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Human resource managers' perceptions of soft skills, involuntary employment turnover,

and the efficacy of a proposed career pathway model

By

Charles Michael Blankenship

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
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for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Community College Leadership
in the Department of Educational Leadership, College of Education

Mississippi State, Mississippi

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Human resource managers' perceptions of soft skills, involuntary employment turnover,

and the efficacy of a proposed career pathway model

By

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The purpose of this study was to conduct qualitative interviews of 10 Human Resource Managers to determine their perceptions of the soft skills necessary for successful employment, to determine the primary causes of involuntary turnover, and to determine their perceptions of the proposed Smart Start Pathway to improve potential employee success and employment retention.

10 businesses located in a 9-county region in central Mississippi were purposively selected to participate in this study. 2 of the businesses were service sector employers, and 8 were manufacturers. Interviews were scheduled with the Human Resource Manager for each business, and the manager was supplied with a copy of the interview questions and a copy of the career pathway curriculum to review. Interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed to determine results.

Human Resource Managers revealed that communication skills and dependability were the most frequently cited soft skills important for employee success; the most frequently cited causes of employee dismissal were attendance, rule violations, and

behavior problem; and finally, the managers interviewed were positive in their perceptions of the efficacy of the proposed career pathways model.

The study showed that soft skills identified by Human Resource Managers and those skills contained in the training modules of the career pathway model are similar. The managers were in agreement that these skills might be better learned and retained at an earlier age than those who will be taking this training to enter the workforce. Additional research is recommended to quantify career pathways program outcomes upon implementation, to determine the causes of employee attendance issues, to determine the practices of employers who demonstrate low turnover rates, and to determine the viability of offering this training as part of the secondary education process.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Sheri Blankenship, and my children, John Michael Blankenship and Madison Blankenship, for their love and support through this often trying but satisfying experience. This dissertation is also dedicated to my mother, Emily Seymer, my stepfather Tom Seymer, my father-in-law, James McPhail, my mother-in-law, Betty McPhail, and in memory of my father, Charles Melvin Blankenship.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On November 5, 2015, Mississippi became the first state in the union to submit a

combined workforce plan to the United States Department of Labor in response to the

new Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (Governor Phil Bryant, 2015). The

workforce plan is the primary document the states provide to the federal government

which outlines how the state will organize the various partner programs listed in the

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA, 2014) and which provides the state's

strategic vision and operations plan for the workforce development system. The

objectives of WIOA include increased planning and cooperation among state agencies

which utilize federal funds to provide workforce services, increased availability of

workforce services to disadvantaged individuals who lack the training and skills

necessary to obtain employment, and increased access to educational pathways which

provide steps to increase levels of education and training and increase the employability

potential of individuals. The WIOA (2014) allows states to submit either a unified plan

or a combined plan. A unified plan consists of only the core functions listed in the

WIOA (2014) which include adult programs, dislocated worker programs, youth

programs, adult basic education programs, Wagner-Peyser Act employment services, and

vocational rehabilitation programs. The WIOA (2014) also lists strategic partnership

programs which include Carl Perkins Act career and technical education programs,

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Trade Adjustment Assistance, Veterans

Unemployment and Training Services, Unemployment Insurance, Supplemental

Nutrition Assistance Program employment and training services conducted under the

Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, work programs conducted under the Food and Nutrition

Act of 2008, Senior Community Services Employment Program services authorized by

the Older Americans Act of 1965, employment and training services conducted under the

Community Development Block Grant funded by Housing and Urban Development,

employment and training services conducted under the Community Services Block Grant

Act, and the Reintegration of Offenders Program under the Second Chance Act of 2007.

A state may submit a combined plan by including the required six core partners and at

least one of the strategic partners. Mississippi's combined plan consists of the core

partners and all 11 of the strategic partners (Mississippi Works, 2015).   In the news

article accompanying the submission of the state plan, Governor Bryant (2015) stated,

"The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act plan we have submitted will improve

Mississippi's existing workforce system by making the entire process more streamlined

for everyone involved," and "by bringing all the relevant state agencies and workforce

stakeholders together during this process we have submitted a plan that will close the

middle-skill job gap and increase workforce participation rates. This will help Mississippi

employers fill openings and also show prospective companies looking to locate in

Mississippi that we are committed to a strong workforce and are open for business"

(Governor Phil Bryant, 2015, para. 2). Submittal of the combined plan includes in the

opening overview section a restating of Governor Bryant's pledge that "every

Mississippian who wants a job should be able to find a job" (Mississippi Works, 2015, p. 1).

The WIOA (2014) was signed into law by President Obama on July 22, 2014. During the signing ceremony President Obama remarked that the new law would create "more partnerships with employers, tools to measure performance, and flexibilities for states and cities to innovate and run their training programs in ways best suited for their particular demographics and particular industries" (The White House, 2014, para. 35). The WIOA (2014) encourages partnerships between employment agencies, training agencies, and employers. This emphasis placed on strong partnerships between public agencies and employers is evident upon review of the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (Mississippi Works, 2015). Echoing President Obama's comments regarding the WIOA allowing for states to tailor the state plan to local demographics and employers' needs, the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (Mississippi Works, 2015) utilized state economic analysis and employer input in the creation of the plan. Mississippi, according to economic analysis data found in the combined plan, has traditionally high unemployment and low workforce participation rates. Employment prospects as shown in the plan are improving due to a recovering economy and a strengthening employer base in Mississippi. The combined plan demonstrates the economic development successes enjoyed by the state over the past decade which include expansions in the automotive industry, aviation industry, and tire manufacturing. However, even with increasing successes in economic development, employers still have problems filling jobs and maintaining a stable workforce. The Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan states "businesses reported needing workers with labor and trade skills and those with basic

work skills (e.g. reading, writing, appropriate workplace conduct). The general consensus among businesses is that employees, across the board, lack core competency skill…" (Mississippi Works, 2015, p. 19). Skills identified by businesses in the combined plan include critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, information technology application, leadership, professionalism/work ethic, and career management. Many of these skills are classified by the literature as soft skills, which "are interpersonal qualities, also known as people skills, and personal attributes that one possesses" (Robles, 2012, p. 453). Mississippi's combined plan does not use the term soft skills in describing this skill set but instead refers to the skills as "necessary skills" (Mississippi Works, 2015, p. 129).

The skills shortages and the problems of finding and keeping employees are not unique to the state of Mississippi as evidenced in reports from the Society of Human Resources Managers. In the Society for Human Resources Managers (SHRM, 2016) Talent Acquisition report many of the same skills identified in Mississippi's combined plan are listed as national skills shortages, and the SHRM report lists one of an organization's greatest challenges as retaining employees.

The Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (Mississippi Works, 2015) establishes the framework by which Mississippi will implement the WIOA. Mississippi has chosen to create career pathways models to increase workforce participation and quality of the workforce in Mississippi. The Mississippi Smart Start Career Pathway will consist of three primary entry points depending upon the individual's needs. Individuals with the most intensive needs, which may include adult basic education services and attainment of a high school equivalency certificate, will be directed into the Smart Class Pathway

(Mississippi Works, 2015). The Smart Class Pathway will provide basic educational skills training and career readiness training including soft skills development training, and upon exit of the Smart Class Pathway the individual will be ready to enter employment or enter into a skills training program (Mississippi Works, 2015). The Career Tech Pathway identified in the combined plan will serve individuals who have sufficient skill and educational level with which to enter into a program at a post-secondary institution with the goal of obtaining a certificate, degree, or industry-recognized credential. The third and final pathway identified in the combined plan is the Work-Ready Pathway which is designed for those individuals who have the skills and education to enter employment directly. In a phone interview with Sandy Crist (S. Crist, personal communication, August 25, 2016), the Director of Adult Basic Education/High School Equivalency for the Mississippi Community College Board, Crist explained that individuals seeking employment who are deficient in basic skills will be required to participate in the Smart Class Pathway. Crist explained that the State of Mississippi had several methods with which to offer basic education and soft skills training including instructor led face-to-face training and online training from American College Testing, Inc. (ACT, Inc.) entitled Career Ready 101. Crist also explained that the new statewide training program would lead to credentials for successful completers including a state issued credential for the Smart Start Career Pathway and the ACT National Career Readiness Credential, which is a series of three tests to assess an individual's level of knowledge in the areas of applied mathematics, reading, and locating information. Implementation of the Smart Start Career Pathway began during the fall of 2016. For the purpose of this study the Smart Class Pathway, which includes adult basic education and

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soft skills training, will be the primary pathway researched although all three of the pathways identified will benefit employers.

