

An aerial photograph of a winter landscape. A snow-covered forest of evergreen and deciduous trees surrounds a river. The river has a section of rapids with white water. A small bridge is visible on the left side of the river.

SOFT SKILLS

Evidence from 50,000+ job ads

October 2018

Key takeaways

- Large European firms put a high priority on social relationship skills
- Firms have strikingly different soft skill priorities even within industries
- Personas map talent segments from behavior- and capability-perspectives
- Job ad deep-dive shows soft skill emphasis at a role-level
- High-precision talent intelligence identifies internal and external talent priorities

In summary

What. Deep-dive in soft skills across large European firms.

Why. Shed light on in-demand capabilities.

How. Crunch extensive job ad data using text analytics.

Content

1. Overview
2. Company profiles
3. Talent personas
4. Job ad deep-dive

The organization of work is changing. Emergence of new technologies creates demand for entirely new sets of skills and transforms existing ones. But technology is not the only driver of change: organizations are increasingly diverse and networked, creating a vastly different work environment than before. Research suggests that this “skill-biased” change has an asymmetric impact on the demand for different skills¹. Soft skills like collaboration, learning and creativity are on a steady upward trajectory while basic cognitive and physical skills face a decline.

Research has also established clear business benefits from specific soft skills, like curiosity². Further, soft skills represent “general human capital” as they are transferable across firms. “Firm-specific human capital”, in contrast, is not. A shift towards general human capital would have a profound impact on labor markets, for instance by transforming firm’s optimal workforce tenure, turnover, and compensation profiles.

This study seeks to answer how companies embrace this new world of work. We crunched some 50,000+ job advertisements from 79 large European firms to better understand how the talent landscape is changing. We explore what soft skills are in demand, what talent personas emerge, and how firms differ in what type of talent they seek to attract. Our analysis is based on what companies *do* rather than what they *say*. This important distinction separates our work from purely survey-based research. In short, we hope this study sheds light on how top European companies attract talent today from soft skill and talent persona standpoints.

We want to present facts without being prescriptive or judgmental. A firm’s optimal set of soft skills ultimately depends on culture fit and business needs and is shaped by strategic resourcing considerations. Yet the insights here should allow companies a moment of reflection. What soft skills do we emphasize? Do we put enough weight on Creativity, Learning, and Passion & Meaning? What skills are our

¹ McKinsey Global Institute (2018). [Skill Shift: Automation and the Future of the Workforce](#).

² Gino, F. (2018). [The Business Case for Curiosity](#). Harvard Business Review, September-October 2018 Issue.

competitors looking for? Are we focusing on the right soft skills vis-à-vis future needs? Is our talent strategy aligned with an aspired culture pivot?

High-level insights are important, but we also touch the practical side. We show how our proprietary methodology can be leveraged to analyze individual job ads across soft skill dimensions. It helps ensure job ads better match workforce needs. This is important as academic research has clearly shown that job ad wording impacts job appeal³. In short, getting the ads right matters, and our methods can help on that journey.

This study is organized as follows. The first section provides an overview of soft skills across large European enterprises. The second section looks at individual firms and provides unique firm-level evidence of the top-60 firms in our data. The third section shifts to talent personas, a data-driven analytical approach. Its behavior- and capability-focused perspective yields novel insights that help organizations align talent priorities with strategic objectives. The fourth section showcases how analysis of individual job ads can be leveraged to pinpoint issues in recruitment messaging at a very practical level. The final section concludes. A data summary is given in the Appendix.

Sample data

We exploit a rich cross-firm dataset of job ads. All ads were collected from public sources in Summer 2018. Our sample has 54,078 ads in total of which 31,529 are in English. For now, we restricted our core sample to English ads. This left us with 79 large European firms across 10 sectors. They are headquartered in the following countries: UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Finland. We captured the largest firms from these countries according to market capitalization or sales, data permitting. Every firm in the sample firms also had to meet certain data quality standards.

Our sample has a good representation of large European firms with a deliberate emphasis on Northern Europe. Southern European firms are not represented. Yet as most of our sample firms are global multinationals, there are many outside-Europe ads included in the data. While the results might generalize to non-European multinationals, we are hesitant to draw such conclusions at this point.

³Gaucher, D., Friesen, J. & Kay, A. C. (2011). Evidence That Gendered Wording in Job Advertisements Exists and Sustains Gender Inequality. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

Overview

Key questions

- How important are soft skills overall?
- How labor market prioritizes different soft skills?
- How reality compares with projected workforce patterns?

We start with a broad overview of the soft skill landscape (see “*Soft skill definitions*”). As noted above, soft skills are expected to capture a bigger share of the future human capital equation. Consequently, it is important to understand the current state of the soft skill market. Our methodology to identify soft skills is presented in Exhibit “*Capturing soft skills*”.

How much are soft skills emphasized?

Our first metric is simple but revealing: how often soft skills are mentioned in job ads? It speaks volumes about the overall emphasis on soft skills. Across the sample the average firm mentions 20 soft skills per ad. But there is considerable variation across the 79 firms.

At the high end, **Nordea, Uniper, BP, RELX Group, Veon, Adidas, Merck, Philips**, and **SAP** mention 30+ per ad. These firms are placing a strong emphasis on soft skills. Ads with many mentions tend to be longer and rich in detail overall. At the low end, a few companies mention less than 10 soft skills per ad. These ads are often not just light on soft skills; they’re shorter ads, light on detail in general. In sum, the findings indicate that firms have chosen clearly different paths. Some put way more emphasis on soft skills than others.

In our view this simple metric already reflects talent strategic priorities. But we should not overlook the practical implications. As mentioned, research has established job ads impact job appeal. It’s hence reasonable to assume that, all else equal, firms with substantial soft skill focus attract a different candidate profile than others. Presumably, individuals who value hard skills over soft skills are attracted to firms where e.g. technical skills are prioritized.

