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Soft skills and employment in honduras: a study of educational models and labor market demands

Habilidades blandas y empleo en honduras: un estudio de modelos educativos y demandas del mercado laboral

José Guillermo Berlioz Pastor

jose.berlioz@unitec.edu.hn

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1169-3573>

Universidad Tecnológica Centroamericana

Tegucigalpa – Honduras

Marlon Osman Meléndez Rodríguez

marlonmelendezrodriguez@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6624-4089>

Investigador independiente

Hamburgo – Alemania

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Abstract

The study investigates the role of soft skills in the recruitment processes of companies within the logistics corridor of Honduras, focusing on the relationship between these skills and job placement success. Soft skills, often termed "non-cognitive skills," have gained prominence in higher education and the labor market, with an increasing emphasis on their importance for academic and professional success. Despite Honduras' slow adoption of competency-based education (MEBC) models, there is a growing recognition of their value in developing essential soft skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication. Using a cross-sectional, descriptive-survey method, data were collected from companies involved in logistics, warehousing, and production. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (EFA and CFA) were employed to assess the validity of key soft skills, including honesty, creativity, positive attitude, and confidence, alongside organizational support attributes. The study revealed significant correlations between these soft skills and recruitment outcomes, highlighting gaps in current human resource practices. The findings underscore the need for enhanced training and educational frameworks to bridge these gaps and better align with labor market demands. By addressing these shortcomings, Honduran educational institutions and employers can improve job placement rates and overall workforce effectiveness, contributing to the country's economic development. The study offers valuable insights into the critical role of soft skills in achieving sustainable employment and economic growth in Honduras.


Keywords: soft skills, recruitment processes, logistics corridor, competency-based education

Resumen

El estudio investiga el papel de las habilidades blandas en los procesos de reclutamiento de empresas dentro del corredor logístico de Honduras, centrándose en la relación entre estas habilidades y el éxito en la inserción laboral. Las habilidades blandas, a menudo denominadas "habilidades no cognitivas," han ganado protagonismo en la educación superior y en el mercado laboral, con un énfasis creciente en su importancia para el éxito académico y profesional. A pesar de la lenta adopción en Honduras de

modelos de educación basados en competencias (MEBC), existe un reconocimiento creciente de su valor para desarrollar habilidades blandas esenciales, como la creatividad, la resolución de problemas y la comunicación interpersonal. Utilizando un método transversal y descriptivo basado en encuestas, se recopilieron datos de empresas involucradas en logística, almacenamiento y producción. Se emplearon análisis factoriales exploratorios y confirmatorios (AFE y AFC) para evaluar la validez de las principales habilidades blandas, incluyendo la honestidad, la creatividad, la actitud positiva y la confianza, junto con atributos de apoyo organizacional. El estudio reveló correlaciones significativas entre estas habilidades blandas y los resultados de reclutamiento, destacando brechas en las prácticas actuales de recursos humanos. Los hallazgos subrayan la necesidad de mejorar los marcos de capacitación y educativos para cerrar estas brechas y alinearse mejor con las demandas del mercado laboral. Al abordar estas deficiencias, las instituciones educativas y los empleadores en Honduras pueden mejorar las tasas de inserción laboral y la efectividad general de la fuerza laboral, contribuyendo al desarrollo económico del país. El estudio ofrece valiosas perspectivas sobre el papel crítico de las habilidades blandas en la consecución de un empleo sostenible y el crecimiento económico en Honduras.

Palabras clave: habilidades blandas, procesos de reclutamiento, corredor logístico, educación basada en competencias

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INTRODUCTION

Economists increasingly highlight the importance of "soft skills" in attaining success in the labor market, supported by compelling evidence that these skills, often termed "non-cognitive skills," are pivotal for achievements in academics and adult life (Deming, D. J., 2017). Over the past decade, researchers and practitioners alike have emphasized a distinct set of soft skills essential in higher education institutions, encompassing collaborative, communicative, and problem-solving abilities (Tang, 2019). There is a notable shift in the business landscape towards prioritizing employee knowledge as a means of gaining a competitive edge. This emphasis on worker knowledge has underscored the significance of both hard and soft skills. The emergence of soft skills gaps within the organization may be indicative of shortcomings in recruitment, selection, and training practices Hurrell, S. A. (2016).

