

# The Importance of Mentalization Skills for Job Success

Alessandro Frolli<sup>1</sup>, Maria Carla Ricci<sup>1</sup>, Francesco Cerciello<sup>2</sup>, Sonia Ciotola<sup>2</sup>, Clara Esposito<sup>2</sup> and Angelo Rega<sup>3,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> DRC - Disability Research Centre, University of International Studies of Rome, 00147 Rome, Italy;

<sup>2</sup> FINDS - Italian Neuroscience and Developmental Disorders Foundation, 81040 Caserta, Italy;

<sup>3</sup> Department of Humanistic Studies, University of Naples, 80100 Naples, Italy;

<sup>4</sup> MetaLab - Neapolitanit, 80144 Ottaviano, Italy;

## Abstract

In recent years, soft skills are considered as a fundamental requirement for job success and decisive for the development of the individual's personality.

Soft skills are essential for job searching, especially for recent graduates, because they could guarantee a rewarding career and success.

The soft skills considered important are: positive attitude, good communication, self-motivation and problem-solving skills, etc. As a result of the continuous changes in the workplace, employers expect that recent graduates will possess excellent soft skills, including good teamwork skills, critical skills, ethical, moral and professional skills, which will enable them to cope with the problems inherent to their professional activities.

Mentalization skills are crucial for healthy personality development and they allow you to perceive, understand and interpret thoughts, emotions, desires and others own, regulate emotional states and be effective in interpersonal relationships.

In this study, we hypothesized that a perfect combination of soft skills and mentalization skills could improve graduates employability.

## Keywords

Soft skills, mentalization, students, leadership, teamwork, problem solving

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Proceedings of the Third Workshop on Technology Enhanced Learning Environments for Blended Education, June 10–11, 2022, Foggia, Italy

**EMAIL:** alessandro.frolli@unint.eu (A. 1); mariacarla.ricci1@gmail.com (A. 2); francesco.cerciello@outlook.it (A. 3);

soniocio95@gmail.com (A. 4); clara.esposito1996@gmail.com (A. 5); angelo.rega@unina.it (A. 6);

ORCID: 0000-0002-2784-2887 (A. 1); 0000-0001-5712-2939 (A. 2); 0000-0002-0641-7347 (A. 6);



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CEUR Workshop Proceedings (CEUR-WS.org)

## 1. Introduction

Mentalization refers to the ability to perceive and interpret human behavior in terms of intentional mental states such as emotions, desires or goals [1]. Mentalization skills are acquired in an evolutionary way and emerge from attachment relationships [2] and from the quality of maternal reflexive functions (RF) [3], and they are the basis of empathy (i.e., consciousness and sharing of the mental states of others) the development of self-esteem, problem solving, social cognition and resilience: the higher the mentalization capacity the greater the social skills acquired [2]. The reflective component favors a better and functional adaptation to the environment and to the various contexts the adult will relate with: mentalization has a fundamental role in the process of adaptation to reality.

Among the various contexts, a fundamental one is represented by the working context and the subsequent success. We know from numerous studies that soft skills [4, 5, 6, 7, 8] are fundamental for job success. In recent years, there has been an increase in the demand of soft skills in the training of specialists, which is itself determined by their high relevance in the modern labour market [7]. These soft skills should be part of the training, which consists of a set of knowledge and skills, and personal qualities, which allow the successful resolution of the functional problems that constitute the essence of the professional activity [9].

The study of Rongraung and colleagues [10] suggested that soft skills are divided into seven skills: ability to innovate, invention and development, communication skills, critical and problem-solving skills, teamwork skills, leadership skills, learning skills, information management skills, and ethical, moral, and professional skills.

Soft skills refer to a set of positive personal attributes and competences that improve relationships, work performance and market value [5]. Soft skills play a very important role in the workplace, job position as well as in the success of your career. These skills are applicable to each field of work and they are usually individual behavioral traits [5, 7, 8]. Several studies state that a combination of personal qualities and soft skills will certainly contribute to improving the employability of graduates [9, 11], especially soft skills which are broadly applicable [6]. The latter also refers to a set of abilities that determine how we interact with others [5].

