

# Soft skills significance: the technical path within the Italian NQF

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## Introduction

Over the last few years important changes and modifications of working scenarios have deeply affected the labour market. In the past, enterprises were numerically limited and labour market offered job stability and systematic career pathways. Today the situation turned upside down: in an increasingly global and interdependent labour market, there is a constant and continuous evolution of jobs. As a result, to face the complexity of the system, previously unknown working profiles, linked to more and more diverse working tasks and processes arise. This transformation and consequent instability has inevitably produced changes for all involved actors. It becomes fundamental to adapt to jobs, maybe different from the possessed qualification and/or skills and competences. It is no longer sufficient to be exclusively specialized (specific technical skills – so called *hard skills* or job-related skills), but it has become crucial to develop those skills which support the individual in better addressing the needs and changes of individual's personal and professional life.

There are many definitions and classifications of this wide group of skills. They identify the set of skills necessary to have a positive impact on daily life, to reach informed decisions, solve problems, and know-how to relate positively and constructively with others. They include cognitive, social, emotional and relational skills and they are often classified as *soft skills*, but other groupings identify cross-sector skills, core skills, transversal skills, key competences.

Apart from the peculiarities of each classification (depending from the primary objective of the classification itself), it is important to underline that with “soft skills” in this paper it is intended the set of skills which are considered:

- transferable to from one job to another or from one context/system to a different one
- non-job specific (compared to hard, job-related, technical skills);
- transversal / cross-sector (in terms of aptitudes and adaptability)
- key / core in relation to employability of individuals and competitiveness of enterprises;
- more intangible, difficult to quantify and measure;
- useful and recognized by the labour market.

Within the education and training system, soft skills are considered necessary to prepare students to better face their future working life and to be active citizens. In this sense, the school-work alternation<sup>1</sup> (within the secondary education and training cycle) envisages specific paths which allows students to experience the workplace. In these paths, in addition to the strictly professional skills required to perform tasks, soft skills play a key role, enabling learners-workers to improve their relationship in working contexts, to develop proactive attitudes, teamwork skills, and problem solving.

In working contexts soft skills are important to deal with working scenarios, using cognitive, social, emotional and relational ability as a predictive professional performance and translating it into positive and efficacious working actions.

For individuals soft skills, in particular creativity, stability and personal effectiveness, may be key factors necessary to solve problems. For example, ethics and tolerance allow

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<sup>1</sup> Law n. 107/2015 on the “Reform of the national education and training system” – the so called “Good School”.

individuals to manage the stress caused by dysfunctional relationships and to adopt behaviors that are appropriate to share norms and values; relational skills increase the ability to work in a team and to cooperate in achieving goals. Another crucial aspect is the ability to make decisions and negotiate, which improves flexibility, empathic listening, and rational detachment.

Despite the shared awareness of the importance of soft skills among systems and subsystems of education/training and the labour market, a European Commission report recently (February 2017) showed that Italy still is, among European Union countries, one of the countries with the highest levels of mismatch between the skills (both technical, cognitive and soft/transversal) that workers have and those requested by the job market.

The following paragraph describes a national experience of “soft skills” definition, within the Italian National Qualification Framework (NQF) development. The action was directed by a Technical Group constituted by the Ministry of Labour and the Regions, supported by Inapp (previously ISFOL) and Tecnostruttura<sup>2</sup>. The main reference point for the National Qualifications Framework is an online tool: the **atlas of labour and the repertory of qualifications** available on line at the following web site: [http://nrpitalia.isfol.it/sito\\_standard/sito\\_demo/index.php](http://nrpitalia.isfol.it/sito_standard/sito_demo/index.php) ).

## The technical path towards a definition of “skill” within the Italian NQF

The process leading to the development of the Italian National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has passed several technical steps, among which a fundamental aspect concerned the identification and description of the qualifications descriptors in terms of: knowledge, skills and competences.