Soft skill development has an impact in the workforce. There is demand for professionals to develop these skills, since their job placement depends directly on the competencies perceived in human talent selection mechanisms. In Honduras, at the end of the nineties, the term competency-based education was incorporated, based on the Tuning Latin America project. This space made it possible to stage the importance of competencies for modernization processes and curricular reform Serrano Serrano, R., Macias, W., Rodriguez, K., & Amor, M. I. (2019).

Honduras has generated slow progress in the incorporation of new educational models, such as the competency-based educational model (MEBC). However, some universities and study centers have opted to declare the MEBC as their teaching philosophy. The relationship models or educational formats will directly affect the economy and the operation of graduates from various educational levels, whether it is generating greater productivity. Honduras experiences significant education inequalities.

Despite allocating a substantial portion of its national budget to education, it ranks among the Central American countries with the poorest academic outcomes. The obstacles it confronts are considerable, ranging from combating illiteracy in rural areas to enhancing secondary school accessibility. Orozco, M., & Valdivia, M. (2017).

In terms of productivity and economy, Honduras has achieved sustained macroeconomic stability. The country has a solid regulatory framework that protects investments and provides attractive incentives, which contributes to studying and updating the logistic corridor value chain and how other sectors may be part of it, connecting with main production sectors and concentrated people. This presents an opportunity for economic growth in the country, by attracting foreign investment and generating jobs. Honduras has a privileged geographical location and many free trade agreements. It is competitive, since it has low-cost labor and logistics services, compared to most countries in the region. Montoya, A. (2020).

Quality of education implies a guarantee in production operation efficiency and market competitiveness. Honduras, I. N. E. (2016). In Honduras, there is little opportunity for formal employment and limited access to technical and vocational education. The Central American country allocates a higher budget to public education compared to other Latin American countries. Despite this increased investment, the country has not achieved better educational results. The Honduran educational system encounters challenges in delivering essential services, characterized by issues such as inadequate teacher accountability and subpar performance. Yitzack Pavon, Fernando (2008).

According to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), there has been a historical trend towards carrying out technical studies with direct access to tertiary education and upper secondary vocational ISCED – 354, specifically to the industrial, automotive, hotel and commercial technical sector (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) 2012).

This has been called the Professional Technical Baccaureate (BTP) and is expressed in the curricular construction of the National Base Curriculum, such as high school diplomas with job opportunities that enable both the exercise of a technical field and entry to the higher level. (Secretaría de educación de Honduras, 2023)

There has been a discernible trend in the labor market in Honduras to pursue technical studies at the certification level according to the ISCED, called ISCED – 453, which are programs without direct access to tertiary education (UNESCO 2012). These programs vary according to their temporality and are mostly taught by the National Institute of Vocational Training of Honduras (INFOP). The courses respond to emerging needs of a technical-vocational nature. INFOP has a Non-Formal Alternative Education Commission (CONEANFO) that ensures the regulation of courses, diplomas and/or certificates, in terms of quality and correspondence with market needs.

At the higher level, there is an emerging offer of certificates and diplomas issued by 20 universities to contribute to the development of managerial, technical competencies and skills linked to specific tasks of graduates in those levels, as well as a growing trend to take Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) for the development of specific skills and soft skills. The study aim was to determine skills during employment recruitment in Honduran national companies in the logistic corridor.

