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SOFT SKILLS, NETWORKS, AND THE SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION IN RWANDA

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KEY MESSAGES

- Young adults seeking to enter the labor market often confront a skills mismatch with firms reporting difficulty finding new entrants with appropriate levels of soft skills. In Rwanda, as in many countries globally, young women face greater challenges to securing employment than men.
- To test whether the soft skills of young women and men can be improved through an intensive training course, and whether this training boosts their labor market outcomes, recent graduates from tertiary education were randomly assigned to a 2-week intensive soft skills training program developed and delivered by staff of the main national University in Rwanda.
- The program facilitated an accelerated entry into the labor market in a period characterized by COVID-19 related disruptions. These effects dissipated over the following year as more jobs became available in the economy and the control group's employment level caught up with that in the treatment group. Moreover, the results indicate significant job networks expansion for participants of the training, which could have led to faster job finding by treated youth.
- Women experienced larger employment gains than men but smaller earnings impacts, though these differences are not statistically significant. Training shifted women's job search from family networks to professional connections, modestly narrowing gender gaps in access to formal opportunities, consistent with recent evidence.
- These findings suggest that such trainings can help facilitate an accelerated entry into the labor market. Future research could explore cost-effective implementation modalities for the training and why the additional advantage on finding a new job experienced by participants of the training did not translate into higher earnings and better job opportunities over the long term.

ABOUT THE AFRICA GENDER INNOVATION LAB

The World Bank's Africa Gender Innovation Lab (GIL) conducts impact evaluations of development interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, seeking to generate evidence on how to close gender gaps in earnings, productivity, assets, and agency. The GIL team is currently working on over 80 impact evaluations in more than 30 countries with the aim of building an evidence base for the region.

The impact objective of GIL is to increase take-up of effective policies by governments, development organizations, and the private sector to address the underlying causes of gender inequality in Africa, particularly in terms of women's economic and social empowerment. GIL aims to do this by producing and delivering a new body of evidence and developing a compelling narrative, geared towards policymakers, on what works and what does not work in promoting gender equality.

CONTEXT

The school-to-work transition is a challenging period for young people, with youth unemployment rates often far exceeding those of adults. In many countries, this period can be more difficult for young women. In Rwanda, 35% of young women are not in education, employment or training, compared to 27% of young men. Young adults seeking to enter the labor market often confront a skills mismatch with employers reporting difficulty finding new entrants with appropriate levels of soft skills—such as communication, teamwork, and initiative—needed to thrive in the workplace (Cunningham and Villaseñor, 2016). Supplementary soft-skills training may reduce the skills mismatch and help youth enter the labor force.

WHAT WE DID

In collaboration with the Rwanda Development Board and the University of Rwanda, we implemented a randomized control trial for a 13-day, in-person soft-skills training for recent university graduates. The curriculum focused on effective communication, networking, and both interpersonal (teamwork, collaboration, trust, empathy, and negotiation) and intrapersonal (self-awareness, personal initiative, and perseverance) skills, and was designed to address employers' perceptions that tertiary education curricula produced technically proficient graduates who lacked complementary soft skills needed to effectively transition into the labor market. The program covered transportation fees to the training venue, as well as accommodation and subsistence costs. To facilitate attendance of women with young children, the program also covered accommodation and transportation fees for a caregiver. Given that the in-person training was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, all participants were tested upon arrival at the training venue and symptoms were monitored on a daily basis to minimize contagion risks. The training incorporated a range of participatory methods (e.g., case studies, simulations, and role play). Moreover, since participants lived at the University premises during the training, there was extensive social interaction that could have further facilitated the development of social networks.

We measure impacts using a baseline survey and three online follow-up surveys: the first about 4 months after the conclusion of the training; the second about 10 months after the training; and the final follow-up about 15 months after the training.