Statement of the Problem

The problem was to ascertain the soft skills which employers believe that employees should possess, the primary reasons for involuntary turnover among employees, and employers' perceptions of the Smart Class Pathway as adopted in the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (2015). Mississippi employers have identified in the combined plan that a lack of technical skills, basic skills, and "necessary skills" contributes to the difficulty in finding and retaining employees. Mississippi, through the WIOA, has submitted a plan written with the input of both public and private sector entities with which to address the shortcomings of the current and future workforce of the state of Mississippi. The combined state plan utilized surveys, data from the Mississippi Development Authority, and a focus group of businesses to determine the needs of the business community in Mississippi regarding the soft, or "necessary," skills needed for employment (Mississippi Works, 2015, p. 18). Raw data and instrumentation were not included in the published plan. The problems to be addressed by the proposed research study will be to attempt to determine the soft skills that organizations perceive to be most important for their organization, to determine if a lack of soft skills in employees contributes to involuntary turnover, and to determine the perceptions of the efficacy of the proposed Smart Start Career Pathway to improve employee recruitment and retention.

A primary objective of the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan is to increase workforce participation rates in the state. Currently, the workforce participation rate is 55.2% (Mississippi Works, 2015). Almost half of the population of Mississippi,

according to the combined plan, available to work are not working, but jobs are available and are going unfilled. In order for the state economy to grow, more of the population must become employed, and to become employed, citizens must develop the skills that will make them employable. The Mississippi WIOA combined plan provides a path to improve workforce participation through structured career pathways including skills development in both technical and soft skills.

Purpose

The purpose of the proposed study was to perform a qualitative study utilizing structured interviews of 10 human resources managers of various service and manufacturing firms to determine the soft skills employers perceive to be most important to their organization, to determine if a lack of these soft skills contributes to involuntary turnover, and to determine the employers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the proposed model of soft skills training to be utilized in Mississippi. Determination of soft skill sets, reasons for involuntary employee turnover, and employer perceptions will be vital to the successful implementation of a training program which is designed theoretically to improve the soft skills and employment retention of individuals. Positive employer perceptions of the effectiveness of the program will potentially lead to more employer utilization of the program.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. Which specific soft skills are important for an individual to possess to be a successful employee?

2. What are the primary causes of involuntary turnover of employees in an organization?

3. To what extent does the proposed Smart Class Pathway program improve employee preparedness and retention?

Definition of Terms

1. Career Pathway: According to the Career Ladders Project, a career pathway is defined as "a series of structured and connected education programs and support services that enable students…to advance over time to better jobs and higher levels of education and training" (Career Ladders Project, 2013, p. 1). In the combined WIOA plan multiple entry and exit points are defined for the career pathways model (Mississippi Works, 2015).

2. Involuntary Turnover: According to Bluedorn (1978), involuntary turnover is an involuntary employment separation initiated by someone other than the individual. For the purpose of this study, involuntary turnover will be defined as employment termination of an individual initiated by the employer.

3. Soft Skills: Robles (2012, p. 453) defines soft skills as "interpersonal qualities, also known as people skills, and personal attributes that one possesses." The combined plan uses the term necessary skills to replace the term soft skills.

Overview of Methods

The researcher performed a qualitative study consisting of structured interviews with 10 human resources managers working for a variety of businesses located within a nine county community college district in central Mississippi. Manufacturing, according

to the State Workforce Investment Board electronic data portal (EDATA PORTAL, n.d.) is the largest employer in the region with service industries such as retail trade, food service, healthcare, and other service providers, therefore manufacturing and service sector employers were chosen for this study. Managers from manufacturing firms and service firms provided a cross section of employers in order to provide as broad a base of research as possible without the possible bias which might occur if only one type of business was utilized. Firms selected were large enough to have a human resources manager on staff. Open-ended questions were utilized during the interview, interviews were tape recorded, and responses were transcribed and checked for accuracy. The researcher personally conducted each interview to ensure that question delivery and follow-up questions were consistent throughout the interview process. Data from the interview transcripts were summarized in charts, and quotes from interviews were included to support findings.

In order to assess the managers' perceptions regarding the Smart Start Career Pathways model, which was not fully implemented in the state at the time of the study, a syllabus and curriculum outline were sent via email to the selected managers. They were given a week to review the curriculum and syllabus prior to the interview.

Delimitations of the Study

This study was conducted utilizing employers from only one community college district consisting of nine counties. Ten businesses known to the researcher to employ a Human Resource Manager were chosen as participants. The research was conducted at the business location utilizing a structured interview schedule created to elicit responses from the interviewees regarding the soft skills necessary for employment, the causes of involuntary turnover, and the interviewees' perceptions of the career pathway model chosen by the state of Mississippi.

Significance of the Study

Mississippi has traditionally demonstrated higher unemployment and lower labor participation rates than national averages as has been shown in the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (Mississippi Works, 2015). The combined plan has also shown that educational attainment rates and poor employability skills create barriers to employment. Career pathways programs, which include employability skills and technical skills, being adopted by the state of Mississippi are avenues that individuals can take to enter the workforce and achieve gainful employment. In order for this to occur, the skills related in training must be applicable to the needs of the businesses which will be employing the individuals. If skill gaps exist between the career pathway model and the needs of hiring managers, it is imperative that those gaps be noted and addressed in order for program outcomes to meet the expectations of increasing workforce participation rates. This study provides data to demonstrate if the skills identified in the combined plan match those skills that managers perceive as necessary for initial employment as well as employment retention. The study also provides insights into the major reasons for involuntary

turnover as well as the perceptions of the Human Resource Managers regarding the proposed pathway model.

Organization of the Study

In this introductory chapter, the researcher has shown that the state of Mississippi has responded to the requirements of the WIOA (2014) by creating a combined state plan in order to deliver federally funded workforce development services to individuals in an effort to increase employment and workforce participation rates. The career pathways model adopted by the state in the combined plan has been introduced and the methodology for conducting the research in this study was outlined. Chapter Two will provide a review of the literature related to soft skills, employment turnover, and career pathways. Chapter Three provides a detailed overview of the methodology utilized to collect and analyze data. Chapter Four presents the results, and Chapter Five will provide the conclusions, discussion, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of literature was performed to determine the extent of research

conducted on the subjects of soft skills and involuntary turnover. The results of the

review will be summarized in the following chapter to include theoretical definitions of

softs skills, types of skills considered in the research to be soft skills, those individuals

considered by research to require soft skills training, the problems associated with a lack

of soft skills, and research on the methods of teaching soft skills. Theories and research

involving voluntary and involuntary turnover will be described, and the costs of

employment turnover will be discussed. Finally the literature review will conclude with

current discussions of career pathways.

Soft Skills

Definitions of Soft Skills

A review of the literature produces a plethora of articles related to soft skills;

however, the definitions of soft skills cluster closely together. Robles (2012), in a study

on executive perceptions of the soft skills needed for the current workforce, defined soft

skills as "interpersonal qualities, also known as people skills, and personal attributes that

one possesses" (p. 453). Pandey and Pandey (2015) state that "soft skills are a cluster of

personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness and

optimism…" (p. 74). Prodanovic (2014) states that soft skills "define human

interpersonal relationships" (p. 7). The consensus among researchers is that soft skills are those skills which help people interact and relate with one another.

Robles (2012) conducted research to establish a list of soft skills executives looked for in new employees. As a follow-up to a business communication class Robles mailed letters and surveys to 90 business executives who participated in the class assignment. The survey asked the executives to list the top 10 soft skills that they perceived as most important for a person to possess. Robles received 49 responses listing a combined total of 517 skills. Robles coded the responses into similar themes and terms and assigned a Likert-type scale to the top 10 skills listed. To determine relative importance between the top 10 skills, Robles sent the list to 182 executives, receiving 57 responses, and found that business executives determined that "integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic" (p. 456) were the most important for an individual to possess in order to be successful.

