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Soft skills and digital practices in the business and education sectors

Habilidades blandas y prácticas digitales laborales en los sectores empresarial y educativo

Habilidades socioemocionais (soft skills) e práticas digitais de trabalho nos setores empresarial e educacional

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Abstract

Introduction: Soft skills, proven to be relevant in business, acquire a renewed role in contemporary contexts of digitalization, where their application becomes necessary. **Objective:** To describe the perceived levels of soft skills and digital practices among workers in the business and educational sectors within the context of the digital Ecuadorian economy. **Methodology:** A quantitative approach, with a non-experimental, descriptive design. The sample includes 845 individuals from the economically active population, selected through convenience sampling: 305 from the educational sector, and 540 from the business sector. A Likert-type questionnaire with 27 items was used to analyze the variables. IBM SPSS software was employed, using frequencies, percentages, and box plots for analysis. **Results:** It was highlighted that more than 78% of the respondents reported high levels in skills such as communication, leadership, and adaptability. Additionally, nearly 83% demonstrated strengths in teamwork and empathy. Regarding the use of digital tools, higher levels were observed in perceptions of utility, and usage purpose. **Discussion:** A balanced relationship between soft skills and digital practices shows that workers from both sectors are sustainably adapting to the digital economy, which requires strengthening training that integrates both dimensions. **Conclusions:** The development of the digital economy in Ecuador depends on the strengthening of soft skills, and the implementation of technology; an interaction that improves employability, productivity, and sustainability

Keywords: sotio-emotional skills; digital competency; digital practices; digital economy; enterprise administration.
JEL: I21; J24; L86; M53; O33

Resumen

Introducción: Las habilidades blandas, de relevancia comprobada en la empresa, adquieren un papel renovado en los actuales contextos de digitalización, donde su aplicación resulta necesaria**. Objetivo:** Describir los niveles de habilidades blandas y prácticas digitales percibidas por trabajadores de los sectores empresarial y educativo en el contexto de la economía digital ecuatoriana**. Metodología:** Enfoque cuantitativo, con diseño no experimental, transversal y de tipo descriptivo. La muestra incluyó a 845 personas de la población económicamente activa, seleccionadas por conveniencia, 305 del sector educativo y 540 del empresarial. Se utilizó un cuestionario con 27 ítems tipo Likert para analizar las variables. Se empleó el software IBM SPSS, recurriendo a frecuencias, porcentajes y diagramas de caja. **Resultado:** Se destaca que más del 78% de los encuestados reportó altos niveles en habilidades como comunicación, liderazgo y adaptabilidad. Además, cerca del 83% mostró fortalezas en el trabajo en equipo y la empatía. En cuanto al uso de herramientas digitales, se observaron altos niveles en la percepción de utilidad y propósito del uso. **Discusión:** La relación equilibrada entre habilidades blandas y prácticas digitales evidencia que los trabajadores de ambos sectores se están adaptando de manera sostenida a la economía digital, lo que exige fortalecer la formación que integre ambas dimensiones. **Conclusiones:** El desarrollo de la economía digital en Ecuador depende del fortalecimiento de habilidades blandas, también de la incorporación de tecnologías; interacción que mejora la empleabilidad, la productividad y la sostenibilidad.

Palabras clave: competencias socioemocionales; competencia digital; prácticas digitales; economía digital; administración de empresas.

JEL: I21; J24; L86; M53; O33

Resumo

Introdução: As competências sociais, de relevância comprovada nas empresas, assumem um papel renovado nos atuais contextos de digitalização, onde a sua aplicação é necessária. **Objetivo**: Descrever os níveis de competências sociais e práticas digitais percebidos pelos trabalhadores dos setores empresarial e educativo no contexto da economia digital equatoriana. **Metodologia**: Abordagem quantitativa, com desenho não experimental, transversal e descritivo. A amostra incluiu 845 pessoas da população economicamente ativa, selecionadas por conveniência, 305 do setor educacional e 540 do empresarial. Utilizou-se um questionário com 27 itens do tipo Likert para analisar as variáveis. Foi utilizado o software IBM SPSS, recorrendo a frequências, percentagens e diagramas de caixa. **Resultado**: Destaca-

