# Entry-level teamwork behaviours through a groupwork lens: Findings from employer interviews and job advertisements

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***Abstract***: *Teamwork is a core employability attribute for business management graduates, yet what it entails at entry level is often left unspecified. Analysis of 75 graduate job advertisements, triangulated with 11 employer interviews, yields a behaviourally specific profile of effective entry-level teamwork. Using a groupwork lens, findings cluster into three domains: task approach and completion, social interaction and collaboration, and the individual in the organisational system. The result is a behaviourally specific checklist to guide curriculum design, assessment and onboarding, aligning preparation with employer expectations.*

***Keywords***: *groupwork; graduate employability; skills; teamwork; facilitation*

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# Introduction

Working with people is identified by the World Economic Forum as a critical workplace competency that can enhance performance for individuals, organisations and society (WEF, 2020). Teamwork appears *among the top four* desired attributes for graduates (Otermans, Nagada, Aditya & Pereira, 2024; Noor, 2023; NACE, 2016; Tushar & Sooraksa, 2023). In a critical assessment of entry-level requirements, Yeoh (2019) reports that across 11 studies (2000–2017) the two leading skills are oral and written communication and teamwork. Teamwork, being a team player and working effectively with others, has long featured in employability models and frameworks compiled by academia and employers alike (Heffernan, Feng, Angell & Fang, 2010; Pefanis Schlee & Harich, 2010; Bravo, Lucia-Palacios & Martín, 2016; Coetzee, 2014; Saeed, 2015; MacKenzie, 2021). Although the WEF (2023) does not list 'teamwork' as a core skill in its taxonomy, it identifies *working with others* as one of eight core skill themes and notes its growing importance. It is therefore timely to examine the importance of teamwork and the ideal behaviours of effective team players.

## Rationale of the study

Teamwork is a multidimensional social construct that employers expect of graduates when graduates enter the workforce (Thapa, 2024; Volkov & Volkov, 2007). Volkov and Volkov (2007) describe teamwork as a social construct that is used to describe a relationship between employees in the working environment. Teamwork skills enable graduates to enter a workplace in which team-based efforts and collaboration have become critical (Lowden, Hall, Elliot & Lewin, 2011).

The objectives of the study were to:

1. determine the importance of teamwork skills for graduates;
2. investigate the nature of teamwork skills for graduates; and
3. develop a list of behavioural attributes for a graduate in the workplace.

Situated within the groupwork tradition, the literature review frames 'teamwork' as a form of facilitated group practice in which task accomplishment is inseparable from process, mutual aid, and member development. Using a groupwork lens, the review organises evidence

around three interlocking domains: taskwork (how work is structured and coordinated), member interaction (communication, conflict negotiation, trust, cohesion), and the individual-in-system (roles, authority, norms, and organisational context). Drawing on Tuckman, Gersick, Bion, and Johnson and Johnson, the argument is that entry-level 'teamwork skills' are emergent groupwork behaviours shaped by developmental stages, facilitative structures, and cooperative norms; effectiveness therefore hinges not only on individual competencies, but on how groups are formed, supported, and reviewed within organisations.

## Literature review

### Teamwork and groupwork: Concepts and distinctions

Although the terms teamwork and groupwork are often used interchangeably, important disciplinary distinctions exist between them. In organisational and management studies, teams are defined as structured groups of individuals who share a common purpose, exhibit interdependence, and hold mutual accountability for collective outcomes (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993a). This approach emphasises clear objectives, well-defined roles, and performance criteria in a professional setting. On the contrary, groupwork originates from social work, psychology, and education and focuses on the development of interpersonal skills, mutual support, and the growth of both individuals and the group (Konopka, 1963; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Groupwork literature tends to emphasise the relational process: how members interact, support each other, and evolve together, rather than merely focusing on task completion or output. This distinction is significant as it suggests that teamwork behaviours observed in professional environments may reflect deeper group processes conceptualised within the groupwork tradition. Nonetheless, these two schools complement each other: teamwork research offers insights into goal attainment and efficiency, while groupwork scholarship highlights human factors such as trust, communication, and personal development that underpin effective team functioning. Integrating these perspectives facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of collaboration, recognising that successful teamwork often depends on the interpersonal dynamics emphasised by groupwork theorists (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993b; Konopka, 1963; Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

## Importance of teamwork skills for graduate employability

Teamwork and interpersonal skills are widely regarded as essential competencies for graduates entering the workforce – in many cases, they are viewed as equally important, or even more important, than technical or disciplinary skills (Kocsis & Pusztai, 2024a&b). Surveys of employers consistently underscore the high value placed on teamwork proficiency. For example, an employer survey by the Association of American Colleges & Universities reported that 70% of employers wanted universities to place more emphasis on developing teamwork and collaboration skills in students (AACU, 2009). In the context of business management graduates, Geel (2015) identified teamwork as the third most important employability skill, reflecting its critical role in organisational success.