The scarce labor supply leads to an increase in crime, homicide, and corruption rates at all levels. Analyzing the quality of life of a society means analyzing the subjective experiences of the individuals that make up it and the perception they have of their existence within it. Vega Mendoza, Victor Hugo, & Ruiz Canizales, Raúl. (2017). Development requires the elimination of the main sources of deprivation of liberty: poverty and tyranny, the scarcity of economic opportunities and systematic social deprivation, the neglect of public services and the intolerance or excessive intervention of repressive states. (Nova-Laverde, pp. 95, 2015)

Objectives

Identify the essential soft skills demanded by employers in the logistics corridor of Honduras by analyzing recruitment practices and the perceived importance of these skills in job placements.

Evaluate the effectiveness of competency-based educational models (MEBC) in Honduran universities in fostering soft skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication among graduates.

Assess the relationship between soft skills gaps and recruitment, selection, and training practices within companies in the logistics corridor, identifying areas for improvement in human resource management.

Analyze the impact of soft skills development on the employability and job performance of graduates from vocational and technical programs in Honduras, with a focus on the correlation between educational outcomes and labor market demands.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted as applied research, employing a descriptive-survey method for data collection. The data collection process was empirical, and since the research evaluated data within a specific period, it was categorized as a cross-sectional study. The study examined the construct validity of honesty, creativity, positive attitude, sense of belonging, initiative, and confidence using both exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) through structural equation modeling (SEM) techniques. Additionally, the discriminant validity of these constructs was assessed relative to the similar construct of organizational support, which included attributes such as flexibility,

sense of belonging, positive attitude, commitment, initiative, teamwork, honesty, interpersonal relationships, confidence, and troubleshooting (Campbell & Fiske, 1959).

A convenience sample was collected over a one-month period from companies associated with the logistics corridor, including specialized freight companies, warehousing facilities, production companies in the melon, tilapia, and oriental vegetable sectors, as well as customs agencies. A questionnaire consisting of 24 multiple-choice questions and 8 open-ended questions was administered to experts, allowing participants to provide detailed free-text responses. Interviews were conducted as a qualitative methodology to gather in-depth data, adapting to the interviewee's context, knowledge of the topic, and beliefs (Lopezosa, C., 2020). Qualitative data analysis methods, including pattern extraction and grouping, were applied to analyze responses to the open-ended questions. Ordinal scales were used to establish a distinct order between variables, while a Likert scale format with five response options was employed to capture cognitive and affective aspects (Ali, Z., & Bhaskar, S. B., 2016). It is important to note that the reliability and validity of an instrument are not influenced by the number of scale points used (Croasmun, J. T., & Ostrom, L., 2011). Qualitative research provides valuable insights into professional practices within a specific context and helps address challenges associated with the subjective nature of qualitative research (Leech, N. L., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J., 2011).

Statistical analyses were conducted using platforms such as Google Sheets and Tableau. A thorough understanding of statistics and at least a basic familiarity with statistical software are essential for comprehending contemporary social and health science research (Arkkelin, D., 2014).

Exploratory Factor Analysis

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with principal components extraction and varimax rotation was performed on the 15 items intended to measure the latent variables. A critical value of 0.50 was set as the cutoff point for determining whether an item defined a factor, and the 'eigenvalue greater than one test' and the screen test were used to define factors (Gorsuch, 1974). All factor loadings exceeded 0.50 (see Table 1), and 13 interpretable factors emerged (see Table 2). Each of the 13 factors demonstrated good scale reliability, with coefficient alphas ranging from 0.50 to 0.90 (see Table 3).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To further validate the latent variables, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed on the data. Three competing models were examined. Model 1 consisted of all items loading onto a single creativity factor. Model 2 specified the loading of the first 15 items onto a creative potential factor and the remaining items, including the six perceived organizational support items, onto a second 'organizational creativity' factor. Model 3 included three factors: creative potential, practiced creativity, and perceived organizational support for creativity, with individual items loading onto the corresponding factor. An improvement in fit from Models 1 to 3 would provide evidence supporting the construct validity of creative potential and practiced creativity, as well as the discriminant validity of practiced creativity relative to perceived organizational support for creativity. In line with the recommendations of Hoyle and Panter (1995), the following fit indices were used to assess the fit of the three models: chi-square (χ^2), goodness-of-fit index (GFI, Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1981), non-normed fit index (NNFI, Bentler & Bonnett, 1980), incremental fit index (IFI, Bollen, 1989b), and comparative fit index (CFI, Bentler, 1990). The use of multiple fit indices is generally advisable to provide convergent evidence of model fit. GFI, NNFI, IFI, and CFI values range from 0 to 1.0, with values closer to 1.0 indicating a well-fitting model (Bentler & Bonnett, 1980; Hoyle & Panter, 1995). Intercorrelations and Cronbach's alphas as scale reliability coefficients for the latent variables are presented.

