TEACHING SOFT SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH SOCIAL INNOVATION PROJECTS

NARJISS ELMOUTANNA
Ph.D. Student
Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco
Elm.narjiss@gmail.com

Nadia MOTII
University Professor
Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco
Nadia.motii@gmail.com

Abstract:
This article presents a review of the specialized literature on the impact of social innovation projects on the acquisition and the learning of Soft Skills abilities by University students through two different kinds of training, first the "inside training activities" including « social innovation projects », problem-solving techniques, team-building exercises, and business simulations, then second the "outside training activities" which also includes entrepreneurial business initiatives and volunteer work. Therefore These activities are essentially aimed at building powerful soft skills abilities for University students through the different innovative teaching approaches that lead graduates to improve their employability and future career opportunities by learning these transversal skills according to the literature presented below.

Keywords:
Social innovation projects, Soft skills development, University curricula, Innovative Teaching Approaches, Young graduates’ employability.

Résumé:
Cet article présente une revue de littérature traitant l’impact des projets de l’innovation sociale sur l’enseignement des Soft Skills au Supérieur à travers essentiellement deux approches d’apprentissage différentes à savoir : "Inside training activities" ou les " activités de formation interne ", qui comprennent entre autres les " projets d'innovation sociale ", les techniques de résolution de problèmes, les exercices de team building… Ensuite, "Outside training activities" ou les " activités de formation externe" qui comprennent également les activités parascolaires et para universitaires liées à l’entrepreneuriat, le bénévolat, et le travail associatif. Ces activités visent essentiellement à renforcer les compétences psychosociales et comportementales chez les étudiants universitaires par le biais de différentes approches pédagogiques innovantes permettant à ces futurs lauréats d’améliorer leur employabilité et de faciliter leur insertion professionnelle.

Mots clés:
L’innovation sociale, l’enseignement des Soft Skills, les approches innovantes de l’enseignement supérieur, l’employabilité des jeunes diplômés.
Introduction:

In these uncertain and complex times, when economic and social turbulence is intensely felt, innovation is the key. We must know how to transform what has existed, find new ways, and reinvent ourselves in a world that is changing so fast that we can question ourselves, even faster than we can think. The question arises at the level of organizations, but also at the level of individuals and groups who are at the heart of these transformations. The central question of this paper is to understand which soft skills are needed to innovate in the social context.

According to Tokaruk et al. (2021), project activities in entrepreneurial business projects such as social innovation have a lot of potential for the development of "soft skills." These activities address not only educational but also social and administrative issues, creating for University students a huge amount of opportunities for "soft skill" development. In the same research, he highlighted that students' social practices and « out-of-class » activities associated with the practice of voluntary work and local government initiatives, within higher education are becoming a huge resource for the evolution of social skills.

The first key to a student's career success is the incorporation of soft skills training into university curricula. The need for soft training programs in a university environment requires essential pedagogical modifications including both educational aspects and professional practices to provide individuals with the abilities needed for both "being" and "doing" (Guerra-Baez, 2019).

Through two different kinds of training, graduates can improve their employability and future career opportunities by learning these soft skills abilities. The "inside training activities," including « social innovation projects », problem-solving techniques, team-building exercises, and business simulations. The second training is the "outside training activities," which also includes entrepreneurial company initiatives and volunteer work. These activities are essentially aimed at building great soft-skills abilities for University students.

Raciti noted in 2015 that higher education institutions should place a significant priority on teaching and developing students' soft skills through an approach to social and pedagogical contexts. Because of their close relationships to social adjustment, workplace adaption, and personal well-being, soft skills need to be incorporated and explored at the academic level.

As noted in the previous studies, project activities, entrepreneurship initiatives, and volunteer work are necessary but insufficient elements of soft skills development in the University curriculum. Therefore roleplay activities, critical thinking, « social innovation practices », and teaching students a variety of problem-solving techniques, according to some researchers, can all be used to help students become more prepared for professional environments.
The World Economic Forum (2016) noted that while a university's primary mission in society is to create and share new knowledge, it also has a responsibility to produce graduates who are "work-ready". Students are given the opportunity to acquire and trust the learning behaviors that « social innovation projects » require through learning situations that pose open-ended challenges or seek solutions to real-world problems. Role-playing is important but underestimated however, it is a crucial tool for preparation for anyone who might face emotionally charged challenges and need to be prepared to react appropriately. « Social innovation projects » must include examples from daily situations so that students may identify with the concepts and techniques being taught during their curriculum (Dean and East, 2019).