Soft skill definitions

Adaptability. Succeeding in a dynamic environment; dealing with pressure and uncertainty; handling stress; fast-moving

Conscientiousness. Being careful and meticulous; a desire to do one's work or duty well and thoroughly

Creative. Innovative, curious, open-minded

Independent. Self-starter, confident, proactive, self-motivated

Leadership & Influencing. Ability to manage, develop, and motivate others; persuade others

Learning. Self-development and growth through education, training, or experiences

Organized. Ability to multi-task, plan, and prioritize

Passion & Meaning. Enthusiastic, energetic, motivated; a desire to make an impact and contribute to meaningful work

Social Skills & Networking. Communication and interpersonal skills and traits; stakeholder management

Teamwork. Ability to work well and cooperate with others; share knowledge with team members

Thinking. Analytical, cognitive and strategic skills; using logical reasoning and analysis

Which soft skills are emphasized?

We explore the overall distribution to understand which soft skills are more important. The percentages shown in Figure “Soft skills overview”, reflect relative soft skill focus. The graphic represents the overall distribution across all firms, industries and countries.

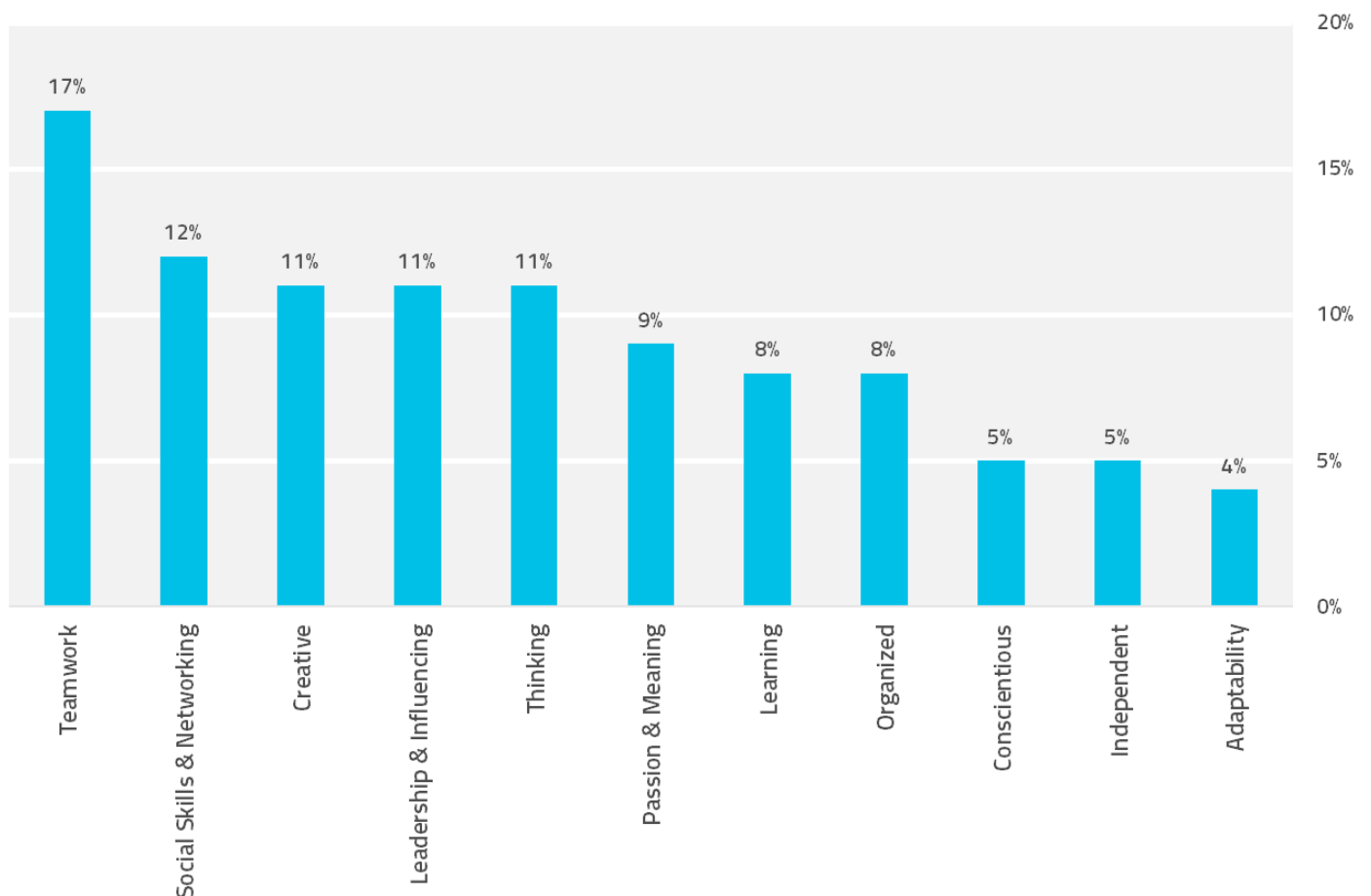
The 11 soft skills group into four tiers of emphasis. Teamwork sits alone in tier one, comprising 17% of all soft skill mentions in our sample. Social Skills & Networking, Creativity, Leadership & Influencing, and Thinking are the next most emphasized skills, each with around 11 percent emphasis in tier two. Passion & Meaning, Learning, and Organized sit in tier three. Conscientiousness, Adaptability, and Independent bring up the rear in tier four, each at about 5 percent emphasis.

