Impact of Soft Skills Training Program on Head Nurses' Performance

Noha Hussein Yassein Hussein [1], Hanaa Samir Abd El-Aziz Elsaiad[2]
(1) Lecturer of Nursing Administration, Faculty of Nursing, Helwan University, Egypt
(2) Lecturer of Nursing Administration, Faculty of Nursing, Benha University, Egypt

Abstract

Background: Soft skills are equally important as hard skills. Technical hard skills are no longer enough for head nurses to compete in this highly competitive work environment. Therefore, soft skills are of paramount importance. **Research Aim:** This study aimed to evaluate the impact of soft skills training programs on head nurses' performance. **Research design:** a quasi-experimental (one-group pretest/posttest) research design was utilized to accomplish the aim of this study. **Setting:** The study was carried out in the Benha university hospitals in six General Medical Units, two General Surgical Units (Male and Female). **Subject:** This study included a convenience sample of n=50 head nurses. **Tools:** three tools used for data collection includes a structured questionnaire sheet, job performance evaluation sheet, and soft skill evaluation checklist. **Results:** There were highly statistically significant differences for head nurses' knowledge, job performance, and soft skills pre/post-intervention at $p < 0.01$ for all. **Conclusion:** Based on the study findings, a training program about soft skills effectively improve head nurses' knowledge, job performance, and soft skills. **Recommendation:** Regular training programs about soft skills for nurses and nursing administrators are essential for encouraging positive nurses' skills and maintain effective health care.

Keywords: Soft skills; Training program, Head nurses, Performance

Introduction

Technical and general skills are the two types of skills that are commonly used. Some behavioral general skills are under the category of soft skills. As a result, soft skills are a set of skills that are required to succeed in personal, professional, and social situations. They work hand in hand with hard skills. Technical skills or domain skills are other names for these hard skills **(Rao, 2018)**. Soft skills are those skills, behaviors, and personal characteristics that assist people in navigating their environment, relating effectively to others, performing successfully, and achieving their objectives **(Asbari et al. 2020; Gruzdev et al, 2018; Rao, 2018; Succi, & Canovi, 2020)**. Employees with a mix of hard and soft skills are the most valued in any organization **(Dean, 2017)**. Communication, enthusiasm/attitude, teamwork, networking, problem-solving and critical thinking, and professionalism are all crucial soft skills in the workplace **(Morrell et al, 2020)**.

Soft skills are categorized as personal knowledge or in other words knowledge obtained from individuals or personal **(Jou et al., 2016; Razmerita et al, 2016; Rothberg & Erickson, 2017; Serna et al., 2017; Stewart et al, 2017; Wang et al., 2016)**. Whereas technical skills including an individual's mental and physical capacity **(Robles, 2012; Zhang, 2012a; Zhang, 2012b)**. Interpersonal skills such as communication, empathy, honesty, integrity, and a sense of humor are examples of soft skills **(Dean, 2017)**. The definition of soft skills is knowledge that is still in the human mind and is very personal **(Asbari et al. 2020; Chen et al, 2018; Holford, 2018; Khoshorour, & Gilaninia, 2018; Perez-Fuillerat et al, 2018; Zebal et al., 2019)**. Soft skills are the non-technical skills, the cognitive and social capabilities that complete the technical skills **(Asher, & Popper, 2019; Laari et al, 2021; Lee, 2019)**. These soft skills are rooted in one's actions and experiences, including idealism, values, and emotionality **(Asbari et al. 2020; Hartley, 2018)**.

Caring is a nurse action to care someone else based on morality and humanity. Caring is influenced by soft skill that a nurse has **(Astuty, & Ginting, 2020)**. Individual performance refers to a collection of individual activities and behaviors that contribute to the achievement of organizational objectives **(Fikri et al., 2020)**. The efficacy of the head nurse in carrying out their tasks and responsibilities may be measured by their performance. The performance of the head nurse is critical since

it has a significant impact on the performance of the nurses. On a daily basis, they deal with the majority of health-care personnel. As a result, head nurses should act as role models; if they fail to motivate their nursing staff, it may have a significant impact on head nurses' work performance, leading to nurses' desire to leave the unit or working with lower quality, low productivity, dissatisfaction, and other passive attitudes toward work and organization, such as a decrease in commitment level **(Luu, 2019; Mohamed Abd-Elhamed et al., 2020)**.