Measurement Model

All latent variables were assessed using 15 items. To test the discriminant validity of our measures, we conducted a CFA, specifying our measurement model and comparing it with alternative models. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with STATA 17.0.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We used the maximum-likelihood estimation method because all variables had acceptable skewness ($|sk| < 2.0$) and kurtosis ($|ku| < 7.0$) values, making this method appropriate (Curran, West, & Finch, 1996). Additionally, the Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed the assumption of normality. The responses were approximately normally distributed, with skewness values ranging from -1.07 to 2.32 and kurtosis values from -1.07 to 0.31 (see Table 1).

All latent variables were assessed using 15 items ($\alpha = 0.83$). To test the discriminant validity of our measures, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), specifying our measurement model and comparing it with alternative models. Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with STATA 17.0. The maximum-likelihood estimation method was employed again due to the variables' acceptable skewness ($|sk| < 2.0$) and kurtosis ($|ku| < 7.0$) values (Curran, West, & Finch, 1996). Specifically, the responses were approximately normally distributed, with skewness values ranging from 0.24 to 1.72 and kurtosis values from 2.23 to 6.82 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Skewness, Kurtosis and Shapiro-Wilk test for assumption of normality

Variables	Skewnes	Kurtosis	Shapiro-Wilk test	
			Z	p
1 - Creativity	1.60	6.09	1.887	0.029*
2 - Honesty	1.72	6.51	1.511	0.065
3 - Flexibility	0.32	2.59	-0.892	0.813
4 - Interpersonal Relation	0.24	3.25	-2.020	0.978
5 - Confidence	2.32	6.68	2.23	0.013*
6 - Sense of Belonging	0.44	2.75	-0.717	0.763
7 - Positive attitude	0.75	3.41	-3.636	0.999
8 - Communication skill	0.91	2.34	0.797	0.212
9 - Troubleshooting	1.28	6.82	1.836	0.033*
10 - Commitment	0.65	2.23	0.664	0.253
11 - Teamwork	0.64	2.57	0.345	0.634
12 - Willingness to learn	1.07	2.55	1.173	0.120
13 - Initiative	1.16	4.94	2.384	0.008*