Our study represents a point-in-time cross-section. Yet the evidence here offers a unique data-point to reflect on broader workforce patterns. Consistent with an increasingly collaborative and interconnected work culture, skills related to social relationships – Teamwork, Social Skills & Networking, and Leadership & Influencing – have a high priority among large European firms. Creativity and Thinking make up the rest of the top-tier skills. This is in line with research that suggest social and emotional skills, creativity, and high-level cognitive capabilities will grow in importance in the future⁴.

For firms, the overall distribution of soft skills provides a useful first-approximation point-of-comparison. Yet it masks substantial firm-level variation and hence it's key to understand how talent competitors are positioned. We turn to this matter next.

Soft skills overview

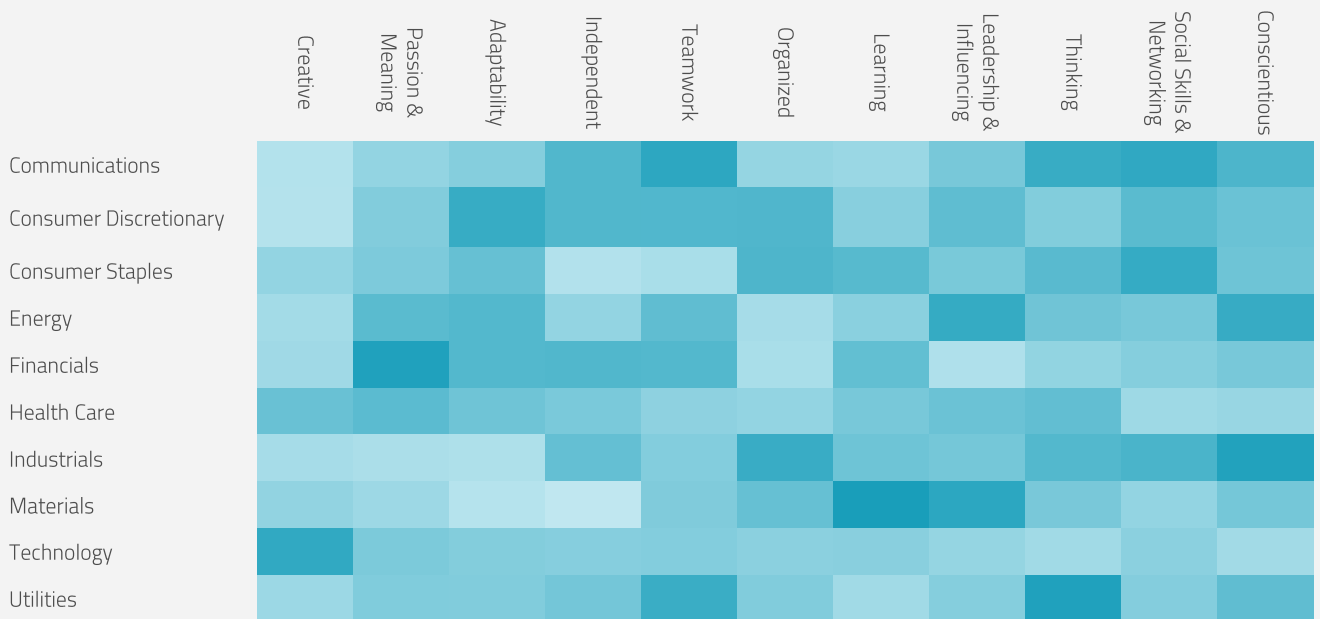
Percentage of all soft skills



⁴ McKinsey Global Institute (2017). [Jobs Lost, Jobs Gained: Workforce Transitions in a Time of Automation](#).

Industry soft skills

Soft skills are general skills valued across industries, yet each industry profile is unique. Creativity is most heavily emphasized in technology and health care, while the communications sector prioritizes Social Skills & Networking, and Teamwork. Industrials prioritizes Conscientiousness. These findings are perhaps intuitive, conforming to previous expectations. But others are less so. For instance, financials has the most Passion & Meaning heavy messaging. Materials industry positions itself as an industry for people who value Learning the highest.



Darker shades of blue represent more skill emphasis

Company profiles

Key questions

- Which soft skills do we emphasize?
- Do our prioritized soft skills align with organizational objectives?
- What's our soft skill profile vis-à-vis key competitors?

In this section we show how individual firms emphasize soft skills relative to each other. The point is to facilitate apples-to-apples comparison across firms. To see how your company compares, see Figure *"Company soft skills"*.

We present relative soft skill emphasis rather than absolute, raw counts of skill mentions. There are two reasons. First, relative skill emphasis ensures comparability across companies. Different companies vary greatly in ad length and this impacts soft skills mentions, and we don't want to reward companies just for having long ads.

Second, we already know how much companies prioritize all soft skills – an average of 20 times per ad. Relative skill emphasis moves past this question and shows how important soft skills are in relative terms. Each is presented as a percentage of all soft skill mentions in a company, and then compared to the sample average.

What firm-level analysis reveals?

Companies vary markedly in soft skill profiles. We discuss a few broad highlights, looking at the top companies for each skill and some consequent implications for attracting talent.

