market will also change. University education aims to develop key competences. Understanding which competences are considered important could improve the motivation of students. The competencies that employees consider important but are perceived to be less important and less motivating by students need to be better communicated. Another important expected outcome of this research is to support the findings of employer research by getting the views of young employees already working.

## 2. Implications of E-Commerce Demands for Labor Market

The competitive advantage of digital firms and the employability of the workforce depend on the skills of the employees. The reason for this is that structural processes, such as globalization and technological advances, demand higher-level and more marketable skills to guarantee high-quality jobs and to increase productivity (European Commission 2017). Moreover, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has increased the pace of technological development in the labor market, such as remote work and digital transformation (Eurofound 2021). Maresova et al. (2018) have investigated the consequences of Industry 4.0 and have concluded that transforming work environments requires more general skills and competencies. To meet the growing expectations of digital firms, triggered by Marketing 4.0, highly skilled business professionals and marketing experts are needed in the e-commerce workforce (Kovács 2021).

Several studies examine the impact of the spread of e-commerce, emphasizing the effects of the increasing volume and use of big data (<u>Thiebaut 2019</u>; <u>Peng et al. 2022</u>), the effects of internationalization (<u>Yan et al. 2022</u>), and the rising level of digital proficiency (<u>Piroşcă et al. 2021</u>).

Corporate operations also have an impact on the digital competency expected of employees, with a growing share of online consumer demand (<u>Wang and Scrimgeour 2022</u>; <u>Olsson et al. 2022</u>) and a deeper understanding of online consumer needs (<u>Dospinescu et al. 2022</u>; <u>Karampournioti and Wiedmann 2022</u>). Labor market responses to all of these should not be neglected.

Amoako (2022) conducted a study to determine what effect the teaching philosophy and curriculum design could have on graduates' employability. Labor market soft skills in the digitalized economy were explored by Schislyaeva and Saychenko (2022). Their review found that during job interviews, soft skills are considered crucial; however, they are becoming increasingly scarce. Researchers can distinguish meta-skills that allow a person to improve and develop other skills as well as learn new skills faster. As researched by Prasittichok and Klaykaew (2022), meta-skills are components of self-awareness, creative problem solving and resilience. According to Barkas et al. (2021), students at a British university were found to have higher-order meta-skills and social capital that contributed to their employability.

There have been many changes in e-commerce, both for the employer and the employee. While this is challenging because the environment is constantly transforming around them, millennials are also motivated by the new technology of e-commerce. (Theodora et al. 2019). In addition, young professionals expect a different work environment and leadership style from former generations in order to deliver adequate work performance and develop their skills (Bilge et al. 2021).

#### 3. Soft and Hard Employability Skills

As early as in the 1910s, in a research study exploring the important factors of the engineering profession, personal qualities were mentioned more than seven times as frequently as knowledge of engineering science and practice techniques. The reasons for employability, success and promotion were reflected in the respondents' answers of, respectively, character, judgment, efficiency, understanding of people, knowledge, and technique, with the list of priorities starting with "soft skills" and ending with "hard skills" (Mann 1918). As defined by Moss and Tilly (1996), the term "soft skills" or "non-cognitive skills" refers to abilities or traits relating to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than formal or technical knowledge. These skills are considered essential for success in education and employment. Cimatti (2016) expands this definition by saying that personal transversal skills, such as interpersonal skills, language and communication abilities, friendship, and teamwork, are soft skills too. When hiring employees, companies prefer candidates who have meta-skills that make them compatible with other team members and are viewed as a good fit for the department or organization (Kenton 2022; Schlee and Harich 2010; Yorke 2006). This indicates that employees are of the opinion that in order to be efficient at work and be prepared for the future, they must manage personal relationships well.

Desired soft skills are aligned with the 5C principles of marketing set up for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by Nosalska and Mazurek (2019). These principles are cooperation, conversation, co-creation, cognitivity and connectivity, which have been found to enhance productivity through communicating with stakeholders in the market, as well as working together in a full business ecosystem, with prices determined by cognitive processes that analyze customer behavior in real time. When employers' expectations are different from what graduates possess in terms of skills, a skills mismatch arises. The discrepancy between the supply and demand of skills should be addressed by further measures. Optimal workplace performance requires a balanced mixture of hard and soft skills. In terms of long-term employability, previous research has also emphasized the importance of soft skill development (Grugulis and Vincent 2009; Heckman and Kautz 2012; Hurrell 2016) and personal proactive adaptivity (Fugate et al. 2004).