Initiative Model

The three-factor model—comprising Initiative, Creativity at Work, and Troubleshooting at Work—demonstrated a good fit to the data, with CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.07 [0.00, 0.09], SRMR = 0.004, and CD = 0.836. Additionally, all standardized factor loadings (λ) for the items on their respective latent variables were significant ($p < 0.005$), with an average loading of 0.74 (Initiative [0.62 – 0.95]; Creativity at Work [0.76 - 0.99]; Troubleshooting at Work [0.61 - 0.93]). We also tested a model where all items were related to a single factor (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Correlations among Variables (Study 1)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1. Creativity	0.829												
2. Honesty	0.851 <i>(0.015)*</i>	0.908											
3. Flexibility	0.444 <i>(0.317)*</i>	0.087 <i>(0.851)*</i>	0.850										
4. Interpersonal Relation	0.485 <i>(0.269)*</i>	0.638 <i>(0.122)*</i>	0.488 <i>(0.266)*</i>	0.646									
5. Confidence	0.906 <i>(0.004)*</i>	0.779 <i>(0.039)*</i>	0.663 <i>(0.104)*</i>	0.689 <i>(0.086)*</i>	0.876								
6. Sense of Belonging	0.902 <i>(0.036)*</i>	0.954 <i>(0.012)*</i>	0.024 <i>(0.969)*</i>	0.496 <i>(0.394)*</i>	0.747 <i>(0.146)*</i>	0.825							
7. Positive attitude	0.317 <i>(0.488)*</i>	0.345 <i>(0.491)*</i>	0.041 <i>(0.9239)*</i>	0.182 <i>(0.695)*</i>	0.286 <i>(0.533)*</i>	0.438 <i>(0.460)*</i>	0.739						
8. Communication skill	0.263 <i>(0.586)*</i>	0.161 <i>(0.729)*</i>	0.620 <i>(0.137)*</i>	0.575 <i>(0.176)*</i>	0.522 <i>(0.299)*</i>	0.060 <i>(0.923)*</i>	0.632 <i>(0.127)*</i>	0.835					
9. Troubleshooting	0.744 <i>(0.055)*</i>	0.855 <i>(0.014)*</i>	0.413 <i>(0.357)*</i>	0.926 <i>(0.002)*</i>	0.817 <i>(0.024)*</i>	0.827 <i>(0.083)*</i>	0.322 <i>(0.480)*</i>	0.477 <i>(0.278)*</i>	0.541				
10. Commitment	0.415 <i>(0.354)*</i>	0.807 <i>(0.028)*</i>	0.274 <i>(0.552)*</i>	0.523 <i>(0.228)*</i>	0.444 <i>(0.317)*</i>	0.759 <i>(0.136)*</i>	0.201 <i>(0.664)*</i>	0.007 <i>(0.986)</i>	0.613 <i>(0.142)</i>	0.550			
11. Teamwork	0.304 <i>(0.508)*</i>	0.180 <i>(0.699)*</i>	0.722 <i>(0.067)*</i>	0.592 <i>(0.161)*</i>	0.483 <i>(0.271)*</i>	0.024 <i>(0.968)*</i>	0.546 <i>(0.204)*</i>	0.109 <i>(0.816)</i>	0.477 <i>(0.279)</i>	0.000 <i>(0.999)</i>	0.748		
12. Willingness to learn	0.666 <i>(0.102)*</i>	0.383 <i>(0.396)*</i>	0.546 <i>(0.205)*</i>	0.185 <i>(0.691)*</i>	0.587 <i>(0.165)*</i>	0.449 <i>(0.448)*</i>	0.436 <i>(0.327)*</i>	0.209 <i>(0.651)</i>	0.335 <i>(0.461)</i>	0.007 <i>(0.988)</i>	0.699 <i>(0.008)</i>	0.901	
13. Initiative	0.566 <i>(0.185)*</i>	0.779 <i>(0.038)*</i>	0.292 <i>(0.525)*</i>	0.807 <i>(0.028)*</i>	0.768 <i>(0.043)*</i>	0.721 <i>(0.168)*</i>	0.170 <i>(0.715)*</i>	0.400 <i>(0.373)</i>	0.803 <i>(0.029)*</i>	0.828 <i>(0.021)*</i>	0.390 <i>(0.386)</i>	0.214 <i>(0.644)</i>	0.837

Cronbach's alphas (scale reliability coefficient) are shown in italics along the diagonal; *p < 0.05;

Table 3

Exploratory Confirmatory Factor Analysis: Results of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, and Confirmatory Factor Analysis: Standardized Root Mean Squared Residual (SRMSR) & Coefficient of Determination (CD).