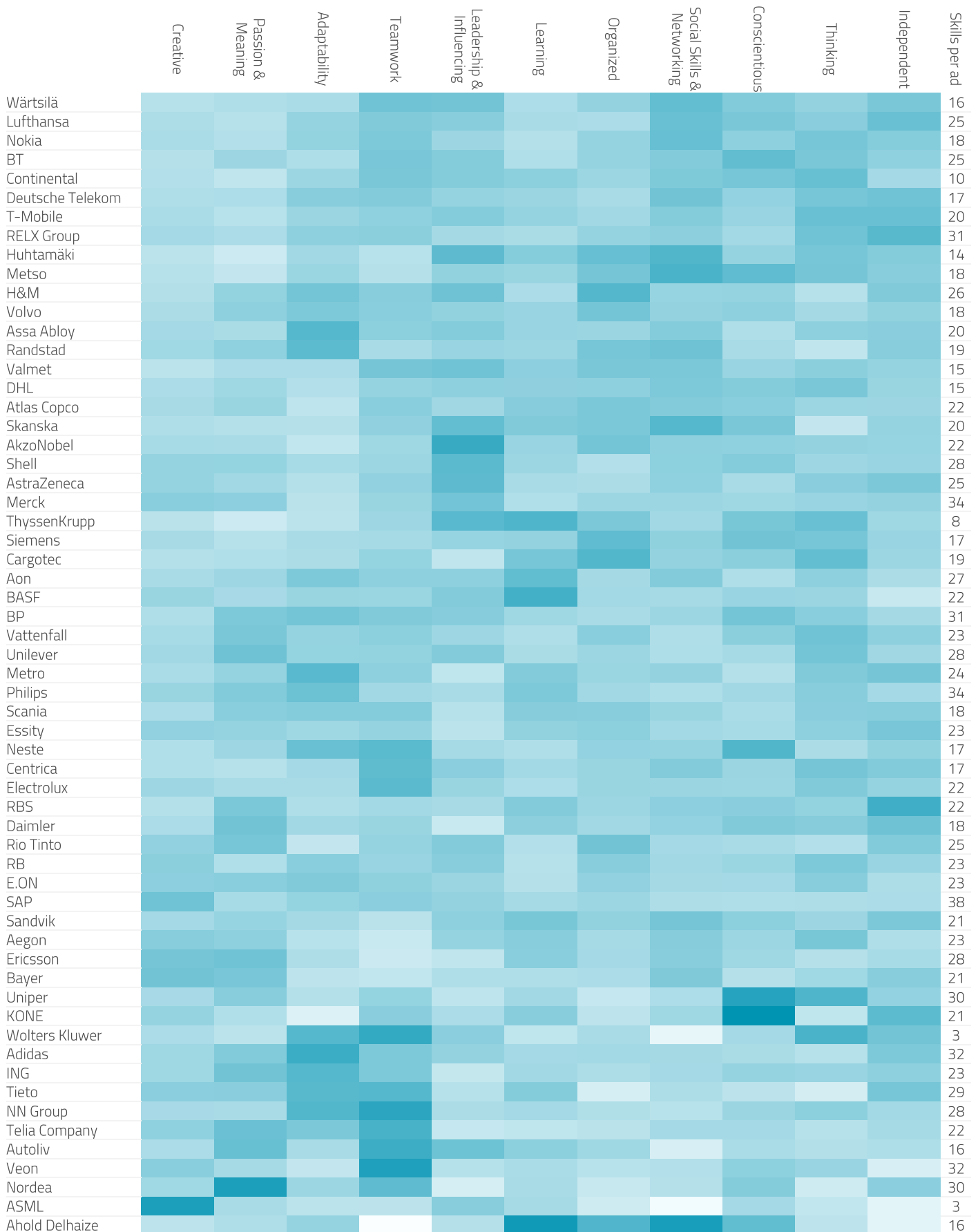
Capturing soft skills

To comprehensively capture soft skills in our large sample, we built an extensive dictionary of around 650 key words and phrases. This dictionary drew from three sources: the European Commission's Skills and Competencies framework; the European Dictionary of Skills and Competencies; and commonly occurring words and phrases in our sample. We then categorized our dictionary into 11 key soft skills. Lastly, we measured skill occurrences in each ad and looked at the relative emphasis of each of the 11 skills.

There are some caveats. While we were thorough and exhaustive in building the dictionary, and we adapted the European Commission's best-in-class framework, the findings reflect our choices in the dictionary. Despite an average ad count of 399, there are some firms with substantially fewer ads. A small sample naturally yields less generalizable insights.

Company soft skills

Top 60 firms by ad count



Darkers shades of blue represent more skill emphasis

Adidas emphasizes Adaptability most of any company – note the dark shade of blue. They're signaling to potential recruits a value on dynamism, and an ability to thrive in fast-paced, high-pressure, everchanging environments.

KONE emphasizes Conscientiousness most in the sample. This trait, a desire to do one's work thoroughly and well, is well-established in the academic literature as the most important personality trait for job performance⁵.

ASML and **SAP** prioritize Creativity most in the sample. These high-tech companies are signaling a value on innovation, curiosity, and open-mindedness in their workforce – an intuitive fit.

Barclays and **RBS** lead the way on Independence. They are more likely to attract confident, self-directed talent.

Nordea stands out in Passion & Meaning. No company in the sample prioritizes this more. Nordea is doing its best to attract enthusiastic, passionate talent, positioning itself as an employer that gives people the chance to make a meaningful contribution to society.

AkzoNobel leads the way on Leadership & Influencing, attracting talent with the ability to manage and inspire others, and well-equipped in matters of persuasion and sales.

Ahold Delhaize applicants are hit with sample-leading emphasis on Learning. People exposed to their ads are presented with opportunities to grow themselves professionally and personally. Further, Ahold Delhaize leads the way on Organization skill emphasis, targeting planners who can multi-task.

Metso joins **Ahold Delhaize** to lead the way in messaging around Social Skills & Networking, highlighting interpersonal skills and traits, and stakeholder management. While Social Skills were the second most important skill for an average company, these companies emphasized it even more.

NN Group and **Veon** message around teamwork more than other firms, and well above the sample average of 17%. Their ads signal a focus on collaborative people who work well with others and share knowledge with their team.

Wolters Kluwer, **Uniper**, and **Fiskars** prioritize Thinking most in the sample, signaling a value on people with strong logical reasoning and analytical skills.

