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GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF THE SOFT SKILLS CATEGORY IN THE DIGITAL HR ENVIRONMENT

ГЕНЕЗА ТА ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ КАТЕГОРІЇ SOFT SKILLS У ЦИФРОВОМУ HR-СЕРЕДОВИЩІ

The article provides a theoretical analysis of the genesis and evolution of the soft skills category in the context of the formation of the digital HR environment. It substantiates that under conditions of economic digitalization and the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence technologies, soft skills are transforming from supplementary individual characteristics into system-forming meta-competencies that ensure the integration of professional, social, and digital dimensions of human capital management. The evolution of scientific approaches to soft skills is analysed, ranging from the dominance of cognitive criteria in personnel assessment to contemporary concepts of “human skills” in the digital economy. The article synthesizes the results of international and national analytical studies confirming the growing role of soft skills in the labour market for the period 2025–2030. A periodization of the development of the soft skills category, their functional classification, and the key mechanisms for developing flexible skills in digital HR systems are proposed.

Keywords: soft skills; flexible skills; digitalization; digital HR environment; personnel management; competencies; HR analytics; labour market.

У статті здійснено комплексний теоретичний аналіз генези та еволюції категорії soft skills у контексті формування цифрового HR-середовища. Обґрунтовано, що в умовах цифровізації економіки та широкого впровадження технологій штучного інтелекту гнучкі навички трансформуються від допоміжних індивідуальних характеристик працівника до системоутворюючих метакомпетентностей, які забезпечують інтеграцію професійних, соціальних і цифрових складових управління людським капіталом. Проаналізовано еволюцію наукових підходів до soft skills від домінування когнітивних критеріїв в оцінюванні персоналу до сучасних концепцій «людських навичок» цифрової економіки. Особливу увагу приділено трансформації функціональної ролі soft skills у системах управління персоналом, що зазнають цифрових змін. Узагальнення результатів міжнародних і національних аналітичних досліджень свідчить про зростання попиту на адаптивність, критичне мислення, комунікацію, емоційну саморегуляцію та здатність до навчання впродовж життя на ринку праці у 2025–2030 роках. Доведено, що посилення автоматизації рутинних і формалізованих завдань не знижує, а, навпаки, підвищує стратегічну значущість людиноцентричних компетентностей, які не піддаються повній формалізації або автоматизації. Це визначає soft skills як ключову ланку взаємозв'язку між технологічними інноваціями та ефективним прийняттям управлінських рішень у цифровій економіці. Запропоновано структуровану періодизацію розвитку категорії soft skills та їх функціональну класифікацію в цифровому HR-середовищі. Визначено основні механізми розвитку гнучких навичок у цифрових HR-системах,



зокрема на основі HR-аналітики, персоналізованого цифрового навчання, безперервного зворотного зв'язку та використання інструментів штучного інтелекту. Зроблено висновок, що цифрові HR-технології доцільно розглядати не як заміну людських компетентностей, а як інструменти, що підсилюють роль soft skills як метакомпетентностей, які забезпечують адаптивність, стійкість і довгострокову конкурентоспроможність організацій у цифровій економіці.

Ключові слова: soft skills; гнучкі навички; цифровізація; цифрове HR-середовище; управління персоналом; компетентності; HR-аналітика; ринок праці.

Statement of the problem. The current stage of economic development is characterized by the deepening of digital transformation, which affects not only technological and production processes but also social and labor relations, employment models, and human resource management systems. The digitalization of HR processes, the widespread use of automated human resource management systems, artificial intelligence technologies, and analytical platforms lead to qualitative changes in the requirements placed on employees as carriers of human capital. In this context, the category of soft skills has gained particular scientific and practical significance, as it is increasingly viewed as a key factor of workforce adaptability and effectiveness in a digital environment. However, a considerable body of existing research focuses primarily on the applied dimension of developing individual skills, while the theoretical aspects of the evolution of the soft skills category within the digital HR environment remain insufficiently systematized. The lack of an integrated conceptual approach complicates the formation of effective HR strategies aimed at the long-term development of human potential in the digital economy. This situation necessitates a comprehensive scientific understanding of the genesis and evolution of the soft skills category, which is essential both for the advancement of human resource management theory and for the practice of digital HR management.