WHAT WE FOUND

Overall, our results indicate that the soft-skills training boosted labor market outcomes: individuals assigned to treatment report a 9 percent increase in the likelihood of earning any income (an increase of 6 percentage points over a control mean of 69%), a 17 percent increase in earnings, and a 12-percent increase in hours worked in the main job, on average over the 15 months after the training. However, these averages obscure significant and consistent time trends in the impacts, with large positive short-term impacts waning over time. Four months after the training, individuals assigned to the training were 14-percentage points (23 percent) more likely to report an active income generating activity than the control group, waning to a marginally significant 6-percentage point increase 10 months after the training, and no evidence of a remaining impact 15 months after the training (Figure 1, top). A similar pattern holds for earnings: individuals assigned to treatment report earning 35% more after 4 months, 19% more after 10 months, and a near zero impact after 15 months (Figure 1, bottom). However, the impacts on labor supply do not wane. At each follow-up, treatment-group individuals report working 3-4 more hours over the last 7 days than the control group. Taken together, our results suggest that the training facilitated an accelerated entry into the labor market that stagnated and allowed the control group to catch-up over the subsequent year.

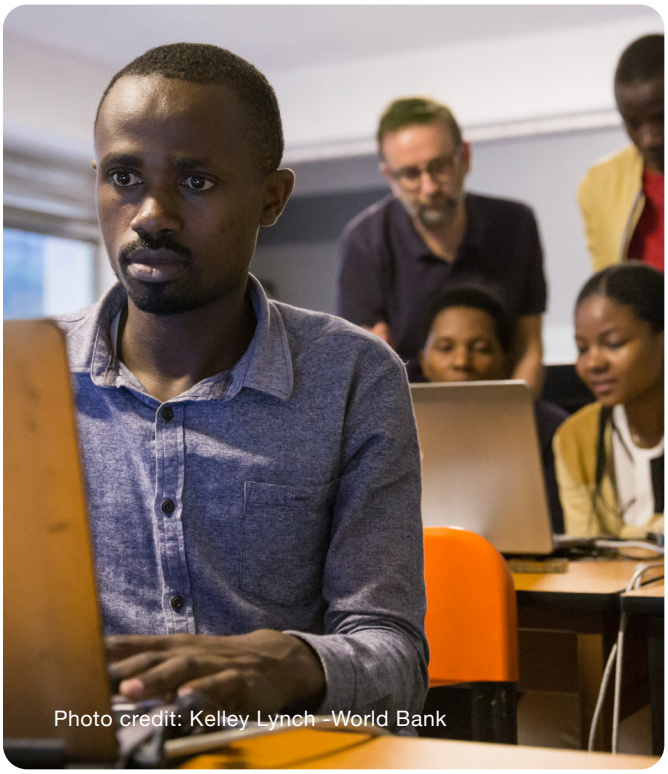

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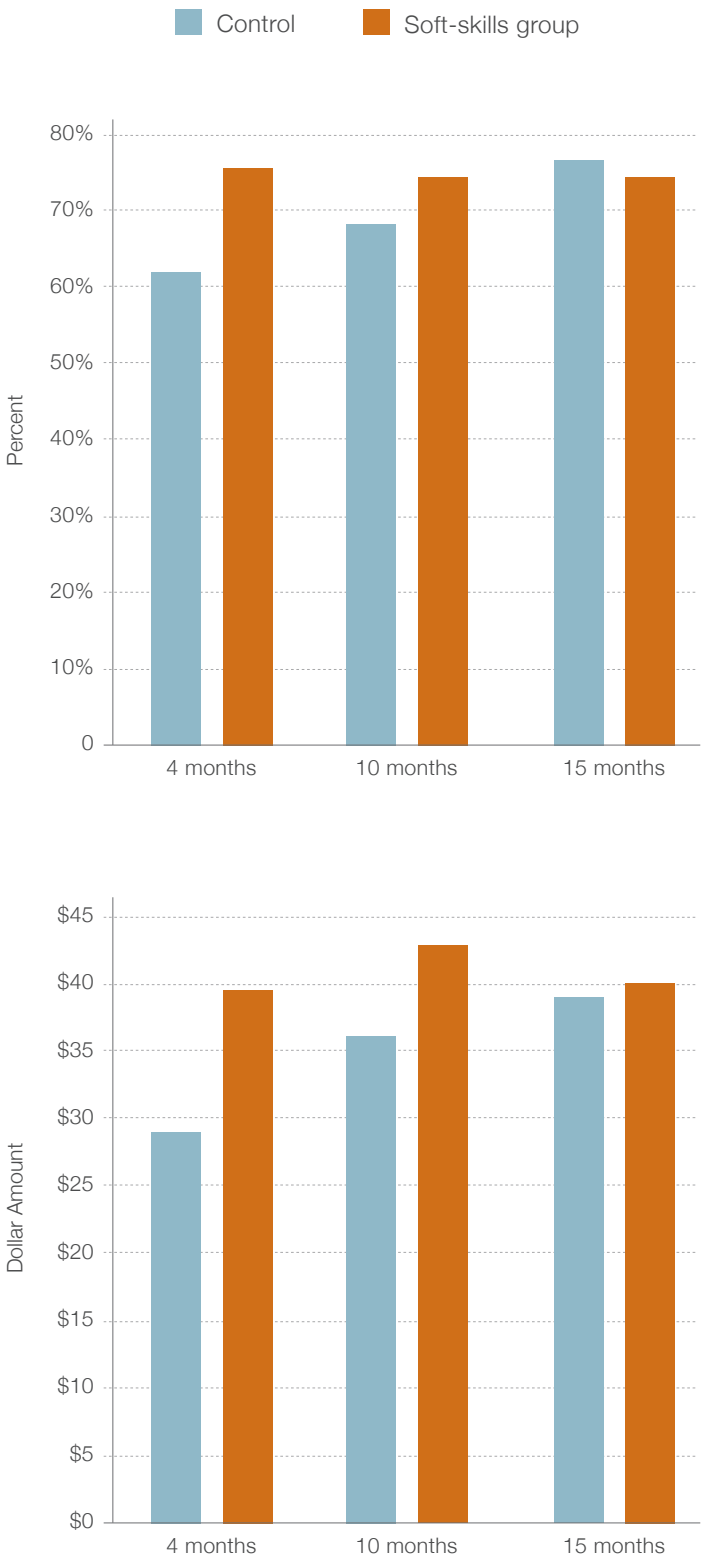
Figure 1: Impacts on likelihood of income generating activity (top) and earnings (bottom).



The 4-month and 10-month estimates are significant at the 1% and 10% levels, respectively.

MECHANISMS

Analysis of intermediate outcomes suggests that network expansion was the dominant mechanism for accelerated labor market entry. The program did not yield persistent improvements in self-reported soft skills, nor did it consistently boost job search activity, though short-term gains in job search readiness—including confidence approaching employers and maintaining a digital CV—were observed. The most sustained impact was on job networking: treated youth discuss jobs with 15% more people, including both pre-existing contacts and new connections formed during the training.