se que mais de 78% dos inquiridos relataram níveis elevados em competências como comunicação, liderança e adaptabilidade. Além disso, cerca de 83% mostraram pontos fortes no trabalho em equipa e na empatia. Quanto ao uso de ferramentas digitais, observaram-se altos níveis na percepção de utilidade e propósito do uso. **Discussão**: A relação equilibrada entre competências sociais e práticas digitais evidencia que os trabalhadores de ambos os setores estão a adaptar-se de forma sustentada à economia digital, o que exige o reforço da formação que integra ambas as dimensões. **Conclusões**: O desenvolvimento da economia digital no Equador depende do reforço das competências sociais, bem como da incorporação de tecnologias; interação que melhora a empregabilidade, a produtividade e a sustentabilidade.

Palavras-chave: competências socioemocionais; competência digital; práticas digitais; economia digital; administração de empresas.
JEL: I21; J24; L86; M53; O33

Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have made significant inroads into all aspects of modern society, transforming everyday activities such as communication, entertainment, and even work environments, giving rise to the development of a digitalized economy that relies on the use of technological tools for its transactions (Cueva & Sánchez, 2025, Espina et al., 2025). The technological incursion has also forced organizations to develop capabilities focused on sustainable innovation, where the integration of technologies and strategic alliances are positioned as key factors for maintaining business competitiveness (Pérez, 2025). In this dynamic, artificial intelligence has progressively been incorporated as a central axis for the optimization of business processes. (López et al., 2024).

From the previous scenario, the importance that these technological elements have acquired in the business context is recognized, as they are linked to higher operational efficiency indicators and even increases in employee productivity (Díaz et al., 2025; Puentes et al., 2024; Ruiz et al., 2024). However, it is important to note that they also require individuals to possess greater technical skills to ensure proper management in emerging work environments. In other words, the organization must begin to cultivate and preserve its

intellectual capital as a strategic management element (Restrepo et al., 2024; Valbuena & Pico, 2024).

Likewise, several studies have shown that soft skills such as positive attitudes, kindness, teamwork, self-motivation, resilience, and effective communication, as well as other personality traits that determine interpersonal relationships, have a direct influence on management, performance, and business efficiency (Cimatti, 2016; Frolli et al., 2022). This has led to their recognition as a strategic factor in organizational management, as these skills complement technical abilities, promote the integration of multidisciplinary teams, and enable adaptation to the demands of a constantly changing labor market (Intriago et al., 2025; Ventura et al., 2024).

The transition to a digitalized economy cannot be explained solely by the incorporation of technological tools into business processes. In this context, human beings are directly involved in the role of collaborators, who must possess the necessary skills to interact and adapt to the constant changes associated with the use of digital technologies. Therefore, it is essential to empirically track how this dynamic (soft skills – digital practices) behaves in different work scenarios. Based on the above, the current research is guided by the following question: In the context of the Ecuadorian digital economy, what is the level of soft skills and digital work practices perceived by workers in the business and education sectors.

Soft skills in organizations

It is important to emphasize that companies are, above all, organizations made up of people, where interaction and communication between employees are fundamental to their functioning. Similarly, the attitudes adopted by staff in critical situations are a key element within this business ecosystem. In this context, resilience becomes a differentiating factor for the company, especially in scenarios of continuous change. Consequently, strong interpersonal relationships promote a stronger organizational climate, which is subsequently reflected in higher levels of productivity and efficiency.

Even in scenarios with high levels of digitalization, the value of an organization is not solely reflected in its tangible and technological assets, but also in the personal and intellectual capabilities of its employees, which together contribute to improving business indicators. In this regard, Zaracho and Aquino (2024) argue that work teams with strong communication

skills and high levels of adaptability to change enhance internal cohesion and efficiency, which leads to goal achievement and improves the perception of job satisfaction (Galván et al., 2024).

Muñoz et al. (2025) also conclude that communication, problem-solving, and teamwork have a positive impact on business performance, viewing these skills from a strategic perspective that contributes to the sustainability of the organization, For their part, Quezada et al. (2025) add that these human skills facilitate problem solving, promote effective communication within the organization, and emphasize that, in the current context where technical skills are increasingly automated, soft skills such as empathy, creativity, resilience, adaptability, and transformational leadership become crucial in decision-making. This aligns with a trend that places greater value on human skills, as they cannot be replicated by machines and are essential for fostering collaboration, innovation, and the ability to overcome challenges.