Graduates who lack teamwork experience often face frustration when transitioning into the workplace. Research indicates that many new graduates feel unprepared for the collaborative nature of professional work, especially if their academic training involved little to no exposure to real team-based projects (Otermans et al., 2024; Crebert, Patrick, Cragnolini, Smith, Worsfold & Webb, 2011a; Crebert, Patrick, Cragnolini, Smith, Worsfold & Webb, 2011b). This gap between educational experiences and workplace expectations is problematic, given that most modern work is accomplished in teams. Otermans et al. (2024) and others note that individuals in today's organisations are mostly working in teams, meaning that a graduate who cannot effectively contribute to a team will struggle in many roles. In fact, 'most people are involved in teams every day regardless of the institution in which they serve' (Galbraith & Webb, 2013). Teamwork is thus crucial to the world of work in the 21st century (Otermans et al., 2024; Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2023a; Aliu & Aigbavboa, 2023b; Riebe et al., 2016a). It provides a way of organising work such that an individual can achieve more in a group than on their own (Bell, Brown, Colaneri & Outland, 2018). Complex organisational and societal goals are often tackled by dividing the work among multiple teams, each addressing a piece of the problem, thereby turning grand objectives into manageable targets (Shuffler & Carter, 2018). The advantages of well-functioning teams are widely documented, including:

- **Increased productivity:** Teams can often accomplish tasks faster and more efficiently by combining diverse skills (Katzenbach &

Smith, 1993a; Bell et al., 2018).

- **Enhanced innovation and creativity:** Collaboration sparks new ideas; a group of people with different perspectives can devise more innovative solutions than individuals working in isolation (Borrill, West, Shapiro & Rees, 2000).
- **Higher employee satisfaction and engagement:** Working in cohesive teams tends to improve morale and job satisfaction, as employees feel supported and share a sense of purpose (Borrill et al., 2000; Tannenbaum & Salas, 2020).

These benefits, however, are not automatic. The three benefits emerge only when teams are managed well and when individuals have strong teamwork capabilities. The emphasis on teamwork skills in employability frameworks and hiring criteria reflects the perception that *how* people work together can significantly influence organisational outcomes. At the same time, there is a tension in the literature between the ideal of teamwork and the reality in practice. On one hand, numerous studies commend the virtues of teamwork and call for more systematic training of teamwork skills in higher education (Riebe et al., 2016b; AACU, 2009). On the other hand, some research has pointed out that simply placing people in teams doesn't guarantee success; issues like poor communication, unresolved conflicts, and unequal participation often undermine team performance (Tannenbaum & Salas, 2020). This critique suggests that developing teamwork skills requires more than just group assignments – it necessitates deliberate instruction in team processes and opportunities for reflection on group dynamics. The current study responds to these insights by not only highlighting the skills graduates need for teamwork, but also by acknowledging the deeper group processes that underpin effective team performance.

## The nature of teamwork: Definitions and key elements

Teamwork is a multidimensional social construct, and a clear understanding of its nature is foundational to this study. At its core, teamwork describes the working relationship and coordinated activity between people — for example, Riebe et al. (2016a) describe teamwork as a set of interrelated behaviours, attitudes, and cognitions that underpin effective team functioning. Organisational structures today are often deliberately designed around teams to achieve communal

goals, which means the concept of teamwork encompasses both what teams *do* (tasks and objectives) and *how* they do it (processes and interactions). Over the years, many formal definitions of 'team' and 'teamwork' have been proposed across various disciplines. A synthesis of classic and contemporary definitions identifies several recurrent elements, which in this study are operationalised as observable entry-level teamwork behaviours. These include:

- **Individual members:** All definitions acknowledge a team consists of multiple people (usually with complementary roles or skills). Teams are fundamentally about *people* working together, and each member brings unique attributes (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993a; Kozlowski & Bell, 2013).
- **Interdependence and mutual accountability:** Team members are not just a group of individuals in name; they are interdependent, relying on one another's contributions, and they share responsibility for the team's outcomes (McEwan & Beauchamp, 2014; Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Sundstrom et al., 1990). Each member is accountable not only for their own tasks but also for supporting others, which fosters a sense of collective accountability for success or failure.
- **Shared goals and objectives:** Almost every definition highlights that teams unite around a common purpose or goal (Kozlowski & Bell, 2013; Gladstein, 1984; Watzek & Mulder, 2019). Teams exist to achieve objectives that individuals cannot achieve alone as effectively. A clear, compelling goal provides direction and cohesion to the team's efforts.
- **Coordinated tasks and collaborative effort:** Teams engage in *taskwork* – the specific tasks or projects that the group must complete – and coordinate their actions to do so (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993b; Bush et al., 2018; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Effective teamwork entails division of labor, synchronization of efforts, and integration of individual contributions into a coherent whole (Ganguli, 2024; Goodwin et al., 2018).

