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**The importance of human skills for youngsters at the
(future) labour market.**

Results of the survey for the app-titude project

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The importance of human skills for youngsters at the (future) labour market

The qualification youngsters obtain has a significant impact on their employment opportunities during their initial career (see Herremans, Vansteenkiste, & Sourbron, 2016)¹. Hence, the 'hard' skills that young people learn still play a pivotal role in their labour market entry. In addition to these hard skills, so-called 'human skills' are considered to be increasingly important in the future workplace. The project app-titude aims to strengthen these human skills of youngsters in order to help ease their transition to work. In this report I reflect on the results of an extensive survey among young people and employers, which was used as scientific input to the app-titude project. These results provide insight into the human skills that are often lacking in youngsters and as such may raise problems in recruitment and at work.

1. Human skills, what's in a name?

A lot of different expressions are used to describe the skills that are distinct from hard knowledge. In the literature review prior to the survey, I came across terminology such as 'soft skills', 'human skills', 'power skills', 'skills of the 21st century', 'generic labour competencies', 'generic work abilities' and so on. In this report, I will use the term human skills, because it refers best to the skills that are desperately needed to function in everyday (working) life.

Furthermore, the literature review showed that there are five dimensions of human skills that can be distinguished, with different types of skills belonging to each dimension. I differentiate skills related to (1) communication (e.g. communicating orally, being self-confident); (2) collaboration (e.g., being open to new and diverse perspectives/ideas, treating persons from a different social, cultural or ideological background with respect); (3) professionalism (e.g., presenting oneself professionally (e.g. through appropriate clothes, hygiene and appearance);

¹ Herremans, W., Vansteenkiste, S., & Sourbron, M. (2016). Op weg naar de arbeidsmarkt. De arbeidsmarktintrede van Vlaamse schoolverlaters. *Over.Werk, Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt Werk*, 26(1), 92-105. Leuven: Steunpunt Werk/Uitgeverij Acco.

being on time); (4) work organisation (e.g., adapting to different job roles and responsibilities; setting and achieving goals); and (5) developmental potential (e.g., lifelong learning; dealing with feedback and critique). I refer to Table 1 for a complete list of the thirty skills that were distinguished as such.

Table 1. Overview human skills

Communication
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. listening 2. communicating orally 3. communicating in writing 4. having empathy 5. being self-confident 6. knowing when to listen and to speak
Collaboration
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. being open to new and diverse perspectives/ideas 8. collaborating with others in an effective and respectful manner 9. treating persons from a different social, cultural or ideological background with respect 10. dealing with conflict 11. networking
Professionalism
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. presenting oneself professionally (e.g. appropriate clothes, hygiene and appearance) 13. being reliable 14. being accurate 15. being on time 16. showing respect 17. having the right work attitude 18. being flexible
Work organisation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 19. adapting to different job roles and responsibilities 20. adapting to different working priorities 21. dealing efficiently with time pressure and workload 22. setting and achieving goals 23. working individually 24. showing initiative 25. thinking creatively
Developmental potential
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 26. lifelong learning 27. solving problems creatively 28. dealing with feedback and critique 29. being self-critical 30. having insight into own strengths and weaknesses

2. Survey among youngsters and employers

After determining the list of human skills, an online survey was made that was sent to both youngsters and employers. The purpose of the survey was to help answer some relevant questions regarding human skills. Specifically, the following five questions were tackled: (1) How important is each human skill for youngsters in order to function effectively in the future labour market? (2) Which human skills are lacking in youngsters? (3) Does the lack of human skills impact the hiring decisions of employers? (4) Do youngsters and employers encounter difficulties in the workplace due to a lack in human skills? (5) Do youngsters get training in the workplace to improve their human skills? The survey was conducted in December 2015 and January 2016 in all four partner countries of the app-titude project, i.e. in Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Luxembourg. In total, 530 employers and 1171 youngsters responded to the questionnaires. As for the employers survey, the majority of respondents came from Belgium (277), followed by the Netherlands (219), France (21) and Luxembourg (13). With respect to the youngsters-survey; about half of the respondents came from Belgium (554). The Netherlands accounted for 302 respondents, France for 290 and Luxembourg for 25.

