# Hard Measures for **'Soft Skill'** Learning Goals

CAPSIM 360

Professors and administrators alike understand the importance of soft skills in the marketplace. One needs to look no further than the fact that virtually every business school has at least one learning goal addressing interpersonal competence. While evidence shows that career success hinges on both technical and non-technical skills, it is the presence of non-technical, interpersonal skills that drives effective organizational leadership[1] and sustainable career success.
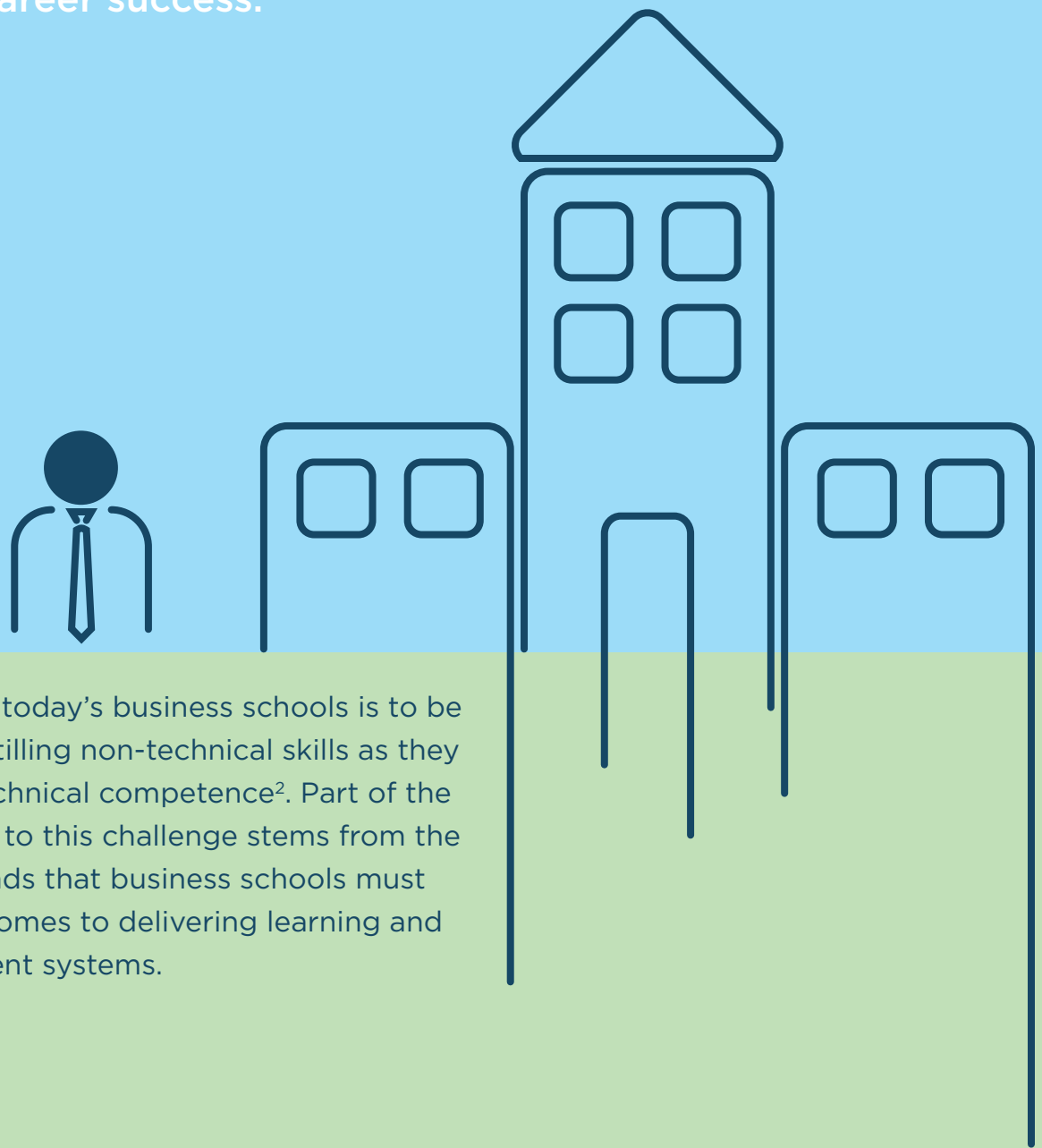
The challenge for today's business schools is to be as effective at instilling non-technical skills as they are at instilling technical competence[2]. Part of the difficulty of rising to this challenge stems from the conflicting demands that business schools must balance when it comes to delivering learning and building assessment systems.