While these elements focus on structural and functional aspects of teamwork, some definitions (especially from the groupwork perspective) also emphasise social and developmental elements – such as the importance of interpersonal relations, communication, and group cohesion (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Konopka, 1963). This highlights a

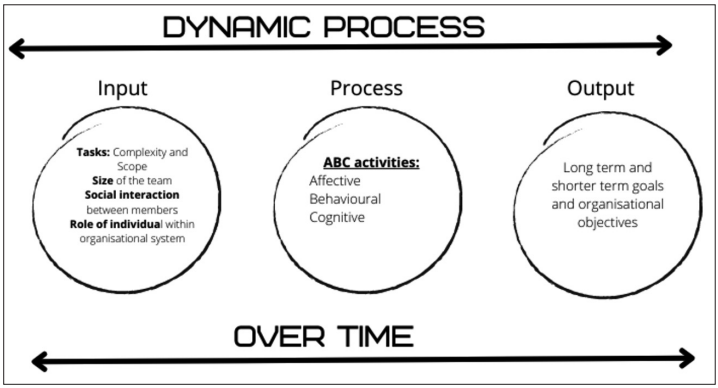
subtle difference in emphasis: where a management-oriented definition might stress task achievement and roles, a groupwork-oriented definition would additionally stress personal growth of members and quality of interactions. However, both views agree that without a combination of individual effort, interdependence, and shared purpose, true teamwork cannot occur.

## Teamwork as a dynamic process: The IPO framework

It is also widely accepted that teamwork is not a static trait, but a dynamic process that unfolds over time. A foundational model that captures this dynamic nature is the *Input–Process–Output (IPO) framework* of team effectiveness. Originally introduced by McGrath (1964) and later refined by Hackman and Morris (1975), the IPO model conceptualises team performance in three linked stages: inputs, processes, and outputs. In simple terms, inputs refer to the initial conditions and resources that teams have, processes are the interactions and activities teams engage in, and outputs are the results or outcomes of team activity (which can include performance outcomes, team member satisfaction, learning, etc.).

Figure 1 illustrates how various input factors feed into team processes and subsequently lead to outcomes. Four broad categories of team *input* factors are commonly identified (Hackman & Morris, 1975; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006):

Fig. 1: Illustration of the inner works of teamwork




- **Task characteristics:** The nature of the task or goal that the team is charged with. This includes task scope (how many and what

variety of components the work involves) and task complexity. Task complexity itself can be analysed in terms of the information required (component complexity), the coordination demands among team members (how interdependent subtasks are, and the timing/sequencing required), and any dynamic conditions (e.g. task elements that change over time) (Wood, 1986; Grossman et al., 2017a; Grossman et al., 2017b). Tasks that are highly complex or interdependent require greater teamwork coordination and often more sophisticated teamwork competencies (such as communication, planning, and adaptability). Teams tend to function well only if they possess both the *taskwork* competencies needed to complete the technical aspects of the task and the *teamwork* competencies required for effective interaction and coordination (McIntyre & Salas, 1995; Morgan et al., 1986). In other words, even a group of highly skilled individuals can fail at a team task if they lack teamwork skills.

- **Team member composition:** The attributes of the individuals on the team (Hackman & Morris, 1975; Bell et al., 2018). Team composition encompasses the size of the team, the distribution of skills and expertise, and the personalities or working styles of members. A key consideration is whether the collective knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) of team members complement one another so that the team has the capability to achieve its goals (Bell et al., 2018). Team members must be able to effectively interact and work with each other, making social skills and communication as important as technical skills (Salas et al., 2018). Research in this area often examines how diversity or homogeneity in member characteristics (e.g. diversity in expertise, or mix of personality types) affects team performance. While diverse teams can offer broader perspectives and innovation, they may also face greater coordination challenges – effective teamwork is needed to leverage diversity into positive outcomes.
- **Organisational system and context:** The environment in which the team operates, including the larger organisation's structure, culture, and leadership climate. The organisational system provides resources, rewards, and constraints that shape how a team works. For instance, an organisation's culture might promote collaboration and knowledge sharing, or conversely, competition

and individualism. According to Kolzow (2014), a team member's commitment to a group task increases when the organisation's goals are important to the individual and when the team has confidence in its own ability to achieve those goals. Leadership is another critical contextual factor; supportive leadership can empower teams and remove obstacles, whereas poor leadership or misaligned management practices can hinder team functioning. Teams do not operate in a vacuum – they are influenced by organisational policies (e.g. whether teamwork is recognised and rewarded), physical and technological infrastructure (tools for communication and coordination), and even broader external conditions like market pressures.