The list of soft skills changes among researchers depending upon the individual and job category being examined. A comprehensive list of all soft skills may be impossible to create due to the variables involved. In an effort to simplify the listing of skills, Ciappei and Cinque created a taxonomy for soft skills rather than list each skill (as cited in Succi, 2015). The taxonomy Ciappei and Cinque established put soft skills into four categories which included politics, strategy, organization, and ethics.

Problems Associated with a Lack of Soft Skills

A common theme among research articles on soft skills is the difficulty employers face in finding qualified individuals. A report from the SHRM (2015) states that the most

common skills lacking in college graduates are soft skills. Cobo (2013) posits that modern educational entities are not providing sufficient training in soft skills. Cobo further states that "these [soft] skills are now fundamental for a broader sector of the population…as well as for a growing segment of the workforce" (p. 82).

Rao (2015) conducted a research study at a university in south Florida to determine the perceptions of students regarding the skills that would make them employable. The author selected 18 college students and two career counselors to take part in the study which involved individual interviews and observations. Findings indicate that students believed that they would be more marketable to employers if they possessed work skills such as critical thinking and teamwork. Rao also stated that colleges should continually monitor employer demands and partner with employers to provide opportunities for students to learn workplace skills. Skills needed by college graduates were the focus of a study by Eisner (2010) as well. Eisner performed a literature review, a data analysis, and a qualitative pilot study in order to determine the workplace skills that college graduates needed. The author utilized data from a number of sources including the Occupational Information Network, Collegegrad.com, Careerbuilder.com, the Collegiate Employment Research Institute and other sources to determine skills lacking in college graduates. The qualitative pilot study was conducted to validate findings from the data and literature. Eisner stated that 17 respondents provided data on the skills that most college graduates lack which included communication, teamwork, and work ethic. Rao (2015) and Eisner (2010) were both studies conducted in the United States of America; however, a lack of soft skills is a global problem. Dabke (2015) performed a study in India in which 60 management

students were placed in internships. Each intern was assigned an industry mentor. The author created a survey questionnaire utilizing the top 10 soft skills which Robles (2012) developed from research. Dabke (2015) expanded on Robles' work to determine if the interns' soft skills affected the mentors' perception of the intern's effectiveness and employability. The author found that both perceived effectiveness and employability were associated positively with soft skills possessed by the intern. The author stated that "[a]cademic institutions should take cognizance of the fact that soft skills are highly valued by practitioners and recruiters and invest appropriately in training and sharpening the students' soft skills" (p. 36).

A lack of soft skills creates problems internally within organizations. Hollenbeck and Jamieson (2015), in an article discussing social network analysis within organizations, posit that soft skills, specifically poor communication skills, can negatively impact teams. Eisner (2010) demonstrates in her study of college graduates that insufficient soft skills were a common cause of employment termination. Eisner (2010) provided data from the College Employment Research Institute which surveyed employers to determine qualities employers expected in new college graduates. The survey results showed that the qualities expected by employers and lacking in college graduates are those skills typically defined as soft skills such as communication, teamwork, work ethic, and critical thinking.

Published research shows that a lack of soft skills can negatively affect both businesses and individuals. Businesses cannot find qualified employees, and employees may lose their employment due to a lack of these important interpersonal skills. A lack of soft skills may in fact influence an individual's earning potential and limit job choice.

Borghans, Ter Weel, and Weinberg (2014) published an article outlining a mathematical model which seeks to quantify the labor-market outcomes of people skills. The authors propose a mathematical model and then utilize data from the United States, Great Britain, and Germany to test the model. The authors specifically looked at underrepresented groups such as women and minorities. The authors propose that a lack of people skills may limit labor-market outcomes such as employment and wages. The authors define people skills as "the ability to effectively interact with or handle interactions with people…" (Borghans et al., 2014, p. 289). Interpersonal skills have already been used to define soft skills. The authors posit that although people skills are important, economists have done little to quantify the importance for individual outcomes, but state that their model provides a "first step in this direction, developing a unified model to understand the labor-market consequences of people skills and demonstrating the relationship between people skills and labor-market outcomes" (Borghans et al., 2014, p. 320).

Who Needs Soft Skills Training

The bulk of the literature addresses a lack of soft skills among recent college graduates, notably Cobo (2013), Rao (2015), and Eisner (2010); however, reflection upon the nature of business organizations and the interaction of people at all levels within the organization would require all levels of employees to possess these skills. ACT in their 2015 report on the Condition of College and Career Readiness states that one of the skill sets which will be important for students to possess if they are to be considered college and career ready are behavioral skills which include "interpersonal, self-regulatory, and task-related behaviors…" (ACT, Inc., 2015, p. 3). The literature contains interesting perspectives regarding the necessity of soft skills training for physicians and executives

(Lazarus, 2013), dentistry students (Quieng, Lim, & Lucas, 2015), and management interns (Dabke, 2015); however, the literature contains little information regarding soft skills as they relate to high school graduates, high school equivalency recipients, and community college graduates who are entering the workforce.

Teaching Soft Skills

As the literature review has demonstrated, soft skills are important for individuals to possess in order to be successful in obtaining and maintaining employment. The literature has also demonstrated that soft skills are important at all levels of the workplace. The important point to determine if skills are lacking in a population is if those skills can be taught. There are conflicting views in the literature regarding the effectiveness of soft skills training. Kyllonen (2013) states that, based upon research, successful programs exist that teach soft skills, and the author further posits that the importance of soft skills will increase research into new programs to provide training for these skills. Mishra (2014) states that soft skills "cannot be taught like hard skills, and soft skills have a subjective orientation and therefore it is difficult to quantify, measure, and observe" (p. 51). Pandey and Pandey (2015) believe that soft skills may be learned but posit that training should be "experiential and highly interactive" which "ingrains skills and attributes…over a period of time" (p. 74). Smith (2014) states that training programs should include problem-based situations to enable students to use higher order skills such as critical thinking. Adams (2014) states that soft skills training programs should include strategies that "empower learners to take ownership of their own learning soft-skills development" (pp. 18-19).

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Technology has become pervasive in modern society, and in the education arena online learning has become a popular method of delivery. The soft skills modules in the proposed career pathway model in the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (Mississippi Works, 2015) can be delivered in an online format. Tadimeti (2014) cautions against relying solely on e-learning for soft skills delivery by stating that the "opportunities to practice soft skills require access to real people" (p. 42). However, Adams (2014) posits that the realities of time constraints in the modern era create the necessity to deliver training quickly and cost effectively. Online learning provides access to training when it is convenient for the organization and individual. Adams (2014) reviewed published research to provide a foundation for the ideas proposed in creating effective soft skills programs, and proposed that effective soft skills program development involved careful content selection that encouraged soft skill development, that programs should provide the opportunity for learners to "take ownership of their own development" (p. 9), and that learners should be rewarded appropriately. Adams (2014) points to research to demonstrate that soft skills cannot be taught like technical skills, but instead should include an "open-ended approach to content creation that enables learners to navigate content in their own way to meet their own learning needs" (p. 10).

The research supports the premise that soft skills can be taught. The research also demonstrates successfully that there is a need for these skills to be taught. Kivunja (2014) states that soft skills are so necessary that they should be considered "an essential component of the new learning paradigm" (p. 9). The literature discusses training programs that have been successful (Kyllonen, 2013), but these programs do not seem to be prevalent. Businesses state that they need these skills; however, Fisher and Martin

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(2000) state that businesses have been reluctant to enter into training programs for these skill sets. The literature contains little to no information regarding large scale efforts to address shortcomings in soft skills. A state wide effort to provide soft skills training as described in the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (Mississippi Works, 2015) will be a new opportunity for research.