Three dimensions to assess job performance of head nurses. First, general characteristics such as attendance and punctuality, appearance, and work habits are used to evaluate head nurse job performance. Second, soft skills such as staff collaboration, patient communication, innovation, documentation, and being technically current. Third, nursing care, which includes activities in the nursing care plan, preventative measures, and patient safety (**Mohamed Abd-Elhamed et al., 2020; Youssif, 2017)**.

Head nurses are required to possess professional competencies in both hard and soft skills. Soft skills are abilities that everyone, even nurses, should have. Nurses need soft skills training to supplement their hard or technical abilities. Success is defined not only by academic skills, but also by soft skills, which are necessary for achieving professional goals **(Hartiti et al., 2020)**. Soft skills need more than standard education since they are complex abilities that require application, practice, evaluation, feedback, and improvement over time **(Tarr, & Lepeley, 2019)**. Therefore, this study aimed to evaluate the impact of soft skills training program on head nurses' performance.

Aim of the study:

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of soft skills training program on head nurses' performance.

Research hypothesis:

Head nurses' knowledge, soft skills, and job performance will be improved after soft skill training program application.

Methods

Research design:

A quasi- experimental (one-group pre/post-test) research design was utilized to accomplish the aim of this study.

Setting:

This study was carried out in the Benha university hospitals in six General Medical Units, two General Surgical Units (Male and Female).

Participant :

A convenient sample of (N=50) head nurses from the in the Benha university hospitals in six General Medical Units, two General Surgical Units (Male and Female). who agreed to participate were recruited in the study. The study was extended over six months, from October 1st, 2020, to marsh 30th, 2021.

Tools of Data Collection

Tools of data collection involved the following tools.

Tool I: Structured questionnaire sheet: it developed by the researcher in Arabic-language related to the current based literatures **(Dean, 2017; Laari, 2021; Rao, 2018; Peddle et al., 2019; Peltonen et al., 2020)**, consisting of two parts:

Part I: Part I: Socio demographic characteristics; this part concerned with the socio-demographics profile of the studied participants included gender, age, education, marital status, years of experiences… etc.

Part II: Head nurses' knowledge regarding soft skills; this part concerned with nurses' knowledge about soft skills included (12) items regarding concept of soft skills (2), importance of soft skills to patient and nurse (4), types (3), and strategics for developing nurses 'soft skills (3).

Tool II: Job performance evaluation sheet: it was adapted from **Ali (2005)**, it was directed to assess head nurse's performance in relation to the following areas: patient care management (18 items), staff management (20 items), and unit management (13) items.

Tool III: Soft skill evaluation checklist, developed by **Youssif, (2017)** and modified by the researchers. It consists of five dimensions

(27 items); communication with staff (6 items), communication with patients (7 items), innovation (2 items), documentation (7 items), and keeping up to date technically (5 items).

Scoring System

For knowledge score the points were distributed as (Yes = 2, No = 1 and I don't know = 0). The total knowledge score ranged from 0 to 24, the total knowledge score was categorized as the following unsatisfactory (<70.0%), and satisfactory (≥70.0%).

Regarding the total performance score, the subject's response was rated (1) for no, and (2) for yes. If the head nurse obtained ≥70% it means that head nurse had adequate of performance, if the head nurse obtained <70% it means that his/her performance is inadequate.

Concerning, the total soft skill scores, head nurses who checked Always were scored "2" and who checked sometimes was scored "1", while those who checked never were scored (0), rated from 0 –14. Soft skills were classified as the following: satisfactory if the percent score was 70% or more, unsatisfactory if less than 70%.

