Ulisse

Soft Skills for Employability

SOFT SKILLS SURVEY REPORT

Employers assessment of graduate's soft skills

Università di Pisa · University of Latvia · Universitas Miguel Hernández · P.Porto ISCAP · Erre Quadro Research over Research

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

ULISSE is a Strategic Partnership for Higher Education project (2018-1-IT02-KA203-048286). The European Commission support for the production of this website does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Intellectual Output 2 - SOFT SKILLS SURVEY REPORT

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How to cite this report:

Araújo, M.S., Ardions, I., Carvalho, P., Vieira, D.A. & Meirinhos, V. (2019). *Survey data presentation. ULISSE IO2 Soft Skills Report 1*. Retrieved from the website of the ULISSE Project - Understanding, Learning and Improving Soft Skills for Employability-, nº 2018-1-IT01-KA203-048286, co-funded by the ERASMUS+ Program of the European Union website: https://ulisseproject.eu/

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Statement of originality:

This deliverable contains original unpublished work, except where clearly indicated otherwise. Acknowledgement of previously published material and of the work of others has been made through appropriate citation, quotation or both.

Date of delivery

December 2019

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION

Soft skills, education and employability are at the center of the concerns of those who have to make recruitment, who needs a competent workforce and who wants to enter the job market. Employers need human resources with technical skills, but that stand out, and this added value lies in soft skills.

One of ULISSE's project aims is to shed light on companies' needs related to soft skills. This report aims at contributing to it by hearing employers' opinions through a survey.

The starting point was to identify employers' assessment of recent higher education graduates' soft skills, followed by the understanding of which soft skills are most valued by employers.

The survey took place in the four countries involved in this project, namely, Italy, Spain, Latvia and Portugal. In total, 221 employers provided their opinion on this topic.

METHODS

Due to the essence of the study aim, the sample consisted of business owners, managers and recruiters contacted by each partner. Consequently, the sample of this study is non-probabilistic which points to cautions about the generalization of the obtained results.

To collect the information, an interview and a questionnaire were built. The questionnaire was prepared in the *LimeSurvey* Software and, based on the languages of each partner, four versions were used. The questionnaire is composed of open and closed questions, followed by demographic questions and one last question where participants had the opportunity to freely comment on the questionnaire.

In the first phase, individual employers' interviews were done by the project partners in each country. These interviews were based on the questions in the questionnaire and employers evaluated its clarity.

In a second phase, the link to the questionnaire was sent to employers in Spain, Italy, Latvia and Portugal.

Feedback from this submission resulted in 221 valid responses, which were statistically addressed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 24).

The statistical treatment of the data collected in the four project partners (Spain, Italy, Latvia, Portugal) was worked in two phases:

(1) all responses received;

(2) the responses of each partner.

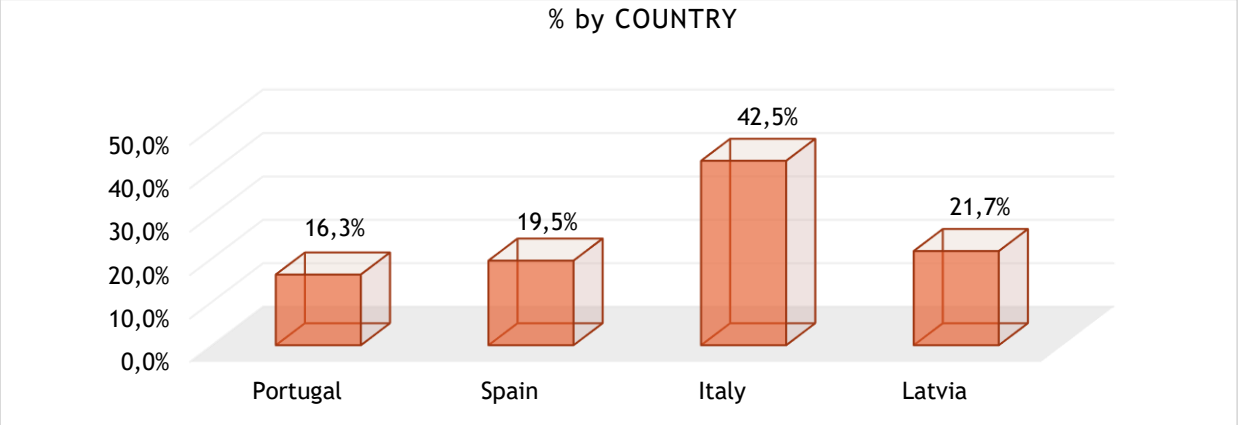
RESULTS

This section presents the results obtained compared by country.

1. SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERIZATION

The total sample is composed of 221 participants distributed across the four countries involved in the project. As we can see, there are 16,3% from Portugal, 19,5% from Spain, 42,5% from Italy and 21,7% from Latvia (Chart 1).

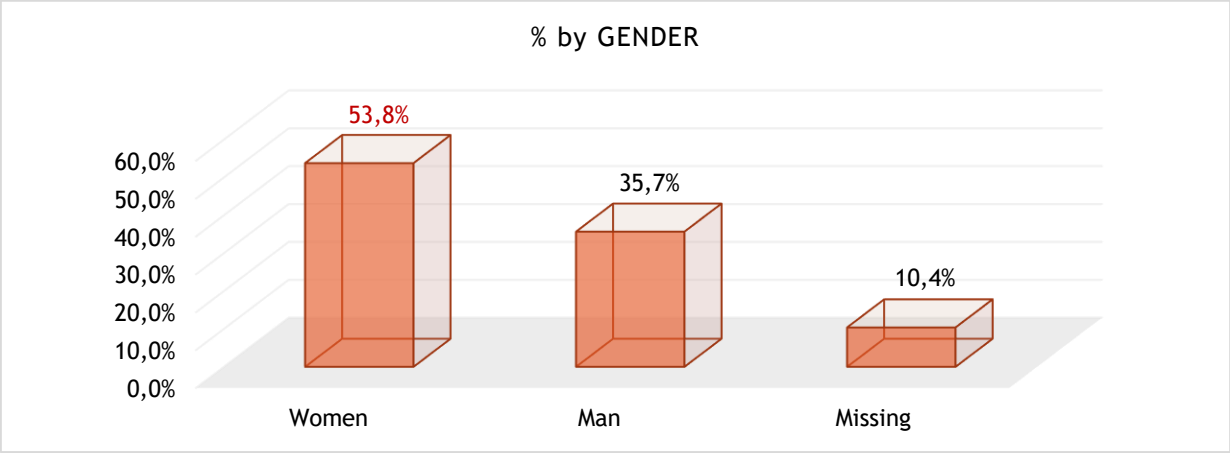
Chart 1 – Country where respondents work (n=221)



n= number of total respondents

The sample has a higher percentage of female respondents (53,8%) than males (35,7%) and 23 (10,4%) omitted this information (Chart 2).

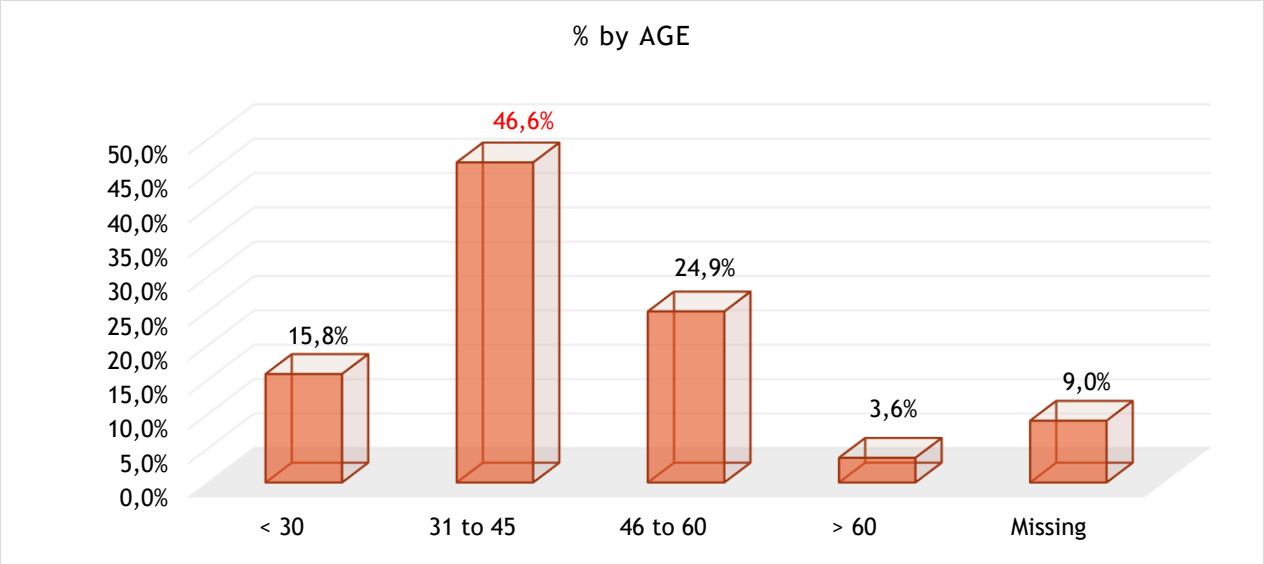
Chart 2 – Gender (n=198)



