

BRIDGING THE GAP: THE ROLE OF SOFT SKILLS AND DIGITALIZATION IN CURRENT EMPLOYEE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *This study investigates current trends in employee training and development within the automotive industry, with a special focus on the growing importance of soft skills and digitalization. The main objective is to identify the key factors influencing modern approaches to workforce development in this dynamic sector. To explore these evolving trends, the research adopted a mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection.*

As part of the qualitative phase, four semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from small, medium, and large automotive companies. These interviews offered in-depth insights into organizational strategies and challenges related to employee learning and growth. In addition, a questionnaire survey was carried out to gather employees' views, preferences, and expectations regarding training opportunities and professional development.

The findings from both methods present valuable recommendations for automotive enterprises seeking to improve or redesign their training programs. By addressing current workforce needs while also anticipating future industry demands, this research helps close the gap between theory and practice. Ultimately, the study offers a well-rounded and forward-looking perspective on the future of employee development in the automotive field.

Keywords: *learning, development, automotive, soft skills, digitalisation*

JEL classification: *M53, M15, O33*

INTRODUCTION

Today's automotive industry is going through a time of major change, driven by challenges and crises happening around the world (Hašková & Zatkalík, 2018). This is especially true in Europe, where even the most well-known car brands are being pushed to adapt quickly. From the fast pace of digitalization to evolving market trends, changing customer expectations, and how employees feel about their roles—there's

a lot shaping the future of the industry (Mazurchenko & Zelenka, 2022). That's why understanding how people grow and develop within this space—especially when it comes to human resources, is more important than ever (Modupe, 2023). It not only helps companies navigate these changes more effectively but also creates opportunities to improve how teams work and how businesses run overall (Brassey, 2019).

As automotive companies embrace new technologies and work toward more sustainable practices, one thing becomes clear: success depends on people (Kacprzak, Krol, & Wielewska, 2017). To keep up with rapid changes and deliver meaningful results, these companies need to not only attract fresh talent but also create an environment that encourages skilled employees to stay and grow (Chung & Huang, 2022). This shift in the industry calls for more than just innovation under the hood—it requires thoughtful, forward-looking approaches to developing talent (Phuyal, Bista, & Bista, 2020). Investing in employee growth through learning opportunities, upskilling, and career development isn't just beneficial—it's essential. These efforts help build a workforce that's adaptable, engaged, and ready to take on the challenges of a fast-evolving industry, ultimately strengthening the company from the inside out (Ayub & Kusumadewi, 2021).

The fast pace of technological change and new regulations is having a profound impact on the people working in the automotive industry. For decades, car manufacturing has been a cornerstone of employment in Europe—providing jobs to over 3.1 million people in manufacturing and another 3.6 million in sales and maintenance as of 2024. But today, the skills needed to thrive in this industry are shifting quickly (Weber, Leončikas, Hurley, & Dragos, 2025)

It's no longer just about technical know-how. There's a growing recognition that soft skills—like adaptability, communication, and teamwork—are just as important (Firmansyah & Soeharto, 2020). As the industry undergoes complex transformations, workers at every level are being called on to think critically, solve problems creatively, and collaborate across disciplines (Ostin, 2023). The future of skills captured this well, noting that continuous innovation and strong interpersonal abilities will be essential, no matter the role (Akla & Indradewa, 2022)

Apart from the development of job-specific professional skills, the growing importance of soft skills in today's industries is critical, including the automotive sector (Bošković, 2021). According to Holt (2018), soft skills within the automotive industry can be categorized into distinct groups to facilitate targeted development. The author identifies communication, teamwork, employee engagement, ethical decision-making, and problem-solving as the most crucial skills for modern enterprise (Holt, 2018). Based on these categories, employers can focus on key individual attributes and address potential challenges to enhance overall company performance and value (Deutscher & Braunstein, 2023).