From the same perspective, Levant, Coulmont, & Sandu (2016) found that « social innovation projects » provide individuals the opportunity to practice thinking through their reactions to various life scenarios. Students with soft skills are more aware of the value of participating in real business simulations. While Levant et al. (2016) agreed that « Social innovation projects » contribute to active learning, Geithner and Menzel (2016) conducted a simulation study that incorporated role-playing. They found that the simulation projects increased the individuals’ soft skills and the advantage was that participants could make decisions without worrying about failure.

In this respect, through the educational process, students assume their professional and personal responsibilities to face new challenges, therefore all of the environmental circumstances and characteristics of these educational activities are anticipated to support the development of transversal abilities « soft skills ».

In this paper review, we will focus on the relationship between the teaching of soft skills development in higher education through “social innovation projects” and the impact on the employability of young graduates, on the other hand, we will emphasize the different types of innovative teaching approaches and analyze the different kinds of social innovation projects that enable University students to face the real-life challenges in the workplace and beyond.

1- **Social Innovation Projects and Soft Skills Development**

In companies, innovation is a crucial stage of transformation. This innovation stage is developed through the innovator's soft skills. However, innovation is a complex notion that is the product of different factors. They can be socio-economic, environmental, or cultural. At the same time, the collective dimension plays an important role in the innovation process.

According to Barron and Darling-Hammond (2010), traditional educational methods by themselves are insufficient to help students develop the desire to write and speak clearly, to
solve complex problems, or even to think critically. Specific programs and methods will be needed in order to learn these skills efficiently.

Innovation is a concept associated with high economic and social issues, the logic and dynamics of which are difficult to understand in human beings. For their part, soft skills or transversal competencies are a trendy expression, now present in the educational universe, professional training and the world of business (Duc et al., 2018).

Indeed, understanding innovation processes also requires an understanding of the characteristics and skills of the people who contribute to them. Thus, for an innovation process to be possible, several individual, organizational and institutional factors must come together. Innovation is the result of the meeting between the individual, the teams, and their work context with the great importance of soft skills. Soft skills, as opposed to technical skills encountered in training, are still poorly defined. In this sense, they are difficult to assess, manage and therefore to steer and control by public policies and managers.

In an innovation process, people are the main factor. They will bring their technical skills but also their soft skills in order to bring together all the elements conducive to innovation. However, the recognition of soft skills is blurred. Indeed, the study reports that there is a mismatch between the skills of employees and those that the positions held require. This is explained in particular by the fact that evaluation systems and training in innovation and entrepreneurship in higher education focus mainly on the technical capacities of individuals. However, assuming that innovation is the meeting of many factors, it is wrong to focus only on technical skills. It is then necessary to apprehend a range of individual and collective, complex and multidimensional skills. In addition, as part of this approach, it is important to understand and know the soft skills related to innovation.

The notion of innovation is frequently used. It refers to precise definitions. It is also linked to economic and social issues. However, its human dimension is often neglected. At the same time, we are talking about soft skills in education, vocational training, and in business. However, work on this subject does not take into account the role of these skills for companies. Thus, soft skills remain relatively unknown.

Innovation soft skills are defined as a dynamic and interrelated set of skills. These skills focus on the individual and collective ability of individuals to situate themselves, to interact, and to set up an environment with a view to transformation. Soft skills enter into cognitive processes
and conative, emotional, and relational factors. This allows individuals to act in an uncertain context and find solutions in new situations in order to innovate.

According to Rodriguez Herrera and Alvarado (2008), social innovations consider the coming together of various actors and social agents as well as various processes in an effort to solve an issue that has been identified. Social innovation involves using innovation to address social issues, although it differs from innovation projects aimed at enhancing market competition. The ability of institutions to create social values is prioritized in social innovation.

However, according to Godin (2012), social innovation was mostly studied throughout the first half of the 20th century as a process of societal adaptation to technological innovation.