Digital practices at work as part of the digital economy

In line with the above, digital practices at work refer to the behaviors and knowledge through which workers incorporate technology tools into their activities to solve problems and achieve objectives within the framework of the digital economy (Plaza et al., 2024). In this sense, the use of digital technologies is described as the ability of employers to adopt new devices, software, or digital platforms and leverage their potential to improve company efficiency and productivity (Novoa et al., 2025). For its part, worker autonomy in the use of technologies refers to the level of freedom and confidence that employees have in selecting and using these tools according to the needs that arise (Mendoza, 2025).

According to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), perceived usefulness is described as the value that workers place on the benefits technology brings to improving their performance (González & Valdivia, 2015). When employees have a high perception of a technological or digital tool, they are more likely to fully adopt it, integrating it into their work routines. However, it should be noted that the use of technologies in the company does not guarantee autonomy and creativity in workers; moreover, their positive impact will depend on the strategic and planned use of this resource within the organization (Villa, 2021). In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the effects of the pandemic forced many companies to explore different forms of management based on trust and work autonomy, which suggests a shift toward evaluations that focus more on results than on physical presence.

The incorporation of digital technologies into work environments without a strategy to strengthen human skills can lead to scenarios of low technology adoption, resistance to change, or even a negative impact on the work climate (Galván et al., 2024; Villa, 2021). The true value of digitalization is evident when technical skills interact harmoniously with abilities such as communication, resilience, adaptability, and creativity, as these facilitate the strategic and autonomous use of technologies in work activities (Muñoz et al., 2025; Quezada et al., 2025).

Based on the above, the following objective is proposed: To describe the levels of soft skills and digital practices perceived by workers in the business and education sectors within the context of the Ecuadorian digital economy. To this end, and considering the literature review conducted, soft skills will be analyzed based on five dimensions: interpersonal communication; teamwork; leadership and decision-making; adaptability to change; and empathy and interpersonal relationships. The variable "digital work practices" will be addressed from four dimensions; frequency of use, purpose of use, digital autonomy, and perceived usefulness.

Methodology

To meet the stated objective: describing the levels of soft skills and digital practices perceived by workers in the business and education sectors within the context of the digital economy of Ecuador, a quantitative approach within the positivist paradigm was chosen, based on the empirical measurement of perception of workers. The study design was non-experimental, cross-sectional, and descriptive, which allowed us to observe how participants rated their own soft skills and their use of digital tools in their work environment.

The study population consisted of workers in the education and business sectors in Ecuador, representing the economically active population of the country, which consists of 8.5 million people (National Institute of Statistics and Census, 2024). The sample included 845 people, 305 from the education sector and 540 from the business sector. Non-probability convenience sampling was used, with participants selected based on their accessibility and willingness to respond. This type of sampling does not ensure statistical representativeness of the entire Ecuadorian population; therefore, the results should be interpreted as a descriptive approximation of the analyzed groups.

To collect the information, a structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale was designed. The questionnaire consisted of 27 items divided into two blocks: soft skills (15 items), organized into five dimensions-communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, and empathy with three questions for each dimension; and digital work practices (12 items), grouped into four dimensions: frequency of use, purpose of use, digital autonomy, and perceived usefulness, with three questions per dimension.

The content validity was reviewed by business management specialists, who evaluated the clarity and relevance of each item. To verify the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used, yielding values above 0.90, demonstrating excellent internal consistency (Frías, 2022). The surveys were conducted online, using forms created in Microsoft Forms and distributed digitally. The responses were stored in an institutional database and then analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics.

In the statistical analysis, frequencies and percentages were calculated, classifying the results into three levels (low, medium, and high) according to the possible response ranges. Total scores were also obtained for each variable and visualized using box and whisker plots, which allowed for the identification of central tendencies, dispersion, and outliers. Since the distributions did not show normality, nonparametric tests (median and Mann-Whitney U) were used to compare differences between the education and business sectors. Significance values were reported directly without correction for multiple comparisons. Thanks to this methodological approach, it was possible to describe how Ecuadorian workers in both the educational and business sectors perceive their soft skills and the use of digital tools in their work environment.