For the purposes of this study, the *nature of teamwork* is examined with particular attention to the three inputs above (task, team members, and organisational context), as these are the domains where graduate employability skills in teamwork are most directly manifested. A fourth input category, the external environment (factors outside the organisation or team, such as economic conditions, industry trends, or societal influences), is also acknowledged in team models, but it lies beyond the immediate scope of our graduate-focused analysis. Together, these inputs set the stage for team processes, often called the 'ABC's of teamwork' – Affect, Behaviour, and Cognition (Bell et al., 2018). In other words, effective team processes occur on three levels: the affective level (e.g. trust, team cohesion, morale), the behavioural level (e.g. communication frequency, coordination activities, helping behaviours), and the cognitive level (e.g. shared understanding or 'mental models' within the team). Strong inputs (like clear task structure, skilled and compatible members, and supportive context) enable robust processes in the affective, behavioural, and cognitive domains (Bell et al., 2018). Those processes, in turn, lead to outputs such as goal attainment (team performance), team member satisfaction, learning and development of members, and even long-term outcomes like team viability for future work (Hackman & Morris, 1975; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). The input–process–output perspective has been refined over time (with newer models adding feedback loops and distinguishing emergent states from processes), but it remains a useful framework for organising how we think about teamwork. It reinforces that to improve teamwork skills in

graduates, one must consider not just the end results but the starting conditions and the interaction patterns that produce those results.

## Group development and groupwork theory: A process-oriented view

Classic groupwork models clarify why process matters for teamwork. Tuckman's (1965) stages—forming, storming, norming, performing (and adjourning)—imply that new graduates typically face early adjustment and conflict before effective performance, underscoring communication and conflict-management skills. Gersick's (1988) punctuated equilibrium shows long periods of inertia with midpoint resets under deadlines, suggesting timed check-ins and facilitation can lift delivery. Bion (1961) highlights unconscious dynamics (dependency, pairing, fight–flight) that can derail collaboration if left unaddressed. Johnson and Johnson (2009) convert this into design principles—positive interdependence, promotive interaction, individual accountability, and group processing—reminding us that simply placing people in groups is insufficient. Together, these perspectives show that entry-level teamwork hinges not only on discrete 'skills' but on structured roles, negotiated norms, reflective facilitation, and attention to context; they also caution that cooperative approaches may falter in competitive climates, strengthening the case for explicit norms, accountability, and midpoint reviews.

Research on groupwork typically uses qualitative, process-oriented methods (e.g., observation, case work, reflective journals) to capture interaction quality, emerging norms and socio-emotional dynamics (Corey & Corey, 2021). Organisational teamwork studies more often rely on quantitative tools—psychometrics, experiments and multi-source surveys—to assess cohesion, leadership and performance outcomes (Tannenbaum & Salas, 2020). Each approach has advantages: qualitative designs explain *why/how* team phenomena occur; quantitative designs generalise *what* correlates with effectiveness. Contemporary reviews therefore advocate blended designs that pair outcome metrics with analysis of team processes (Salas, Reyes & McDaniel, 2018; Riebe, Girardi & Whitsed, 2016a), for example combining delivery KPIs with periodic focus groups or reflective logs.

Positioning this study across both traditions enables contribution to each. On the organisational side, evidence on graduates' actual

behaviours in teams illuminates preparedness and specific skill gaps at entry. On the groupwork side, interpreting those behaviours through process theories shows how abstract constructs (e.g., role negotiation, storming–norming) manifest in early careers. Where findings converge with some studies and diverge from others, the variation is best explained by context, including team maturity, role clarity and deadline pressure, thus moving beyond summary to explanation and critique.

Integrating teamwork and groupwork perspectives offers a richer analytical lens. Teamwork scholarship clarifies the tasks, roles and skills valued by employers and how graduates perform; groupwork theory explains why behaviours succeed or fail through developmental and interpersonal processes. Classic models—Tuckman's stages and Gersick's punctuated timing—illuminate trajectories across projects, while Bion's dynamics and Johnson and Johnson's cooperative principles reveal latent forces and design levers. This blended view treats graduate teamwork not as a checklist but as manifestations of deeper group processes and learning, guiding educators and employers in cultivating readiness and effectiveness and providing conceptual tools with both practical and theoretical value.

## Methodology

All samples were drawn from the South African job market, although the research problem addressed by this study may be a worldwide challenge. The theoretical lens that was used in this study is inductive and interpretive in nature, which is the foundation of qualitative research (Bansal et al., 2018). Predominantly, the aim of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of certain social phenomena (Renz et al., 2018), in this case, teamwork as an employability skill. A content analysis of 75 adverts for graduate positions was conducted that highlighted the importance of teamwork skills was discovered. Adverts were selected from graduate programme employment websites. A requirement for the advert was that the intention of the employer was to seek graduates from higher education institutions with Business Management degrees with specialisation in marketing, and who had little or no experience. In the advert there had to be a reference to the competencies or skills the graduate should possess.