Analysis of recent research and publications.

The issues of formation and development of soft skills within human resource management systems have become an object of active scholarly discussion in the context of human capital transformation and economic digitalization. In the classical works of McClelland D. [1], Boyatzis R. [2], Spencer L. and Spencer S. [3] the decisive role of behavioural and social competencies in ensuring professional performance and employee adaptability is substantiated, while soft skills are predominantly interpreted as relatively stable individual characteristics. Further development of these approaches can be observed in the studies of Goleman D. [5], Salovey P. and Mayer J. [6], which emphasize the importance of emotional and social competencies for leadership, teamwork, and managerial decision-making. In contemporary analytical materials of the Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [4], it is highlighted that under conditions of digital transformation, soft skills acquire a dynamic character and should be considered as an integral component of lifelong skills development systems embedded in digital HR practices.

In studies addressing economic digital transformation and labour automation, Brynjolfsson E. and McAfee A. [7] argue that the diffusion of digital technologies and artificial intelligence leads to an increased demand for skills that cannot be fully formalized or automated. These ideas have been further developed in more recent analytical reports of the World Economic Forum [8; 9], where soft skills are conceptualized as core «human skills» and meta-competencies of the digital economy, as well as in Deloitte reports [10], which emphasize their importance for effective change management and the functioning of hybrid organizations within the digital HR environment. Within the Ukrainian academic discourse, particularly in the works of Heiets V., Kolot A., Hrishnova O., Lisoher L., and Amosha O. [11], soft skills are considered an important component of human capital development and organizational competitiveness in the context of digitalization. At the same time, recent OECD studies [12] stress the necessity of institutional governance of skills development, taking into account the growing impact of artificial intelligence. Nevertheless, the issues of the genesis and evolution of soft skills as a scientific category specifically within the digital HR environment remain insufficiently systematized, which determines the relevance of further theoretical research in this field.

Objectives of the article. The aim of the article is to provide a theoretical understanding of the genesis and evolution of the soft skills category in the context of the digital HR environment, as well as to substantiate the transformation of their content, functional role, and development within human resource management systems under the influence of digitalization.

Pr Summary of the main research material. The formation of the soft skills category in academic discourse was not an instantaneous process but rather a gradual one, reflecting the evolution of views on the role of the human factor in economic and managerial systems. The genesis of this category is closely linked to changes in dominant

models of human resource management, the transformation of organizational structures, and the increasing complexity of the socio-economic environment in which enterprises operate. For this reason, soft skills should be considered not merely as a set of individual abilities, but as the outcome of the historical development of managerial thought and human resource management practices.

The initial stage in the formation of the prerequisites for the soft skills category dates back to the 1970s and is associated with a rethinking of the criteria used to assess employees' professional suitability. During this period, scholarly research began to critically reassess the dominance of cognitive indicators, particularly intelligence levels, in personnel selection and evaluation, as such an approach failed to explain why employees with similar intellectual characteristics demonstrated different levels of job performance. It was at this stage that the theoretical foundations for a shift toward the assessment of behavioural and motivational aspects of professional activity were established [1].

In the 1980s–1990s, the institutionalization of the competency-based approach in human resource management took place, within which soft skills began to be regarded as an integral component of professional competencies. In the works of Boyatzis R., Spencer L. M., and Spencer S. M., soft skills are interpreted through systems of behavioural indicators that distinguish high-performing employees and managers from average performers [2; 3]. At this stage, skills were predominantly viewed as relatively stable individual characteristics that could be identified and applied within HR practices.