In Tables 2 and 3, the background characteristics of the surveyed employers and youngsters are described. More than half (58.3%) of the employers surveyed are women. All age groups are represented among these respondents. In terms of education, the vast majority of respondents has a bachelor's degree (56.1%) or a master's degree (25.1%). The surveyed employers are mainly working in the temporary employment sector (59.6%), followed by the public service sector (15.4%) and the secondary sector (14.7%). They mainly employ more than 50 persons within their organization and are familiar to working with low- or middle educated employees and youngsters. Regarding the surveyed youth, about six in ten of them are female (61.8%). The vast majority (70.7%) is aged 18 to 24 years. Nearly one in two (52.4%) is still in school, while one in four (26.5%) is working with a temporary or permanent contract. Nearly 15% are unemployed. Most of the surveyed youngsters have worked during their studies (68.1%). Of those who have a working status, most are employed in services (47.6%) or in the public sector (28.3%). Most surveyed youth were low- or middle educated (respectively 30.6% and 28.4%) at the time of the survey.

Table 2. Background characteristics surveyed employees

Gender - women	58,3%
Age	
<30 years	13,2%
30-39 year	26,4%
40-49 year	33,2%
> 50 year	27,2%
Educational level	
Secondary	18,1%
Bachelor	56,8%
Master/PhD	25,1%
Sector	
Temporary agency work	59,6%
Industry	14,7%
Services	10,3%
Non commercial services	15,4%
Organisational size	
1-9 employees	14,5%
10-49 employees	21,5%
50-249 employees	25,3%
250-1999 employees	26,0%
>2000 employees	12,6%
Share of low or medium educated employees	
<10%	31,7%
10%-49%	34,1%
>50%	34,2%
Share of employees aged <30 years	
<10%	16,0%
10%-49%	63,0%
>50%	21,0%

Table 3. Background characteristics surveyed youngsters

Gender - women	61,8%
Age	
<18 years	8,4%
18-24 year	70,7%
25-30 year	20,9%
Educational level	
Low educated	30,6%
Medium educated	28,4%
High educated	41,0%
Labour market status	
At school	52,4%
Working with a permanent or temporary contract	26,5%
Working with an interim contract	3,5%
Unemployed	15,4%
Inactive	2,1%
Working during studies	68,1%
Sector (only for working respondents)	
Agriculture	2,3%
Industry	21,9%
Services	47,6%
Non commercial services	28,3%

3. Results survey

3.1. Importance of human skills

In this section the results of the survey are elaborated. If we look at the importance of human skills (table 4), it appears that the vast majority (often more than 80%) of respondents find it (very) important that young school-leavers possess the listed human skills in the future workplace. This result stresses the relevance of human skills for the future labour market. Moreover, both youngsters and employers are almost unanimous in their verdict. Only a handful of human skills are somewhat less of a priority to employers: 'thinking creatively' (73.0%), 'being confident' (69.6%), 'working individually' (69.4%) and 'networking' (67.5%).