Eventually, in this study we wanted to check if there were correlations between mentalization skills and soft skills owned by a group of young graduates. Specifically, we started from the hypothesis that greater mentalization skills were predictive of good soft skills and of a good work success.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Participants (Inclusion criteria)

The sample examined consists of 70 young graduates in Economics, aged between 23 and 24. Specifically, the sample included young people (a) aged between 23 and 24 years, (b) who did not have any psychopathological disorders (evaluated through the administration of SCID 5) [10], (c) had normal cognition (assessed through the administration of Raven's Progressive Matrices) [11], (d) and a grade of 110 e lode (homogeneity of academic performance).

### 2.2. Methods

The protocol used for the evaluation of the inclusion criteria consists of the following tests: SCID 5 [12] and Raven Progressive Standard Matrices [13], while the RFQ-8 test was used for the evaluation of the reflective functions [14].

**SCID 5:** A clinical structured interview according to the DSM-5. The items (questions) have a sequence that promotes a differential diagnostic process and provides the clinician to assign scores, which include the presence or absence of diagnostic criteria (regardless of the patient's responses to SCID questions). This tool is used to confirm one or more diagnoses hypothesized on the basis of DSM-

5 criteria and to ensure that all major diagnoses (mood disorders, eating disorders, personality disorders, etc.) are systematically evaluated.

**Matrici Progressive di Raven:** A test used for assessing nonverbal intelligence applied to visuo-spatial material. This version of the test is divided into 5 tabs (A, B, C, D, E) in which it is required to complete a series of figures with the missing one choosing from 6 options; each group of items becomes more and more difficult, requiring an increasingly high encoding, interpretation and understanding of the items themselves. Raven matrices are considered the elective test to measure the gf factor of intelligence, or fluid defined intelligence.

**RFQ\_8:** Self-administered questionnaire that evaluates the level of mentalization possessed by two subscales, which evaluate certainty (RFQ\_C) and uncertainty (RFQ\_U) about the mental states of self and others. The highest scores at these subscales indicate two distinct RF disorders, respectively, hypomentalization and hypermentalization. Hypomentalization reflects concrete thinking and poor understanding of the mental states of self and others, while hypermentalization describes that attitude towards the identification of too certain and detailed patterns of mind and mental states not supported by evidence.

### 2.3. Procedures

In the laboratory of new learning technologies of the University of International Studies in Rome, a sample of 70 boys (45 M and 25 F) of average age 23.7 (SD 1.10) was collected after a careful evaluation of the inclusion criteria. All the students were given the questionnaire RFQ-8 [14] for the evaluation of mentalization skills one month after obtaining a master’s degree in Economics. In addition, graduates have been asked to report any job hires to understand the time of employment from graduation.

### 3. Results

The data analyses were carried out using the statistical survey software SPSS 26.0 [15]. Significance at the level of 1% ( $\alpha < 0.01$ ) has been accepted. From the analyses carried out, it has been possible to correlate the subscales of the RFQ-8 with the time taken to find an occupation by the new graduates. We have named RFQ\_C the subscale Certainty, RFQ\_U the subscale Uncertainty and Time to Employment the employment time employed.

In this study, we performed a correlation analysis to investigate whether mentalization skills correlated with the time it took recent graduates to find employment.

Our analysis found a not significant negative correlation between the uncertainty subscale and the employment time [ $r = -0.177$ ;  $p=0.170$ ]. This data indicates that as the uncertainty of mental states increases, the time taken to find employment decreases.

We also found a significant positive correlation between subscale certainty and employment time [ $r = 0.947$ ;  $p<0.01$ ]. This data indicates that as the certainty of mental states increases (hypermentalization) the time taken to find work increases (table 1).