A further expansion of the soft skills concept can be observed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, driven by the development of emotional intelligence theory and research in organizational behaviour. During this period, emphasis shifted toward emotional and social competencies that directly influence leadership effectiveness, teamwork, and managerial decision-making [4; 5]. Gradually, soft skills ceased to be perceived as a supplementary element of professional activity and became one of the key determinants of organizational effectiveness.

A qualitatively new stage in the genesis of soft skills emerged from the 2010s onward under the influence of economic digitalization, labour automation, and labour market transformation. Contemporary studies emphasize that soft skills enable employees to adapt to technological change and to perform tasks that cannot be fully formalized or automated [6; 7].

The current stage in the evolution of the soft skills category (2020–2025) is associated with

the formation of the digital HR environment and the increasing use of artificial intelligence tools in human resource management. During this period, soft skills are increasingly conceptualized as meta-competencies and “human skills” that facilitate effective interaction between individuals and digital technological systems, including AI-based solutions, and integrate technical and social dimensions of human resource management [8; 9; 10; 12].

The main stages of the genesis and evolution of the soft skills category in management theory and HR research over time are summarized in Table 1.

Thus, the periodization of the development of the soft skills category presented in Table 1 demonstrates its gradual transformation from individual behavioural characteristics of employees into a comprehensive system of meta-competencies that acquire key significance under conditions of digital human resource management.

The evolution of the soft skills category within the formation of the digital HR environment transforms not only the instruments of human resource management but also the very logic of interaction between employees, organizations, and technologies. Whereas previously soft skills were perceived as a desirable yet secondary complement to professional knowledge, within the digital HR environment they increasingly become a fundamental prerequisite for the effective performance of both employees and organizations as a whole. This shift is driven by the fact that digital technologies and artificial intelligence assume an ever-growing share of routine and formalized tasks, while human roles remain focused on communication, decision-making, adaptability, and responsibility.

At the initial stage of digital transformation, soft skills were still interpreted as individual behavioural or social competencies necessary for teamwork or effective leadership. However, with the spread of remote work formats, digital platforms, HR analytics, and algorithmic management systems, it has become evident that possession of isolated skills no longer guarantees professional success. Employees are required to learn rapidly, integrate different types of knowledge, operate under conditions of uncertainty, and interact not only with other people but also with digital systems. That is why in the digital HR environment there is a shift from understanding soft skills as a set of competencies to understanding them as meta-competencies, i.e. universal abilities that ensure the development, updating and effective use of other skills. In this context, soft skills perform an integrative function by combining professional

Table 1

Periodization of the development of the soft skills category in academic research

Stage of development	Time period	Key academic approaches	Core interpretation of soft skills
Stage I. Formation of preconditions	1970s	Critique of the cognitive approach to personnel assessment	Intangible employee characteristics are viewed as an alternative to the dominance of intelligence-based indicators; emphasis is placed on motivational and behavioural aspects of job performance
Stage II. Institutionalization of the competency-based approach	1980s–1990s	Competency-based approach in human resource management	Soft skills are interpreted as a component of professional competencies expressed through behavioural indicators of effective performance; skills are considered relatively stable
Stage III. Expansion of the conceptual content	Late 1990s – early 2000s	Emotional intelligence theory; organizational behaviour	Soft skills include emotional and social competencies; their role in leadership, teamwork, and interpersonal communication increases
Stage IV. Reinterpretation under digitalization	2010s	Digital economy; labour automation	Soft skills are viewed as skills that cannot be fully formalized or automated; their importance for employee adaptability to technological change intensifies
Stage V. Conceptualization in the digital hr environment	2020–2025	Digital HR systems; artificial intelligence; meta-competency approach	Soft skills acquire the status of meta-competencies and «human skills» that ensure effective interaction between individuals and digital and AI-based systems

Source: compiled by the authors

knowledge, digital tools, and social interactions into a coherent system.