II- **Social Innovation Projects**

1. **History**

In the mid-twentieth century, definitions of innovation took a technical, sometimes functionalist turn, embedded in productive thought patterns and at the expense of relational complexity. The individuals involved in the innovation process responded to the same normative interests as those whose soft skills were sought, as evidenced by this approach: "Innovation is a complex and multi-faceted process, from idea to market launch. It is made up of two main phases: an upstream phase, a kind of period during which the accent is placed on the management of creativity, and a downstream, fast, rapid phase, which leads to the placing on the market. Naturally, leaders tend to favor one or the other of these phases, hence the existence of upstream leaders and downstream leaders (Deschamps, 2012).

“Innovation skills” were identified at the end of the 1980s by sociologist and economist Alain d’Iribarne (1989). Distinguished from skills of imitation and skills of transposition, they “allow us to deal with new and unprecedented situations, by drawing on a heritage of knowledge and by recomposing, from them, the elements necessary for the production of ‘a suitable solution’ (Bernardeau Moreau, Delalandre, 2019).

In history, innovation and innovators were linked to the transgression of order, the reformation period, or the dawn of the Enlightenment, before finding a positive connotation after the Second World War with the progressive design of innovation as a process (Godin, 2016).
2- **Definition:**

Murray, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan (2010) defined social innovation as new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and forge new social connections or partnerships. These inventions benefit society and increase its capacity for action.

According to Sal (2011), social innovation offers new solutions for socioeconomic problems that stimulate economic development and business prospects, and are more effective, efficient, and long-lasting than current approaches, that is, social innovation adds value to society.

The specialized literature, however, also emphasizes the ways in which social innovation raises social values or advantages for society. According to Echeverra (2008), social innovation seeks to advance social values such as well-being, quality of life, social inclusion, solidarity, citizen participation, environmental quality, health care, the effectiveness of public services, or the educational level of society, as opposed to business innovation, which aims to increase productivity and competitiveness to enter new markets.

These innovative approaches to social issues typically work best when those issues have certain traits or exist under specific conditions. Mulgan, Tucker, Ali, and Sanders (2007) argue that when issues deteriorate, mechanisms fail, and institutions continue to reflect prior issues, innovation becomes essential. The issues that social innovation seeks to address are not straightforward rather, they are complex and challenging to resolve.

Veresné Somosi and Balaton (2016) assert that social innovation can operate as a correcting element in communities where there is a lack of technological advancement and that innovation is one of the determinants of economic growth. In the same perspective, Estensoro (2015) finds that further research is needed to determine whether and how social innovation might improve and expand its impact on society.

According to Mulgan (2006), social innovation refers to "innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need" and occurs within a variety of organizational structures, from for-profit businesses that frequently generate social value through their programs to dual mission organizations creating new hybrid models.

Innovation, according to the OECD definition, consists of implementing a new or significantly improved product (good or service) or process. It is also a new method of
marketing or a new organizational method in the practices of a structure, the organization of the workplace, or external relations (OECD, 2015).

Innovation is a multidimensional activity that requires the interaction of many individual, organizational and institutional factors. To innovate, you have to know not only how to create, but also how to implement. And in the creation and implementation, the human is the source of the process.

To meet all these challenges and as innovation appears to be the first skill of the future (World Economic Forum, 2020), training in innovation and entrepreneurship is rapidly spreading in many higher education disciplines.

Chell (2007) demonstrates that social entrepreneurs work within this continuity using a business strategy, they concentrate on enhancing social outcomes for a specific community or set of stakeholders. Consequently, the motivation behind social entrepreneurship is the production of societal benefits rather than maximizing shareholder or personal income (Noruzi, Westover, & Rahimi, 2010).

Social entrepreneurs act as change agents by utilizing innovation at a systemic level to alter the current system in society (Bruin & Ferrante, 2011) Above all, the "double bottom line" is what drives social entrepreneurs to perform both financially and socially, as many businesses with strong social objectives aim to achieve.

According to Hart and Milstein (2003), businesses can create "sustainable value" by using "strategies and practices that promote a more sustainable world while also enhancing shareholder value." Porter and Kramer (2006) go on to promote "shared value creation" as a strategy for businesses and organizations to further their social responsibility objectives.