**Table 1**  
Correlation between RFQ and time to employment

	RFQ_C		RFQ_U	
	r	p	r	p
<b>Time to Employment</b>	.947	<0.01*	-.177	.170

\* Statistical significance  $p<0.01$

## 4. Discussions

In recent years, there has been an increase in the demand of soft skills (not just hard skills - real technical skills) in the training of specialists with higher education, determined by their high relevance in the modern labour market [7]. Specifically, when we mean soft skills we refer to qualities and competences that the individual can exploit transversally in different contexts, such as adaptability, flexibility, responsibility, integrity and efficiency, motivation and positive attitude [16]. Soft skills play a very important role in the workplace, the position you hold, as well as in the success of your career. It has been seen that soft skills are highly valued by employers today as significant for the success of their activities however there is a dissatisfaction with their development during the university course [7].

Numerous research has found that a combination of personal qualities and soft skills can contribute to improving the employability of graduates [11], especially soft skills which are broadly applicable [6]. They also refer to a set of abilities that determine how we interact with others [5]. Similarly, mentalization skills are also crucial to the structuring of the Self and to being able to interact in the functional way. More specifically, Interpersonal Mentalization (IM) skills can help us to realize why some individuals are better at understanding other people's mental states and taking a clearer view of situations. For example, mentalization activities such as recognizing familiar faces or voices, semantic memory, and autobiographical memory allow sellers to apply their social knowledge to use effectively programmed formats (Frith and Frith 2003). Other people may be able to better understand a client's state of mind and their thinking process [17].

The theory of mind (ToM) has therefore been found to be very relevant even in sales contexts because sellers "need to read the minds of their customers in order to maximize customer satisfaction and optimize long-term performance" [18]. Therefore, the mentalization skills applied to marketing, organizations, sales etc. can allow subjects to engage in customer interactions, then simultaneously recognize their intentions and process signals, and finally use that new information to maximize customer satisfaction.

In this study, we wanted to verify if there were correlations between the mentalization skills of a group of young graduates in Economics and the time taken to find a job.

Our analysis has shown that a hypomentalizing profile are more reluctant to consider the complexity of the mental states of others taking less time to find employment. However, it was not significant, but we know that there is a negative correlation.

The other highlighted profile is the hypermentalizing one, which describes those subjects that appear excessively certain and excessively detailed about the mental states of self or others without appropriate evidence to support these representations. They spend more time in finding employment, as they will also have difficulties in interviewing because of their lack of empathy and social cognition.

This positive correlation was found to be significant.

In addition, with this study, we can affirm that mentalization skills represent an important evolutionary stage for the development of a good adaptive functioning of the person within the various social contexts [1, 2] but they also represent fundamental skills for career and career success. By attributing mental states, the young person makes meaningful and predictable the behavior of others and will be able to implement, in a flexible way, the most appropriate behavior, such as to be able to respond adaptively to the various interpersonal exchanges, especially in a functional way within working contexts. Finally, another important interpretative model is the biopsychosocial one [20] which is having a strong diffusion among the studies. It integrates and analyzes biological, psychological and social levels to explain the motivational processes of human performance. Motivation is the result of the interaction of these three conditions and of the interaction between the person and the situation [19].

## 6. Conclusions and Limits

Our study showed a significant correlation between the mentalization skills of young graduates and the time taken to find employment. In particular, two profiles were highlighted: one hypomentalizing, which describes those subjects with low mentalization skills that can not adapt to the work environment, and a hypermentalizing profile, that describe those subjects with high mentalization skills who succeed in succeeding within the work context in which they are inserted. Our study shows that a more careful training both for the development of good skills and mentalization, and soft skills (not just hard skills) could facilitate young graduates to find employment and perhaps be able to maintain it in the long term.

However, further studies are needed in order to make these results generalizable, through an extension of the sample and a follow-up over time in order to evaluate the maintenance of employment or possible improvements within the working sector.

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