Employee Turnover

A review of the literature involving employee turnover demonstrates that the primary focus of researchers involve the elements leading to voluntary employment turnover, rather than involuntary turnover, which according to Bluedorn (1978) are voluntary employment terminations initiated by the individual. Much of the research involving turnover in employment references work done by William Mobley in linking job satisfaction with voluntary employment turnover (Mobley, 1977). Mobley proposed a model of the steps, or linkages, that an employee considered between experiencing job dissatisfaction and deciding to leave or stay. Mobley (1977) proposed that the steps in the process could be skipped altogether due to impulsive behavior or possible outside influences that were not job related.

Mobley (1977) states that:

The model being described is heuristic rather than descriptive. There may well be individual differences in the number and sequence of steps in the withdrawal decision process, in the degree to which the process is conscious, and as noted earlier in the degree to which the act of quitting is impulsive rather than based on a subjectively rational decision process. (p. 239)

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Lee (1988) tested Mobley's (1977) intermediate linkages model at a large western United States financial institution. Lee (1988) surveyed 40% of the 14,000 employees and received responses from 445. Lee (1988) expanded Mobley's (1977) model by substituting job satisfaction with organizational commitment and job involvement. Lee (1988) states that the results support Mobley's (1977) intermediate linkages model and that "[w]hen other job attitudes were substituted for satisfaction the model was generally sustained" (p. 271). Lee (1988) states that "data suggest that it is appropriate to consider the Mobley (1977) model as a valid and robust linkage between job attitudes in general and employee turnover" (p. 271). Wittmer, Shepard, and Martin (2014) conducted research based upon Mobley's (1977) intermediate linkages by surveying employees at a 90 store retail food chain located in the Midwestern United States. Employees were separated into six group categories to test for differences between groups (Wittmer et al., 2014). The authors found that "job satisfaction typically predicted turnover intentions for most employees" (p. 811). Lee and Rwigema (2005) performed a study based upon Mobley's (1977) work to determine how employees' decisions changed over time noting Mobley's (1977) theory that turnover was a dynamic process. Lee and Rwigema (2005) provided questionnaires to 108 white collar professionals from South Africa of which 53 had left their jobs and 58 had remained at their jobs. Lee and Rwigema (2005) sought with the questionnaires to determine satisfaction levels over different periods of time to determine differences between those who left employment and those who remained. The authors found that the attitudes and satisfaction leading to decisions to stay or leave occurred over a period of time and that measures of satisfaction taken at a single period in time were unreliable (Lee & Rwigema, 2005).

Mobley's (1977) model demonstrates the decision process people utilize to leave their employment. Wittmer et al. (2014) demonstrate that there are dissatisfied individuals who remain at their place of employment. In order to determine why people remain at a place of employment Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, and Erez (2001) proposed a theory of "job embeddedness" (p. 1102). The authors stated that "job embeddedness" can be described "as like a net or web in which an individual can become stuck" (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1104). The authors listed the components of job embeddedness as the links people have to other people and activities, the fit between their job and community, and the strength of those linkages which the authors refer to as what the employee is willing to sacrifice (Mitchell et al., 2001). The authors performed a study to test the job embeddedness construct by surveying two groups known to experience high turnover rates which included a grocery store chain that employed 700 individuals and a community based hospital which employed 500 individuals. The authors found that "people who are embedded in their jobs have less intent to leave and do not leave as readily as those who are not embedded" (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1116). The authors also state that "[j]ob embeddedness also goes beyond a combination of measures of the perceived desirability and ease of movement (job satisfaction, organizational commitment and job alternatives, job search) in predicting turnover" (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1116).

Gender issues in employment turnover were the focus of a study by Wilkins and Wooden (2013) regarding involuntary turnover in which the researchers wished to determine why men were more likely to lose their jobs than women. The researchers examined data from the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia database

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from 2001 to 2009. Initial data analysis showed higher rates of involuntary job loss for men; however, when controls for industry and occupation were utilized, the differences between involuntary job loss between men and women were not significant. The authors found that jobs such as construction and manufacturing that experienced high turnover rates employed fewer women than men; whereas jobs in education and healthcare fields that have lower turnover rates employed fewer men. Ertas (2015) researched turnover intentions between younger and older workers in government employment. The author utilized data from the Federal Employees Viewpoint Survey during April and May 2011, and 266,000 employees responded to the survey. The author found that younger workers were more likely to state a desire to leave their jobs. Ertas (2015) states that "the odds of turnover intention for Millennials were about 5 times as large as the odds for an older employee after controlling for all other factors…" (p. 413). Ertas (2015) also found that for both age groups, increases in job and pay satisfaction decreased turnover intentions. Ertas's results reflect aspects of both voluntary turnover models proposed in the literature review. Increases in job satisfaction and pay satisfaction decreasing turnover intentions points to Mobley's (1977) linkages whereas younger workers having higher rates of turnover intentions could reflect that they are less embedded in their jobs as demonstrated by Mitchell et al. (2001).

The literature contains little research regarding involuntary turnover. Bluedorn (1978) states that "involuntary separations have been ignored as a topic of study" (p. 650). Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, and Gupta (1998) state that involuntary turnover "reflects a bad hiring decision that must be corrected" (p. 513). Stumpf and Dawley (1981) performed a study of bank tellers during the 1970's in which they correlated a

relationship between voluntary and involuntary turnover and job performance and absenteeism. The researchers examined absenteeism and performance evaluation data on bank tellers at a large metropolitan bank between 1970 and 1976. Stumpf and Dawley (1981) found that absenteeism and performance were indicators of both voluntary and involuntary turnover. Monks and Pizer (1998) performed a trend analysis on voluntary and involuntary turnover to determine if job security was declining; however, their study only involved rates of turnover and included no data on causation. Shaw et al. (1998) performed a study of the trucking industry where organizational-level turnover was studied. Specifically the researchers sought to determine if human resource management practices predicted turnover and to determine if there were links between human resource management practices and voluntary and involuntary turnover rates. The researchers mailed a 24-page questionnaire to 1,072 trucking companies and received 227 completed responses (Shaw et al., 1998). Shaw et al. (1998) found that "[s]taffing practices predicted discharge rates" (p. 521). Shaw et al. (1998) also state that their "results suggest that the use of valid selection techniques, combined with a favorable (low) selection ratio, reduces discharge rates" (p. 521). The selection ratio referenced by Shaw et al. (1998) refers to "how choosy an organization is in hiring employees. Choosy organizations presumably select the best of the crop" (p. 514). The study performed by Shaw et al. (1998) was conducted for the trucking industry and may not be generalizable to other industry sectors. Eisner (2010), during a research study involving workplace skills of recent college graduates, showed that the top reasons employers cited for employment termination include soft skills. Based upon the literature review, gaps exist

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in the literature regarding research into involuntary turnover. The most recent study by Eisner (2010) was limited to recent college graduates.

There is a cost associated with employee turnover. Shaw et al. (1998) state that "the costs of incorrect hiring decisions have been estimated to be high" (p. 514). Both voluntary and involuntary turnover create costs to the company. Karsan (2007) states that "[t]he cost to the company is made up of both direct costs that are easily measurable and indirect costs that may not be as easy to gauge precisely" (p. 33).   Karsan (2007) states that of the types of turnover, involuntary turnover should cost the company less because the company should have a plan in place prior to terminating the employee. However, a need to terminate employment could be unforeseen and sudden which would increase the cost of the turnover incident. Karsan (2007) stated in his article that companies can utilize online worksheets to calculate turnover costs. One of the online calculators can be accessed on the SHRM website see: (*www.shrm.org*, 2014). The turnover worksheet provides a step-by-step fill in the blank interface to calculate many of the same costs referenced in Karsan (2007), which include separation costs, vacancy costs, replacement costs, and training costs. Karsan (2007) states "[t]he total cost and impact associated with an employee who leaves the company can be quite high, and development of a good hiring-retention program can be significantly more important than most companies realize" (p. 35). Whether turnover is voluntary or involuntary it is important to realize that there is a cost associated with that turnover event.