Latent Variables	KMO	SRMSR	CD
1 - Creativity	0.679	0.000 < 0.08	0.998 > 0.90
2 - Honesty	0.553	0.04 < 0.08	0.950 > 0.90
3 - Flexibility	0.553	0.04 < 0.08	0.950 > 0.90
4 - Interpersonal Relation	0.653	0.03 < 0.08	0.960 > 0.90
5 - Confidence	0.792	0.02 < 0.08	0.980 > 0.90
6 - Sense of Belonging	0.575	0.04 < 0.08	0.955 > 0.90
7 - Positive attitude	0.672	0.03 < 0.08	0.965 > 0.90
8 - Communication skill	0.691	0.03 < 0.08	0.970 > 0.90
9 - Troubleshooting	0.553	0.04 < 0.08	0.950 > 0.90
10 - Commitment	0.602	0.04 < 0.08	0.955 > 0.90
11 - Teamwork	0.553	0.04 < 0.08	0.950 > 0.90
12 - Willingness to learn	0.649	0.03 < 0.08	0.960 > 0.90
13 - Initiative	0.653	0.03 < 0.08	0.960 > 0.90

The results from the Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis indicate that all latent variables demonstrate a good model fit, as evidenced by SRMSR values below 0.08 and Coefficient of Determination (CD) values exceeding 0.90, suggesting strong explanatory power. However, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure reveals variability in the suitability of the data for factor analysis. While variables like Confidence, Communication Skill, and Creativity show strong adequacy with higher KMO values, others such as Honesty, Flexibility, and Teamwork have lower KMO values, indicating they are less suited for factor analysis but still within an acceptable range. Overall, the analysis supports the validity of the constructs, with some variability in factor suitability.

Creativity Model

The hypothesized four-factor measurement model—comprising Initiative, Sense of Belonging, Confidence, and Commitment—fit the data well, with CFI = 0.81, RMSEA = 0.01 [0.00, 0.07], SRMR = 0.006, and CD = 0.813. All standardized factor loadings (λ) for the items on their respective latent variables were significant ($p < 0.005$), with an average loading of 0.90.

The results of the SEM analysis indicated that the four-factor model showed positive associations between Creativity ($\beta = 0.62, p = 0.013$; CI85% [0.13 - 0.11]), Sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.74, p < 0.001$; CI85% [0.39 - 1.08]), and positive attitude at work ($\beta = 0.71, p < 0.001$; CI85% [0.39 - 1.01]) with initiative at work. Furthermore, the model demonstrated that when these three latent variables interact simultaneously, their combined effect on Initiative at Work significantly increases compared to the individual effect of each variable ($\beta = 0.95, p < 0.001$; CI85% [0.80 - 1.09]), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Standardized estimates of Flexibility, Sense of Belonging, and Positive Attitude in Initiative. All parameter loadings were significant at the 0.05 level