The importance of teamwork as a graduate employability skill was confirmed during 11 in-depth interviews with employers. All participants were either part of the HR team that appoints marketing graduates, or the line managers of the marketing graduates of the companies analysed earlier. All participants were directly involved in recruitment processes or were part of the management team of interns and graduates. A semi-structured interview approach was chosen, to ensure that the researcher could ask follow-up questions to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (teamwork skills).

Twelve interviews were conducted, but one interviewee did not mention teamwork as an important skill. In the in-depth interviews, consequently the importance and nature of teamwork were explored further. This study received ethics approval from the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2021/0611/21). All participants provided informed consent.

While qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews were used, the analytic focus on *role negotiation, conflict handling, and norm formation* reflects groupwork's process-oriented tradition (Corey & Corey, 2021). In this sense, the study sits at the intersection of organisational teamwork measurement and *groupwork facilitation logics*, reading interview evidence for affective, behavioural, and cognitive processes (Bell et al., 2018) rather than only for task outputs.

## Results

The ability to work in a team, being a team player, working collaboratively, having interpersonal skills and team building skills, were mentioned in 48 of the adverts (64%) and the top skill sought after in a graduate. The importance of teamwork as an employability skill were established.

Three themes were identified during the content analyses of the interview manuscripts. The first theme was how to approach and complete a task as a team player in a team; the second theme focused on the social interaction and collaboration of teamwork; and the third theme was the role of the individual in the organisational system. Three main themes emerged from the content analysis of the eleven in-depth interviews in terms of the nature of teamwork skills.

## Theme 1: How to approach and complete a task

From the literature study, the types of tasks and competencies are important for teamwork efficiency. Teams function well together if they possess taskwork competencies (skills needed to complete the task) (McInture and Salas, 1995; Morgan, Glickman, Woodard, Blaiwes and Salas, 1986). Taskwork competencies are behaviours that contribute to the accomplishment of the task, and performance (Rousseau, Aubé & Savoie, 2006). Participants were, thus, asked about the types of tasks graduates would be involved in. Two discrete categories were identified and associated with Theme 1, namely the way graduates approach tasks, and the manner in which they will complete the task.

*Approach to the task*

Of the 11 participants, five (45%) mentioned that an individual should approach a task with the bigger picture and strategies of the organisation in mind, while 27% mentioned two other behaviours required in approaching a task: (i) being proactive and taking the initiative, and (ii) applying the mind and acting logically. One participant (9%) mentioned that the individual should be highly critical in everything they do, and another wanted team members who could handle multiple tasks at once. Some participants expressed their opinions as follows:

> Participant 11: *I think the biggest thing for me is a sense of willingness, it does not matter what gets thrown to an individual, they look at it from a bigger picture and bigger context and then they run with it, whether they can or cannot or have the capacity, they are always willing to help.*

> Participant 1: *Somebody who is just proactive and who would say that I know you have to do it like this but why don't you consider doing it another way.*

> Participant 2: *Understanding what your impact is of your little piece of the puzzle and the best team players are the ones that can see the big picture and not just the one little piece of the puzzle that they have to do.*

> Participant 5: *Someone that applies their mind in every task that they get.*

In relation to the qualities of the worst team player, the categories were repeated. Two of the participants (18%) explained that failing to share information or guarding information from others was undesirable behaviour. Failing to see or consider the bigger picture and a fear of doing things incorrectly were each mentioned by a participant.

*Completion of tasks*

It is not only important to approach a task with a proactive mindset, but also to complete the task according to a high work standard. Employers want team workers who take ownership of their tasks without being selfish about it, as was mentioned by three participants (27%). Employers seek competent individuals who are well organised, follow the rules and procedures, and who are detail oriented, as stated by two participants:

> Participant 6: *I am looking for someone that is highly analytical, somebody that is highly critical, but not negative, highly critical about everything they do and high attention to detail.*

> Participant 9: *Take ownership of your work and mistakes and move on.*

Instances of team members who, when completing tasks, failed to own tasks or shifted the responsibility, were mentioned by nine of the participants (89%) as causing frustration. Making mistakes or not attending to finer detail was mentioned by two participants (18%), and poor time management was mentioned by one participant (9%).

Tasks are an important element of all teamwork, as an organisation's tasks are divided into smaller parts and completed by teams. To complete tasks, individuals should be able to work with others in a team. Together, the information provided by participants provides important insights into the behaviours graduates should exhibit if they are to be viewed as good team players.

**Theme 2: Social interaction and collaboration**

Salas, Reyes and McDaniel mention the importance of getting along with team members and socially interacting (Salas, Reyes and McDaniel, 2018). The questionnaire required participants to reflect on the best and worst team players. Six themes were identified that describe the positive behaviours that are sought once negative behaviours were identified that should be avoided by graduates. The six main themes that were identified, describe how a person should interact and collaborate with others in a team. The first and most important theme communication – elements of communication were mentioned nine times (89%).