Because research on social entrepreneurship and social innovation is still in its development, it is important to establish a common understanding of both the phrase "social innovation" and its connections to social entrepreneurship. Although there is much discussion about the connections between social entrepreneurship and social innovation, very few connections have been made (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). The necessity to compile various perspectives on social innovation and social entrepreneurship by conducting a theoretical synthesis of the subject of social entrepreneurship and its related sub-fields served as the motivation for this review.
3- Digital social innovation perspective:

To maintain place with the ongoing social changes, new digital technology-related skills and abilities are needed. Emerging as critical components for innovation, growth, and engagement in society and the economy. Therefore, Digital Social Innovation (DSI) is a recent field that combines social innovation and digital technology.

According to Bria et al (2015), digital social innovation is a type of social and collaborative innovation where users, communities, and innovators work together to co-create knowledge and solutions for a wide range of societal issues at a scale and speed that was unthinkable before the development of the Internet.

At the same time, to succeed in innovation, the corporate culture and the work environment are also important points. These elements will also promote individual and collective transformation. It is important to create a work environment that is favorable to the individual and the group. For this, there are eight characteristics: team coordination, collaboration, team cohesion, inter-team cohesion, autonomy, work organization, organizational support, and finally team support in the face of change.

In the innovation process, innovators are unanimous on the fact that soft skills are important. They note in particular curiosity, open-mindedness, the ability to work in a team, perseverance, creativity, and empathy. In order to engage in groups, it is important to develop relational skills. These skills involve collaboration and communication. At the same time, it is also important to develop conative skills to take action. These skills can be apprehended through extroversion, motivation, openness, intuitive thinking, tolerance, and perseverance.

4- Social innovation projects:

In social innovation projects, a group of student volunteers collaborates with a local nonprofit that has recognized a difficulty or issue. Then, the group of students will collaborate with the organization to develop a realistic alternative to that issue. Additionally, volunteers have the option of choosing to participate in the Research team, which places an emphasis on creating ethical and effective research procedures and offers the chance to collaborate more closely with academic staff on their research projects.

Local not-for-profit groups frequently have to choose which of several competing requirements to prioritize when it comes to resources. Operational needs come first, but most of these companies do not always have the time or economic resources to devote to
investigating new opportunities and trying to cut concepts that could potentially bring interesting initiatives to their operations.

Students will work on practical assignments as volunteers to create a workable solution for a local organization. Students will have the chance to collaborate with a supervisor to connect classroom learning and have access to extra resources in addition to directly collaborating with their community partner and student volunteer group. Students that take part will be able to develop the following skills:

- Teamwork, Collaboration, Decision-making and action, Professionalism, Strategic thinking, Design Thinking, Community and civic engagement.

According to The Young Foundation, (2007), four stages are noted in the creation of social innovation projects: (a) the plan, which must be suitable to the social need it aims to address the success of this step depends on the identification of the social issue and availability of the concepts and information required to deal with it, (b) implementation, which is dependent on a variety of factors, including the resources needed for pilot projects, which are the experimental step of innovation; (c) learning and development: the chances for developing new skills or systematizing experience as well as the collection of factors that encourage learning to determine success at this level, (d) the ability to reproduce social innovation to increase the beneficiaries, the dissemination of innovations at the local, regional, and worldwide levels.

In the literature presented above several essential elements for the development of social innovation projects are highlighted according to different authors’ statements. The "pillars of social innovation," as Buckland and Murillo (2013) referred to them, are five crucial elements for social innovation projects. They are as follows: (a) social impact, which aims to bring about social change and resolve an issue; (b) economic sustainability, which ensures that the financial plan will continue to work in the future; (c) The type of innovation, whether closed or open, gradual or radical, and the presence of innovative products; (d) inter-sectoral collaboration; the existence of various actors in the initiative and their relationships with one another; (e) scalability and replicability; scalability is the ability of the initiative to grow or multiply; and replicability is the ability of the initiative to be repeated in a different setting.

The following significant elements or criteria should be taken into account when developing social innovation, according to Rodriguez Herrera and Alvarado (2008): (a) associativity, which is the capacity to bring people together and mobilize them, particularly through the involvement of actors; (b) integrality, which is the expression of knowledge, perceptions, and reactions; (c)
sustainability, which is consistency across time made possible by innovative responses to resource limitations; this criterion is a prerequisite for reproduction; (d) innovation, which is a specific, transformative action that is typically collective in nature and that provides a solution to a particular problem through new procedures, methods, and organizational structures; (e) Replicability, or the ability for other authors to use the teaching of an innovative experience in many contexts.