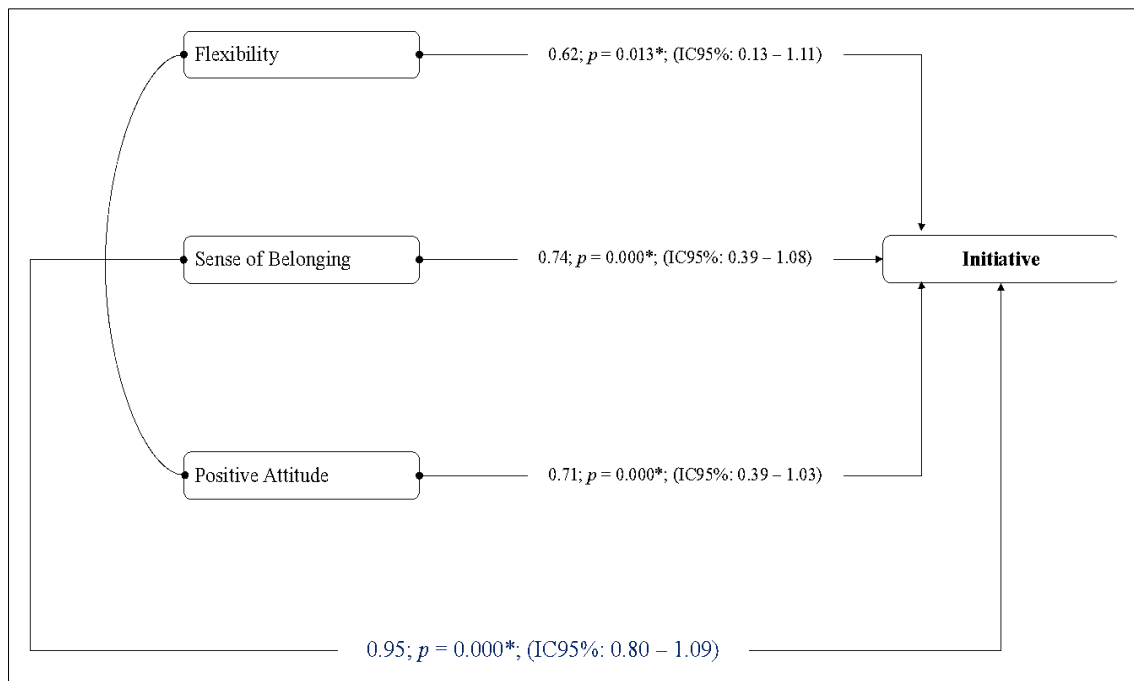


Figure 2

Standardized estimates of Initiative, Sens of Belonging, Confidence, and Commitment in Creativity. All parameter loadings were significant at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level.

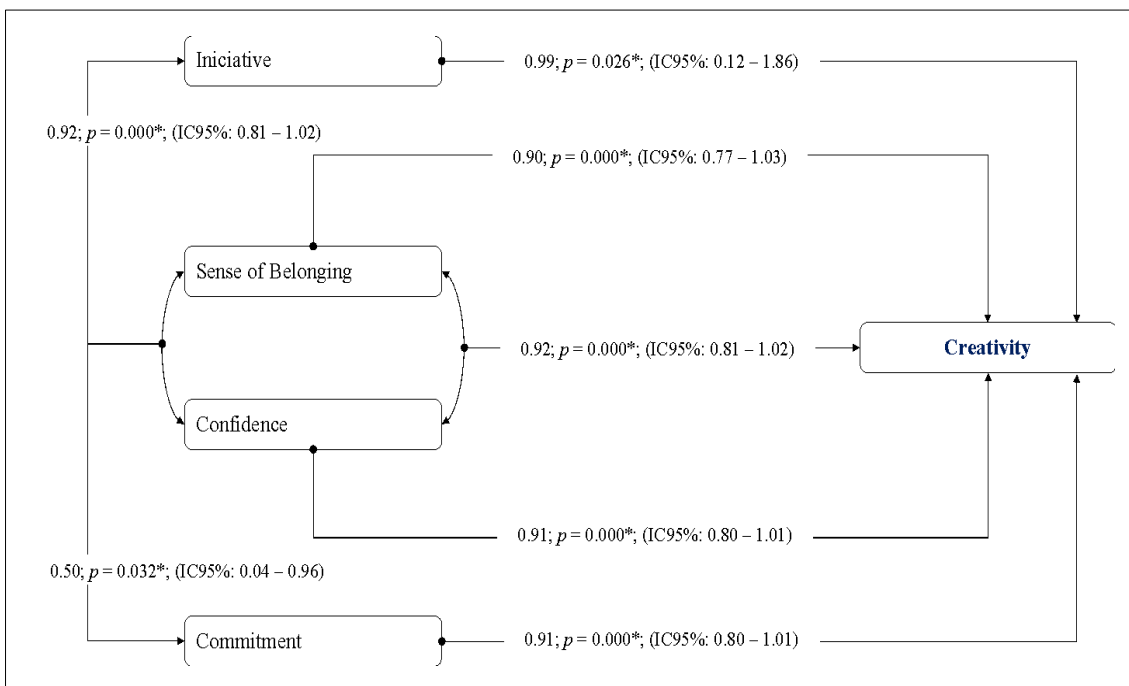
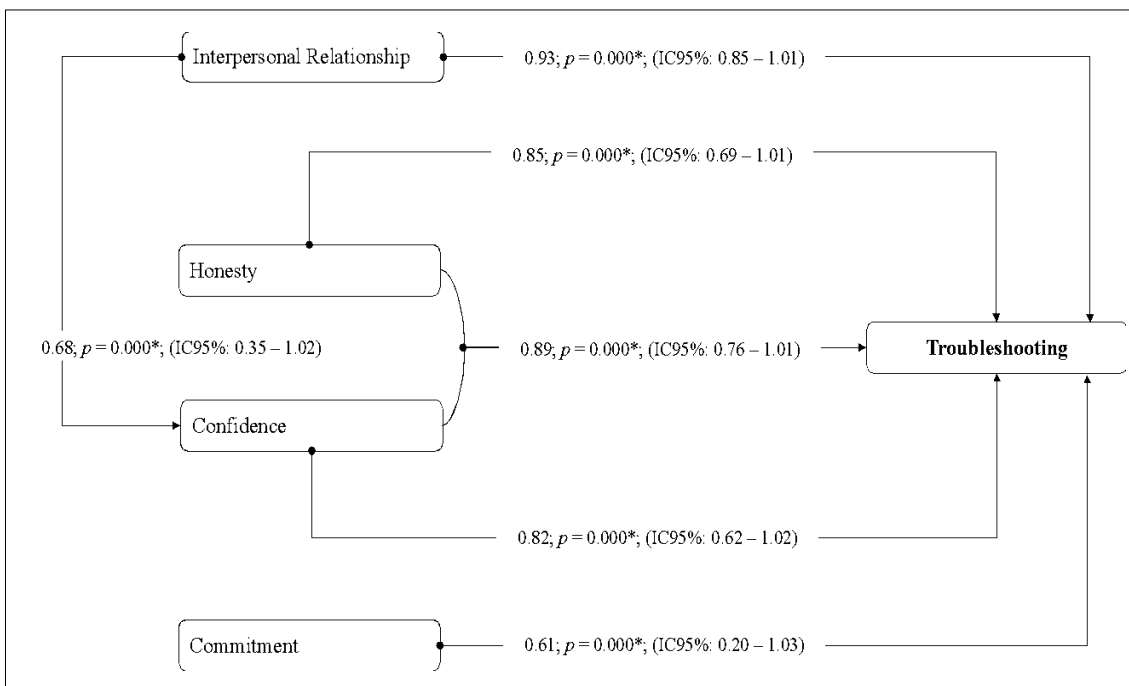