n= number of total respondents

Respondents are mostly aged 31-45 (46,6%), followed by 46-60 (24,9%), less than 30 (15,8%), over 60 (3,6%) and 9% of participants chose not to inform their age (Chart 3).

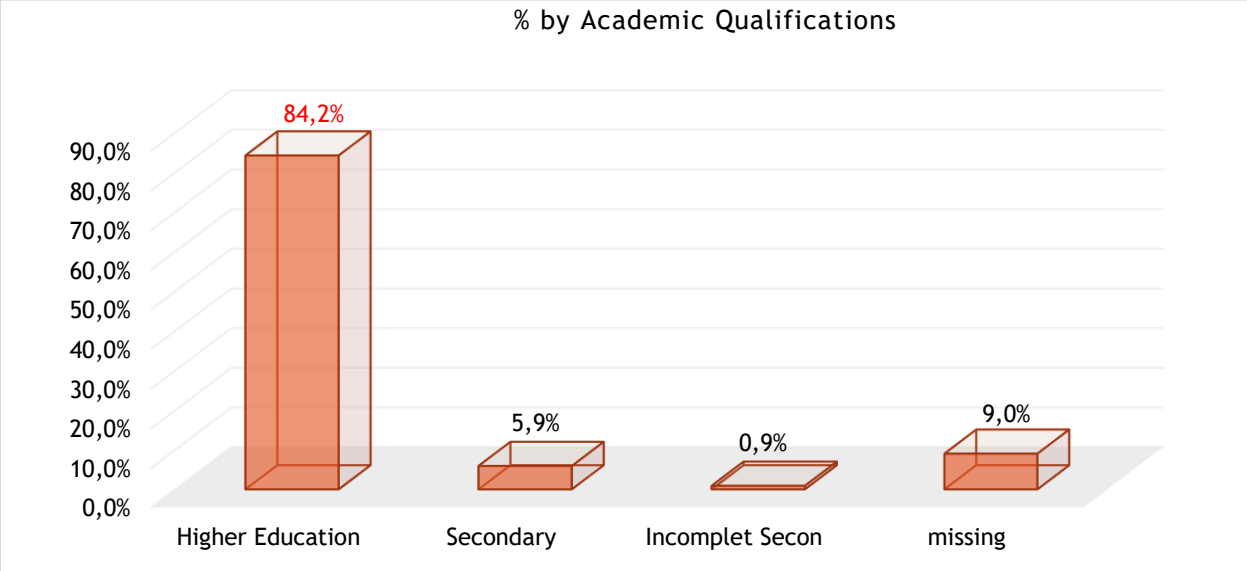
Chart 3 - Age (n=201)



n= number of total respondents

With regard to academic qualifications, the overwhelming majority reported holding higher education (84,2%) (Chart 4).