According to Nobrega, Macario, and Pasa (2016), the issues facing contemporary society indicate to a process of social transformation that calls for significant adjustments to social structures in the interest of promoting social advancement and finding ways to make social practices more effective. The critical development of the existing social model in its economic, political, and social dimensions as it relates to growth, as well as the rise in social inequality, unemployment, and new risks, is highlighted by this approach in the social dimension.

III- Teaching Soft Skills in Higher Education through Social Innovation

The term "soft skills" was discovered in the United States Army in the early 1970s (Jacobs, 1973). It was taken up in the world of education, particularly in the more global perspective of skills assessment (Berry, Garcia, 2016), and then in management to describe the qualities and different dimensions of leadership.

Nevertheless, this expression, which appeared in French-speaking educational sciences in the mid-1990s, emphasizes semantically the functions and uses rather than the nature, and their common belonging to several skills (Rey, 1996).

In addition to technical knowledge and skills (centered on a practice) or professional skills (centered on a professional universe), the remaining dimensions are now referred to as transversal skills. Although the notion of "savoir-être" is still sometimes used (Faure, Cucchi, 2020). Many other expressions also exist, a recent report counts 28 French or English terms in circulation (Saint Georges, 2019), to which we can add: talents, personal skills, generic skills, polyfunctional skills, etc.

We can also identify in the literature the expression "transferable skills" (Lainé, 2011), defined as "specific skills attached to a given professional situation (job, sector or productive organization), but which can be implemented in another professional context".
This push for entrepreneurial education is closely tied to the goal of developing the innovative character of people in order to increase innovation. Many of these courses focus on technical devices - hard skills such as business plan training, agile methods, and creativity tools. More recently, and increasingly, students are also being asked to develop cross-cutting skills within or outside their curricula (Kennel, 2019; Arnold, 2019), and thus objectify qualities beyond the scope of the qualification.

1- Critical thinking and Soft skills:

Runco & Pritzker (1999), noted that It is possible to see critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity as elements of the innovation process. It has been noted that a creative process can be intentional or unintentional and is directly related to innovation (Van Holm, 2015).

According to Beale (2007), When a favorable discovery is made by accident, such as when no one is looking for it, it is known as accidental creativity or unintentional invention. Blind creativity, also known as serendipity, is considered accidental creativity and contributes to the inventiveness of both machines and animals.

Any creative process, whether intentional or unintentional, also calls for a review of the results. Self-criticism and reflection are necessary for evaluation. It is crucial to determine whether a concept is original or just a revision of something that has already been done.

More than half of the approximately 2 billion youth globally are expected to lack the skills or qualifications required to engage in the developing global workforce by 2030, according to the Education Commission (2017).

From this point of view, it makes logical sense to encourage the development of skills necessary for future employment. They should contain soft skills, technical abilities, business skills, and work-ready skills. Learning and training should be participatory, multicultural, interesting, beneficial, and applicable to the needs of the future job market.

Technical knowledge is essential for tackling the difficulties of the fourth industrial revolution. Programming code, computing, project management, financial planning, mechanical functions, scientific jobs, digital skills, and other job-specific talents should be included in this category of knowledge and abilities.

The term "soft skills" refers to a variety of abilities that are equally important. They include social-emotional learning, teamwork, self-confidence, compassion, a positive mindset, cultural
awareness, and communication. They also include critical thinking, creative thinking, cooperation, flexibility, and leadership.

Other traits that may help with employability include invention, creativity, hard work, resilience, enthusiasm, confidence, risk-taking, courage, and business skills. The value of the mentioned traits is supported by research, and new educational initiatives should be created to incorporate social and emotional learning SEL and improve learners' intrapersonal, social, and intellectual skills (Gibert, Tozer, & Westoby, 2017).

**2- Creativity and Soft skills :**

Creativity is linked to organizational innovation, through individual creativity (Amabile, Pratt, 2016). However, the creativity of at least one individual is a necessary but not sufficient condition for innovation. The myth of the isolated creator (or a couple of innovators) continues to be conveyed by the media following the success of individuals strongly associated with innovative economic success.