Figure 3

Standardized estimates of Interpersonal Relationship, Honesty, Confidence, and Commitment in Troubleshooting. All parameter loadings were significant at the 0.05 level



CONCLUSIONS

The study's findings provide robust evidence supporting the use of the maximum-likelihood estimation method, justified by the acceptable skewness and kurtosis values of the variables and confirmed by the Shapiro-Wilk test. The responses were approximately normally distributed, further validating the choice of analytical methods. The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis, performed using STATA 17.0, demonstrated that the hypothesized models exhibited good fit indices, with particularly strong results in the three-factor and four-factor models assessing Initiative, Creativity, Sense of Belonging, and Troubleshooting. The confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the discriminant validity of the measures, with all standardized factor loadings being significant and averaging high values, indicating strong relationships between the latent variables and their respective indicators.

Moreover, the exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses revealed that while all latent variables demonstrated a good overall model fit, there was variability in the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measures of sampling adequacy. This suggests that while some variables, such as Confidence and Communication Skills, were strongly suited for factor analysis, others, like Honesty and Teamwork, showed lower adequacy but remained within acceptable ranges.

The SEM results further underscored the positive associations between Creativity, Sense of Belonging, Positive Attitude, and Initiative at Work. Notably, when these latent variables interacted simultaneously, their combined effect on Initiative was significantly stronger than the individual effects, emphasizing the importance of these factors in enhancing workplace initiative. These findings align with the study's objectives and contribute valuable insights into the dynamics of workplace behaviors and attitudes. Overall, the study supports the validity and reliability of the proposed models, offering a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing Initiative and Creativity at Work.

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