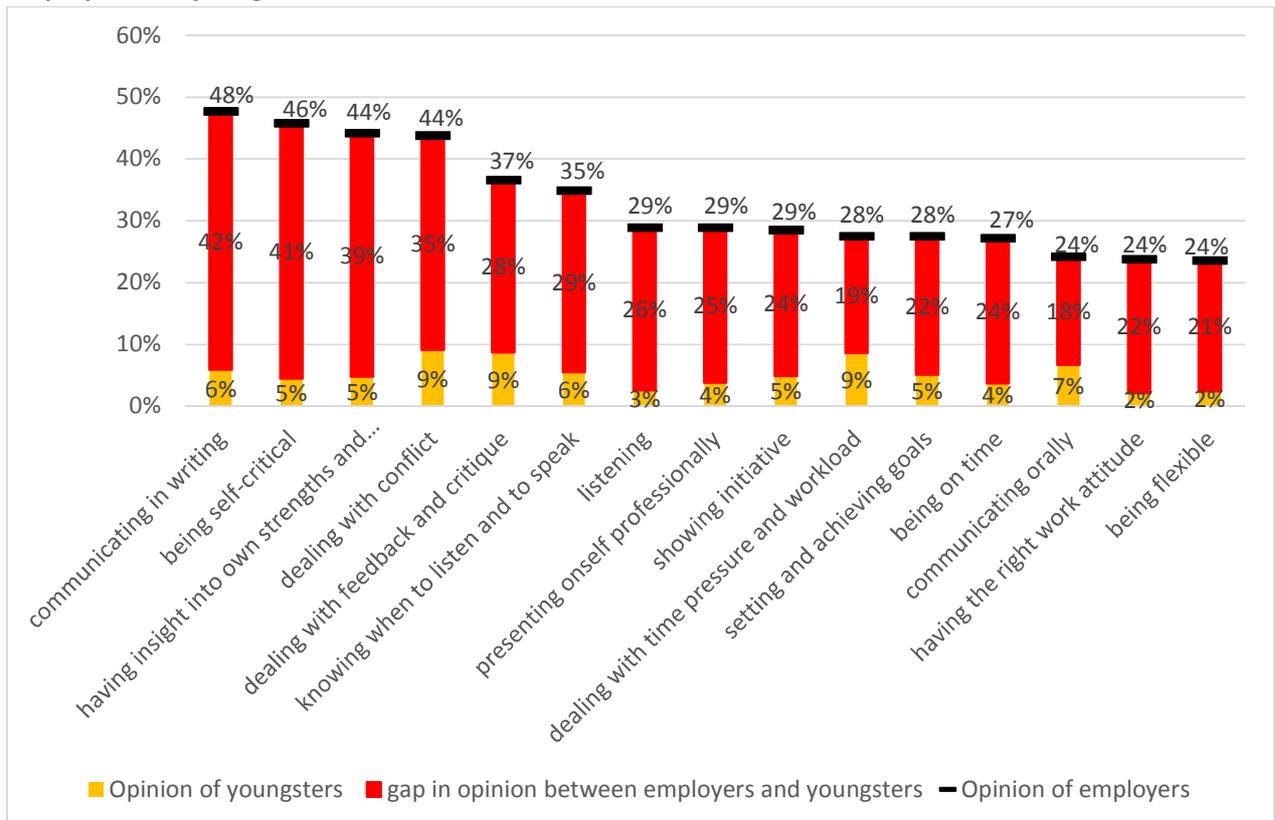
Table 4. Percentage respondents who find it (very) important that young school-leavers possess the human skill in the future workplace

	Employers	Youngsters
Communicating orally	95,7%	91,0%
Being reliable	95,7%	90,9%
Listening	94,5%	90,1%
Having the right work attitude	94,3%	88,9%
Showing respect	94,0%	90,5%
Collaborating with other persons	93,8%	89,9%
Dealing with feedback and critique	92,6%	86,5%
Treating others with respect	90,9%	86,0%
Having insight into own strenghts and weaknesses	90,9%	85,5%
Being flexible	90,4%	82,3%
Dealing efficiently with time pressure and workload	89,6%	86,7%
Knowing when to listen and to speak	89,4%	87,2%
Being open to new ideas	89,4%	86,1%
Being self-critical	89,4%	85,2%
Being on time	88,1%	88,5%
Adapting to different working priorities	87,5%	82,8%
Presenting oneself professionally (e.g. appropriate clothes, hygiene and appearance)	87,0%	86,3%
Showing initiative	86,8%	84,2%
Being accurate	86,6%	85,3%
Adapting to different job roles and responsibilities	85,7%	81,2%
Dealing with conflict	84,7%	82,2%
Lifelong learning	83,2%	77,4%
Setting and achieving goals	83,0%	84,3%
Communicating in writing	81,9%	84,8%
Having empathy	81,7%	79,3%
Solving problems creatively	78,1%	70,2%
Thinking creatively	73,0%	69,5%
Being self-confident	69,6%	82,5%
Working individually	69,4%	81,8%
Networking	67,5%	69,9%