Results

Below is a description of the dimensions that comprise soft skills and work practices, differentiating between the business and education sectors. Table 1 shows the proportion of participants in each category (low, medium, and high) corresponding to the five dimensions of soft skills. These levels represent self-reported perception of participants regarding their own competencies. In the five dimensions evaluated, most participants were in the high category of soft skills perception, with proportions exceeding 78% in communication, leadership, and

adaptability, and close to 83% in teamwork and empathy. No significant differences were found between education and business workers, as the percentages remain very close in each dimension.

Table 1

Perception of soft skills, labor sector

Dimension	Category	Education (% / n)	Business (% / n)	Total (% / n)
Communication	Low	8.5% (26)	9.3% (50)	9.0% (76)
	Medium	13.1% (40)	12.4% (67)	12.7% (107)
	High	78.4% (239)	78.3% (423)	78.3% (662)
	Total	305	540	845
Teamwork	Low	8.2% (25)	9.6% (52)	9.1% (77)
	Medium	7.2% (22)	9.4% (51)	8.6% (73)
	High	84.6% (258)	80.9% (437)	82.2% (695)
	Total	305	540	845
Leadership	Low	8.2% (25)	8.1% (44)	8.2% (69)
	Medium	11.8% (36)	12.0% (65)	12.0% (101)
	High	80.0% (244)	79.8% (431)	79.9% (675)
	Total	305	540	845
Adaptability	Low	7.5% (23)	8.0% (43)	7.8% (66)
	Medium	9.8% (30)	12.2% (66)	11.4% (96)
	High	82.6% (252)	79.8% (431)	80.8% (683)
	Total	305	540	845
Empathy	Low	8.2% (25)	8.7% (47)	8.5% (72)
	Medium	8.5% (26)	8.7% (47)	8.6% (73)
	High	83.3% (254)	82.6% (446)	82.8% (700)
	Total	305	540	845

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey conducted in 2025.

Perceptions of digital work practices across the four evaluated dimensions are shown in Table 2. A trend toward the high category was observed in the perception of usefulness and purpose of use, with more than 60% of participants in both sectors. In the case of frequency of

use and digital autonomy, a more balanced distribution between the medium and high levels is observed, reflecting variability in how workers integrate digital tools into their activities. The differences between education and business are minimal, with very similar percentages in each dimension.

Table 2

Perceptions of digital practices by employment sector

Dimension	Category	Education (% / n)	Business (% / n)	Total (% / n)
Frequency of use	Low	9.2% (28)	10.4% (56)	9.9% (84)
	Medium	39.7% (121)	29.8% (161)	33.4% (282)
	High	51.1% (156)	59.8% (323)	56.7% (479)
	Total	305	540	845
Purpose of use	Low	5.9% (18)	6.5% (35)	6.3% (53)
	Medium	36.1% (110)	30.0% (162)	32.2% (272)
	High	58.0% (177)	63.5% (343)	61.5% (520)
	Total	305	540	845
Digital autonomy	Low	8.2% (25)	10.2% (55)	9.5% (80)
	Medium	47.2% (144)	40.4% (218)	42.8% (362)
	High	44.6% (136)	49.4% (267)	47.7% (403)
	Total	305	540	845
Perception of usefulness	Low	4.6% (14)	6.5% (35)	5.8% (49)
	Medium	31.1% (95)	27.0% (146)	28.5% (241)
	High	64.3% (196)	66.5% (359)	65.7% (555)
	Total	305	540	845

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey conducted in 2025.