The growing role of soft skills in the contemporary economy is confirmed by the findings of authoritative international analytical studies devoted to labour market transformation under conditions of digitalization and the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence technologies. In particular, the World Economic Forum's "Future of Jobs Report" (2025) indicates that approximately 39% of core employee skills are expected to undergo significant changes by 2030, reflecting the rapid evolution of competency requirements and the increasing importance of soft skills [9]. The same report systematically highlights critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, lifelong learning, and communication among the most in-demand skills of the future, i.e. skills that cannot be fully automated.

Analytical materials of the OECD Skills Outlook (2024) further confirm that in the context of digital and «green» economic transformation, demand for soft skills is growing faster than for purely technical skills [13]. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development emphasizes that flexible skills enable employees to adapt to change, work effectively with new technologies, and interact efficiently within complex organizational systems. Particular attention is given to such characteristics as the ability to cope with uncertainty, social interaction,

responsibility, and self-regulation, which are considered critically important for labour market resilience.

The conclusions of Deloitte's Global Human Capital Trends (2024) deepen the understanding of the role of soft skills in the digital HR environment, highlighting that more than two-thirds of organizations view the development of flexible skills as a key prerequisite for successful digital transformation of human resource management [10]. Deloitte emphasizes that digital HR technologies, HR analytics, and artificial intelligence tools do not diminish the importance of the human factor; rather, they increase the demand for soft skills such as systems thinking, emotional maturity, leadership, and ethical responsibility.

Similar trends can also be observed in the national context. Materials of the State Employment Service of Ukraine emphasize that in 2025 employers consistently identify communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and self-management among the most in-demand skills, confirming the growing importance of soft skills regardless of the sector of employment [14; 15]. At the same time, Ukrainian HR labour market reviews record a shift in emphasis from formal compliance with professional requirements toward candidates' behavioural maturity and adaptability, particularly under conditions of digitalization of work processes [16].

An additional factor reinforcing the relevance of soft skills in Ukraine is related to demographic and structural challenges in the labour market. According to assessments by the KSE Institute, the decline in the working-age population and persistent labour shortages increase demand for employees with universal flexible skills who are capable of rapid reskilling, combining multiple functions, and interacting effectively in a changing environment [17]. Consequently, in the national context, soft skills acquire not only individual but also systemic significance, acting as an important resource for organizational resilience in the context of digital transformation.

Analytical forecasts by international organisations indicate that soft skills, which ensure adaptability, learning ability and effective human interaction with digital systems, will play a leading role in years 2025–2030 [6; 9; 10]. According to aggregated data from the World Economic Forum, the OECD, and Deloitte, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, communication, and lifelong learning capabilities will remain among the most demanded skills in the labour market. These skills demonstrate a stable upward trend in importance, as they cannot be fully automated and remain essential for performing complex managerial, analytical, and communicative tasks in a digital environment.

A projected assessment of the dynamics of key soft skills for the period 2025–2030 is presented in Figure 1, illustrating a gradual increase in their

significance within the structure of employer requirements.

The growing importance of critical thinking and creativity is particularly evident, which is associated with the need to make non-standard decisions under conditions of high uncertainty. At the same time, consistently high levels are observed for communication and emotional self-regulation, which ensure effective interaction in contexts of remote and hybrid employment. Thus, the presented data confirm that in the period 2025–2030, soft skills not only retain their relevance but also strengthen their position as fundamental elements of professional competitiveness in the digital economy.

The documented increase in the significance of soft skills (see Figure 1) necessitates a rethinking of their functional role within the system of digital human resource management. To better understand the contemporary role of soft skills, it is advisable to classify them according to their functional purpose (Table 2).

The proposed classification demonstrates that within the digital HR environment, soft skills cease to be a supplementary component of professional activity. They extend beyond purely interpersonal abilities, encompass cognitive, ethical, and organizational dimensions of professional performance, and fulfil a set of key functions that ensure the effectiveness of digital HR processes.