3.2. Lack of human skills

While almost all human skills are considered as (very) important by the majority of the employers and youngsters, at the same time a substantial part of the employer-respondents believe that youngsters lack certain of these human skills. Figure 1 shows that about one in two of the employers indicated that youngsters are (rather) unable to communicate in writing, be self-critical, have insight into their own strengths and weaknesses and handle conflict. About one in three believes that youngsters are (rather) unable to handle criticism or feedback and (rather) do not know when to listen and speak. Furthermore, nearly one in four of the employers think that youngsters are (rather) unable to handle criticism or feedback and (rather) do not know when to listen and speak. Furthermore, nearly one in four of the employers think that youngsters are (rather) unable to listen, present themselves professionally (e.g., through appropriate clothing, hygiene, ...), show initiative, deal with time and workload, set and achieve work goals, be on time, communicate orally, have the right attitude and be flexible.

Figure 1. Percentage of youngsters that (rather) do not possess a listed human skill according to respondents, whereas the human skill is deemed (very) important by more than 80% of surveyed employers and youngsters

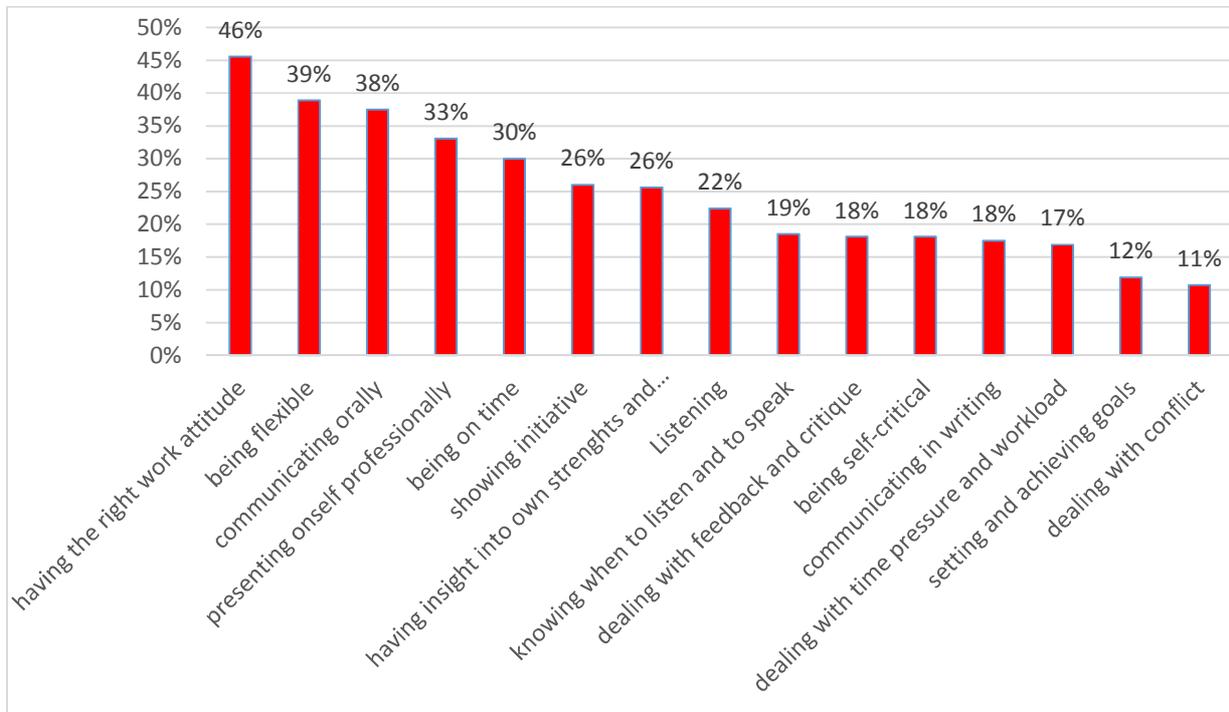


If we look at the opinion of the youngsters themselves, we get a different picture. Only a minority of them indicate not possessing the listed human skills. Hence, there is a big gap in the opinion of employers and youngsters, as shown in figure 1. There are a number of possible explanations for this observed difference in assessment. On the one hand, the samples of youngsters and employers are not linked to