Through these insights we know what type of soft skills profiles European firms look for. What is left unknown is how these findings align with formally stated organizational objectives and desires. For instance, are organizations striving for a more growth-oriented culture putting enough emphasis on Learning? Firm-level soft skill profiles help assess priorities: Does the profile we see here represent our broader aspirations? Are the skills we prioritize consistent with our objectives?

Job ads and diversity

Research shows that gendered language in job ads impacts job appeal³. Men find masculinely worded ads more appealing, women the reverse. We used the same set of feminine and masculine words as Gaucher, Friesen & Kay (2011) to rank the ads in our database. We found that masculine words dominate by a large margin. But **Nordea** and **Sandvik** were striking exceptions. With almost equal shares of feminine and masculine words, they are likely to have an advantage in attracting female talent. Yet in some firms, job ads likely deter potential female applicants, and hence make hitting diversity targets more challenging.

⁵ Barrick, M. R. & Mount, M. K. (1991). The Big Five Personality Dimensions and Job Performance: A Meta-Analysis. *Personnel Psychology* 44(1), 1-26.

Talent personas

Key questions

- Which talent personas are we attracting?
- Which talent personas should we be attracting?
- What do talent personas reveal about our organization?

In this section we focus on broader talent personas. They show what type of talent segments companies are seeking to attract and how behaviors and capabilities cluster together. Uniquely, the approach helps organizations identify latent characteristics – such as future-orientation – which can uncover under-the-surface organizational priorities.

We conducted a data-driven exploration to identify six personas across our sample of large European companies (see *"Talent personas overview"* for descriptions). Employing unsupervised machine learning, we clustered the 10+ million words in our data. Personas were then created to represent the key characteristics of each cluster.

Talent personas represent a comprehensive view of different talent segments – consolidating and condensing all the job ad information into neat cohesive packages. Clustering based on commonalities across large volumes of data also serves the purpose of fading job-specific criteria. This allows us to instead form more general profiles which – compared to traditional job categorizations – provide a framework for analyzing talent from a more behavior- and capability-focused perspective.

What the personas reveal?

The most sought-after persona is the Optimizer with a 25% share of jobs. This process- and efficiency-focused persona is favored by companies like **Huhtamäki**, **Metso**, and **ThyssenKrupp**. Coming in closely behind is the Influencer at 22%. Strategic and impactful, this persona is most commonly found at **RB**, **UPM**, and **Shell**. The technical creator Innovator (17%), the empowering change-agent Integrator (14%), the analytical relationship-builder Liaison (14%), and the flexible frontline-force Executor (8%) make up the rest.

Seeing a company's talent choices through personas can yield some telling insights into its priorities (see *"Company talent personas"*). Take, for example, **Sandvik** and **Metso**: similar businesses but attracting distinctly different talent personas. The former is exhibiting more of a change-mindset with its preference for Integrators, while the latter shows more concern for smoothly running operations by recruiting a high proportion of Optimizers.