First and foremost, soft skills perform an *adaptive function*, which consists in enabling

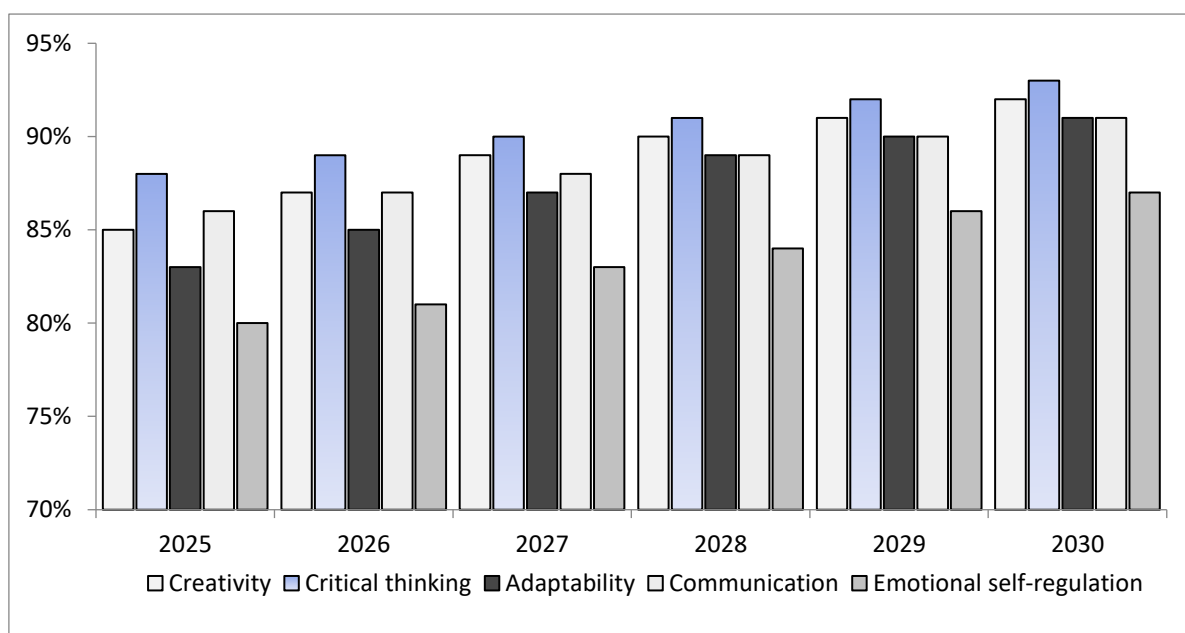


Figure 1. Key soft skills in the labour market (2025–2030)

Note: The values represent a conditional level of significance of soft skills (in %) based on the frequency of their mention among key future skills in analytical reports of the World Economic Forum, the OECD, and Deloitte.

Source: compiled by the authors

Table 2

Classification of soft skills in the digital HR environment

Soft skills group	Content of skills	Role in the digital HR environment
Cognitive	Critical thinking, systems thinking, creativity	Enable the analysis of complex situations, data-driven work, and decision-making under conditions of uncertainty
Communicative	Digital communication, intercultural interaction, teamwork	Support effective interaction within virtual and interdisciplinary teams
Self-organizational	Adaptability, lifelong learning, time management	Allow employees to work effectively under conditions of remote and flexible employment
Emotional and social	Empathy, emotional self-regulation, leadership	Ensure organizational social resilience and reduce tension during periods of change
Ethical and responsible	Responsibility, ethical thinking, conscious use of artificial intelligence	Support the appropriate application of digital technologies and algorithms in HR practices

Source: compiled by the authors

employees to operate effectively under conditions of continuous technological change. Digital human resource management is characterized by the dynamic nature of HR platforms, the implementation of HR analytics, and the use of automated tools for personnel selection and assessment [18]. Under these conditions, flexible skills such as adaptability, lifelong learning capacity, and stress resilience allow employees to master new tools rapidly and maintain productivity without significant organizational costs related to reskilling.