A Central Tension

A fundamental tension exists around balancing the needs of the school, such as providing data for accreditation documentation, and the needs of the student, such as providing actionable developmental feedback[3]. This central tension exists because so often schools choose the easiest path to measurement — using only the most readily available data for learning assessment and accreditation. Yet, the availability of data does not predict how useful the information is, particularly when we consider how to best meet the developmental needs of our students.

We Can Do Better

The main point here is that we can, and must, do better to balance the needs of the school and of the students. This point was made strikingly clear in a special issue of the Journal of Management Education, which focused on learning assessment and accreditation. The authors of the leading article issued a wake-up call, "It is not clear whether any given accredited or aspiring school is merely interested in compliance or is using assessment for real improvement in student learning[4]."

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Put simply, there is a distinct need for more effective and efficient approaches to measuring acquired skills for both accreditation purposes and facilitating individual skill development. This exemplifies the need to go beyond accreditation simply for compliance and instead balance the needs of both the school and the student. This challenge becomes even greater when one turns a focus toward the assessment and development of non-technical soft skills.

The Current State of Soft Skill Assessment

The central tension described above becomes particularly apparent with soft skills. Even in the best-case scenario, the measures that business schools commonly bring to bear to assess soft skills fall well short of adequately meeting the developmental needs of students. One reason for this ineffectiveness is that assessment approaches such as knowledge tests, self-reflection essays, and case analyses continue to predominate business schools. Put bluntly, none of these approaches can be truly effective for developing lasting, interpersonal competence among business school students.

What we need are assessment approaches that efficiently capture soft skills with high-quality, career relevant, and valid measurements. Having such evidence-based information then allows a school to provide actionable feedback to students while also helping the students monitor their own progress and development over time.

Are There Other Assessment Solutions?

If we recognize that the current state of soft skill assessment is not living up to the promise of effectively developing these competencies in our students, a good question might be 'what are some potential assessment solutions around soft skills?'

A variety of methods can be used for learning assessment in general, ranging from those discussed above to others like essays, business simulations, and standardized tests. Yet, if you look across all of the available options there are only three approaches have been supported by large-scale empirical evidence as effective methods for assessing and developing interpersonal skills. These approaches include assessment centers, peer evaluations, and 360 surveys. Not only have these methods been supported by management research, they have also been substantially "field tested" outside of academics.

Of these three assessment options, however, assessment centers are often the most costly and time demanding to use, which makes it more challenging for many schools to implement them. Peer evaluations and 360 surveys are generally free of these constraints, which can make them more cost effective to utilize. These multisource feedback instruments represent a viable alternative to the current state of soft skill assessment.

Why Does Multisource Feedback Work?

Multisource feedback systems are widely used outside of academics and there is a wealth of evidence that supports them as an effective means to capture information about soft skills[5]. So the real question is 'why does multisource feedback work?'

It comes down the idea of 'the power of perspective.' We know from decades of research that self-awareness is essential for professional development[6]. Those who are more self-aware develop more effectively and more quickly than those who are not[7].
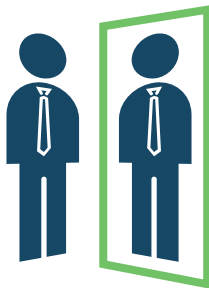
The power of perspective

An Underutilized, But Effective Tool

Despite the wealth of research that points to the value of multisource feedback instruments for skill measurement and development, the use of 360 surveys is very rarely found beyond a small handful of super-resourced elite business schools. Recent developments now suggest, however, that these valuable tools need not be limited to a select few institutions. The key is to find a 360-survey instrument that is valid and reliable, as well as scalable and applicable to business school programs and curricula.

Capsim360 meets these requirements by focusing on essential skills derived from the extensive research on managerial and leadership effectiveness. So the feedback from Capsim360 is about driving development in individuals to move them from individual contributors to leadership roles. Capsim360 is solely designed for the sake of learning and can be embedded within a course or used as a standalone tool occurring over the duration of a program. Because it uses real-life data from the workplace, it's ideal for working professionals. This makes Cpaism360 relevant to executive education, MBA programs, or any other programs that develops working professionals.