The preparatory phase

This phase included literature reviewing and assessing the validity and reliability of the study's tools. This involves a review of prior and current related literature and studies, and familiarization with the many aspects of the study research problems using readily available books, journals, magazines, and articles. Tools were tested for their reliability by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient test in SPSS program version 24 by a statistician. It was carried out on (5) of head nurses, and the results were as the following: Internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's α) for the knowledge questionnaire (Tool- I) was 0.810, for job performance (Tool- II) was (0.899), and for soft skill was 0.865.

Pilot study

A pilot research was conducted with a group of five head nurses. It is carried out prior to data collection to assess the feasibility, duration, cost, and adverse events of a full-scale research project and to enhance the study design. The appropriate changes were made as

a result. The sample includes participants from the pilot research.

Fieldwork

The researchers were accessible for data collection three days a week, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. The pretest, training program session implementation, and posttest data were collected during a six-month period from October 1st, 2020, to marsh 30th, 2021. The framework of the study was carried out through the following four phases:

I. **Assessment phase:** assessment of head nurses' knowledge, job performance, and soft skills before the implementation of the soft skill training was done.

II. **Planning phase:** based on the findings of the assessment phase; goals, priorities, and expected outcomes will be formulated to meet head nurses needs.

III. **Implementation phase:** Implementation of the training program was carried out at the previously mentioned settings. Boosters, and brochures for teaching the studied participants were prepared by researchers in simple Arabic language. The educational program consisted of 2 consecutive sessions. The session was in small groups (N=10 head nurses) with a duration of approximately 20 -30 minutes. The first session included knowledge regarding concept of soft skills, importance of soft skills to patient and nurse, types of soft skills, and strategies for developing nurses 'soft skills. The second session included soft skill training including communication with staff, communication with patients, innovation, documentation, and keeping up to date technically.

IV. **Evaluation phase:** to assess the impact of the training program on improving knowledge, job performance, and soft skill of head nurses, a post-test (immediately after the application of the training program), was done using the same tool.

Ethical Considerations

The research approval was obtained from the director of in the Benha university

hospitals . Oral consent was also optioned from each head nurse after explaining the study's aim, and purpose. In addition, participants who agreed to participate in the study were assured that all information obtained would be kept confidential. They can also withdraw from the study at any time they choose.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data was coded and entered to the statistical package of social sciences (SPSS) (SPSS Inc; version 24; IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). After complete entry, data was explored for detecting any error, then, it was analyzed by the same program for presenting frequency tables with percentages. Qualitative data was presented as number and percent. Besides, Quantitative data were described as mean / SD as appropriate. The study data was tested for normality by Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Paired sample t-test was used to indicate an actual difference between target group knowledge, attitude, and practice scores average before and after implementation of the training program. Spearman correlation (r) was performed to measure the strength of a linear relationship between ordinal variables. The results were considered statistically significant at $P \leq 0.05$.

Results

Out of 50 participant head nurses who responded to the questionnaire, 26 (52%) aged ranged from 35 - < 45years, with mean 38.99 ± 6.31. Among the participants, 44 (88%) were females. Moreover, 30 (60%) had a bachelor's education. Of all respondents, 43 (86%) were married, 40 (80%) did not attend training programs about soft skills, and 22 (44%) of them had 10 – <20 years of experience with mean19.36 ± 3.54 (**Table 1**).

Regarding the job performance level, 14%, 18%, and 20% of the studied head nurse had satisfied job performance levels about patient care management, staff management, and unit management pre-intervention, compared with 92%, 94%, and 96% post-intervention, respectively **(Table 2)**.

Figure 1 illustrated that 16% of studied head nurses had satisfactory job performance before soft training program implementation, compared with 94% (satisfactory), immediately

after the implementation with a highly statistically significant difference at p <0.01.

Table 3 demonstrated that the participant head nurses' satisfactory soft skills markedly increased from 22%, 26%, 18%, 20%, and 24% related to communication with staff, communication with patients, innovation, and documentation respectively pre- intervention to 94%, 96%, 84%, 90%, and 92% post-intervention, respectively.

Regarding the overall soft skills, **figure 2** showed that of all participants that 22% of studied head nurses had satisfactory soft skills before training program implementation, compared with 92% post-implementation with a highly statistically significant difference at p <0.01.