Effective communication of a good team player is open, honest and in-time communication. Team members should be able to speak

their minds, challenge ideas, and also apply active listening skills. If conflict arises, they should resolve it in a constructive manner. The second important element relates to being a team player, as a positive team spirit enhance cohesion, which was mentioned six times (54%). Lastly, providing support and being willing to help others was highlighted by the participants (mentioned four times; thus, by 36% of the participants). Some participants commented as follows:

> Participant 8: *Not being a push-over, often people confuse building good relationship with those individuals that are just nice people, but I think you can build a [sic] relationships but still at the same time get key messages across and delivering [sic] hard message in a way that is not destructive to your relationships.*
>
> Participant 10: *Making sure they absorb information through active listening and taking into account what you say.*
>
> Participant 11: *A person that are [sic] very resourceful and not taking no for an answer, but they will make a plan.*

A poor team player who does not take responsibility causes others in the team to struggle (27%). Furthermore, a poor team player is often inflexible and resistant to change (27%), whilst only wanting their own way and mistreating people to achieve their objectives (27%). Another problem is an individual who takes credit for something they have not done (9%), and not understanding their own role in the team (9%).

> Participant 3: *The worst team player were [sic] basically lazy and they were not pulling their weight and that really influences the team, if they are not at the same level of competency and they are not as productive as everyone else, it creates a bit of an unhappiness, so you can't have someone not pulling their weight and doing their part.*
>
> Participant 4: *The quality that don't [sic] work for me is a bad attitude.*

### Theme 3: Role of the individual in the organisational system

Although organisational systems and culture were identified by researchers as having an important influence on the work output of teams (Kolzow, 2014), very little is known about a team player's engagement in the organisational system. It is not only important for a person to complete tasks and manage other team members, but they should also make a positive contribution to the team.

Behaviour like being resourceful, having excellent networking skills, being a lifelong learner with a curious mind, and remaining calm in stressful situations were identified as important three times (27%) by the 11 participants. Employers seek resilient problem-solvers who are assertive. Other behaviours are: being an energetic person who enjoys their work, being analytical, being passionate, and having good self-awareness. The participant quotes below substantiate these findings:

Participant 7: *A good team player always have [sic] good ideas themselves but they continuously hear people out to find out their ideas.*

Participant 8: *The best people that I have worked with have an optimistic attitude.*

Participant 9: *I would rather work with a Grade 12 person, than working with a person with a Master's [sic] degree with a bad attitude.*

Participant 11: *Understanding that their behaviour have [sic] an impact on those around you and keeping calm in a stressful situation.*

The worst team players in terms of the organisational system are those who have a negative outlook on the work (27%), who display a bad attitude (18%), and who are opinionated (18%). One participant also mentioned team members boasting about past performance, but performing poorly, as problematic.

Participant 4: *The quality that don't [sic] work for me is a bad attitude.*

## Discussion

The findings confirm that employers value graduates who can approach tasks proactively, collaborate effectively, and contribute positively to organisational systems. However, while these attributes align with much of the teamwork literature, they also invite deeper analysis. For example, the emphasis on proactivity and ownership echoes Salas et al. (2018), who argue that taskwork and teamwork competencies must co-exist. Yet other studies caution that overemphasis on initiative without adequate role clarity can create conflict or duplication of effort (Ly et al, 2018; Bolino et al. 2013; Brault, et al. 2014). This suggests that while initiative is essential, it must be balanced with mutual accountability — a principle long highlighted in groupwork research (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993a).

Similarly, employers in this study stressed communication, supportiveness, and positive team spirit. These findings align with Bravo et al. (2016), who demonstrated that communication quality strongly predicts team satisfaction in student groups. At the same time, groupwork theorists warn that communication is not always constructive: poorly managed conflict or unequal participation can fragment a group (Bion, 1961). Thus, while communication is consistently reported as a core graduate skill, it is the *quality and process* of that communication — honest, timely, and inclusive — that determines whether it strengthens or undermines teamwork.