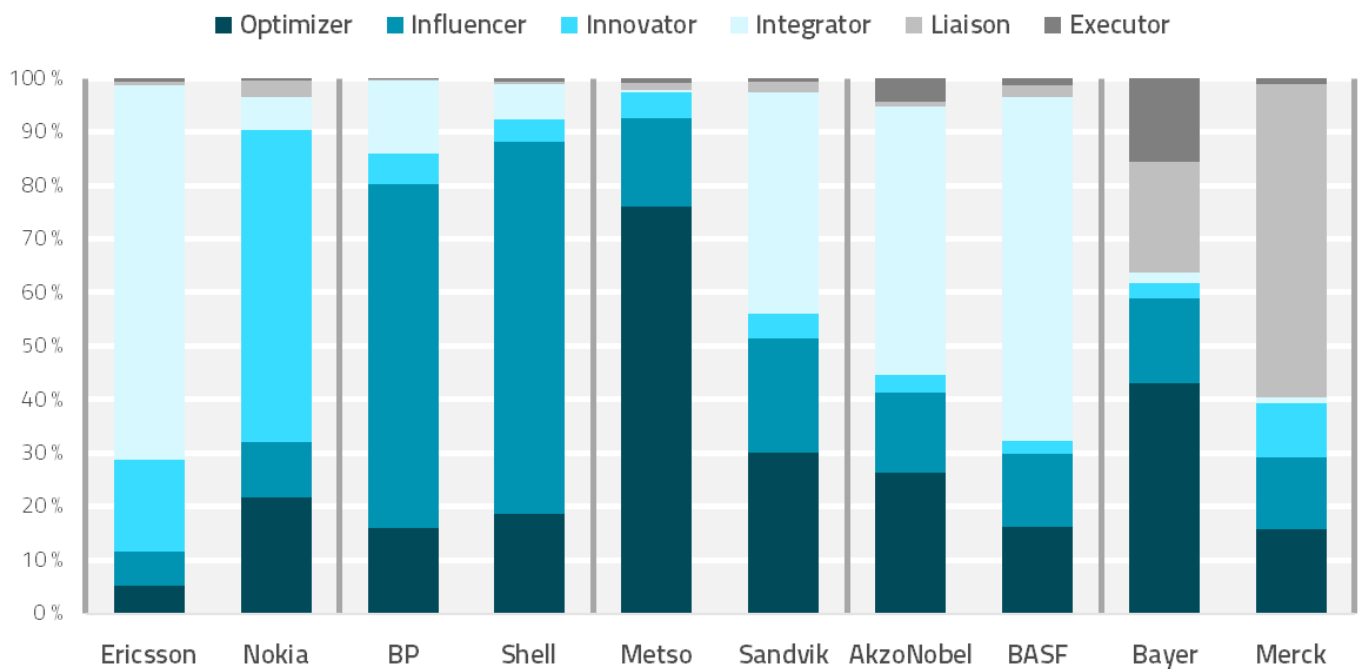
Talent personas overview

Clustering reveals 6 distinct profiles

Future-oriented		Present-focused	
Influencer Vision, passion, impact. <div>22 % of ads</div>		Optimizer Efficiency, control, results. <div>25 % of ads</div>	
Focus areas Strategy Engage, drive, align Plan & develop	Key traits Influencing Proactive Adaptable	Focus areas Monitor, review, define Coordinate & facilitate Compliance & risk	Key traits Technical Initiative Cooperation
Example roles Business Manager Key Account Manager Product Manager	Top companies RB UPM Shell	Example roles Project Engineer Maintenance Technician Buyer	Top companies Huhtamäki ThyssenKrupp Metso
Integrator Connect, share, empower. <div>14 % of ads</div>		Liaison Data, expertise, stakeholders. <div>14 % of ads</div>	
Focus areas Transformation Drive, lead, coach Ideas & potential	Key traits Creative Social Leadership	Focus areas Research, analyze, review Connect, interact, train Quality & standards	Key traits Analytical Network Learning
Example roles Integration Engineer Portfolio Manager Supply Chain Planner	Top companies Ericsson BASF Aon	Example roles Project Manager Field Service Engineer Application Specialist	Top companies Merck Philips AstraZeneca
Innovator Innovative, technical, advanced. <div>17 % of ads</div>		Executor Fast-paced, flexible, friendly. <div>8 % of ads</div>	
Focus areas Products & innovation Build, test, implement Share & collaborate	Key traits Teamwork Analytical Flexible	Focus areas Check, handle, solve Organize & optimize Sell & promote	Key traits Organized Accurate Interpersonal
Example roles Software Developer Solution Architect Data Scientist	Top companies RELX Group NN Group Deutsche Telekom	Example roles Sales Advisor Department Supervisor Quality Assurance	Top companies Ahold Delhaize H&M ASML

Company talent personas

Comparison of select firms



Another example is **Nokia** and **Ericsson**. The former invests in technical creators (Innovator), while the latter goes for more soft-skilled creatives (Integrator). Elsewhere, we see more similarity within a sector. **Shell** and **BP**, for instance, share a preference for Influencers, and **BASF** and **AkzoNobel** both emphasize Integrators in their recruiting efforts.

Companies have multiple personas, with one or two often more pronounced. This reflects differing objectives within organizations. For instance, we would expect growth and legacy businesses to have very distinct profiles. Different workforce compositions also contribute to diversity in this respect.

The personas are distinct from each other by construction. But two common themes emerge. First, soft skills matter. Each persona has a different emphasis, but soft skills always play a role. Second, personas can broadly be divided into more future-oriented and more present-focused groups. The three future-oriented personas – Influencer, Integrator, and Innovator – emphasize more words like *future*, *forward*, *change*. The more present-focused personas – Optimizer, Liaison, and Executor – include more words like *maintain*, *ongoing*, *continuous*.

These subtle differences identify organizations' latent future-presence orientation which is difficult to observe through other means.

In this section we have provided an overview of talent personas across large European firms. This choice reflects our aim to understand overall talent landscape, skill clustering, and company differences. One can see that companies tend to have dominating personas (e.g. Optimizer in Metso). It partly reflects our deliberate choice to be agnostic and comprehensive with respect to ad content. That is, we have not removed company statements as they in our view convey information about the type of talent firms are looking for.

In short, talent personas offer a high-level lens on talent acquisition that can bridge the link to organization culture and strategic priorities. On the talent acquisition front, they help understand target groups as cohesive personas, assess candidates' culture fit, develop employer branding, and re-think communication to better appeal to target talent.

Job ad deep-dive

Key questions

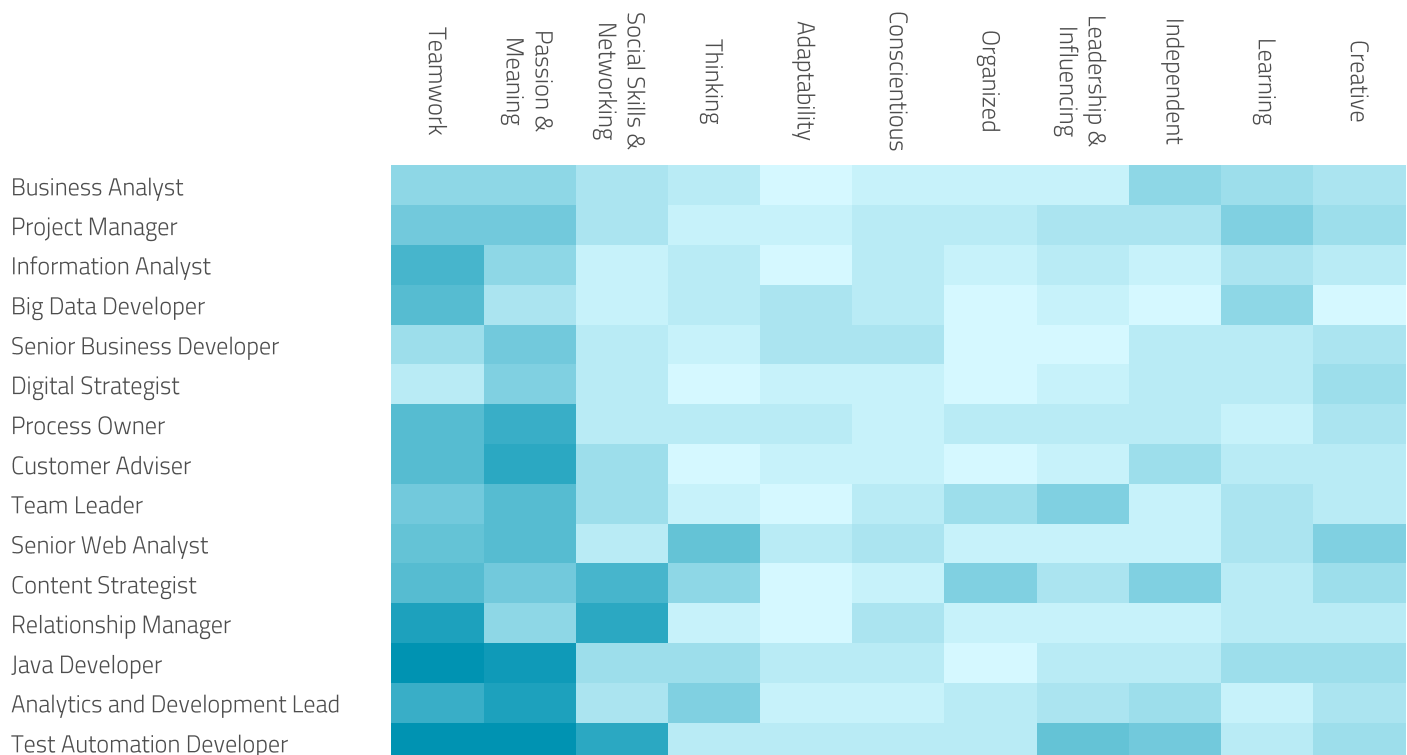
- What characteristics do we emphasize in different jobs?
- Do our soft skill profiles align with real role requirements?
- How do our role profiles compare with peers?