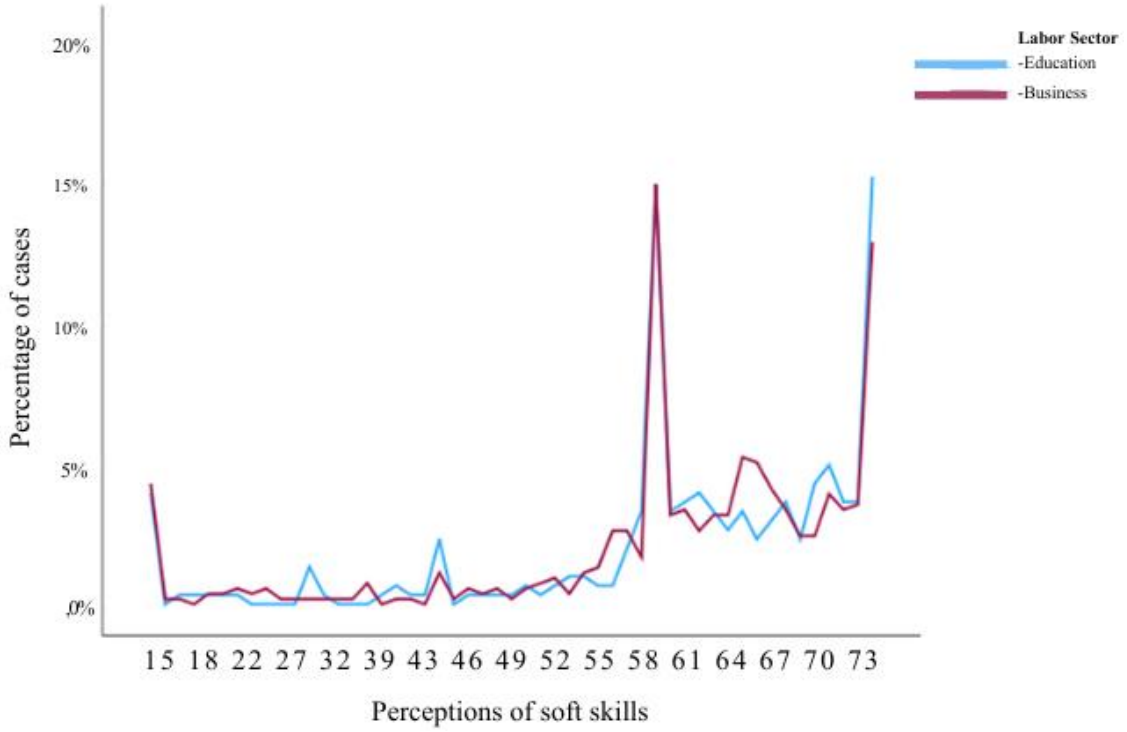
Overall, the results in Tables 1 and 2 show that both soft skills and digital skills are perceived as being at a high level by most participants, regardless of their sector of employment. The general trend indicates positive self-assessment and significant integration of digital skills in both educational and business environments.

Additionally, Figure 1 shows the distribution of soft skills scores for workers in both sectors. The horizontal axis displays the total score for the variable, consisting of 15 items (on

a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree), with a possible range between 15 and 75 points. The vertical axis shows the percentages of cases corresponding to each value. It can be observed that in both education and business, high perceptions of soft skills predominate, with minimal differences. This supports the homogeneity observed in the results of the specific dimensions.