The finding that employers reward proactivity and ownership aligns with Salas, Reyes and McDaniel's (2018) argument that taskwork and teamwork competencies must co-exist; however, studies caution that initiative without negotiated role clarity can create duplication and conflict (compare Morgan et al., 1986; McIntyre & Salas, 1995). Likewise, while communication quality predicts team satisfaction (Bravo, Lucia-Palacios & Martín, 2016), groupwork theorists show that communication can be dysfunctional when unresolved power asymmetries or avoidance norms persist (Bion, 1961). The evidence that graduates often occupy supportive roles on entry is consistent with stage-based development (forming/storming) in existing teams (Tuckman, 1965) but contrasts with accounts that expect early leadership from graduates in loosely structured projects (e.g., Goodwin, Blacksmith & Coats, 2018). This tension suggests context matters: in tightly coupled teams, mutual accountability and negotiated norms (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993a; Johnson & Johnson, 2009) moderate the payoff from 'initiative,' whereas in looser settings initiative is more visible and less likely to clash with boundaries. Finally, time-bound projects in our sample exhibited midpoint resets, echoing Gersick's (1988) punctuated equilibrium; this pattern helps explain why some behaviours (e.g., detailed planning) correlate weakly with early outcomes but strongly with late-stage delivery.

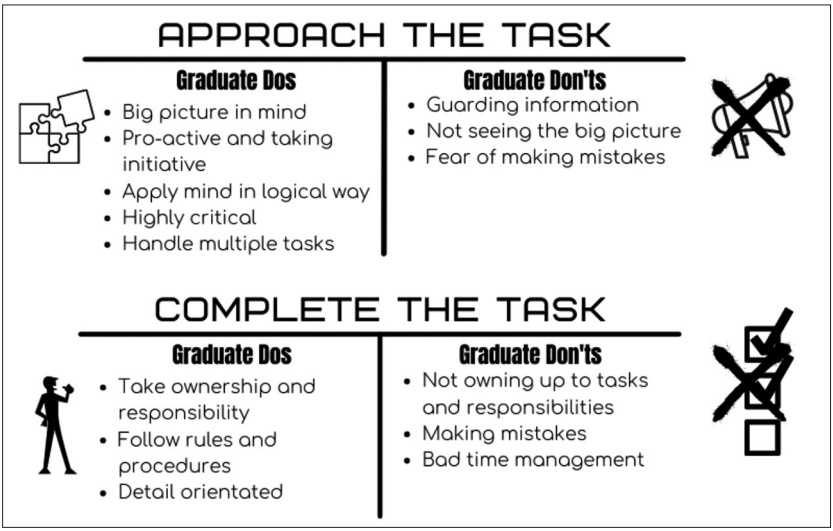
From the results of the components of a good or bad team player, a list of acceptable (dos) and unacceptable (don'ts) behaviours of graduates when it comes to teamwork behaviour was compiled.

## Approach to and completion of tasks

A list of behavioural attributes was compiled for graduates (Figure 2 and 3). Graduates should learn to approach tasks with the bigger picture in mind. Not being able to see the big picture is one of the frustrations other team members may experience with a graduate. Pro-active behaviour by taking initiative and not always waiting for a manager to give instructions is important for the employer. The ability to apply one's mind in a logical manner and being critical (asking questions) on your own and others team members' work is important. Graduates should also be able to manage various tasks at the same time.

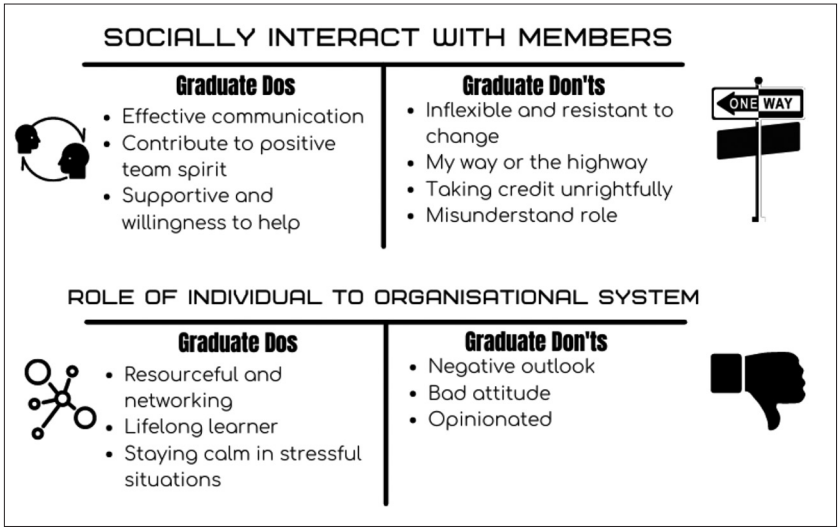
It is important that graduates can share relevant information with the correct people. Graduates should not be scared to make mistakes and then correct the mistakes.

Fig 2. Dos and don'ts for team players in approaching and completing tasks




Graduates should take ownership and responsibility for their part in the completion of task(s). Although a graduate should approach a task with an open mind, it is important to follow the rules and procedures of the company they work for. While completing a task, it is important that a graduate should show the ability not only to see the bigger picture, but also to focus on the finer detail.

Fig 3. Dos and don'ts for team players in approaching and completing tasks




While completing tasks, graduates should own up to their responsibilities. When mistakes are made, the graduate should communicate this clearly and own up to their mistakes. A graduate should manage their time effectively and meet all deadlines during the completion of tasks, as this may have a ripple effect in the business.