Career Pathways

Career pathways as defined in the introductory section are relatively new concepts in workforce development. In fact a search of the literature reveals very little research on career pathways. The WIOA (2014) is the first federal legislation which mandates a concerted effort to create such pathways. The Career Pathways Toolkit (United States Department of Labor, 2015) states the "WIOA requires states and localities to collaborate with adult education, postsecondary education, and other partners – to establish career pathways systems that make it easier for all Americans to attain the skills and credentials needed for jobs in their regional economy" (p. 5). Prior to the enactment of the WIOA career pathways were utilized, but they were not mandated nor widespread. According to the Career Pathways Toolkit (United States Department of Labor, 2015) "[c]areer pathways programs are designed to serve a diverse group of learners to include: adults, youth, dislocated workers, veterans, individuals with a disability, public assistance recipients new immigrants, English language learners, and justice-involved individuals" and that the "WIOA now codifies the essential elements of career pathways into law" (p. 6). Mississippi was the first state to submit a state plan to the federal government to address the requirements of the WIOA, and the state plan when fully implemented will provide a statewide career pathways model.

Alssid et al. (2005) contend that the "global economy has intensified effort by governments to increase the education level of their workforces," and that "[t]raditionally education has been one way out of poverty for the unemployed and working poor…" (p. 83). Jurmo (2011) states that "significant populations of youth and adults are not 'work ready'" because "[t]hey lack the basic skills, occupational knowledge, credentials,

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support systems, and other assets that are needed to attain, retain, succeed in, and advance in emerging jobs" (p. 171). For individuals without basic education, technical skill, and in today's workplace the soft skills necessary for employment, a pathway out of poverty seems to be unobtainable. Alssid et al. (2005) state that "[a]lthough there are many career pathway models, the most compelling builds a bridge for disadvantaged adults to economic self-sufficiency" (p. 85). Alssid et al. (2005) further state that "[w]here the state makes the resources available and local entities work with the community colleges, career pathways constitute a real and powerful opportunity to move economically disadvantaged individuals in well-paying careers" (p. 85). Much of the published information concerning career pathways located in the literature review predates the passage of the WIOA of 2014 and the Act's codification of the elements of a career pathway model. Mississippi will begin implementation of the state plan in the fall of 2016 as the first state in the nation to do so which will provide opportunities to conduct research on the effectiveness of a career pathways model as defined by the WIOA of 2014.

Summary of Literature Review

The literature was reviewed to determine the extent of research which has been conducted on soft skills in the workplace, involuntary turnover, and career pathways. The literature was reviewed to determine how soft skills are defined, how they are taught, and how a lack of soft skills can create problems in the workforce. The literature shows that definitions of soft skills are similar across the various research studies, that lists of skills vary from study to study, and that a lack of soft skills creates problems in the workplace. The research predominately focused on recent college graduates, leaving

notable gaps in the research regarding other groups of employees such as lower skill, hourly employees. Involuntary turnover is not well represented in the research either. The predominant amount of research has focused on voluntary turnover decisions, which are those decisions initiated by the employee. Finally the literature was reviewed to determine the extent of research conducted on career pathways.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to conduct a qualitative study utilizing structured interviews of 10 human resource managers to determine the soft skills employers determine are necessary for employees of their organizations to possess, the primary reasons for involuntary turnover for the organizations, and the employers' perceptions of the proposed Smart Start Career Pathways model, specifically the Smart Class Pathway, as adopted in the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (Mississippi Works, 2015). To accomplish the purpose of this study an interview guide consisting of 18 questions was utilized to collect data for the stated research questions. This chapter will outline the method that was used to conduct the study and include a discussion of the research design, the participants, the sample, instruments utilized to collect data, the process of collecting data, and the method of analyzing the data. As the career pathway model was not fully implemented at the time of the study, a copy of the syllabus and curriculum was provided to each human resource manager to be interviewed. These were provided a week prior to the interview in order for the interviewee to review the materials and reflect upon them.

Research Design

In order to fully explore the employer perceptions of skill sets and efficacy of the career pathway model to be implemented, a qualitative research design was utilized.

Structured interviews of human resource managers were conducted. Soft skill delineations as shown in the literature review vary widely and are described differently based upon the individual's definition and experience, and the investigator wished to determine if soft skills contribute to involuntary turnover. The Smart Start Career Pathway was not implemented fully at the time this research was conducted thereby eliminating the possibility of collecting quantifiable data. A qualitative study allowed the researcher to determine as stated by Merriam (2009) "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 23). The researcher wished to understand from the human resource managers perspective the soft skill sets needed to be successful in their organizations, what causes employees to lose their jobs (involuntary turnover), and the human resource managers' perceptions about the career pathways model the state is implementing.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Which specific soft skills are important for an individual to possess to be a successful employee?

2. What are the primary causes of involuntary turnover of employees in an organization?

3. To what extent does the proposed Smart Start Career Pathway program improve employee preparedness and retention?

Research Site

This research study was conducted within a nine-county region located in central Mississippi. According to data gathered from the State Workforce Investment Board (SWIB) electronic data portal (EDATA PORTAL, n.d.) the region has a total population of 226,160. The southernmost county in the region is the only metropolitan county, with the remaining counties being primarily rural. Data taken from the SWIB electronic data portal show that the demographics for the counties reflect a population that is 52% white and 44% African American with 49% males and 51% females. The poverty rate for the region is 22.4%, workforce participation rate is 58%, and the per capita income is shown to be $19,272. However, when the metropolitan county is removed from the average, the eight rural counties show a poverty rate of almost 30%, a workforce participation rate of 50.5%, and a per capita income of only $17,390. When reviewed separately, the metropolitan county has a poverty rate of 13.1%, a workforce participation rate of 67%, and a per capita income of $34,330, which is one of the highest in Mississippi. These demographic profiles show that the region is very diverse. Employment in the region, according to a sector analysis done utilizing the SWIB electronic data portal (EDATA PORTAL, n.d.), is primarily in manufacturing and retail trade. Manufacturing, according to the report (EDATA PORTAL, n.d.), provides the highest earnings per worker.

Participants

The population to be studied included businesses known to employ a Human Resource Manager and located within a nine-county community college district in central Mississippi. Ten businesses were selected to participate in this study. The businesses to be studied included manufacturers and service sector employers.

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research utilizes a non-probability sampling technique called purposive sampling. This sampling method "is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). The local community college provided workforce development training to approximately 70 businesses in 2016 which met the criteria for selection for this study and were located within the nine-county region, and the businesses for this study were selected from among this group. Fifteen businesses were contacted in order to get the 10 for the study. The businesses were contacted by the researcher and permission letters were signed to allow the researcher to perform the structured interviews of their Human Resource Manager at their place of business. The Human Resource Manager at each of the chosen facilities was contacted by the researcher to schedule an interview date and time. A copy of the interview questions and a copy of the Smart Start Pathway curriculum was provided to each of the Human Resource Managers for their review approximately one week prior to the scheduled interviews. Before the interview began, the researcher provided the Human Resource Manager with an informed consent document, and the Human Resource Manager was informed that the interview would be electronically recorded and was assured that identifying information would be removed from the interview transcripts. Identifying information such as company names, individual names, and electronic recordings were destroyed upon completion and verification of the interview transcription process.

Instrumentation

Interview questions were created based upon the literature to elicit responses that identified soft skills important for successful employment, causes of involuntary turnover, and the effectiveness of the proposed Smart Start Career Pathway program. Interview questions were created by the researcher. They were provided to a subject matter expert from the Mississippi Community College Board, to a subject matter expert at the Mississippi State Workforce Investment Board, and to a Human Resources Manager not affiliated with the study for review prior to the conduct of the research to determine if the questions posed were valid and applicable. Feedback was received from the Human Resources Manager and the Mississippi Community College Board. Based upon the comments from both individuals, the interview guide was utilized as written. No changes were made. The interview guide consisted of 18 questions. A structured interview guide was utilized by the researcher to ensure that each participant in the research study was asked the same series of questions. A copy of the structured interview guide is included in the appendix for review. Table 1 contains information linking each interview question to the research questions guiding this study.

Table 1

Research questions and supporting interview questions

Research Question	Supporting Interview Questions
Which specific soft skills are important for an individual to possess to be a successful employee?	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 12
What are the primary causes of involuntary turnover of employees in an organization?	5, 6, 7, 8
Will the proposed Smart Start Career Pathway program improve employee preparedness and retention?	14, 15, 16, 17, 18
Questions added to collect additional information	9, 11, 13

Data Collection

The human resource manager at each chosen employer was interviewed by the researcher at their place of business. This allowed the interviewee to have ready access to any materials which he or she required to complete the interview. Interviews were conducted personally by the researcher in order to ensure that question delivery and follow-up questions were consistent. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed by the researcher for accuracy.