Figure 1

Percentage trend in perceptions of soft skills by employment sector

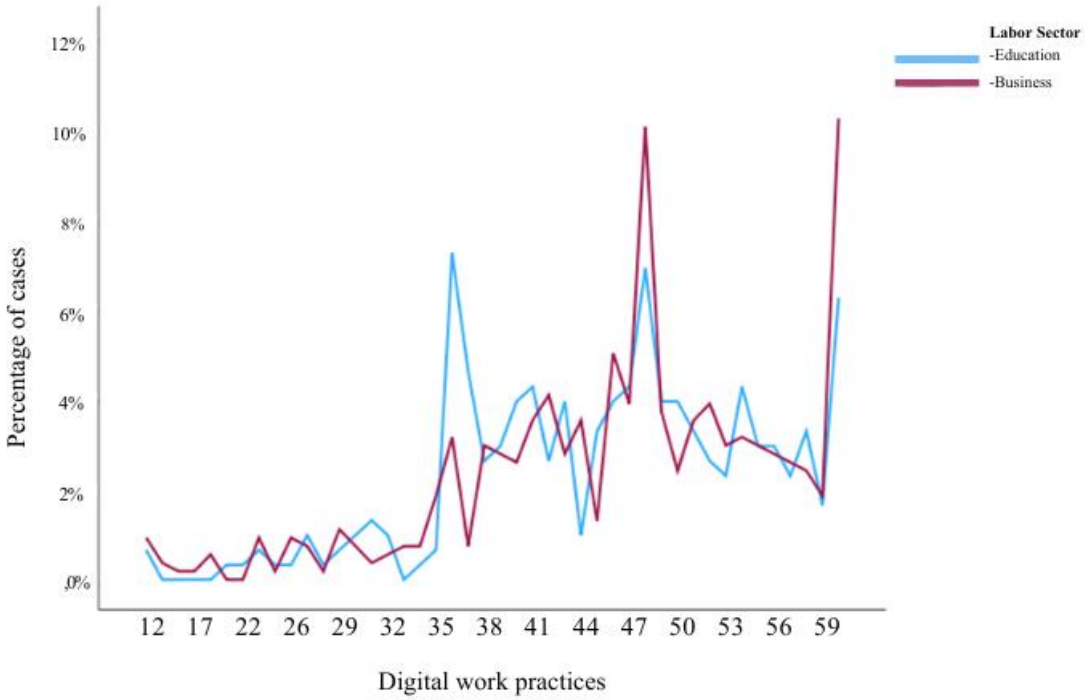


Source: Own elaboration based on the survey conducted in 2025.

Similarly, Figure 2 shows the distribution of total scores in digital work practices, based on 12 items, with a possible range between 12 and 60. The trend reflects a concentration in the middle and high values of the scales, in both the education and business sectors, reflecting consistent integration of digital tools in work activities, with no significant differences between sectors.

Figure 2

Percentage trend in digital work practices by sector

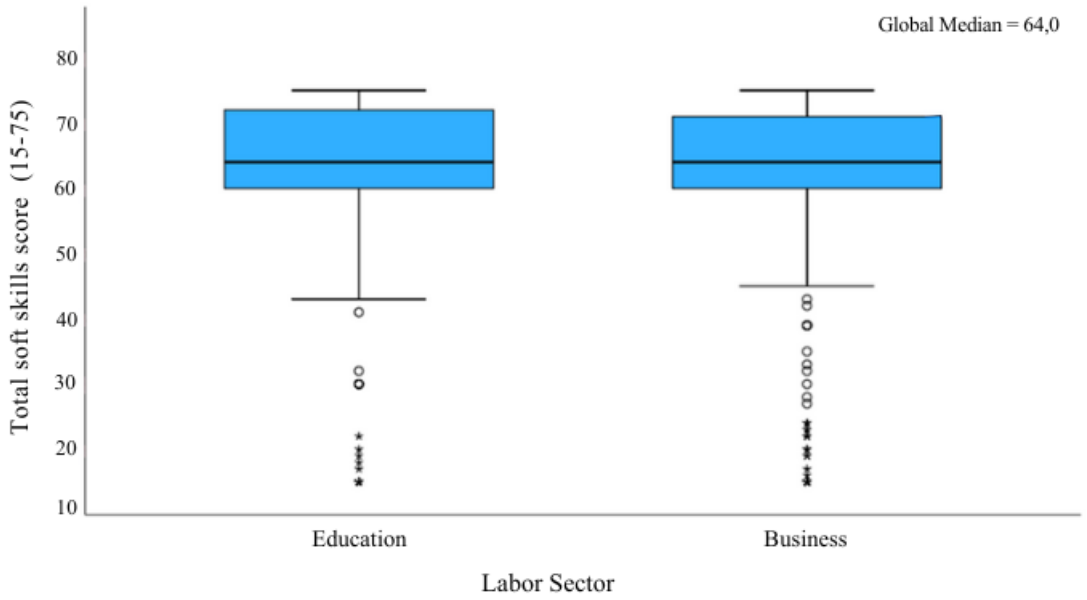


Source: Own elaboration based on de survey applied in 2025.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test confirmed that neither the soft skills variable and the digital practices variable do not follow a normal distribution in any of the sectors analyzed (education and business), as the significance values were less than 0.05 in all cases. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the distribution of total scores using box plots. In both indicators, the medians are high and remain very close between education and business, confirming the similarity observed in the previous analyses. However, the interquartile ranges show that there is moderate variability in the scores, and the presence of extreme values suggests that some participants have low perceptions. This result shows that, while the central tendency points to a high level of soft skills and digital practices, there are workers with gaps in the development of these competencies.