The development of soft skills in today's digitalized society is particularly essential, given the wide range of interpersonal interactions involved in professional environments. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the digital nature of modern communication does not hinder the development of soft skills but rather enhances and supports their effectiveness (Bucchiarone, 2022). Various digital tools and technologies enable employees to improve their communication skills, increase their awareness of high-pressure situations, develop problem-solving abilities, and foster team collabora-

tion (Melnychenko, Lositska, & Bieliaieva, 2021). Based on the above-stated foundation and current literature review, it is possible to recognize the existing lack of research on the topic, concretely exploring automotive employee development with a primary focus on the soft skills and digital approach interconnection (Hašková & Zatkálík, 2018). As human capital becomes more valuable for contemporary businesses, its development becomes more reasonable for achieving company effectiveness and competitiveness in the market (Kacprzak, Krol, & Wielewska, 2017).

This research aims to explore how two important elements—employee soft skills and digital tools—can work together to boost efficiency in the automotive industry. It takes a closer look at how both employees and employers perceive these aspects, and how they come together in real workplace settings. By understanding how people interact with technology and with each other, this study hopes to shed light on how a balanced blend of human strengths and digital solutions can create a more effective and collaborative work environment.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the objectives of the research and gain a deeper understanding of current trends in training and development within the automotive sector, the author adopted a mixed-methods approach. This included conducting semi-structured interviews and distributing a questionnaire survey. The semi-structured interviews proved especially valuable, as they allowed for a more detailed exploration of the unique characteristics of employee development practices within the Central European automotive industry. In total, four interviews were conducted with professionals working as learning and development managers. These conversations provided rich qualitative insights, highlighting specific strategies and challenges faced by companies in the region. To ensure confidentiality, each participating organization was anonymized and identified using generic labels (Company 1 to Company 4). All interviews took place during the year 2023, with each session lasting approximately one hour. The detailed background information about the companies involved is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Detailed information about companies

Characteristics	Company 1	Company 2	Company 3	Company 4
Number of employees	8,000	2,000	70	60
Main sector	Manufacturing (Automotive)	Manufacturing (Automotive)	Services (Marketing)	Services (Learning and Development)
Interviewer	L&D manager	L&D manager	L&D manager	L&D manager
Planned budget for learning and development	Yes, central budget	Yes, central budget	Yes, central budget	Yes, central budget

Source: Author own elaboration

After the interviews, the author carefully analyzed and categorized the responses to identify common patterns and themes that align with the research goals. While the number of interviews was limited, the depth and relevance of the information gathered made a significant contribution to addressing the research questions. These findings

complement the quantitative data from the questionnaire and together form a strong basis for the conclusions presented in this study.

Building on the insights gained from the semi-structured interviews and the initial data analysis, the author proceeded with a questionnaire survey to further explore employee attitudes toward learning and development. This survey was conducted in May 2024 within a Czech-based automotive enterprise. Its main aim was to gather employees' views, intentions, and perceptions related to various aspects of workplace training and professional growth.

The questionnaire achieved a response rate of 62%, resulting in 68 completed responses. To measure opinions effectively, the survey used a 7-point Likert scale, which was chosen based on its proven reliability and suitability for this type of research, as supported by the literature (Korkut & Arslan, 2016). The collected responses were subjected to statistical analysis in order to uncover key trends and patterns connected to employee learning behaviors and development needs. This step added a valuable quantitative perspective to the study, complementing the qualitative results from the interviews. Together, the two methods provided a more comprehensive understanding of how learning and development are perceived and practiced within the selected company.

research results

The qualitative findings of this research provided important insights into how automotive companies perceive the evolving balance between technical and soft skills. A recurring theme across all interviews was the recognition that this balance is becoming increasingly crucial for organizational success. Company representatives consistently emphasized that while technical expertise remains essential, the role of soft skills has grown significantly in recent years.

Table 2. Thematic outcomes on soft skills and digitalization in employee training and development

Dimension	Findings from Interviews	Illustrative Examples (Companies)
Soft Skills – Current Focus	Strong and increasing emphasis on soft skills across all companies; included in most training programs.	Teamwork, communication, leadership, customer orientation (Company 1–4).
Soft Skills – Future Needs	Expected to dominate future competence frameworks; associated with adaptability and “human touch.”	Lifelong learning, individualization of skills, change management (Company 1–4).
Digitalization – Current Practices	Digitalization already present in training programs; used both for technical and soft skills.	eLearning platforms, AI/VR training, chatbots, digital academies (Company 1–4).
Digitalization – Future Outlook	Seen as a strategic necessity; integration expected to expand further.	Microlearning, virtual reality simulations, self-learning digital tools (Company 1–3).