Academic structures that pay attention to their training, to balance technical skills and soft skills, allow their graduates to work simultaneously on the design, presentation, negotiation, and cooperation processes inherent in innovation projects. Work environments are decisive in the mobilization of skills and the form of creative cooperation, including for people with rare technical skills, whose confinement to strict usages entails the risk of a loss of cultural capital and social capital.

To be inventive, you have to be able to make mistakes, start over, break the rules, have time for reflection and discussion, benefit from sufficient autonomy. Creativity presented as the condition of competitiveness cannot therefore fully flourish in an organization that is too strictly regulated, with no freedom of expression for individuals (Hery, 2018).

**3- Cooperation and social innovation :**

Google can be seen as an example of offering, through the possibility of attractive projects for example, these environments that promote innovation by and with employees (Lallement, 2015). The work environment is an important part of this cohesion, and thus of the strength of the key transversal skills at the organizational level.

However, it is on this idea that the model of the working environment of Silicon Valley was developed. There is a mix of high-tech and counter-culture heritage through playful devices or
facilitators of the link between work and outside of work. The principle of these systems is to promote the commitment of individuals to the service of their company.

In general, the notions of diversity, multidisciplinarity, and complementarity of skills are expressions that come up frequently to describe teams as well as innovative projects. To these are also regularly added the mention of enthusiasm, energy, or passion.

4- Complex Problem solving and social innovation:

Recent work carried out around the organization of work shows that learning new things or solving unforeseen problems are particularly differentiating criteria between, on the one hand, learning organizations and lean production structures, and on the other, companies following a more traditional model (particularly the Taylorian model).

In fact, the results of many studies show a strong relationship between the form of work organization and the perceived quality of work by employees, with learning organizations offering the best scores in terms of recognition and meaning at work (Benhamou, Lorenz, 2020). Innovators fundamentally claim to love learning. Whether through the prism of the object or through encounters, the most of people interviewed highlight the pleasure of learning, the interest in novelty, discovery, and the importance of feeding the imagination.

We are confronted here with the capacity to produce new ideas and to synthesize plural ideas, resulting from this proactive and collective learning, which are nourished by important cognitive capacities (divergence, convergence, mental flexibility), but also by forms of social or relational intelligence which play a key role in the animation and revitalization of the network.

Discussion and Conclusion:

An analysis of the specialized literature shows that social innovation is a new concept, that addresses a variety of social issues, from community development, and health to working conditions and education. To increase the influence on community services or the productive dynamics of social processes, developing social innovation projects involves modifications to the current social practice. Making these changes requires an organized community or non-governmental group (Astrorga, 2004).

Additionally, since social innovation cannot be viewed as an individual skill or as the sum of abilities, but rather as a social competence shared by social groups, social learning gets involved
in this aspect. These adjustments to the current social practice should be followed by a wide range of skills from different social actors (Engel, 1997).

For social innovators, the interest in soft skills is crucial for the performance and transformation of companies. Indeed, soft skills make it possible to act and develop everyone's ability to react and solve problems collectively. Thus in an innovation process, it is important to value individual and collective capacities because they complement each other when they meet.

For these reasons, the first recommendation resulting from the report is to train and support the individual in the awareness, mobilization, and legitimization of soft skills acquired in training contexts and previous or extra-professional projects. Then, it will be necessary to support management and work groups in the process of integrating a diversity of profiles and recognizing the associated soft skills. At the same time, organizations will have to be helped to develop a working context allowing the development of soft skills.

The integration and awareness of soft skills to innovate should be done from the earlier training. Then, soft skills should also be part of professional training methods. Finally, it is important to value disciplinary and cultural diversity as a strength in the work of innovation.

The obstacles in the projects are those that prevent them from being completed. The management of social innovation projects must take into account these barriers in order to reduce their impact and, in turn, achieve the goals outlined for this type of project.

Additionally, the various obstacles to social innovation are covered in the literature presented above. The six obstacles to social innovation, are (a) a lack of technical expertise, (b) objection to risk, (c) financing commitments, (d) a lack of confidence in a member of the management team in innovation, (e) mixed groups made up of both volunteers and permanent employees, and (f) a lack of prior innovation-related experience.

Finally, it is advised that social innovation project managers consider these elements when doing their planning in order to guarantee the achievement of project goals. This will reduce the impact of any potential obstacles, particularly considering the project management team's expertise, technical knowledge, and experience.
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