In this section our focus turns to individual job ads. The analysis enables organizations to get a high-precision snapshot of soft skill priorities and helps target actions where they are most needed. We gain in-depth understanding of how different soft skills are emphasized in different roles. We identify potential gaps, for instance, whether certain soft skills are adequately represented in a given firm. Further, the analysis shows how consistent soft skills are across jobs.

While analyzing the data, we saw firms where almost identical job titles had very different soft skill profiles. This likely reflects lack of coordination and shared standards in recruitment practices. In sum, in-depth knowledge enables firms to ensure their messaging is aligned with company strategy, and better cater their ads to the target applicant pool. Well-positioned ads give applicants a better idea of what to expect from the position, and whether they have the right profile to thrive.

Role-level soft skills

Profiles of select roles in one firm



Darker shades of blue represent more skill emphasis

What deep-dives reveal?

Figure “Role-level soft skills” is a profile of 15 jobs for a single unnamed company. It’s an example of a within-firm comparison. In this section we use raw counts to capture soft skill mentions in each role. The analysis provides some noteworthy insights.

First, the profiles reveal company-level emphasis on specific soft skills. Teamwork and Passion are fairly consistently more highly prioritized across roles. On the other hand, Adaptability and Conscientiousness are consistently lower-prioritized in this firm.

Second, the profiles illustrate differences across roles. A few, like Content Strategist and Relationship Manager, prioritize Social Skills more and Passion less. Project Manager and Big Data Developer emphasize Learning, while Senior Web Analyst put focus on Thinking and Creativity. Team Leader leans towards Leadership & Influencing and Organized. In short, an analysis like this provides a uniquely detailed lens on organizations’ soft skill priorities.

Figure “Key Account Manager soft skills” shows a comparison of 10 KAM profiles in select firms. The purpose here is to illustrate differences in profiles for a job that should have broadly similar responsibilities across

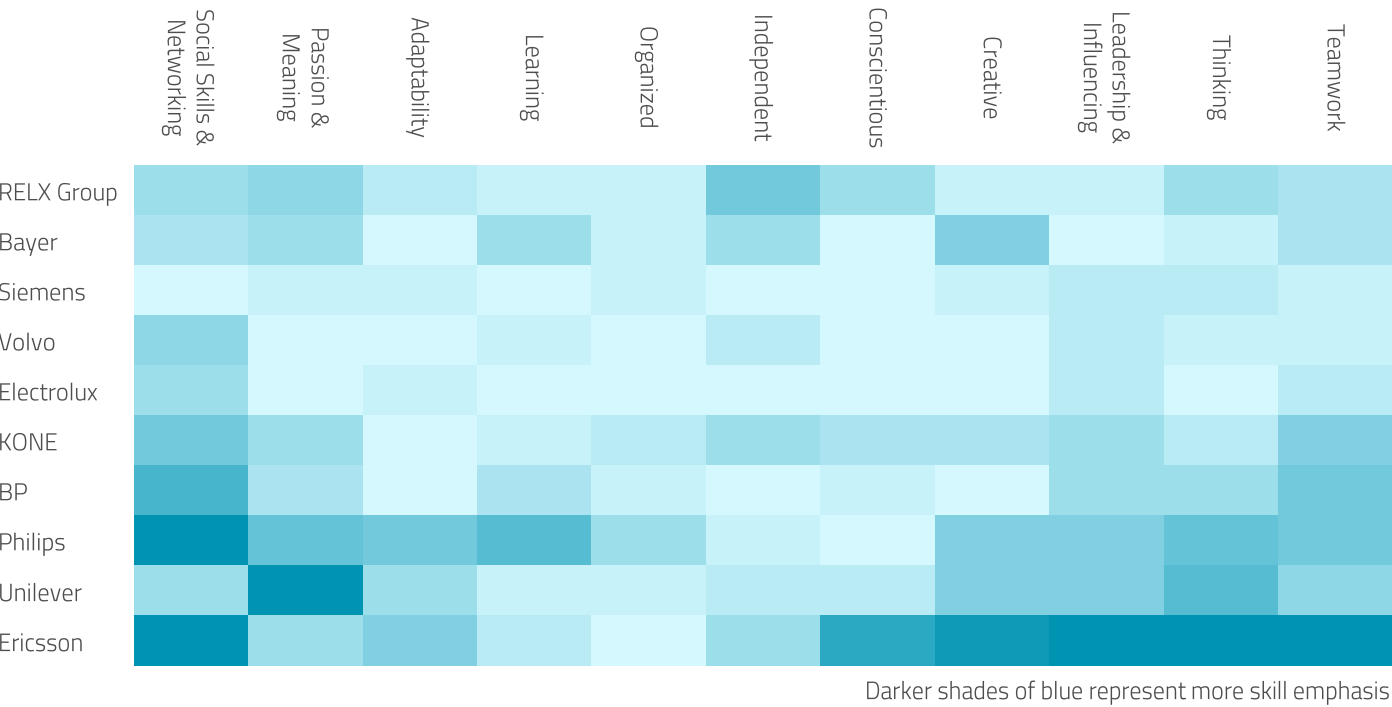
organizations. Stark contrasts emerge. **Ericsson’s** ad is rich in soft skill messaging: Social Skills & Networking, Conscientiousness, Creativity, Leadership & Influencing, Teamwork, and Thinking are strongly emphasized.