Figure 3

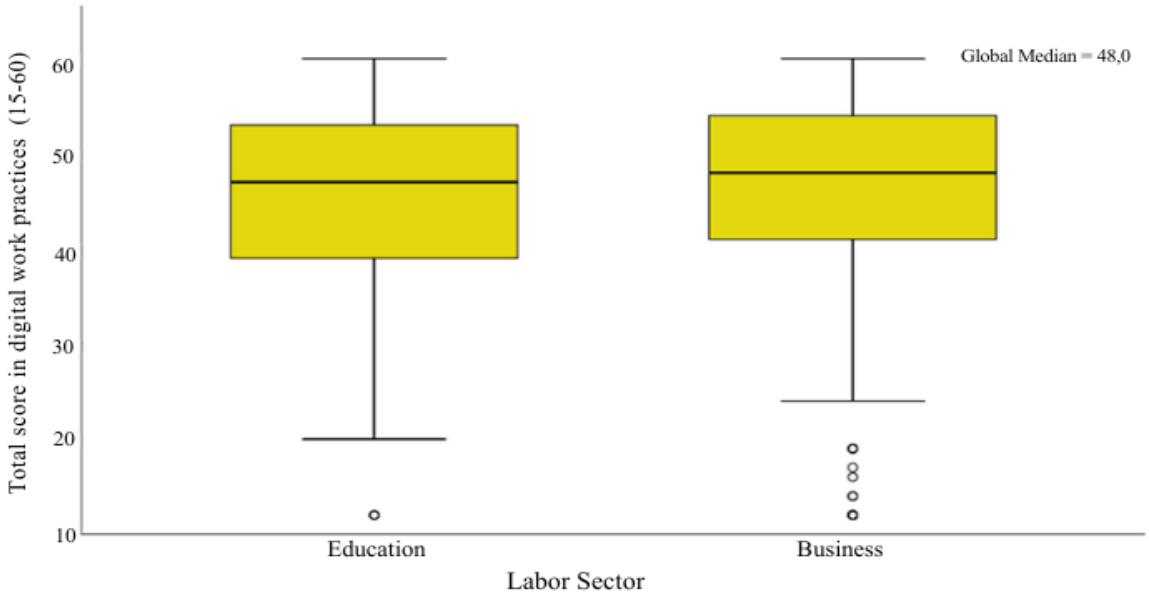
Distribution of total scores in soft skills by the employment sector.



Source: Own elaboration based on the survey applied in 2025.

Figure 4

Distribution of total scores in digital work practices by the labor sector.



Source: Own elaboration based on the survey applied in 2025.

The results show that both soft skills and digital skills are self-assessed at high levels by most workers. The homogeneity observed in the medians and proportions confirms that these competencies are significantly integrated into both work contexts, although the presence of outliers indicates segments with relatively lower development. This snapshot shows a solid foundation of cross-cutting and digital skills in the sample analyzed.

Given that the distributions were not normal, non-parametric tests were applied to compare the differences between sectors. The results of the median and Mann-Whitney U tests confirmed that there are no statistically significant differences in soft skills scores or digital practices between workers in the education and business sectors ($p > .05$ in all cases). Table 3 summarizes these results which show that, regardless of the sector to which they belong, workers perceive similar levels of soft skills development and digital practices implementation, supporting the idea of a homogeneous skills base in the analyzed sample.

Table 3

Results of nonparametric tests to compare soft skills and digital skills by job sector

No	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig.[a,b]	Decision
1	The medians of the total soft skills are the same across labor sector categories.	Median test for independent samples	,935[c]	Retain the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of total soft skills is the same across labor sector categories.	Mann-Whitney U test for independent samples	0,414	Retain the null hypothesis.
3	The medians of the total digital practices are the same across labor sector categories.	Median test for independent samples	,482[c]	Retain the null hypothesis.
4	The distribution of total digital practices is the same across labor sector categories.	Mann-Whitney I test for independent samples	0,083	Retain the null hypothesis.

A. The significance level is .050.

B. The asymptotic significance is shown.

C. Yates' continuity correction for asymptotic significance.

Source: Own elaboration based on the survey applied in 2025.

Discussion

The high levels of soft skills perception revealed by this study, with percentages exceeding 78% in communication, leadership, and adaptability, and around 83% in teamwork and empathy, align with what various studies show about their impact on job performance. For example, Rivera and Cabrera (2025) found a significant correlation (Rho = 0.855) between these competencies and job performance in a local government in Peru, highlighting that soft skills training increases the likelihood of meeting institutional objectives.