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Capsim360: A Closer Look at Effective and Efficient Assessment

Let's take a closer look at Capsim360 so you get a better feel for how this type of soft skill assessment really works and how it can be used to balance those two needs we discussed earlier — the needs of the school and the needs of the student.

Capsim360 measures information on nine skill domains that underlie managerial effectiveness:

> administrative   > leadership   > service
> interpersonal   > motivational > citizenship
> communication   > ethical   > technical
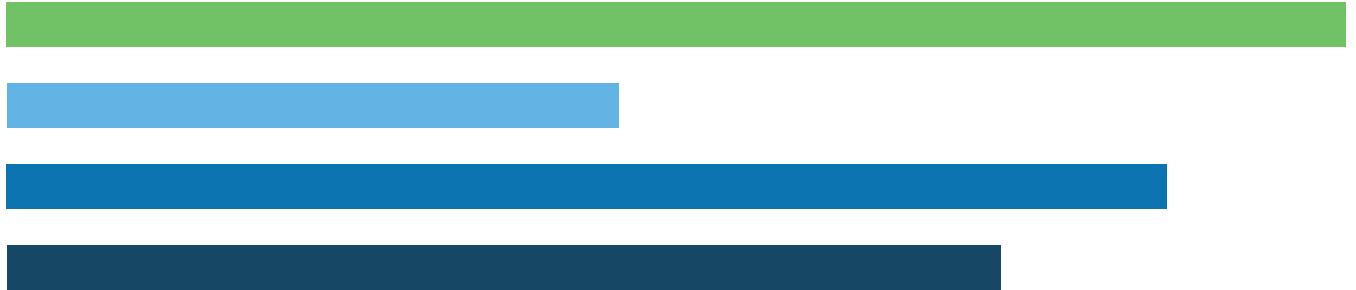
These domains come from the empirical research literature on leadership development and management education[8]. This is an important design feature because it ensures that Capsim360 has a solid evidence base for what is measured and that it spans the range of soft skills important to inculcate in our students.

There are a few other design characteristics that make Capsim360 ideal for business school contexts:

>   It captures workplace information from participants' managers, peers, and direct reports, as well as a self-rating.
>   It's delivered efficiently online.
>   It produces online and downloadable feedback reports.
>   It has a straightforward, streamlined, and user-friendly interface.

Participant-driven Development

One great feature of Capsim360 is that it is participant driven. In this way, individuals engage and take ownership of their self-development immediately, which is critical for successful professional development. This process begins right from the start, when participants drive the process of registration and invite potential reviewers. An additional benefit of this participant-driven process is that it relieves the administrative burden from instructors and makes the instrument more flexible in terms of implementation.

As you can see from the participant dashboard, Capsim360 is easy and straightforward to use. Participants can add respondents right on the dashboard by simply entering their names, email addresses, and work relationships (i.e., manager, peer, or direct report).

Participant-driven process encourages ownership of self-development and eliminates administrative headaches.

Streamlined and Concise Survey

Once respondents are entered, an invitation email is sent with a link to the survey, which only takes respondents about 10-15 minutes to complete. There are 48 behavioral items that comprise the nine skill domains along with two optional open-ended questions for respondents to include additional written comments. All the items are rated on a sliding scale and if a respondent feels they are unable to rate a given behavior, they can always choose a "not applicable" option.

Once surveys are completed, participants can see the developmental feedback presented at both the skill-level and item-level. Results are further broken out by respondent type (e.g., manager), which facilitates more accurate self-awareness for the participants. Skill-level feedback helps participants quickly identify the areas they are in most need of development as well as continued maintenance. Item-level feedback allows participants to dive deeper into the results to gain further insight and pinpoint specific areas of strength and weakness.