At the same time, soft skills realize an *integrative function* by linking the technical and social dimensions of digital human resource management. Digital HR tools operate with large volumes of data and formalized algorithms; however, their effectiveness directly depends on human ability to correctly interpret analytical outputs and apply them in practical managerial decision-making. Critical thinking, communication, and emotional self-regulation ensure coherence between data, managerial actions, and the organizational social climate.

The *regulatory function* of soft skills becomes particularly significant under conditions of digitalization, as it relates to ethical and behavioural aspects of human resource management. The growing use of artificial intelligence in HR practices intensifies concerns regarding the fairness of algorithmic decisions, transparency of recruitment and evaluation procedures, and the protection of personal data. In this context, soft skills such as responsibility, ethical thinking, and social sensitivity serve as instruments for balancing technological efficiency with the humanistic principles of management.

In addition, soft skills perform a *coordination function* in the context of the expansion of remote and hybrid forms of employment. Digital human

resource management involves interaction within virtual teams, cross-functional collaboration, and asynchronous communication. Under these conditions, flexible skills ensure the alignment of individual actions, support team cohesion, and facilitate effective distribution of responsibility among participants in work processes.

The *strategic function* of soft skills in the digital HR management system is no less important. The level of development of employees' flexible skills determines an organization's capacity to manage change, implement innovations, and cultivate a culture of continuous development. In this sense, soft skills extend beyond individual characteristics and are transformed into a collective resource that ensures the long-term competitiveness of enterprises in the digital economy.

Thus, within digital human resource management, soft skills perform a multidimensional functional role, encompassing adaptive, integrative, regulatory, coordination, and strategic aspects of HR activities. This substantiates the necessity of their purposeful development and systematic integration into organizations' digital HR strategies.

It should be noted that digital personnel management systems create fundamentally new opportunities for the development of soft skills, transforming this process from a fragmented training activity into a continuous and personalized element of human resource management. Unlike traditional approaches focused on one-time training sessions or standardized development programs, the digital HR environment enables the integration of flexible skills development directly into employees' everyday professional activities.

One of the key mechanisms in this context is human resource analytics and data-based competency development. Digital HR platforms enable the accumulation and analysis of data on

employees' behavioural patterns, outcomes of team interactions, feedback, and professional development dynamics. Based on these data, individual soft skills profiles are formed, making it possible to identify both strengths and areas for improvement. As a result, the development of flexible skills becomes targeted in nature and is grounded not in subjective assessments but in analytical indicators.

An important role is played by personalized digital learning, which is implemented through learning management systems and learning experience platforms (LMS and LXP platforms). Unlike standardized training courses, digital learning systems make it possible to adapt content to employees' individual needs, levels of preparedness, and specific professional tasks. Project-based platforms, collaborative work systems, and digital communication environments create conditions for the development of soft skills through practice, including teamwork, problem-solving, conflict management, and coordination of activities within virtual teams. Microlearning formats, managerial scenario simulations, case-based modules, and interactive learning approaches contribute to the development of such soft skills as critical thinking, communication, leadership, and decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. In this context, the development of soft skills takes place not outside work activities, but directly within the process of performing professional tasks.

A separate mechanism for the development of soft skills in digital HR systems is digital feedback and continuous assessment systems. Assessment tools, digital surveys, and ongoing feedback from colleagues and managers enable employees to quickly assess the level of development of their behavioural competencies. This fosters reflection, self-regulation, and personal responsibility for professional growth, which constitute core elements of contemporary meta-competencies.

The use of artificial intelligence in the development of soft skills is also gaining significant importance. AI algorithms are applied to recommend personalized learning pathways, analyse communication styles, simulate managerial scenarios, and forecast workforce development needs. At the same time, the effectiveness of such tools directly depends on the level of development of soft skills themselves, particularly critical thinking and ethical responsibility, which highlights the interdependence between technological and human components of digital HR systems.