Data Analysis

According to Merriam (2009), "all qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative" (p. 175). Interview transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher to determine if the data support or refute the research questions posed by this study. Due to the small sample size of this study, data were reviewed manually by the researcher. The responses were analyzed for emergent themes. Responses were coded and organized for frequency.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The participants for this study consisted of businesses engaged in manufacturing and service delivery located within a nine-county community college district in central Mississippi. The total number of employees for the 10 companies chosen was 9,906, and data from the Mississippi Department of Employment Security for November of 2016 show that the nine counties comprising this study has a total civilian labor force of 99,460 (Mississippi Department of Employment Security, n.d.). Based upon these data, the companies chosen employ 9.96% of the civilian labor force of the nine-county region. Turnover data collected for the 10 companies averaged 16.9% per year for involuntary turnover. Five of the companies reported that they utilize a temporary to permanent practice for recruiting new employees in which a staffing agency hires new entry level employees who work as temporary employees for a period of time before, or if, they are hired as full time employees of the company for which they serve as temporary labor. Three of the five companies hiring temporary workers reported turnover percentages for the temporary workers, which averaged 102.7%. As can be seen the turnover rate for temporary workers is drastically higher than full-time employees. On average the companies recruit new entry level employees from a distance of 38.5 miles. Managers were asked to provide the top three entry level jobs for their companies. Table 2 below

provides the data for entry level positions and provides an overview of the companies

which were selected for this study.

Table 2

Company type, number of employees, turnover, and entry-level jobs

Company	Type of Company	Number of Employees	Turnover Percentage	Entry Level Jobs
Company A	Manufacturer/ Distribution	388	16% full time 240% temporary	Order Processor Sorter Shipping/ Receiving
Company B	Manufacturer	100	15% full time 48% temporary	Machine Operator
Company C	Service Provider/ Staffing	242	20% full time	General Laborer Production Technician Inspector
Company D	Manufacturer	6000	14% full time Temporary not reported	Production Technician
Company E	Manufacturer	101	10% full time 20% temporary	Assembly Operator
Company F	Service Provider/Retail, Construction	1500	7% full time	Retail Sales Associate Customer Service Call Center Construction Technician
Company G	Manufacturer	160	6.5% full time Temporary not reported	Operator Technician
Company H	Manufacturer	1000	25% full time	Production Technician
Company I	Manufacturer	225	5% full time	Welder Material Handler
Company J	Manufacturer	190	50% full time	Production Technician

Note: Turnover percentage reported for both full time and temporary workers if temporary workers are utilized by the company.

Data were collected to determine the minimum qualifications for entry level positions shown in Table 2. With the exception of the welder position with company I, the companies required a minimum of a high school diploma or high school equivalency. Company I requires a welding certification for entry level welders. Company D prefers three years of production related experience in addition to the educational requirements. All companies interviewed also hire skilled labor such as industrial maintenance technicians and professional positions which require college degrees such as managers, accountants, and engineers.

Two of the companies interviewed have structured pre-employment programs for new employees. Company D and company F both require individuals to complete a pre-employment program before beginning work. Both programs teach work-related technical skills, and the program for company F teaches some customer relations skills. Company I requires individuals to achieve a silver level on the ACT, Inc. Work Readiness Assessment before consideration for employment.

Results for Research Question One

Research Question 1: Which specific soft skills are important for an individual to possess to be a successful employee?

The opening question, asked of all 10 Human Resource Managers, regarded their definition of soft skills. All 10 managers stated variations of the same answer that soft skills were interpersonal skills, which closely matches the definition used for this research study. The Human Resource Manager for company J stated that soft skills meant "[b]eing able to get along with people." The Human Resource Manager for company F defined soft skills as "their character traits, interpersonal skills, and just

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overall their personal attributes that they've acquired over the years." The manager at company G simply stated that "[s]oft skills to me means your people skills." These definitions match those found in the literature. During the interview process Human Resource Managers were asked to identify the soft skills which they determined to be important for an individual to possess in order to be successful in their organizations. Interview transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher to determine which soft skills were identified by the Human Resource Managers. A list of the skills identified was created and the frequency for each response was determined. Table 3 shows the list of soft skills identified by the Human Resource Managers and the frequency for each response.

Table 3

Soft skills identified and frequency of response

Soft Skill	Frequency
Communication	7
Dependability	5
Attitude	4
Interpersonal Skill	4
Comprehension	3
Empathy	2
Teamwork	2
Work Ethic	2
Character	1
Cooperation	1
Integrity	1
Self-Motivation	1

Communication was the soft skill identified most frequently as being important for success on the job. The Human Resource Manager for Company D stated "[y]ou've got to be able to communicate with people, communicate your needs. You have to be able to communicate and give feedback on your product, if you're getting what you need or if you need to do something different." The Human Resource Manager for Company C when addressing the question of which soft skills are important for success stated "good communication is key." The Human Resource Manager at Company G stated in

regards to the importance of communication skills that "understanding..the ability to interpret instructions, understanding of direction" is very important to productivity and safety, and employees must be "able to read, understand, [and] comprehend the instructions given as it relates to the operation and the performance of the job duties." The Human Resource Manager at Company F expands on the necessary communication skills by stating that in addition to speaking and writing "the listening skills [and] nonverbal communication…[is] very important for those frontline employees."

The second most frequently cited soft skill was dependability. Most Human Resource Managers who cited dependability referenced problems of attendance and punctuality as defining characteristics of a lack of dependability. The Human Resource Manager at company B stated "[w]e're looking at attendance. We're looking at punctuality….because if they're not here and they're not dependable, it affects their team members and that in turn affects how they communicate and work with and get along with others…" The Human Resource Manager from company I further defines dependability by stating that dependability refers to the "willingness to do the job, come to work every day, being able to be given instructions and trust that they will follow through with them."

The remainder of the soft skills listed in Table 3 were listed as being important for success in the businesses interviewed, but these skills were simply listed and discussed less than communication and dependability.

A number of workplace problems due to a lack of soft skills were noted by the managers interviewed. Productivity problems, customer relations problems, and interpersonal issues within the business were all noted as problems due to a lack of soft

skills. The manager at company D states that productivity problems occur due to a lack of soft skills because "you get things done through people….if we just did it though machines, they don't care how we speak to them or don't care what language you use." The Human Resource Manager at company F states that a lack of soft skills makes it "difficult for them to interact with customers, because it's not always the nice pleasant experience." Specifically the manager at company F stated that the lack of "the listening skills, the empathy, nonverbal communication, [and] not understanding what all that means" created problems with customer relations. The Human Resource Manager at company H states that interpersonal problems on the shop floor such as "impatience and shortness of temper and just intolerance" were problems related to a lack of soft skills.

As shown in this section, all of the managers define soft skills similarly and relate the importance of these skills; however, only one company has an in-house training program to provide soft skills training to their employees. Company D has a 1-day program that the Human Resource Manager referred to as "essential skills" which was utilized as a soft skills development program; however, it was not mandatory training for all employees. The Human Resource Manager at company B stated that the company had tried a soft skills development program for their employees by experienced little success with the program stating that after training "behavior did not change at all." The managers all agreed that possession of these skills is important, but based upon the data little effort is done to provide training at the organizations interviewed.

Research Question 2: What are the Primary Causes of Involuntary Turnover of

Employees in an Organization?

Human Resource Managers during the course of the interview were asked for the

primary reasons for involuntary turnover, which for the purpose of this research study

was defined as the termination of employment of an individual initiated by the employer.

Interview transcripts were reviewed to determine the causes of involuntary turnover.

Table 4 lists the reasons given by Human Resource Managers and the frequency of

response.