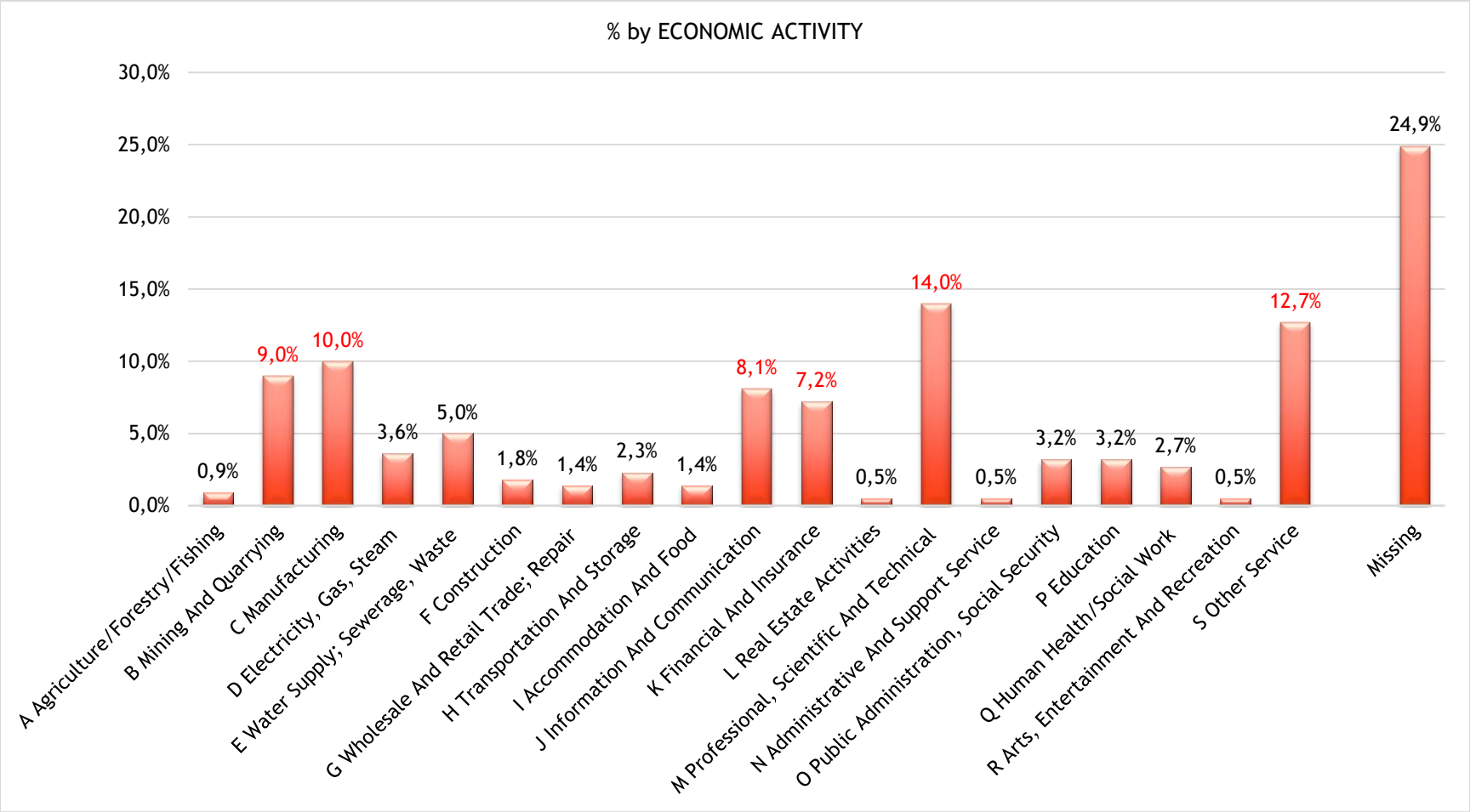
Chart 4 - Academic qualifications (n=201)



n= number of total respondents

In the type of economic activity participants work most, it was found that there was a large dispersion of business areas, but Consulting, Scientific, Tech and Business Owners stood out with 14,0% and Other Service Activities with 12,7%. It should be noted that of the total respondents, 24,9% did not report the economic activity in which they worked (Chart 5).

