

Women and the future of soft skills training

An initiative of the ILO Women in STEM Workforce Readiness and Development Programme

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Importance of soft skills for the future of work

Higher cognitive skills along with social, emotional, and communication skills are critical to enhance personal productivity and support career advancement of women across STEM-related sectors in South East Asia.

Robotic automation and artificial intelligence are making significant inroads in STEM-related sectors. However, machines lack the ability to work in teams, lead others, communicate effectively, assess and understand cross-cultural workplaces, and finally negotiate then reach consensus at work.

Thus, these soft skills along with higher cognitive skills such as creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, become crucial to increase both employability and productivity among female workers.

The ILO approach for soft skills development

The ILO through its *In Business* soft skills modules seeks to enhance workplace-based learning through an affordable and effective methodology for continuous/ life-long training on soft skills in-company. The ILO modules allow enterprises to develop critical soft skills among low and mid-skilled female employees.



Participating enterprises in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand will benefit from an innovative learning approach designed by the ILO to deliver soft skills training, leveraging peer learning networks to support development, growth, and enhancement of enterprises. The *In Business* training methodology offers a suite of training modules that apply activity-based, participant driven learning designed to upskill female employees and connect them with role models and mentors.

Topics for soft skills development include:

- Vision setting and professional development
- Creative thinking
- Problem solving
- Teamwork
- Reaching consensus
- Interpersonal communication
- Public speaking
- Critical thinking and reasoning
- Time management and self-organization
- Starting to manage
- Leadership
- Personal awareness
- Working across cultures
- Managing upwards

Objective of soft skills development

The ILO soft skills development programme seeks to strengthen retention and advancement of women workers through enterprise-based peer learning programmes. There is a urgent need to develop workplace-based training programmes to upskill female employees and with this reduce their risk of being displaced by robotic automation and artificial intelligence.



For this purpose, the ILO collaborates with employers and workers in target countries and sectors to boost critical soft skills of low and mid-skilled female workers. Female employees are organized into company-level peer support groups, each with a senior staff mentor, and receive activity-based soft skills training organized by and within participating firms with the support of the ILO. In total, female participants have an opportunity to receive up to 14 training sessions, or 42-45 hours of training on soft skills.

The ILO methodology and modules for soft skills development

What are the key attributes of the ILO *In Business* methodology?



Activity-based learning (ABL): female workers are engaged with a variety of group activities and exercises including reading, writing, discussing, thinking, and applying knowledge in a group with real work-based examples.



Peer learning: emphasizes on female participants learning with and from each other, sharing experiences and existing knowledge. Participants are divided into small groups and enrolled in a particular module, and are then responsible for sharing their own knowledge, insights and experiences with others while working together by following step-by-step instructions set out in the learning modules provided.

What are the key benefits for enterprises and female workers?



Boost personal productivity and secure retention of female employees: the ability to work in teams, lead others, communicate, negotiate, solve problems, and innovate contributes greatly to increased personal productivity and improved career prospects among female workers.



Cost-effective/affordable approach compared to existing soft skills training programmes: removes the need for and costs attached to expensive trainers as the *In Business* facilitator is not expected to have subject matter expertise relevant to the training. Their role is to promote group-driven learning and to guide participants through a series of learning activities. The ILO methodology and modules allow enterprises to train hundreds of employees with a sustainable and cost-effective approach.



Training modules are flexible and customizable: modules can stand alone and provide opportunities for local and enterprise examples. At the same time *In Business* gives participating enterprises the opportunity to choose appropriate modules from a wide range of thematic offers.



Training is offered in a modular system to support continuous/life-long learning in-company: 14 training modules and soft skills topics are available. Each module requires 3-4 hours of training. This allows lifelong training in-company without interfering in business and production deadlines. Training sessions are run separately and build on existing knowledge.



Standardized modules improve learning outcomes: module structure is standardized to facilitate learning in-company. In each module a business case study presents a real life-situation for participants to reflect on and discuss with other group members. By discussing the case, students learn from others' ideas and perspectives, and develop an understanding of the topic at hand within the workplace with the support of a logical framework.



Enhance skills adoption at the workplace: at the end of each training module, participants should be able to articulate how the knowledge they gained from the programme makes a difference for themselves at work. Thus, the training modules aim to not only support the acquisition of skills but also the adoption of these critical soft skills in the workplace.

What are the benefits for female workers of combining training and mentoring sessions in-company?

Peer support and mentoring are especially important for women in male-dominated industries, as they lack the guidance and access to role models from which their male counterparts benefit. Through peer support and mentoring programmes, women have advanced in their professional careers, increased access to social networks, and benefited from having female role models in positions of leadership, each of which is essential for changing social norms as well as inspiring women to advance in their professional careers.





**“Jobs are not decent by definition,
They are decent by design”**

Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General

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