each other: the surveyed youngsters are not the youngsters who are employed by the surveyed employers. Therefore, it is possible that the assessment of the surveyed employers would be different if it would refer to the youngsters-respondents. On the other hand, it is also possible that the surveyed youngsters overestimate themselves (i.e., they may believe that they possess certain human skills while this is not the case) and/or that the surveyed employers underestimate youngsters (i.e., they may believe that youngsters do not possess certain human skills while the latter actually do possess these). Anyway, this result indicates that there is a significant mismatch between what youngsters think to be possessing in terms of human skills and what employers think that these youngsters possess.

3.3. Problems due to lacking human skills

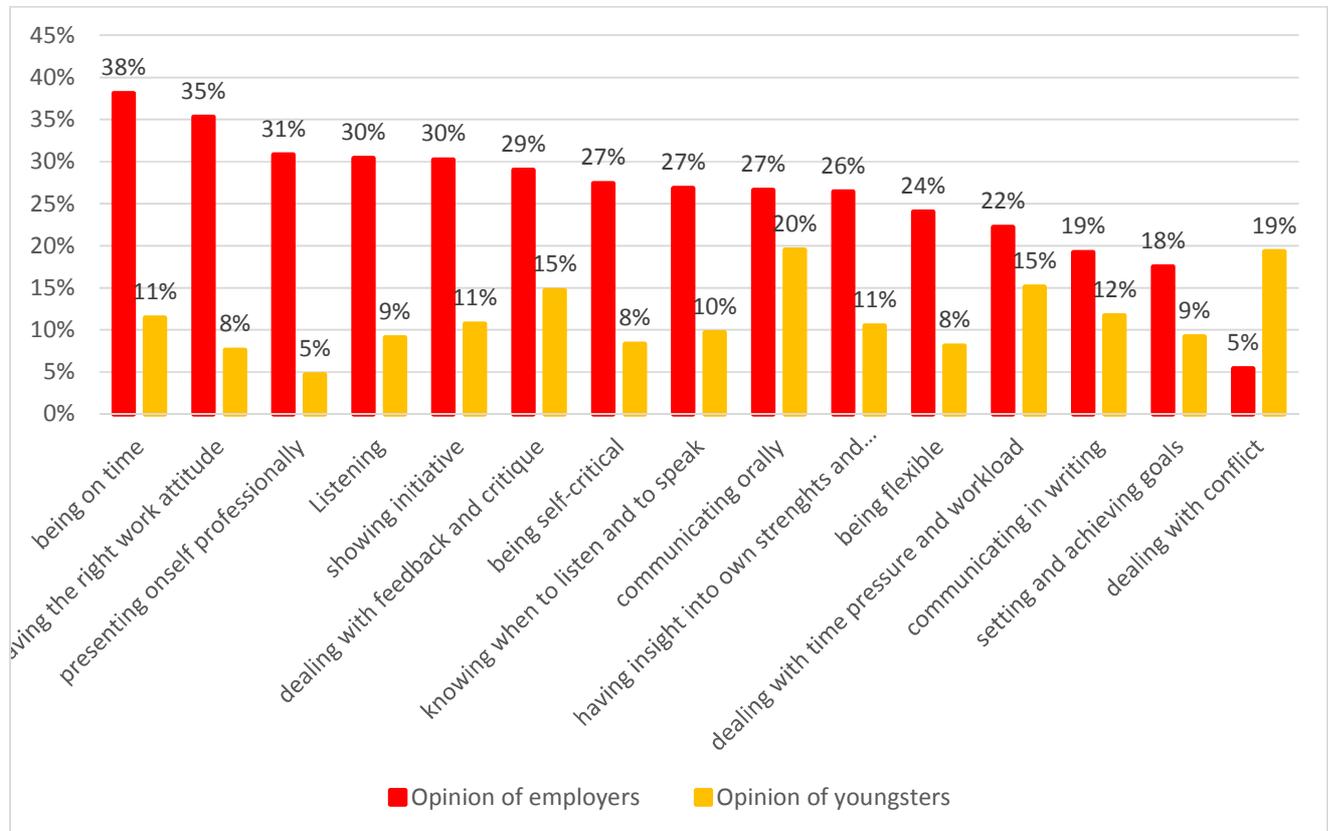
In the previous section, we noticed that employers believe that youngsters lack certain human skills. Should we be troubled by this result? In other words, is lacking certain human skills problematic for youngsters? Figure 2 shows a first answer to this question. The figure indicates the percentage of employers that did *not* recruit a youngster because he/she mastered the human skill not well. In figure 2, the focus lies on the same fifteen skills that were discussed in figure 1. From figure 2, it becomes clear that a significant part of employers decided not to recruit certain youngsters in the past, because the latter showed a lack in human skills. In particular, not mastering the human skills 'having the right work attitude' (46%), 'being flexible' (39%), 'communicating orally' (38%), 'presenting oneself professionally' (33%) and 'being on time' (30%) has been punished in terms of recruitment opportunities.