All the three descriptors were technically analysed and developed. In detail, the technical path towards a shared identification of skills started from two main definitions:

- a) the analysis of the descriptor as defined in the EQF Recommendation<sup>3</sup> (Knowledge Skills and Responsibility-Autonomy<sup>4</sup>).
- b) the analysis of the descriptor as defined in regional systems and/or education subsystems within the national system of competences certification<sup>5</sup>.

and it forwarded to

- c) the definition of a proposal for Italian descriptors articulated along an eight-level NQF.

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<sup>2</sup> Tecnostruttura is an association of Regions and Autonomous Provinces for specific purposes, mainly the FSE (web site: <http://www.tecnostruttura.it/>)

<sup>3</sup> The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of the 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning.

<sup>4</sup> The descriptor “**competence**” was revised in the Proposal for a *Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning*. COM(2016) 383 final 2016/0180(NLE). Brussels, 10.6.2016

<sup>5</sup> Legislative Decree n. 13/2013, regarding the «Definition of the general rules and essential performance levels for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning and the minimum standards of the national system of competence certification, following art. 4, subparagraphs 58 e 68, of the law n. 92/2012».

Interministerial Decree 30th June 2015 regarding the «Definition of an operative framework for the national recognition of the regional qualifications and competences, within the national Repertory of qualifications following Art. 8 of the Legislative Decree n. 13/2013».

**a) The analysis of the descriptor “skill” as defined in the EQF Recommendation**

The descriptor “skill” in the EQF is defined as

*“the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and/or practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments)”.*

As with the other two descriptors (knowledge and competence), the translation of skills into Italian language and into the education and training systems, has created difficulties in interpretation and understanding, since skills are often used to indicate aptitude, ability and, in some contexts, it is a synonym for competences<sup>6</sup>.

From a first analysis of the European definition, it is possible to note the explicit dimensions of the definition, such as skills (apply knowledge and use know-how) are directly linked to the achievement of the output (to complete tasks and solve problems).

It also specifies which types of skills are identified, namely:

- Cognitive (including the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and
- Practical (including manual skill and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).

Furthermore, the analysis of all the explicit dimensions of the definition (cognitive and practical skills), considered in the articulation on the eight EQF levels, led to a more detailed analysis of additional components (implicit dimensions), which provided the basis for the perimeter of the definition within the national framework.

Among these, there are at least 5 dimensions:

1. Wideness and specialization (basic skills, wide range of skills, advanced, specialized)
2. Complexity of the task/problem (simple task, routine problems, specific problems, ...)
3. Logical, intuitive and creative thinking and knowledge development / integration
4. Rules, tools, methods and materials (use / application / ...)
5. Context and referring field (work or study, different fields, specialized fields)

Wideness and specialization of skills	Complexity of the task/problem	Development of knowledge and creative solutions	Rules, tools, methods and materials (use/application)	Context/ field
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<sup>6</sup> In French, for instance, skill is translated as: *aptitudes professionnelles / capacités professionnelles* (Cedefop Terminology, 2014)

basic skills, wide range of skills, advanced, specialized ...	simple task, routine problems, specific problems, unpredictable problems ...	Creative solutions to abstract problems Research/Innovation Extend existing knowledge ...	Using simple rules, Applying basic methods, tools material,	Work or study Different fields Specialized fields ...
	<b>COGNITIVE</b>		<b>PRACTICAL</b>	

The scheme over reported shows how:

- skills wideness (first column) and context/field (final column) support the fine-tuning of skills levels along the eight increasing levels;
- the two main dimensions (cognitive and practical ) are clearly identified;
- there is a dimension which extends both cognitive and practical skills (*Development of knowledge, creative solutions, innovation*) as it gives further informative elements to differentiate levels, especially higher levels (from the level 5 EQF) as they are connected with cognitive/soft skills.

***b) The analysis of the descriptors as defined in regional systems and/or education subsystems within the national system of competences certification***

The "skill" descriptor was also analysed as defined in Annex 3 of the Interministerial Decree of 30 June 2015 (Article 10), where skills and knowledge are identified as components of the competence and indicate the

*"ability to **apply knowledge and use know-how** to complete **tasks and solve problems**; to express the technical, application or relational to components for the exercise of the competence; they are cognitive (in relation to the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (including manual skill and the use of methods, materials, tools).*

This definition originates from the technical work of experts appointed by the regions with a specific purpose: the homogenization and normalisation of the diverse regional repertoires. This objective, even though distinct from the EQF process, has been developed in coherence with it and, as a result, the above definition is clearly in line with the definition of the EQF framework.

