

**THE ACCOUNTING SPECIALISED STUDENTS' PERCEPTION
ON THE HARD SKILLS AND THE SOFT SKILLS
IN THE ACCOUNTING FIELD**

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Abstract: *The main objective of our research is studying the perception of the accounting specialized students regarding the necessary skills that a candidate should accomplish in order to get a job in the accounting field. Thus, it was undertaken an exploratory study, based on a descriptive transversal type research, using the polls/ questionnaire as the research methodology. In order to set a global conclusion of the questionnaire on could notice that over 50% of the questioned accounting specialized students that work in the accounting field or in a field related to accounting believe that soft skills are more important than hard skills in order to enter the work market in the accounting area. At the opposite side, the accounting specialized students that do not work or work in a field that is not connected to accounting consider the hard skills more important. In order to be performing, the accounting specialized students (the future accounting professionals) must have a strong soft skills background in order to complete the specialized acknowledgement. Combining the hard skills and the soft skills in a harmonious way, they will contribute to the long term organizational success and the accounting profession will be permanently enriched.*

Key words: *students, accounting field, hard skills, soft skills, polls/questionnaire.*

INTRODUCTION

The expectations that employers have from the accounting professionals and from the graduates of curricula specialist who want to work in the accounting field, will be derived from activities that the latter should be able to perform as well as from their roles of creators, mediators, guardians and reporters of sustainable value in order to support and help developing the organization's success.

In the recruitment process, the employer will try to identify the extent to which a candidate applying for a job receives the right mix of knowledge, skills and abilities in order to check if he/she fits or not the position. Many organizations use the concept of skills both in the initial recruitment process, but also during the activity engaged in measuring, improving and continue its development. From the European Commission's point of view, the key skills represent "a transferable multifunctional package of knowledge, skills (abilities) and attitudes that all individuals need for their personal fulfillment and development, social inclusion and employability. These must be developed until the completion of compulsory education and should act as a foundation for further learning as part of lifelong learning. " [11]

Mândruț et. all notes that this definition and analysis of the specific of key skills have the following results: skills are defined by a system of knowledge - abilities - attitudes; trans disciplinary are of default; key skills are somehow educational aims of compulsory education; they must be the basis of lifelong learning. [6]

The key skills have a well-defined representation in the National Education Law no.1 / 2011, which demonstrates that their inclusion represents the maximum referential or educational process. There are careers that require more hard skills and less soft skills. For a person wishing to pursue a career in accounting are equally necessary both hard and soft skills. In order to access the labor market in accounting is required the possession of hard skills which represent an appropriate set of knowledge, skills and other values and attitudes

in order to resolve successfully a certain category of work or learning, circumscribed to accounting profession, in effectively and efficiently work conditions. Hard skills must be completed by soft skills, which are those skills that transcend a particular field or study program, having trans-disciplinary nature.

International Education Standard 3 “Professional Skills and General Education” includes a list of skills that represent capabilities that professional accountants must possess for the activity.[12] This list includes intellectual skills, technical and functional skills, personal skills, interpersonal and communication skills, organizational and business management skills.

Economic specialized literature raises the issue of hard and soft skills to access employment in accounting. Lei Han brings into question some differences between hard skills and soft skills. The above researcher believes that hard skills can be learned in school and from books. Most soft skills are not taught well in school and have to be learned on the job by trial and error. There are many books and guides on soft skills. Hard skills are skills where the rules stay the same regardless of which company, circumstance or people you work with. In contrast, soft skills are skills where the rules changes depending on the company culture and people you work with.[4]

Klibi & Oussii found in their study a gap between students' perceptions and employers' expectations regarding the entry into employment in accounting. Students value technical skills higher than generic skills. However, they do not deny the importance of several generic skills. This difference in perceptions may be the result of a lack of communication between students and professionals.[3]

In his study, Williams directly affects positive social change by enhancing the quality of soft skills for future employees who enter the local work force.[10] Cărbunăreanu [1] undertakes a study aimed to identify the perception of public employers regarding skills that must be possessed by graduate of master's degree in public administration from the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication of the University Babeş-Bolyai. The study brings into question a number of issues such as: the main skills needed in order to obtain a job in the field covered by the study, the site of competence forming and proposals for improving these skills. Economic literature brings into question the importance of soft skills for the accounting profession.