Table 4 illustrated that the participant nurses' knowledge regarding soft skills prominently increased from 28%, 32%, 26%, 24%, and 28%, respectively before implementation of the training program compared to 94%, 98%, 92%, 90%, and 96%, immediately post-intervention regarding knowledge about the concept of soft skills, the importance of soft skills for nurses, the importance of soft skills for patient care, types of Soft Skills, and strategies for developing nurses 'soft skills, respectively.

Concerning the total knowledge regarding soft skills, **Figure 3** showed that among of the total participants %26 of studied head nurses had satisfactory knowledge about soft skills before training program implementation, compared with 96% post-implementation with a highly statistically significant difference at p <0.01.

Table 5 reported that there was a highly statistically significant positive linear correlation between head nurses' knowledge and their soft skills pre- intervention at r= 0.675, and p<0.01. Moreover, there was a highly statistically significant positive linear correlation between head nurses' knowledge and their job performance pre- intervention at r= 0.590, and p<0.01. Additionally, there was a highly statistically significant positive linear correlation between head nurses' job performance and their soft skills at r= 0.701, and p<0.01 pre-intervention.

Furthermore, **table 6** reported that there was a highly statistically significant positive linear correlation between head nurses' knowledge and their soft skills post-intervention at r= 0.588, and *p*<0.01. Also, there was a highly statistically significant positive linear correlation between head nurses' knowledge and their job performance at r= 0.601, and *p*<0.01 post-intervention. Additionally, there was a highly statistically significant positive linear correlation between head nurses' job performance and their soft skills at r= 0.623 at *p*<0.01.

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of the Head Nurses according to their Characteristics (N=50).

Items	N	%
Gender		
Female	44	88
Male	6	12
Age (year)		
25 - < 35	10	20
35 - < 45	26	52
45 – 55	14	28
$\bar{x}$ & SD	38.99 ± 6.31	
Educational Level		
Secondary technical nursing school diploma	9	18
Bachelor of Nursing	30	60
Master's degree	8	16
PHD	3	6
Marital Status		
Single	6	12
Married	43	86
Divorced	0	0
Widow	1	2
Years of Experience		
1 – <10	8	16
10 – <20	22	44
20 – 30	20	40
$\bar{x}$ & SD	19.36 ± 3.54	
Training courses for soft skills		
Yes	10	20
No	40	80

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Head Nurses Related Job Performance Level Pre and Post Intervention (N=50)

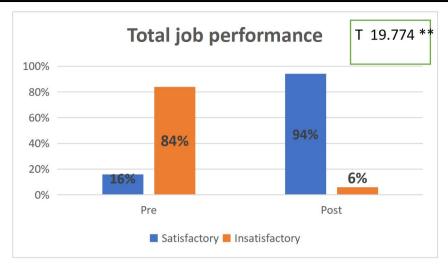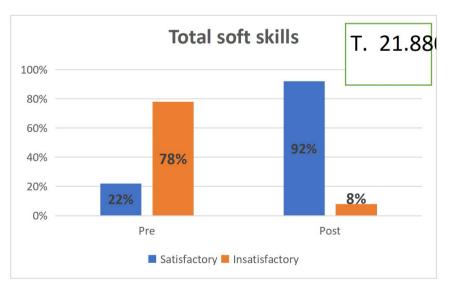|	Pre				Post				T test / *P* value
	Satisfaction		Insatisfaction		Satisfaction		Insatisfaction		
	n	%	N	%	n	%	N	%	
Patient care management	7	14	43	86	46	92	4	8	18.775 <0.01**
Staff management	9	18	41	82	47	94	3	6	17.990 <0.01**
Unit management	10	20	40	80	48	96	2	4	20.113 <0.01**
Total performance	8	16	42	84	47	94	3	6	19.774 <0.01**

Figure (3): Percentage Distribution of Head Nurses Related Total Job Performance Level Pre and Post Intervention (N=50)

Table 3: Percentage Distribution of Head Nurses Related Soft Skills Level Pre and Post Intervention (N=50)