Figure 2. Percentage of employers that reports not to have recruited an applicant due to a problem with the human skill



In addition, figure 3 shows that a fair share of the employers indicated having experienced problems with youngsters in the workplace because the latter did not master human skills well enough. Between 24% and 38% of the employers mention that they have encountered problems with the same human skills that also hurt the recruitment opportunities of youngsters (i.e. having the right work attitude, being flexible, communicating orally, presenting oneself professionally and being on time). Therefore, lacking these human skills does not only limit youngsters' opportunities to enter the labour market, but also affects their lives once at work. Similar to our observation in figure 1, we notice again a large difference in opinion between employers and youngsters. Indeed, when we consider the views of youngsters, only a limited share of them indicated to have experienced problems in the workplace due to the absence of a specific human skill. Only with respect to the human skills 'communicating orally' (20%), 'being able to deal with conflict' (19%), 'dealing with feedback and critique' (15%) and 'being able to deal with pressure and workload' (15%) a more pronounced part of the youngsters indicated having encountered difficulties in the workplace.

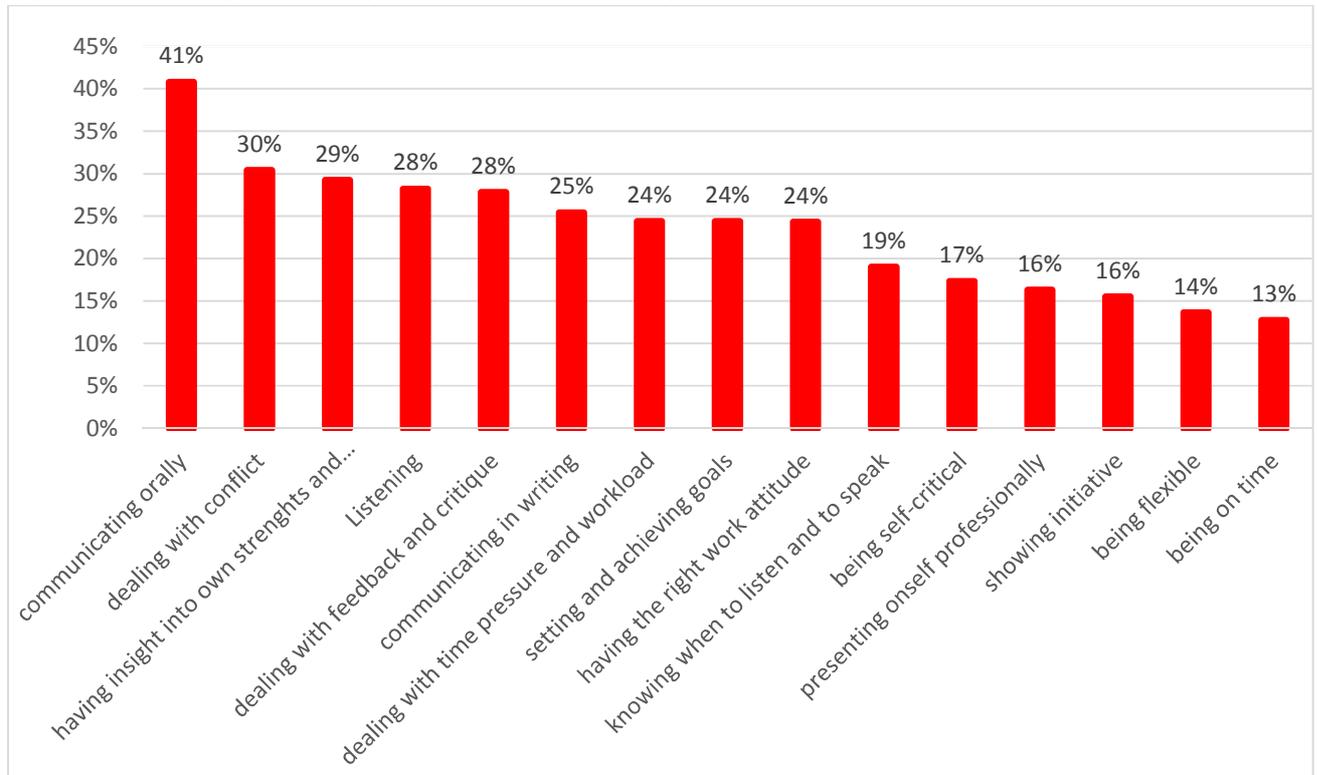
Figure 3. Percentage of employers/youngsters that report to have encountered problems due to certain human skills



3.4. Training to improve human skills

The previous section learned that a significant part of the employers believe that certain human skills are lacking in youngsters, which casts problems on their recruitment and at work. Employers try to remedy part of the difficulties by offering training that is specifically aimed at improving human skills (see figure 4). Still, the results from figure 4 demonstrate that the human skills that are deemed as most problematic in the workplace are only addressed to a limited degree by these trainings. For example, only a minority of employers provide training to improve the human skills 'being on time' (13%), 'being flexible' (14%), and 'presenting oneself professionally' (16). Other human skills are more often tackled through training. Still, on average only about one in four employers provides training.