James Heckman, Nobel Prize winner for Economics in 2000 and, also, professor at the University of Chicago demonstrated in his research projects that even that level of development of soft skills are affecting directly the formation of cognitive competence and predicts mostly the good school performance.[14] It's true that as an accountant you'll spend significant time at a desk or computer, swimming in financial statements, receipts and other financial data. However, once the numbers are crunched and ledgers are balanced, that morass of financial information needs to be explained to someone, either verbally or in writing. The role of accountant in a large firm also requires many forms of communication such as: writing, verbal skills, interpersonal communication. [2]

Experts agree that technical skills can be taught much more easily than soft skills. If you have workers with great communication, negotiation and interpersonal skills, hold onto them." You can have the best technology and processes in the world, but if your people aren't able to communicate about them, if they aren't effectively demonstrating teamwork, critical thinking and emotional intelligence, it doesn't help your business succeed," he says. [8]

Sri Yane analyzes soft skills necessary for graduates of accounting programs operating in the banking system. Soft skills for positions in banking for accounting graduates are needed in all positions though other attributes are also needed such as ethics / integrity, motivation, time management, and can cope with stress. [9]

In their research Low, Samkin and Liu found that overall; the majority of participants in this study were of the opinion that tertiary accounting education plays an important role in soft skills development for accounting graduates. The majority of participants also perceived that a three year degree should not diminish the quality of soft skills development at tertiary level since the fourth year did not provide additional soft skills development for them. [5] Shanker [7] considers that “Effective communication is important in business dealing with employees and outsiders, such as vendors and clients. Because accounting is an intrinsic part of any business, good communication skills are vital in this area. Important financial tasks such as budget preparation and reporting, bill paying, payroll and recording income need to be presented properly to management and others to be useful and meaningful.”

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main objective of our research is to study the accounting specialized students' perception related to the necessary skills in order to access the labor market in accounting. Starting from these concerns, there has been elaborated an exploratory study that is based on a descriptive cross-sectional research, the used research method being the survey (investigation) and the research instrument being the questionnaire. In order to accomplish this purpose, there has been developed a questionnaire containing two categories of questions: general questions, their role being to provide a more accurate picture on the personal profile of the target group and questions about accounting specialized students' perception regarding the needed skills in order to access the labor market in the accounting field.

The questionnaire was distributed to the target group consisting of a number of 100 alumni students, members of the Body of Expert and Authorized Accountants of Romania (CECCAR), Arad branch and 150 students and masters from accounting profiles within the Faculty of Economic Studies of the University "Aurel Vlaicu" of Arad. This was distributed in February and March 2016, representing the basis for the interpretation of the scientific endeavor. The material determines its two goals transposed in dynamic by testing a hypothesis presented in detail in the following section. Conceiving research hypothesis helps to clarify issues that need to be analyzed in the research and it can be accepted or rejected by appealing to calculations based on statistical test “chi square”.

In this context, there were completed the following steps: the definition of statistical hypothesis, establishing of the materiality "alfa" and of the degrees of freedom, the chi square parameter definition, the definition of the critical region, the calculation of observed value of the parameter and the taking of a decision in the study proposed. During the study, two hypotheses were proposed, they being discussed in the next paragraph.

RESEARCH RESULTS

We intend to bring into attention the aspects subjected to the analyzing in order to achieve our goals. In order to achieve our first goal, we take into consideration two targeted groups: group 1) formed by 100 students from which 45 are unemployed and 55 employed but their job has nothing to do with accounting; group 2) formed from 50 students employed in a job that is linked to accounting.

Objective I: The perception of the two groups (group 1 and 2) regarding the importance given to the technical skills over the generic ones in order to have access on the labor market in the accounting field.