There is a growing trend of the hybridization of skills, and more traditional jobs require complex approaches. For instance, sales representatives not only need strong communication and persuasion skills, but they also need to understand the origins and research methodologies of products. What is more, such skills as structured query language (SQL) expertise, strong data analysis skills, and knowledge of CRM (customer relationship management) can lead to higher remuneration for marketing managers and customer service managers, which is also an example of hybridization (<u>Doyle 2019</u>).

Past decades have seen a variety of studies exploring marketing soft skills, including factors which make a marketer employable and are demanded in the marketing field (Finch et al. 2013; Gregorio et al. 2019; Walker et al. 2009). Previous research highlights the importance of soft skills, which are already strong expectations in career and junior positions and are reflected in job advertisements (Kovács and Zarándné 2022). To effectively prepare for the expectations of the labor market, it is important to know the competencies that are essential in the world of work. The study of students' assumptions is special because it is an under-researched area. In education and in the design of corporate training, it is also important to know which competencies are considered important by future generations in the labor market.

According to the academic literature, improving the employability of graduates by equipping them with soft skills that enable them to adapt to the ever-changing digital marketing work environment is crucial. An awareness of essential hard and soft skills is a critical factor for competitiveness and employability for universities and graduate students and wherever employees are on their career paths (Kovács 2021). The differences in desirable job transition options are based on the information on skills required and on building up strategies and identifying options.

In recent years, a number of studies have examined employers' recruitment practices and job offers, and they have revealed that employers place a high value on non-cognitive skills in recruiting and hiring (Kovács and Zarándné 2022; Börner et al. 2018; Clarke and Skuterud 2016; Hoeschler et al. 2018; Verma et al. 2019). Employees and employers should be aware of expectations and skills, as this motivates employers to develop their skills and provides employers with financial recognition (Bassi and Nansamba 2019). Evolved around outstanding employability skills in various digital marketing fields including e-commerce positions, former research (Kovács 2021; Kenton 2022; Finch et al. 2013; Gregorio et al. 2019; Walker et al. 2009; Kovács and Zarándné 2022) found that soft skills were imperative in marketing positions. This present research follows the summary of Gregorio et al. (2019) on the primary skillsets that affect marketing employability (Table 1).

Factors	Skills
Basic soft skills	Flexibility, Teamwork, Interpersonal skills, Initiative, Motivation, Oral communication and presentation skills, Stress resilience, Self-development
Digital and technical skills	Knowledge of social media, Knowledge of mobile, Knowledge of e-commerce, Knowledge of analytics and real time practices, Knowledge of Internet and software knowledge, SEO and SEM
Core marketing skills	Planning, organization and time management, Content creation across channel, Creative thinking, Precision and attention to detail, Sales knowledge and management skills, Ability to manage multiple marketing tasks
Analytical skills	Data-driven/data-oriented, Good conceptual and analytical skills, Statistical knowledge, Problem solving, Critical thinking, Ability to synthesize information into meaningful and actionable reports
Customer insights skills	Knowledge of company and its customers, Knowledge of research methods, Knowledge of customer touchpoints and journey, CRM and relational skills

Source: Kovács (2021) based on Gregorio et al. (2019).

Surveying business graduates and employers, studies on skills in marketing (Azevedo et al. 2012; Barker 2014) found that employers were not confident regarding business graduates' abilities in key hard and soft skill areas and in key generic competencies that seemed to be essential in long term employability. Using a text-mining method, Rios et al. (2020) tested and identified graduate competences as important predictors of employers' satisfaction with graduates' work performance. Their results were based on a sample of roughly 120,000 job advertisements. Implications for developing educational standards around 21st century skill development were discussed and described. Thus, the most relevant skills for the near future seem to be collaboration, communication, content analysis, critical thinking, descriptive analysis, problem solving, social processes/development and textual analysis.

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