Figure 4. Percentage of employers that provides training to improve the human skill



4. Conclusion

The results of the conducted survey confirm that human skills are indispensable as necessary skills for young people to function effectively in today's and tomorrow's labour market. Both the surveyed employers and youngsters stressed that possessing a wide range of human skills is very important. Still, a considerable part of the employers mention that youngsters do not master certain human skills well enough. The youngsters however, have a different perception. Biased assessments may partly help explain this big difference in opinion between youngsters and employers.

One of the objectives of the app-titude project is to make young people aware of the importance of certain human skills and indicate where and how they can make progress. This seems very important. After all, the results of the survey show that young people who lack certain human skills are hindered in their access to the labour market and encounter problems in the workplace. Sufficient attention to the human skills of youngsters is therefore needed. Only one in four of the employers are trying to address the human skills of young people by offering training. Hence, a

majority of employers do not tackle the perceived lack in human skills of their young employees. Perhaps part of the employers do not believe that such programs are effective or that it is their responsibility to provide them. This result indicates that there is room for other initiatives and shows the importance of our app-titude project.

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Reference: Vansteenkiste, S. (2016). Het belang van human skills op de toekomstige werkvloer voor jongeren. *Over.Werk. Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt Werk*, 26(1), 120-127. Leuven: Steunpunt Werk / Uitgeverij Acco.