Within this objective, we intend to test the next hypothesis:

Assumption 1: There is a difference of perception between the two groups regarding the importance paid to the technical/functional skills as well as the generic ones

in order to have access on the labor market in the accounting field. The two targeted groups have been requested to answer the following question: „Do the technical/functional skills have priority over the generic ones in order to have access on the labor market in the accounting field?” The default answers to this question had the Likert scale as a basis, being used five alternative answers noted from 1-Total disagreement to 5-Total agreement.

The null hypothesis: There is no difference of perception between the two groups regarding the importance given to the technical/functional skills, as well as the generic ones in order to have access on the labor market in the accounting field.

In order to test the hypothesis we will use the chi-square test (Karl Pearson).

Decision criteria:

- The materiality: $\alpha=0,05$
- The number of freedom degrees:
 $df=(\text{no. columns}-1) \times (\text{no. rows}-1)=(5-1) \times (2-1)=4$

Table 1

Observed and theoretical frequencies

OBSERVED / THEORETICAL	Total disagreement	Disagreement	Indifference	Agreement	Total agreement	Total on rows
Group 1	6/7	20/31	4/4	37/31	33/27	100/100
Group 2	4/3	27/16	2/2	9/15	8/14	50/50
Total on columns	10/10	47/47	6/6	46/46	41/41	150/150

Source: Own elaboration based on the answers from the questionnaire

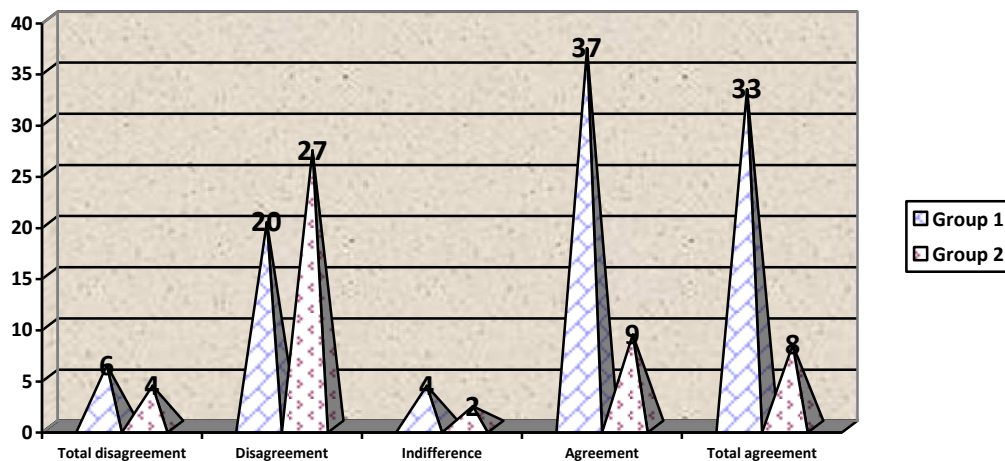


Figure 1. Opinion of the targeted groups 1 and 2 regarding the hard and soft skills

More than 50% of the respondents forming the group 1 consider that the technical/functional skills have priority over the generic ones in order to have access on the labor market in the accounting field (33% are in total agreement regarding the question from above, 37% are in agreement). 6% of the respondents express their total disagreement, 20% are in disagreement and 4% are undecided.

More than 50% of the respondents forming the group 2 consider that the generic skills have priority over the technical/functional ones in order to have access on the labor market in the accounting field (8% are in total disagreement regarding the question from above, 54% express their disagreement). 16% of the respondents express their total agreement, 18% agreement that the technical/functional skills have priority over the generic ones in order to have access on the labor market. Two persons are undecided.

The calculation of the observed value of the parameter:

$$\text{Chi}^2_{\text{calculated}} = (6-7)^2/7 + (20-31)^2/31 + (4-4)^2/4 + (37-31)^2/31 + (33-27)^2/27 + (4-3)^2/3 + (27-16)^2/16 + (2-2)^2/2 + (9-15)^2/15 + (8-14)^2/14 = 19,40$$

$$\text{Chi}^2_{\text{calculated}} = 19,40$$

$$\text{Chi}^2_{\text{critical}} = 9,488$$

Taking the decision:

$$\text{Chi}^2_{\text{calculated}} > \text{Chi}^2_{\text{critical}}$$

The null hypothesis is rejected; therefore the alternative hypothesis is accepted. As a consequence, there is a difference of perception between the two groups regarding the importance given to the technical/functional skills as well as over the generic one in order to have access on the labor market in the accounting field.