Source: Author own elaboration

One perspective stands out in particular—that of Company 1, where the learning and development manager holds responsibility for more than 8,000 employees. This representative explained that while the company's training strategy in the early 2000s was focused almost entirely on technical skills, the approach has shifted considerably

over the past decade. Since around 2015, there has been a sharp rise in the demand for soft skills, and today nearly two-thirds of all training activities are dedicated to areas such as teamwork, communication, negotiation, and customer-oriented thinking. This evolution reflects a wider recognition that even highly technical roles—such as those in engineering, IT, and production—now require employees to demonstrate strong interpersonal, collaborative, and problem-solving abilities in order to succeed.

Comparable patterns were also identified in Companies 2, 3, and 4. Their representatives described how they are actively working to design and implement training programs that encourage team spirit, strengthen communication, and support adaptability in the face of rapid industry change. Taken together, these findings highlight a clear and consistent message: technical expertise alone is no longer sufficient for meeting the challenges of today's automotive sector. Instead, companies increasingly view the development of soft skills as a vital part of preparing their workforce for both current demands and future transformations.

Beyond soft skills, all participating companies pointed to a rising need for training in digital technologies, with particular emphasis on artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and advanced e-learning platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation, yet many organizations are still in the process of developing comprehensive strategies to integrate digital tools effectively. For now, much of the momentum seems to come from employee interest and expectations rather than from fully established internal frameworks.

At the same time, digitalization is not limited to technical upskilling. Increasingly, companies are also using digital tools to strengthen soft skills. An innovative example comes from Company 2, which introduced virtual reality scenarios where employees practice interactions with virtual customers. These immersive simulations are designed to enhance communication and negotiation abilities, providing a creative and highly engaging approach to professional development.

Building on the insights gathered from company representatives, the research was extended with a quantitative approach to better understand how employees themselves perceive the changing landscape of learning and development—particularly in relation to digital tools. While the qualitative phase highlighted organizational strategies and priorities, this stage of the study aimed to capture the voices of those directly involved: the employees. The focus was on examining their perceptions of digital learning, as well as their readiness and willingness to adopt new technologies for self-directed development.

A specific area of interest was the “pre-training” phase—how employees prepare for learning opportunities and to what extent they are open to incorporating digital resources into their own development paths. Instead of simply assessing the structure of formal corporate training programs, the study sought to uncover individual learning behaviors. Key questions included whether employees use digital platforms on their own initiative and whether they feel confident in exploring new tools to support their growth.

The results were highly encouraging. Data showed that 57% of respondents regularly use digital tools on a daily basis to support their personal learning journeys, while another 26% reported using such tools weekly. Only 10% indicated that they rarely engage with digital solutions for self-development. These findings clearly sug-

gest that employees are not only open to digital learning but are already actively integrating it into their routines. This demonstrates a growing shift in mindset, where continuous learning is increasingly driven by individual initiative, supported by accessible and user-friendly digital resources.

For organizations, these results represent a valuable opportunity. By building on employees' existing engagement with technology, companies can design training programs that align corporate objectives with personal learning habits. In this way, the future of workforce development is likely to depend on bridging structured organizational strategies with self-directed learning behaviors—an area where digital tools are emerging as a powerful connector.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings from both the literature review and the empirical study offer valuable insights into the increasingly important role that soft skills play in today's business landscape—particularly within the automotive industry. As companies continue to undergo rapid digital transformation, soft skills are emerging as a critical component in navigating these changes. In the context of digitalization and the adoption of new technologies, the learning and development environment is evolving at an accelerated pace. These shifts are not only redefining technical requirements but also placing greater emphasis on human-centered capabilities.