At the other end of the spectrum, **Siemens’** ad is light on soft skills overall. It likely either prioritizes harder skills, or else features more direct, informational messaging about the job. The key takeaway is that, holding job constant, firms tend to emphasize very different attributes. It reflects varying talent priorities across firms.

In sum, ad-specific deep-dives enable companies to assess how well soft skill profiles align with the real needs of each position. It’s also an assessment of internal consistency. Further, deep-dives help identify internal and external best-practices to simply build better job ads. Organizations with large worker inflows could even do A/B testing to optimize their soft skill profiles. Through cross-firm comparisons, an organization can identify differences and similarities in individual roles. This can be especially helpful with critical or high-demand roles.

Key Account Manager soft skills

Comparison of select firms



Conclusion

We conclude with few key points. First, firms vary markedly in their soft skills emphasis. Some firms put them front and center, others less so. As soft skills are expected to capture a bigger share of the future human capital equation, we would expect the “runners-up” to put more focus in this area going forward.

Second, preferences for soft skills differ across firms. The emerging patterns indicate that companies have divergent talent priorities within industries. Strikingly this is true even between competitors.

Third, the personas provide a novel, data-driven lens to understand talent segments from a behavior- and capability-focused perspectives. This framework helps companies align talent priorities with strategic objectives and re-think employer branding. We present empirical evidence on how competing firms within different industries compare from a talent persona perspective. Interesting similarities and contrasts emerge.

Fourth, at a practical level we show how individual job ads can be assessed regarding soft skill content. Such analysis

helps map potential gaps and tailor ads for target audiences. Amid tightening labor markets, optimizing soft skills messaging can make a difference.

The business case for improved clarity around soft skills is crystal clear. Organizations need not only understand their own talent strategic priorities, but increasingly, also their competitors’. Few things are as informative of company direction than the type of talent it seeks to attract. Elaborate, high-precision talent intelligence can help here.

We hope this analysis yields novel insights and inspiration. We warmly welcome comments and suggestions. Stay tuned for more.

How high-precision talent intelligence can help organizations

Strategic resourcing

- Make sense of talent landscape in terms of soft and hard skills
- Ensure soft skill alignment with company strategy
- Stay on top of capability transformation

Employer branding

- Understand your target groups through talent personas
- Know what you are messaging to potential talent
- Differentiate yourself from the competition

Talent acquisition

- Improve understanding of soft skill profiles
- Craft more compelling messages to better fit target audience
- Ensure job ad language reinforces diversity objectives

Competitive intel

- Get insight into competitors’ talent priorities
- Get clarity where industry talent demand is heading
- Capture weak signals of competitors’ business priorities

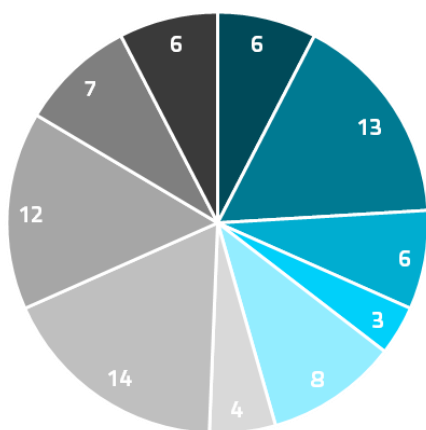
Appendix: Data summary

Key figures

Number of ads	54,078
Number of English ads	31,529
Number of firms	79
Average number of ads per firm	399
Average number of soft skills per ad	20

Industry breakdown

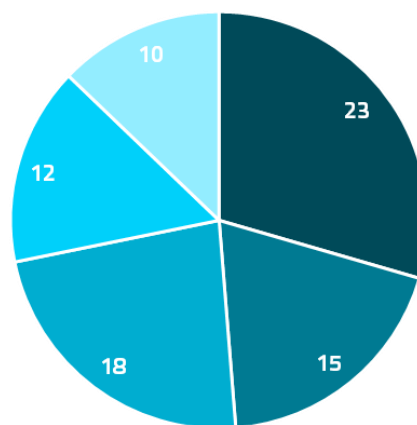
Firms per sector



- Communications
- Consumer Discretionary
- Consumer Staples
- Energy
- Financials
- Health Care
- Industrials
- Materials
- Technology
- Utilities

Country breakdown

Firms per country



- Finland
- Sweden
- Germany
- Netherlands
- UK

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