In order to achieve the second objective we consider two targeted groups: group 3) formed by 150 students and group 4) formed by 100 alumni students that operate in the accounting field.

Objective II: The perception of the two groups (group 3 and 4) regarding the importance given to the technical skills over the generic ones regarding the access on the labor market in the accounting field.

Within this objective, we intend to test the next hypothesis:

Hypothesis II: There is a difference of perception between the two groups (group 3 and 4) concerning the importance given to the technical/functional skills over the generic ones regarding the access on the labor market in the accounting field. The targeted groups have been asked to answer the following question: "Do the technical/functional skills have priority over the generic ones in order to have access on the labor market in the accounting field?" The default answers to this question had the Likert scale as a basis, being used five alternative answers noted from 1-Total disagreement to 5-Total agreement.

The null hypothesis H_0 : There is no difference of perception between the two groups regarding the importance given to the technical/functional skills over the generic ones regarding the access on the labor market in the accounting field.

In order to test the hypothesis, we will use the chi-square test (Karl Pearson).

Decision criteria:

- The materiality: $\alpha = 0,05$
- The number of freedom degrees:

$$df = (\text{no. columns} - 1) \times (\text{no. rows} - 1) = (5 - 1) \times (2 - 1) = 4$$

Table 2

Observed and theoretical frequencies

OBSERVED THEORETICAL	Total disagreement	Disagreement	Indifference	Agreement	Total agreement	Total on rows
Group 3	10/11	49/60	5/7	47/41	39/31	150/100
Group 4	9/8	51/40	6/4	22/28	12/20	100/50
Total on columns	19/19	100/100	11/11	69/69	51/51	250/250

Source: Own elaboration based on the answers from the questionnaire

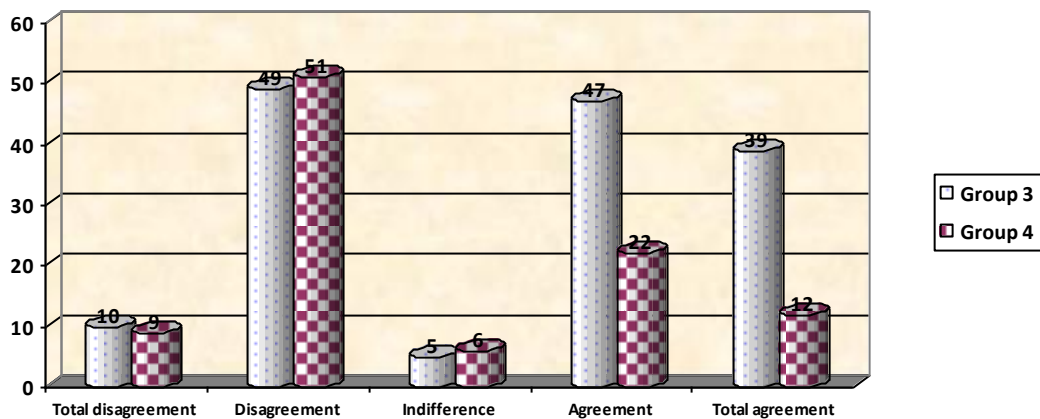


Figure 2. The opinion of the targeted groups 3 and 4 regarding the hard and soft skills

More than 50% of the respondents forming the group 3 consider that the technical/functional skills have priority over the generic ones in order to have access on the labor market in the accounting field (26% are in total agreement regarding the question from above, 31,33% are in agreement). 6,67% of the respondents express their total disagreement, 32,67% are in disagreement and 5 persons are undecided.

More than 50% of the respondents forming the group 4 consider that the generic skills have priority over the technical/functional ones in order to have access on the workforce market in the accounting area (9% are in total disagreement regarding the question from above, 51% express their disagreement). 12% of the respondents express their total agreement, 22% agreement that the technical/functional skills have priority over the generic ones in order to have access on the labor market. Six persons are undecided.