	Pre				Post				T test P value
	Satisfaction		Insatisfaction		Satisfaction		Insatisfaction		
	n	%	N	%	n	%	N	%	
Communication with staff	11	22	39	78	47	94	3	6	17.454 <0.01**
Communication with patients	13	26	37	74	48	96	2	4	16.311 <0.01**
Innovation	9	18	41	82	42	84	8	16	18.690 <0.01**
Documentation	12	24	38	76	45	90	5	10	17.100 <0.01**
Up to date technically	10	20	40	80	46	92	4	8	14.331 <0.01**
Total soft skills	11	22	39	78	46	92	4	8	21.880 <0.01**

Figure (2): Percentage Distribution of Head Nurses Related Total Soft Skills Level Pre and Post Intervention (N=50)
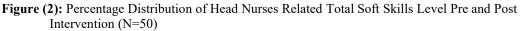
Table 4: Percentage Distribution of Head Nurses Related Knowledge Level Pre and Post Intervention (N=50)

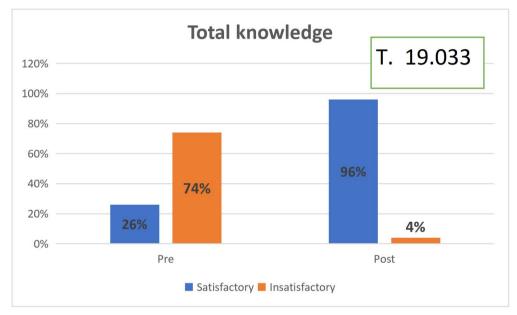| Pre				Post				Friedman test / P value
Satisfactory		In satisfactory		Satisfactory		In satisfactory		
N	%	n	%	N	%	N	%	
Concept of soft skills								
14	28	36	72	47	94	3	6	16.009 <0.01**
Importance of soft skills for head nurses								
16	32	34	68	49	98	1	2	15.813 <0.01**
Importance of soft skills for patient care								
13	26	37	74	46	92	4	8	19.422 <0.01**
Types of Soft Skills								
12	24	38	76	45	90	5	10	18.003 <0.01**
Strategics for developing head nurses 'soft skills								
14	28	36	72	48	96	2	4	17.106 <0.01**

Figure 3: Percentage Distribution of Head Nurses Related Total Knowledge Level Pre and Post Intervention (N=50)

Table 5: *Correlations between Studied Variables Pre-Intervention*

		Total knowledge	Total soft skills	Total job performance
Total knowledge	r.		0.675	0.590
	p		<0.01**	<0.01**
Total soft skills	r.			0.701
	p			<0.01**
Total job performance	r.			
	p			

Table 6: *Correlations between Studied Variables Post-Intervention*

		Total knowledge	Total soft skills	Total job performance
Total knowledge	r.		0.588	0.601
	p		<0.01**	<0.01**
Total soft skills	r.			0.623
	p			<0.01**
Total job performance	r.			
	p			

Discussion

Soft skills are the arts of nursing, the element of the soul and mind of the very foundation of nursing care **(Laari et al, 2021; Sills, 2015)**. Nurses often interact with other nurses, other health care professionals, patients, and patients' relatives in the course of their work. Furthermore, working as a nurse at a hospital requires the capacity to work as part of a team. As a result, a nurse is required to possess soft skills **(Bratajaya, & Ernawati, 2020)**. Soft skills help head nurses to utilize their technical talents and knowledge more effectively, whereas hard skills relate to the technical ability and factual information required to accomplish a task. These two abilities are complimentary, but soft skills are required for success in any job that requires human contact and cooperation **(Laari et al, 2021)**. Therefore, this study aimed to evaluate the impact of soft skills training programs on head nurses' performance.