Streamlined surveys can be completed in 10-15 minutes increasing participation
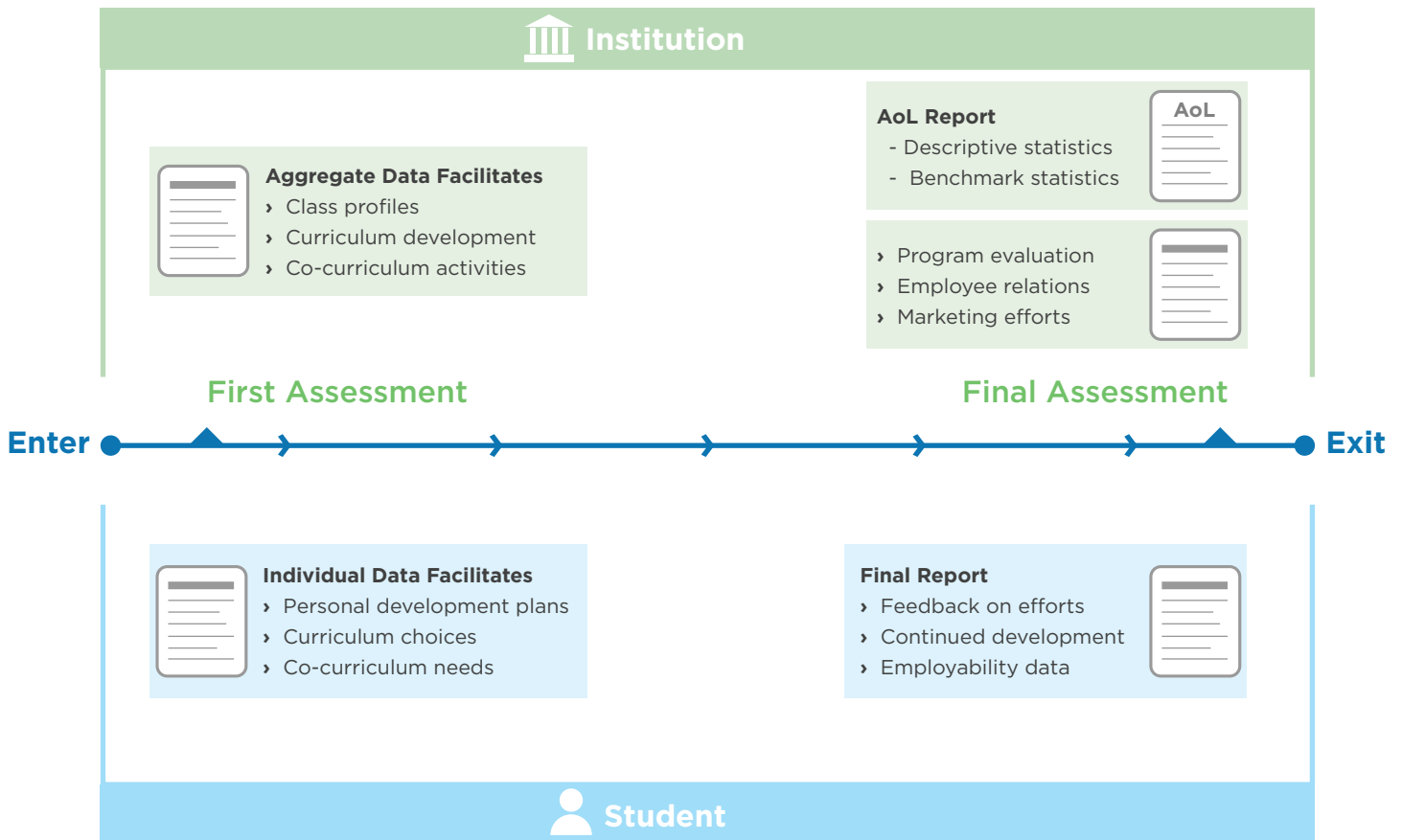
Rare and Meaningful Data for Assessment

Now that you've seen how the developmental needs of students can be met by giving actionable, direct feedback on the different skills and behaviors that underlie effective management, let's talk about how Capsim360 can make life easier for you — particularly around the assessment and accreditation process.

We are all quite familiar with learning assessment processes and how assessment fits with accreditation documentation. Accrediting organizations require mission-linked learning goals that produce outcomes, which are supposed to lead us to take action. This feedback loop is meant to ensure we're meeting our mission and fulfilling our obligations to various business school stakeholders. The primary focus of our assessment process is nearly always at the program-level when we collect data and make decisions, but it is important to remember that our data are assessed at the student-level and thus, can be brought to bear to meet the needs of accreditation and individual development.