GENDER HETEROGENEITY

The paper finds that the soft-skills training had nuanced gender-specific effects on labor market outcomes and the types of networks used for job search. Women experienced a larger increase in employment likelihood and hours worked than men, but the impact on their earnings was smaller, though these differences are not statistically significant. In terms of occupational choice, women were more likely to work as employees, while men were more likely to work in registered firms. Regarding networks, the training shifted women's job search contacts away from family and friends; for men, the effect on discussing jobs with friends and family was positive. Importantly, both men and women showed significant increases in using social media and training-mate networks for job discussions, indicating the program fostered broader, more diverse professional connections for both genders.

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POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our findings suggest that soft-skills training can accelerate youth entry into the labor market, but may not yield lasting improvements in earnings or job quality. Although the program was not cost-effective at its pilot scale—given the high delivery costs of an intensive residential format—our findings highlight its potential value when adapted for broader implementation. Participants expressed a strong willingness to pay for the training (around US$200), suggesting that the training filled a genuine skills gap even if current delivery costs exceeded its short-term benefits. Embedding similar soft-skills and networking modules directly into university curricula could substantially improve cost-effectiveness by leveraging existing faculty, facilities, and academic credit systems, but may come at the cost of some of the key benefits of the program: larger networks stemming from engaging with new training mates.

For more information on the study, see the journal article here.