At the same time, the effectiveness of digital mechanisms for developing soft skills largely depends on managerial approaches and the

overall human resource management strategy of the enterprise. Without a clear recognition of the value of flexible skills, digital tools risk becoming merely a formal element of HR practices. Therefore, the development of soft skills should be integrated into strategic human resource management documents, performance evaluation systems, and leadership development programs.

In digital HR systems, combined assessment models are increasingly used, integrating quantitative performance indicators with behavioural metrics. This approach makes it possible to consider not only the achievement of results but also the manner in which they are attained, which is fundamentally important for the development of such soft skills as teamwork, responsibility, and leadership.

Moreover, digital HR systems create conditions for managing the development of soft skills across different stages of the employee lifecycle. Already at the recruitment stage, digital tools enable the identification of candidates' behavioural characteristics and the prediction of their fit with organizational culture. During the onboarding stage, the development of soft skills is supported through digital induction programs that foster basic interaction and self-regulation skills. In subsequent stages of career development, flexible skills become the foundation for preparing future leaders and managers.

A distinct role in the development of soft skills is played by digital mentoring and coaching. Modern HR platforms allow organizations to implement mentoring programs through digital communication channels, expanding access to expert experience and facilitating the development of reflection, emotional maturity, and self-management skills. Unlike traditional formats, digital mentoring provides flexibility and scalability, which is particularly important for large or geographically dispersed organizations.

At the same time, the development of soft skills within digital HR systems is closely linked to the formation of organizational culture. Digital tools can support a culture of openness, collaboration, and mutual learning; however, they cannot replace managerial decisions aimed at encouraging appropriate behavioural models. Therefore, the effectiveness of digital mechanisms for developing flexible skills largely depends on leadership examples and managerial practices that consistently communicate the value of soft skills in everyday organizational activities.

It is also necessary to consider the risks and limitations of digital HR systems in the development of soft skills. Excessive reliance on quantitative indicators may lead to a simplified understanding of behavioural competencies and

the neglect of the professional context in which they are applied. In addition, the use of automated solutions in HR practices requires heightened attention to ethical issues, particularly data protection and the prevention of discrimination.

Summarizing the above, it can be concluded that mechanisms for developing soft skills in digital HR systems form a multi-level and interconnected set of managerial decisions in which technological tools serve not as an end in themselves, but as means of supporting human potential development. Digital human resource management systems facilitate a transition from fragmented and intuitive approaches to flexible skills development toward a comprehensive, analytically grounded, and strategically oriented model of management.

Conclusions from the study. The conducted research has made it possible to substantiate that within the contemporary digital HR environment, soft skills have evolved from supplementary individual employee characteristics into system-forming meta-competencies that determine the effectiveness of human capital management under conditions of digital transformation. The analysis of the genesis of the soft skills category demonstrates that their content has gradually expanded from behavioural and social abilities to complex capabilities that ensure the integration of

human and technological components of human resource management.

The article proves that the digitalization of HR processes does not diminish the significance of soft skills; on the contrary, it strengthens their role as a key resource for organizational adaptability, resilience, and innovative development. This indicates a transition of soft skills toward the status of universal capabilities required for effective interaction between individuals and digital HR systems and artificial intelligence tools. The functional role of soft skills in the personnel management system has also been substantiated, and mechanisms for developing flexible skills in digital HR systems have been systematized by distinguishing analytical, educational, behavioural, and organizational components. This approach makes it possible to interpret the development of soft skills as a holistic and integrated process rather than as a set of isolated HR instruments.

Prospects for further research should be associated with deepening the quantitative measurement of soft skills in the digital HR environment through the application of HR analytics and artificial intelligence tools, as well as with the analysis of ethical aspects of algorithmic personnel management and the impact of digital HR systems on organizational culture and employees' behavioural patterns.

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