Table 4

Causes of involuntary turnover and frequency of response

Cause of Involuntary Turnover	Frequency
Attendance	10
Rule Violation	6
Behavior	3
Integrity	2
Job Performance	2

Employee attendance was the primary cause of employment termination given by

Human Resource Managers in 9 of the 10 interviews. The Human Resource Manager

who did not list attendance as the primary cause named it as the second highest

contributor to employment termination. The Human Resource Manager from Company I

states "[t]he biggest problem we have and the biggest problem I've had in 40 years of doing this all over the south has been the [attendance] issue. People coming to work when they're supposed to and on time." The Human Resource Manager for company C states that "[f]irst and foremost, attendance is always a big problem." A review of the transcripts clearly demonstrates that attendance is the most frequent cause of involuntary turnover.

The remaining causes of involuntary turnover as stated by several Human Resource Managers are minor contributors to involuntary turnover. Rule violation was the second most noted cause of involuntary turnover and consisted primarily of safety violations and abuse of cellphone use policy while on the job. The Human Resource Manager for company D, which was one of the largest companies interviewed, stated that "attendance is number one. There are no other major [causes], maybe conduct, but they're such a small percentage. It's clearly attendance."

Human Resource Managers were asked to describe the primary causes of voluntary turnover, which are turnover decisions initiated by the employee. The predominant reason given by the managers was that employees chose to leave for better pay and benefits. The Human Resource Manager for company F stated that during exit interviews a predominant cause of voluntary turnover was that new employees used the job as a "stepping stone" to gain experience and move to higher paying employment. One company had employees choose to leave because the company manufactures a product that is not widely in demand, and the employees who left felt insecure about the future of the company. Only two companies stated that retirement was a leading cause of

voluntary turnover; however, the number of retirees for these two companies consisted of five employees.

Table 2 in the introduction to this section provided information about the sector, number of employers, turnover percentages, and entry level jobs reported by the interviewees. Of note is the fact that turnover rates vary widely among the companies even within the same sector types. Manufacturing sector turnover ranges from a high of 50% to a low of 5%. The service sector employers demonstrated turnover rates of 20% and 25%. The Human Resource Manager for company I, which has a turnover rate of 5%, stated that he tried to make it difficult for individuals to achieve employment with the company; however, once an individual was employed the company "work[s] hard to try to keep people." The Human Resource Manager at Company J, which experiences a 50% turnover rate, when asked why the turnover rate was high stated that "it's a hard job. It's not a pleasant job." The Human Resource Manager for company F, a service sector employer with employees working in retail sales, call center operations, and construction, stated that at a turnover rate of 25% the company was a "leader in our industry." When asked why the turnover rate was lower at company F, the Human Resource Manager stated that "first is a really strong screening process" and "second…we compensate folks very fairly, and our benefit package is outstanding."

Research Question Three

Research Question 3: To what extent does the Proposed Smart Class Pathway

Program Improve Employee Preparedness and Retention?

As part of the requirements of the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (Mississippi Works, 2015) a career pathway model will be utilized to provide skills training to

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increase workforce participation rates. One of the goals of this research project was to determine how Human Resource Managers who are engaged in the recruiting and hiring process perceived the Smart Start Pathway model which the state of Mississippi is implementing. Human Resource Managers were asked during the course of the interview about their perceptions regarding the impact on potential applicants, current employees, recruiting, and retention. Overall the perceptions of the managers were positive. Nine out of ten managers responded favorably with one Human Resource Manager from company B stating "[i]n terms of our production workers, there's certain things I don't really think will make a difference." Most Human Resource Managers responded positively to the proposed pathway model. Company A's Human Resource Manager stated that the pathway model would "get them a step ahead, especially if they never learned anything because this is what employers look for." The Human Resource Manager for company C stated that "if they go through this program and they retain it and they apply it, …it will definitely impact the workforce, because it will give them the necessary soft skills that they would need…and it would help with retention too." The Human Resource Manager for company I stated that the pathway model "[l]ooks to me like the greatest thing since sliced bread, frankly," and that the program "really ought to be pushed as hard as it can everywhere."

Summary of Results

The results show that the Human Resource Managers determined that soft skills were interpersonal skills, which matched the definition set for this research study. Communication and dependability were the most frequently cited soft skills noted by the managers as required for an employee to be successful. A lack of soft skills created

several problems in the workplace. Managers noted that a lack of soft skills created productivity problems, customer relations problems, and interpersonal problems amongst employees. Although these skills are important, the companies interviewed do not have a structured training program in place to develop those skills in their current employees.

Involuntary turnover was found to be due primarily to attendance problems. Nine of the 10 managers interviewed stated that absenteeism was the number one reason for employees to lose their jobs. Rule violations and behavior problems were the next most frequently cited reasons for employment termination. Voluntary turnover was most frequently a result of employees leaving for better pay and benefits.

The Human Resource Managers were positive in their perceptions of the Smart Class Pathway which is being implemented in Mississippi. Only one manager responded negatively about their perception of soft skills training programs which was based upon a negative experience with a prior training program that was utilized by the company for which the manager worked. The managers expressed that the soft skills training program, if successful, could help to improve prospective employees' preparedness and improve retention.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this research study was to determine the soft skills that Human

Resource Managers determine to be important for successful employees, the primary

causes of involuntary turnover, and the Human Resource Managers' perceptions of the

proposed career pathway model to improve employment preparedness and retention.

This chapter will summarize the findings, present conclusions based upon those findings,

and provide possible topics for future research.

Summary of Findings and Conclusions

Research Question One

Research question one addressed the soft skills which Human Resource Managers

determined to be important for success as an employee with their organization. Interview

transcripts were analyzed, soft skills identified were recorded as identified, and frequency

of response was recorded. Communication skill was the most frequently cited soft skill.

The frequency of response shown in Table 3 was taken directly from the transcripts of the

ten interviews. Robles (2012) combined the like-themed soft skills when defining the top

10 soft skills executives look for in new hires; however, no attempt was made on the part

of the researcher to combine like-themed soft skills in the report of results. Several of the

skills listed by the various Human Resource Managers could be combined. Robles

(2012) describes the characteristics of a person with a strong work ethic as being

hardworking, willing to work, loyal, self-motivated and having good attendance. In

Table 3 self-motivation, dependability, and work ethic could arguably be combined into

one category based upon the traits identified by Robles (2012). Attitude, character, and

integrity are aspects of an individual which could be combined into the heading of

character. However, the list was portrayed as related in the interviews with the intent to

demonstrate the skills the Human Resource Managers related as important to them. The

researcher chose to portray the list as determined from the interview data rather than

combine like themes.

The Smart Start Pathway chosen as part of the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan

(Mississippi Works, 2015) contains training modules to address soft skills, or as noted in

the plan "necessary skills" (p. 129). In order for the pathway to be effective those skill

sets should match those identified by Human Resource Managers. Table 5 shows the

skills identified by Human Resource Managers and the soft skills contained in the career

pathway model.

Table 5

Soft skills identified and soft skills in Smart Start Pathway

Soft Skills Identified by Human Resource Managers	Soft Skills in Smart Start Pathway
Communication	Problem-solving
Dependability	Teamwork
Attitude	Communication Skills
Interpersonal Skill	Goal Setting/Time Management
Comprehension	Professional Image
Empathy	Role of Employer and Employee
Teamwork	Financial Awareness and Life Skills
Work Ethic	Personality Profile
Character	
Cooperation	
Integrity	
Self-Motivation	

Note: Soft Skills in Smart Start Pathway comes from the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (2015, p. 129).

As shown in Table 5 the soft skills identified as being important to Human Resource Managers are clearly contained in the modules to be offered as part of the Smart Start Pathway. The Human Resource Managers' opinion of the importance of these skills can best be summarized by the Human Resource Manager for company A who stated that a lack of soft skills "interferes with your opportunity to be employed

successfully." Table 6 demonstrates how the Smart Start Pathway Skills align with the soft skills listed as important by the Human Resource Managers.

Table 6

Soft skills in Smart Start Pathway alignment with skills identified as important

Soft Skills in Smart Start Pathway	Soft Skills Identified by Human Resource Managers
Problem-solving	
Teamwork	Teamwork Cooperation
Communication Skills	Communication Interpersonal Skill
Goal Setting/Time Management	
Professional Image	
Role of Employer and Employee	Dependability Work Ethic Integrity Self- motivation
Financial Awareness and Life Skills	
Personality Profile	
Difficult to Categorize	Attitude Character Comprehension Empathy

Note: Soft Skills in Smart Start Pathway comes from the Mississippi WIOA Combined Plan (2015, p. 129).