## Social interaction and collaboration

Teamwork is a social construct and forms the foundation of the relationship between employees and their working environment (Volkov and Volkov, 2007). A list of behavioural attributes for graduates in terms of their social interaction and collaboration in the team was compiled.

Effective communication is the first important element when interacting with your team (Otermans, Aditya, & Pereira, 2023). Graduates should contribute to a positive team spirit. It is important to show willingness to help and support other team members, especially seniors. Graduates should ensure that they understand their own role in the team and the organisation.

### Role of the organisational system

Graduates should contribute to the team and the organisational system. Networking skills and being a resourceful member with connections, are important elements. To have a positive attitude towards learning is important as it can enhance social inclusion in a team. Graduates should be able to remain calm in stressful situations. Graduates should be aware to not portray negative attitudes towards others or the company. They should not be too opinionated, but rather show willingness to learn, change and contribute in a positive manner towards the organisation.

The role of the graduate within the organisational system highlights another area of debate. Employers valued resilience, optimism, and networking skills, which are consistent with broader employability frameworks (Otermans et al., 2024). However, groupwork theory suggests that groups can unconsciously fall into dependency or avoidance patterns when members rely too heavily on authority or avoid difficult interactions (Bion, 1961). This raises a critical implication: graduates should not only demonstrate positive attitudes but also be prepared to engage constructively with organisational tensions and uncertainties, rather than withdrawing or resisting change.

Taken together, these findings illustrate that graduate teamwork is best understood not only through the lens of employability but also through groupwork theory. While teamwork literature typically highlights *what* skills are needed, groupwork frameworks reveal *how* and *why* those skills matter in the dynamic, and sometimes unpredictable, processes of group functioning. This critical perspective strengthens the study's contribution by situating graduate teamwork behaviours within a broader interdisciplinary discourse. The sample is drawn from one national labour market and early-career roles; future research could triangulate behavioural checklists with observed team interactions and facilitation artefacts, and test whether midpoint reviews (Gersick, 1988) magnify gains from communication training.

## Conclusion

Graduates entering the contemporary workplace must demonstrate a wide range of behavioural and interpersonal competencies alongside technical expertise. As Grant, Hanlon and Young (2024) argue,

employability today requires the capacity to operate speedily and effectively in dynamic environments. This implies that graduates must be proactive, take initiative, and identify opportunities to contribute constructively to their roles. Exposure during higher education to diverse experiences, such as collaborative projects, simulations, and workplace-integrated learning, enables students to see the bigger picture, apply critical thought, and manage multiple tasks simultaneously. Accountability also remains crucial: graduates are expected to take responsibility for their mistakes, comply with professional regulations, and execute tasks with precision and attention to detail.

Communication skills are central to these expectations. The ability to articulate ideas clearly and persuasively is consistently ranked as a key workplace requirement (Otermans, Aditya and Pereira, 2023). Equally, a positive attitude, willingness to learn, and readiness to assist others are foundational to building trust and cohesion within teams. Networking, both within and beyond the organisation, extends these benefits by opening opportunities for collaboration and professional growth. These elements are not merely individual behaviours but reflect deeper processes associated with group functioning. Classic models of group development, such as Tuckman's (1965) stages of forming, storming, norming and performing, highlight that cohesion, conflict resolution, and role negotiation are natural elements of group progress. Similarly, Johnson and Johnson (2009) emphasise cooperative learning principles such as positive interdependence and promotive interaction, while Bion (1961) reminds us that unconscious group dynamics, such as dependency or resistance, can shape team effectiveness.

The responsibility for developing these competencies does not rest solely on graduates. Higher education institutions have a central role to play in deliberately embedding teamwork and groupwork into curricula. Lecturers should integrate structured group activities, reflective assessments, and guided facilitation to encourage students to practise effective teamwork behaviours. As Otermans, Aditya and Pereira (2023) note, graduates often carry into the workplace the collaborative skills fostered during their studies. This aligns with the view of Johnson and Johnson (2009) that cooperative group experiences, when properly facilitated, promote skills transferable to professional contexts. By designing assessments that attend not only to task completion but also to processes of communication, trust-building

and conflict management, lecturers can better prepare students for the complexities of group life in organisations.

Teamwork must be understood as more than just a technical employability skill. It is simultaneously a behavioural competency and a manifestation of deeper group processes. Graduates should actively cultivate adaptability, initiative, clear communication, and collaborative engagement. At the same time, higher education must purposefully foster these competencies by aligning classroom practices with groupwork theory and methodology. By doing so, institutions will ensure that graduates are equipped not only to meet the immediate demands of their roles but also to contribute meaningfully to the long-term effectiveness of organisations.

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