Based on the empirical data collected, it is increasingly clear that soft skills are no longer considered a secondary or optional element of employee development. In fact, they are emerging as a new standard and an essential part of professional growth. This marks a significant shift from earlier decades, when technical expertise was seen as the main driver of success and soft skills were often treated as complementary. Today, organizations across the automotive sector recognize that technical knowledge alone is not sufficient to deal with the growing complexity of modern workplaces. What is particularly interesting is that the demand for soft skills is not only being encouraged by employers but also strongly expressed by employees themselves. Workers are showing a greater awareness of the importance of personal qualities such as communication, empathy, adaptability, and teamwork, and they are increasingly asking for opportunities to develop them.

This change can be understood in the context of highly digitalized work environments. While digital tools and platforms make processes faster, more efficient, and often more cost-effective, they also carry the risk of reducing human interaction to brief, transactional exchanges. Daily communication may happen through emails, instant messaging, or automated systems, which, while practical, do not always create the space for deeper dialogue or the building of trust. As a result, many employees feel the need for more meaningful engagement with their colleagues and managers. They want to strengthen collaboration, share knowledge in a more personal way, and feel part of a community rather than just a process. This explains why training programs focused on soft skills such as leadership, negotiation, conflict resolution, and team building are receiving such strong interest from employees themselves.

At the same time, the relationship between digital tools and soft skills has also evolved. These two areas are no longer seen as separate or even as competing priorities. Instead, they are becoming increasingly interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Digital tools are not only used to teach technical knowledge but also to create innovative and engaging opportunities for developing interpersonal abilities. For example, virtual reality environments allow employees to practice negotiation or customer interaction scenarios in a safe, simulated space. E-learning platforms provide interactive content that encourages reflection and peer-to-peer communication. Collaborative tools support teamwork by enabling shared problem-solving across distances. In these ways, technology becomes a driver of soft skill development rather than a barrier to it.

On the other side, soft skills also enhance the use of digital technologies. Employees who are adaptable, open to change, and comfortable with continuous learning are more likely to embrace new platforms, experiment with innovative tools, and integrate them successfully into their work routines. Skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving help workers evaluate digital solutions effectively and apply them in ways that truly improve performance. In this sense, soft skills and digitalization form a kind of partnership: one provides the human dimension, while the other offers the technical means.

This collaborative dynamic holds great potential for the future of training and development. By combining strong human qualities with effective digital tools, organizations can design programs that are both efficient and personally meaningful. Employees are not only trained to perform their tasks but also encouraged to grow as individuals and as members of a team. Such an integrated approach supports higher motivation, greater job satisfaction, and improved organizational performance. Ultimately, the evidence suggests that the future of workforce development lies not in choosing between technology and human skills, but in building bridges between them—creating a balanced and forward-looking model where each strengthens the other.

It is important to recognize, however, that this research provides only a snapshot of a much larger and more complex transformation: the ongoing evolution of learning and development in the digital era. As with any study, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The sample of interview participants was relatively small, which means that the qualitative findings, while insightful, cannot be assumed to represent the entire automotive sector. Further in-depth qualitative research would therefore be useful to confirm and expand upon the preliminary trends identified in this study. In addition, the quantitative survey was conducted within a single Central European country. While this offers valuable regional insight, it may also restrict the wider applicability of the results to other cultural and organizational contexts. To strengthen and generalize the conclusions, future research should aim to include a broader range of companies, industries, and cultural environments.

Despite these limitations, the study makes a meaningful contribution by highlighting how soft skills and digitalization are increasingly interconnected within modern learning and development practices. It shows that employees and organizations alike recognize the value of balancing human-centered competencies with technological innovations. Exploring this intersection more deeply could bring significant benefits, not only for academic theory but also for practical applications in the workplace. As the world of work continues to evolve—driven by rapid technological change, new business models, and shifting employee expectations—understanding how soft skills and digital tools reinforce one another will remain a vital area of study. Ultimately, this research serves as a starting point, offering insights that can inspire further inves-

tigation and support organizations in designing training strategies that prepare their workforce for the challenges and opportunities of the future.

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