As can be seen in Table 6 soft skills that the Human Resource Managers identified as important to employee success align with the training modules provided within the Smart Start Pathway Curriculum. The soft skills identified which are personal

character traits such as attitude, character, and empathy are difficult to categorize and are listed as such, as is comprehension.

Research Question Two

Research question two sought to determine the major causes for employees to lose their jobs. The research shows that employee attendance was the number one reason for employment termination. Nine out of the 10 managers interviewed listed attendance as the number one cause of termination, and the one manager who did not list attendance first listed it as the second largest cause of turnover. Rule violations including policy violations and safety violations were the second leading cause of involuntary turnover. Three managers stated behavioral problems such as workplace violence were reasons for termination, two managers stated that integrity issues were primary causes for people to lose their jobs, and two managers stated that job performance issues which included product quality and an inability to learn the job were issues that led to involuntary turnover. All of the stated reasons could reflect a lack of soft skills. Work ethic as defined by Robles (2012) included a component of attendance and punctuality; however, poor attendance could also reflect a lack of job satisfaction or job fit. The Human Resource Manager at company J stated that she was aware of "people that have grown up in a household that didn't have an alarm clock because nobody in that house ever had to get up and be anywhere," which could point to a lack of a developed work ethic. People who have lived in an environment that does not evince a strong work ethic may not have developed the soft skills that drive them to come to work every day, or to be at work on time. Additional research is needed to determine the causes of attendance problems. The causes of involuntary turnover stated during the interviews are very similar to the causes

noted by Eisner (2010) which included unethical behavior, lack of motivation and a work ethic, failure to follow instructions, and attendance. The Smart Start Pathway will provide soft skills training modules which might possibly improve employment retention. Upon implementation additional research will be needed to determine if the soft skills development improves employment retention.

One data point that varied from business to business was turnover rate. Several businesses evidenced high turnover rates while others were very low. For those businesses with low turnover rates the organization tended to reflect the findings of Shaw et al. (1998) in which the researchers found that "choosy" (p. 514) organizations experienced lower turnover rates. The Human Resource Manager for company I, a manufacturer which has a low turnover rate, reflects the finding of Shaw et al. (1998) by stating that "one of my purposes in life was to make it hard to get a job here." The Human Resource Manager for company A states that in the initial interview and tour "I try to scare them off." Lower turnover rates were noted for businesses that had a tough selection process. Further research is recommended to determine the factors that influence turnover rates for hourly employees.

Research Question Three

Interview data showed that 9 of the 10 Human Resource Managers had favorable perceptions of the proposed career pathway model. One manager who was not positive about the program had attempted to provide soft skills training to her current workforce with limited success. The majority of the managers interviewed agreed the proposed pathway training model could enhance the soft skill levels of future and current

employees, and the majority thought that the skill development might reduce involuntary turnover.

A recurring theme that emerged during the interview process was the timing of soft skills training. All 10 of the Human Resource Managers interviewed thought that soft skills training should be done at a younger age than the state career pathway model is targeting. The model adopted by the state and administered by the community colleges will target those individuals who are over the age of 18 and seeking to enter the workforce. The Human Resource Manager from company B stated that soft skills development "starts with parents raising their children to respect and to obey." The Human Resource Manager for company I stated that softs skills "ought to be taught in the junior or senior year of high school." The Human Resource Manager at company D stated that soft skills should be learned "when they learn to talk." Currently the soft skills training program outlined in the Smart Start Pathway is limited to individuals who are over the age of 18 and entering the workforce. Based upon the comments of the managers interviewed, application of this program at the secondary education level might be of some importance. Further research should be conducted to determine if this is feasible.

Limitations

Participant businesses were selected using non-random, purposive sampling; therefore, the results of this research are not generalizable to other areas or businesses. The Smart Start Pathway has not been fully implemented in the state making quantifiable data unavailable. The businesses chosen for the sample were diverse and included

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manufacturing and service delivery; however, other employers not included in the study might require a slightly different set of skills in order for an employee to be successful.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Policymakers

This research has shown that people require soft skills to be successful employees, that the lack of soft skills create numerous problems in the workplace, and that those problems created by a lack of skills add costs to businesses through productivity losses, customer relations problems, and turnover. Therefore, it is important to implement fully the Smart Start Pathway which includes training on these skills which are essential to employee success. Based upon comments from the Human Resource Managers interviewed during the course of this research, these training programs should be made available to individuals at a much younger age. Providing this type of training to younger individuals may promote increased skill retention and application. The career readiness and soft skills training is currently only available to individuals in the Smart Class Pathway, but based upon the comments of managers, this soft skills training should be made available to all individuals wishing to enter the workforce.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has provided four primary ideas for additional research which are listed below.

1. Upon implementation of the Smart Start Pathway, quantifiable data should be collected to determine the effectiveness of the model to reduce turnover and increase retention.

2. The primary causes of employee attendance problems should be studied in order to address the primary cause of involuntary turnover as related by the managers interviewed.

3. Research should be conducted to determine the practices of those employers who evince low employee turnover rates.

4. Research should be conducted regarding the application of the Smart Start Pathway model to secondary education students.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

DATE: November 22, 2016

TO: Charles Blankenship, Educational Leadership

FROM: Jodi Roberts, HRPP Officer, MSU HRPP

PROTOCOL TITLE: Human resource managers' perceptions of soft skills, involuntary employment turnover, and the

efficacy of a proposed career pathway model

PROTOCOL NUMBER: IRB-16-532

Approval Date: November 22, 2016 Expiration Date: February 01, 2017

This letter is your record of the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) approval of this study as exempt.

On November 22, 2016, the Mississippi State University Human Research Protection Program approved this study as exempt from federal regulations pertaining to the

protection of human research participants. The application qualified for exempt review under CFR 46.101(b)(2).

Exempt studies are subject to the ethical principles articulated in the Belmont Report, found at www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/#

If you propose to modify your study, you must receive approval from the HRPP prior to implementing any changes. The HRPP may review the exempt status at that

time and request an amendment to your application as non-exempt research.

In order to protect the confidentiality of research participants, we encourage you to destroy private information which can be linked to the identities of individuals as

soon as it is reasonable to do so.

The MSU IRB approval for this project will expire on February 01, 2017. If you expect your project to continue beyond this date, you must submit an application for

renewal of this HRPP approval. HRPP approval must be maintained for the entire term of your project. Please notify the HRPP when your study is complete. Upon

notification, we will close our files pertaining to your study.

If you have any questions relating to the protection of human research participants, please contact the HRPP by phone at 325.3994 or email irb@research.msstate.edu.

We wish you success in carrying out your research project.

Jodi Roberts

Review Type: EXEMPT

   IRB Number: IORG0000467

APPENDIX B

STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you define the term soft skills?
2. In your organization which soft skills are important for an individual to possess in order to be successful?
3. What training programs do you provide your employees to address soft skills?
4. How do you think soft skills are learned? And when should they be learned?
5. What problems do a lack of soft skills cause for your organization?
6. What is the typical turnover rate for employees in your organization? Of that rate how many are terminations of employment?
7. If your company conducts exit interviews, what are the typical reasons for voluntary turnover?
8. What are the top 3 reasons you see in your organization for employment termination?
9. What are your organization's top 3 entry level jobs?
10. What are your minimum job requirements for entry level jobs? Education level and experience?
11. Typically how far do the majority of your employees commute to work each day?
12. Please describe any pre-employment training and assessment utilized by your organization.
13. What methods does your organization currently utilize to recruit new employees?
14. Based upon your review of the course syllabus and content of the Smart Start Career Pathway Model, how will this program impact your organization?
15. How do you think this program will impact prospective applicants?
16. How do you think this program will impact your current workforce?
17. How would a program such as the Smart Start Career Pathways Model impact your current hiring practices?
18. Upon implementation how would you think the Smart Start Career Pathway Model would impact your involuntary turnover