It can be noted, therefore, that the set of cognitive and practical skills is confirmed by the work of regional experts.

***c) The definition of a proposal for "skill" in the Italian NQF***

Considered that the technical work of the regions' experts was in line with the EQF descriptor, in the National Qualifications Framework proposal regarding the descriptor "skills", the two typologies: cognitive and practical, have been assumed.

The further step concerning the articulation of these two broad classifications in the eight level frame, produced additional elements of discussion.

As regards practical skills the descriptor, as above defined, was considered too restricted (only practical skills), so the descriptor has been expanded to include, in addition to practical, *procedural, technical, vocational and sectorial* skills.

Also, cognitive skills needed to be further analysed and detailed.

In fact, the components of cognitive skills are very complex and related not only to the typically cognitive abilities (the development of ideas, linked to the use of logical thinking, intuitive and creative thinking and problem solving), but also to other aspects such as, for instance, those related to the social dimension of interpersonal relationship.

Therefore, beyond the cognitive skills descriptor, as understood in the EQF, it was decided to assume other descriptive dimensions to better express, in the Italian framework, those skills which are more versatile, useful and recognized in the labour market in terms of employability of people and enterprises competitiveness.

The ratio of this choice lies in the need to develop a qualifications system able to support individuals in their employability and enterprises in their competitiveness.

The mission of the national qualifications system is therefore to identify groups of skills and competences which are typical of a wide range of occupational profiles and thus easily transferable from one job to another or from one context to a different one.

In this sense, it was necessary to have an in-depth study of the most widespread and well-known European and international classifications. In fact, the main problems in the identification of this set of skills are: the wide range of existing classifications, categorizations and taxonomies and the selection of the most suitable and adequate or appropriate skills to cover national requirements, in both education and training systems and regional qualifications repertoires.

Besides, all Italian regional repertoires and several European National Qualifications Frameworks were examined in detail in order to identify best practices and suitable solutions.

The detailed analysis of the above classifications and systems detected common elements and homogeneous features. The axes on which all these taxonomies seem to adhere are related to several psychological functions, useful to group clusters as follows:

**1- Soft Skills cognitive** (our way of thinking) refers to the whole mental processes and activities. An example is the ability to **problem solving**, that is, the ability to solve effectively, quickly and creatively any kind of problem, taking into account the context, the people involved, and resisting the stress. **Open and flexible mind-set** is another set of skills needed to respond to the demands of changing environments, and also it provides individuals to be good listeners and therefore facilitates interpersonal relationships. **Critical Thinking** is also an important skill which helps to improve how to analyse situations independently and process information without being persuaded or influenced by others.

**2- Soft Skills activation:** (how we translate what we think into action). The ability to take initiatives, to be ambitious and proactive, output/objective-oriented. **Accuracy, pro-action** and **creativity** support the achievement of brilliant results and excellent performance in professional context. **Organizational** skills, (planning, taking responsibilities) together with energetic enthusiasm and self-motivation and/or motivate others is the basis for building working teams geared to achieving common goals.

**3- Soft Skills socio-relational-emotional** (how we manage our emotions and relationships). They refer to skills which enable individuals to manage emotions, to communicate effectively (taking into account the context and the actors involved), empathize and listen to others without prejudice, trying to understand the different points of view. This set of skills helps supporting the establishment of harmonious relationships with others in personal life and colleagues in working contexts. Basic ability are: autonomy, cooperation, ability to negotiate, flexibility and adaptability.

These three broad clusters may of course be divided into several sub-groups (managerial, communication, etc...), but the main focus, within the development of the Italian National Qualifications Framework (NQF), was to identify the set of soft skills which best suited the national qualifications descriptions, comprehensive of all systems and subsystems distinctiveness and recognized by the labour market.