The nice thing about an assessment tool such as Capsim360 is that it's flexible to fit your school's unique assessment process — whether you're assessing for proficiency, usually done at the end of a program, or you're assessing for change, done both at the beginning and the end of a program. The important point here is that regardless of your assessment design, Capsim360 ensures you're getting direct, reliable, and valid information from an instrument designed to measure the types of soft skills that link to both your college learning goals and the personal goals of your students.

| Dashboard | Results by Domain | Results by Item | Resources |

Your Capsim 360 results on nine managerial skill domains are shown below. Feedback scores consist of raw score averages and percentages of possible score for each respondent type. Note that raw scores are first normalized to a scale of 1-100 before computing the percentages. Gap scores compare your self-rating to how others rated you (negative scores mean you rated yourself higher than others).

Administrative Skills ⓘ

Respondent Type	Count	Average	Percentage of total possible score	Gap Score
Self	1	4.82	96%	
Manager	2	2.65	41%	-2.17
Peer	3	3.67	67%	-1.15
Direct Report	3	3.02	51%	-1.80

Communication Skills ⓘ

Respondent Type	Count	Average	Percentage of total possible score	Gap Score
Self	1	4.66	92%	0.00
Manager	2	3.03	51%	-1.63
Peer	3	3.57	64%	-1.09
Direct Report	3	2.37	34%	-2.29

Easily identified gaps give participants insights for better development planning.

Program wide implementation provides data for curriculum improvement and learning goal assessment

An Implementation Example: Assessing for Change

Let's take a look at what a typical program-wide implementation of Capsim360 might look like. Ideally, we will assess in the first term as well as the last, which will produce ample data that can be used for a variety of evaluation and instructional purposes. From this implementation design, Capsim can produce five separate reports that span direct feedback to students and about your school's program.

In terms of student reports, the first report that students receive is at the beginning of the program and uncovers areas in need of development. This valuable feedback can inform students' subsequent curriculum and co-curricular choices – helping them choose certain electives or activities outside of class to strengthen areas in need of development. The second student report is delivered toward the end of the program and helps them examine whether they were able to change as a result of their efforts as well as identify areas in need of continued focus. This second report also offers "hard data" to improve employability – providing evidence they indeed possess the soft skills that employers regularly identify as desirable but rare in business school graduates[9].

In terms of program reports, the first report the school receives provides administrators with a better understanding of a program's cohort – identifying various strengths and

weaknesses. This report can inform curriculum development over time or various co-curricular activities a school might offer to particular cohorts. The second program report occurs toward the end of a curriculum and offers data for overall program evaluation that can inform marketing efforts and create better relationships with employers – as you can demonstrate the growth in your students as a results of participating in your program.

Finally, a fifth report can be generated from Capsim360 results. This assurance of learning (AoL) report summarizes key assessment data for your school's accreditation documentation and includes descriptive and benchmarking statistics that link to your school's learning goals. This AoL report also allows you to close-the-loop – using the data to make curricular and co-curricular improvements in your program for alignment to your mission and more effective student development.

Beyond Mere Assessment: Adding Value to Your Institution

Now that we've talked about how Capsim360 can be used to provide high-quality learning assessment data that facilitate both accreditation and student development, we conclude with three additional opportunities to create value for your institution by taking soft skill measurement seriously.

The use of Capsim360 creates a source of differentiation for your institution — a unique value you can brand and market.

The first value is demonstration. Using a tool like Capsim360 gives you hard metrics for soft skills. This makes accreditation documentation easier and more effective. If you're using something that's tried and true and that's been field tested as an effective approach for capturing soft skills, why not leverage this kind of evidence-based tool?

Another added value is development. By using multisource feedback you can provide the rare feedback that is needed to improve career success. By doing so, you are directly facilitating the success of your school's alumni. As noted earlier, there's substantial research outlining the key reasons for career failure among aspiring managers, and it's overwhelming linked to a lack of soft skills.

A final value stems from differentiation. The use of Capsim360 creates a source of differentiation for your institution — a unique value you can brand and market. Despite strong empirical evidence and widespread adoption of 360s outside of academics, they're still relatively rare in business schools today. In fact, they are one of the most underutilized skill development tools in business school curricula[10]. Thus, it's a real opportunity for your school to differentiate itself all while meeting documentation demands for accreditation and professional development needs of your students.

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