The socio-demographic profile of the studied nurses revealed that more than half aged ranged from 35 - < 45years, with mean 38.99 ± 6.31. Among the participants, most of them were females. Moreover, about two-thirds had a bachelor's education. Of all respondents, the majority were married, and did not attend training programs about soft skills, and more than one-thirds of them had 10 – <20 years of experience with mean 19.36 ± 3.54. The socio-demographic profile of the studied sample was partially contradictory with **Elmohmady et al. (2020)** that the age of nurses ranged between 21-35 years with mean score 27.06 ± 3.40. Majority of head nurses were female. Regarding to head nurses' years of experience, the mean years of experience was 4.74 ± 3.26, more than half of head nurses had less than 5 years of experience. Regarding to educational level, nearly two – thirds of nurses had Bachelor of Nursing.

The current study revealed that less than quarter of studied head nurses had satisfactory job performance before soft skill training program implementation, compared with the vast majority of them immediately after the implementation with a highly statistically significant difference at $p < 0.01$. There were highly statistically significant differences for

nurses' knowledge, job performance, and soft skills pre/post-intervention at $p < 0.01$ for all. **Laari and Dube (2017).** Found that study participants viewed soft skills training as a motivator for nursing personnel to provide better care to their patients. The findings of the study also show that nursing students need to be taught soft skills in order to improve their work performance in the clinical setting and improve how they communicate with their customers.

McCulloch et al . (2009) in a study entitled "The effects of aviation-style non-technical skills training on technical performance and outcome in the operating theatre", found that training in non-technical skills resulted in improvement in attitudes to safety, team non-technical performance and technical error rates both in the operative field and outside it. Moreover, **Dewolf et al. (2021)** in a study entitled "The Effect of Teaching Nontechnical Skills in Advanced Life Support: A Systematic Review", reported that team simulation training results in improved soft skills and a marked reduction in the time required to complete a simulated cardiac arrest. Therefore, the implementation of nontechnical skills training into advance life support courses could have a positive impact. Understanding and improving nontechnical skills may help to create more effective teams.

The result of **Elmohmady et al. (2020)** in a study entitled "Contribution of Non-Technical Skills on Nurses' Performance Efficiency of Nursing Care Process in Intensive Care Units, Tanta", showed that more than two- thirds of nurses had satisfied level in performing total technical skills and less than two -thirds of nurses had satisfied level in total soft skills, with significant positive correlation between overall observed nurses' technical skills and their overall soft skills. Additionally, **Elmohmady et al. (2020)** revealed that more than two- thirds of nurses had satisfied level in performing overall nursing care process.

The current study finding illustrated that concerning the total knowledge about soft skills, one-quarter of studied nurses had satisfactory knowledge about soft skills before training program implementation, compared with most of them post-implementation with a

highly statistically significant difference at *p* <0.01. Similarly, **Fasoi et al. (2019)** in a study entitled **"**NON-TECHNICAL SKILLS FOR NURSE-ANESTHETISTS: LEARNING AND EVALUATION" found that nurses need to learn non-technical skills. On contradictory**, Gordon et al. (2015)** in a study entitled "Enhancing health care non-technical skills" found that health care professionals are familiar with nontechnical skills. On the other hand, **Laari and Dube (2017)** in a study entitled "Nursing students' perceptions of soft skills training in Ghana" indicated that a majority of respondents understood the concept of soft skills and agreed with the definition of 'soft skills', also, the majority of respondents strongly agreed that soft skills training in nursing institutions might promote quality nursing care in health facilities, they believed that training in soft skills will enhance their knowledge on patient care.

Conclusion

Based on our current study, it was concluded that the study training program about soft skills effectively improves head nurses' knowledge, job performance, and soft skills. Present study showed that the implementation of training program is effective to improve head nurses' soft skills in terms of communication with staff, communication with patients, innovation, documentation, and up to date technically.

Recommendation

1. Soft skills have become the lifeblood required to revive the poor quality of nursing care. The need to include soft skills into nursing curricula should be viewed as an urgent resuscitative call that requires immediate response by regulatory agencies.

2. Regular training programs about soft skills for nurses and nursing administrators are essential for encouraging positive nurses' skills and maintain effective health care.

3. Conduct continuous training to increase nursing skills Further research studies are needed to assess the forces of soft skills on nurse's burnout and job satisfaction.

4. Replication of the present study on a larger representative probability sample size in various Egypt governorates is recommended to achieve generalization of the results.

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