The calculation of the observed value of the parameter:

$$\chi^2_{\text{calculated}} = (10-11)^2/11 + (49-60)^2/60 + (5-7)^2/7 + (47-41)^2/41 + (39-31)^2/31 + (9-8)^2/8 + (51-40)^2/40 + (6-4)^2/4 + (22-28)^2/28 + (12-20)^2/20 = 14,25$$

$$\chi^2_{\text{calculated}} = 14,25$$

$$\chi^2_{\text{critical}} = 9,488$$

Taking the decision:

$$\chi^2_{\text{calculated}} > \chi^2_{\text{critical}}$$

The null hypothesis is rejected; therefore the alternative hypothesis is accepted. As a consequence, there is a difference of perception between the two groups regarding the importance given to the technical/functional skills as well as the generic ones in order to have access on the labor market in the accounting field. In their professional activity the teachers together with the students from the accounting profiles will have to focus on identifying the expectations formed regarding the accounting professionals from the point of view of the roles and activities that they will make, this way going over the knowledge and the skills acquired and tested during the professional training. Only by this way, the long-term organizational success can be generated.

More and more companies are interested in hiring persons that have good soft skills, being willing to invest later in trainings in order to develop the employee's hard skills necessary for the daily professional activities. We see recruitment announcements which focus more and more on the soft skills as an important requirement for the access on the labor market, because they can bring a major contribution to the professional success. Of course, hard skills cannot be neglected either. In the recruitment process there are applicants with high specialized knowledge specific to the job, but that do not excel in the area of the emotional intelligence, as well as at the opposite corner, there are applicants

which excel in the area of soft skills but with lower specialized knowledge. Some employers consider that these hard abilities can later be improved through training.

We can say that owning hard skills will make you be called for the interview and get the job, but soft skills will make you keep the job. [15]

“The economical crisis and the transformations from the last couple of years raise questions regarding the criteria which the employers take into consideration in the process of selection. The accent seems to be distant from the candidates with a consistent theoretical stock of knowledge and extremely specialized, over the candidates with high potential of progress.

Most of the managers are not contented with the candidates because they do not succeed in adapting to new situations and express their selves assertively. For this particular reason, companies prefer the candidates in which there is rather more potential. The discussion moves, this way, to how we identify this potential. By using some psychometrical instruments in the selection faze is one of the most verified and efficient strategies from the point of view of the costs for identifying the most appropriate candidates” says Mădălina Bălan, Managing Partner HART Consulting.[16]

CONCLUSIONS

When trying to draw a global conclusion of the questionnaire, including the questions and the answers of the questioned persons, it could be observed that more than 50% from the accounting specialized students questioned which work in the accounting field or have a job linked to accounting, think that the professional/technical skills have priority over the generic one in order to have access on the labor market from the accounting field.

At the other corner, the unemployed accounting specialized students questioned or who have a job that is not linked to the accounting, give priority to the soft skills as an important requirement of the access on the labor market, because they can bring a major contribution to the professional success. In order to make performance, the students from the accounting profiles (the next accounting professionals) have to harmoniously combine the hard skills with the soft skills. Only by this way they will be able to contribute to the development of the long-term organizational success and the accountant profession will only have to gain.

Apart of these specialized knowledge specific to the accounting field, it is necessary that in academic environment the study programs to focus on the development of the socio-emotional abilities, because the more we will invest earlier in these soft skill the more the graduates (next employees) will bring more benefits to the organizations from which they will be part of. As much we will delay investing in these soft skills as more we will lose more from the advantages that these skills can bring to the organizations in which the next graduates will activate.

An important role have the courses for professional continuously forming organized inside the professional corps as well as inside the companies, in which there can be highlighted the perfection of the hard skills but also the development of the soft skills.

The main limit of our research is the fact that the targeted group did only include professional accountants from CECCAR Arad branch and students/master students from one single university. We intend to extend in the near future the targeted group also among the other subsidiaries CECCAR from Romania, with members of other professional organizations, investors, students from other universities from the country and from abroad, memberships of the academic medium as well as others users of the financial-accounting information, in order to obtain additional information and substantiate, at the same time, more relevant conclusions.

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