Along the same lines, Rodríguez et al. (2025) demonstrated that these skills help public servants create more positive work environments, adapt more easily to change, and resolve conflicts collaboratively and assertively. In the field of education, Ramírez et al. (2025) found correlations greater than 0.75 between soft skills, particularly responsibility, adaptability, and information management, and teaching performance, confirming that these competencies are a cross-cutting component of professional performance.

The findings of this study reveal a high perception of soft skills development, as well as the ongoing integration of digital practices in both education and business. This aligns with recent literature, which highlights the importance of combining both dimensions in the context of the digital economy. Moreno (2025) notes that automation and digitalization are transforming professional profiles, meaning that it is no longer only technical skills that are valued, but also soft skills such as adaptability, leadership, and communication. These qualities were identified as being highly valued in this research.

For their part, Marín and Berrios (2025) agree that current competitiveness demands talent management that integrates both soft skills and digital technologies, as this combination is key to achieving successful job placement and remaining competitive in the market. In the same vein, the Carolina Foundation report (Muñoz et al., 2025) highlights that Latin America still faces structural deficiencies in these capabilities, which hinder progress in productivity and innovation. It also emphasizes that the interaction between digital and socio-emotional skills is essential to improve employability and ensure a more sustainable economy in the region.

The results obtained in Ecuador reveal self-reported high levels of soft skills and digital practices, which align with evidence from other Latin American countries. In this regard, Rivera and Cabrera (2025) in Peru, and Puentes et al. (2024) in Colombia, identify a high self-perception of competencies such as communication and leadership in digitalized work environments. Similarly, Mendoza (2025) points out that in Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina, digital work activities became consolidated after the pandemic, with standards comparable to those in the current study. Overall, it can be observed that Latin American workers are developing a hybrid profile, where socio-emotional skills are positioned as a decisive characteristic for harnessing technological potential at work. This may show a regional trend toward more flexible working models based on autonomy and trust.

Conclusions

The results showed that, in the Ecuadorian context, the digital economy does not rely solely on technology, but also on how soft skills are combined with the everyday use of digital tools. This interaction becomes a crucial foundation for forming a more comprehensive type of labor capital, a finding supported by the homogeneity observed between the education and business sectors in the non-parametric tests applied. This result is related to TAM, given that the high perception of usefulness identified in digital practices helps explain the integration of these tools into daily work in conjunction with soft skills.

Furthermore, the results suggest the need to strengthen training programs and talent management policies that integrate both soft skills and digital competencies. This contributes to the ongoing discussion by showing that combining soft skills with digital competencies is essential to improving job opportunities and ensuring the continuity of organizations amid constant technological change. In this regard, it is proposed that the digital economy be viewed as an ecosystem where the human and the technological are intertwined, and the development of cross-cutting skills makes a competitive difference for individuals and companies.

Given that this was a descriptive study, the conclusions focus solely on the perceptions shared by workers in the education and business sectors themselves, without implying causal relationships or allowing for statistical generalizations. Future research could move toward the design of explanatory or predictive models that consider how soft skills and digital practices

interact to influence productivity, employability, or business innovation, allowing for empirical testing of the relationships proposed by TAM and generating comparative evidence between sectors or regions within the framework of the digital economy.

Ethical considerations

This study did not require approval from an Ethics or Bioethics Committee, as it did not involve the use of living resources, biological agents, or sensitive personal data. The research was based on anonymous surveys administered to individuals over the age of 18, who participated voluntarily, in an informed manner, and without any risk to their physical, psychological, or social integrity. Confidentiality, anonymity of responses, and respect for the ethical principles of scientific research were guaranteed, in accordance with institutional regulations and international recommendations on research ethics.

Conflict of interest

All authors contributed substantially to the manuscript and declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this article.

Author contribution statement

Wilson Manuel Sandoval Aguilar: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal Analysis, Research, Resources, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Visualization, Project Management, Writing: Review and editing.

Fiorella Adelaida Castro Castro: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal Analysis, Research, Resources, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Visualization, Project Management, Redaction: Review and editing.

Jorge Manuel Cueva Estrada: Supervision, Project Management, Redaction: Review and editing, Validation.

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