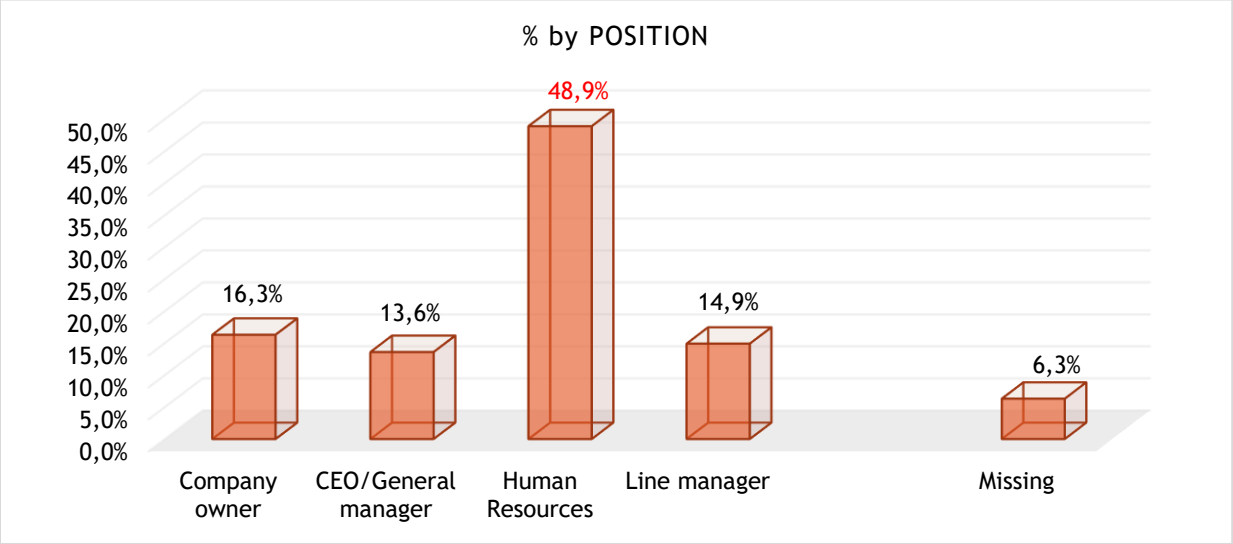
Chart 5 - Economic Activity (n=166)



n= number of total respondents

The respondents' position is essentially Human Resources Professional (48,9%), being more or less similar in the other positions (16,3% owner, 14,9% Line Manager and 13,6% CEO/General Manager/Director), 6,3% don't say the position (Chart 6).

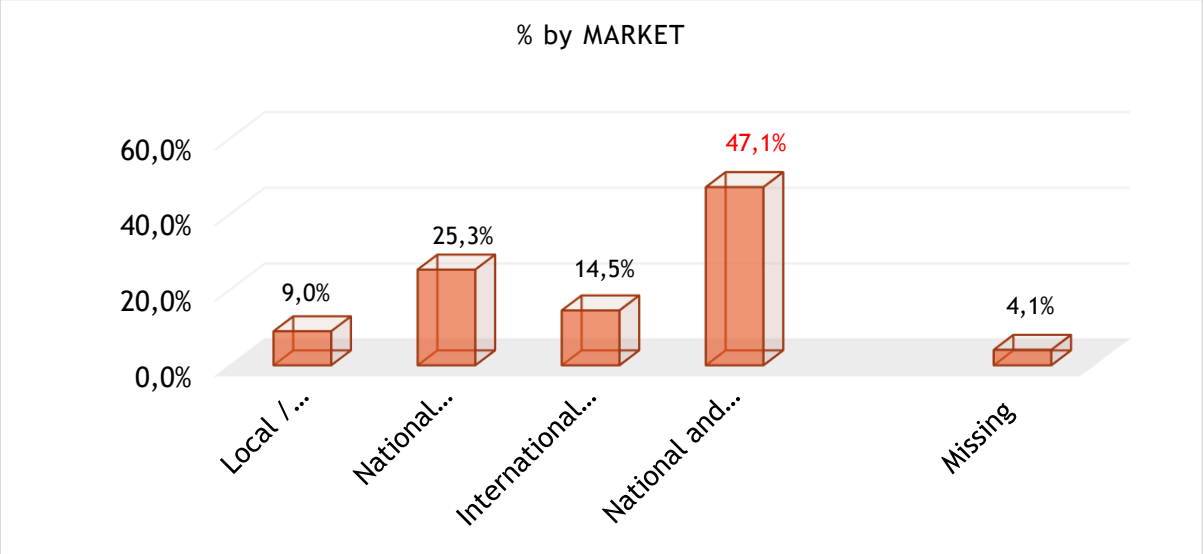
Chart 6 - Position (n=207)



n= number of total respondents

The respondents' market was mostly and at the same time National and International Markets, registering 47,1%, only Nacional 25,3%, only International 14,5% and Local/regional 9%. 4,1% of participants don't report none (Chart 7).

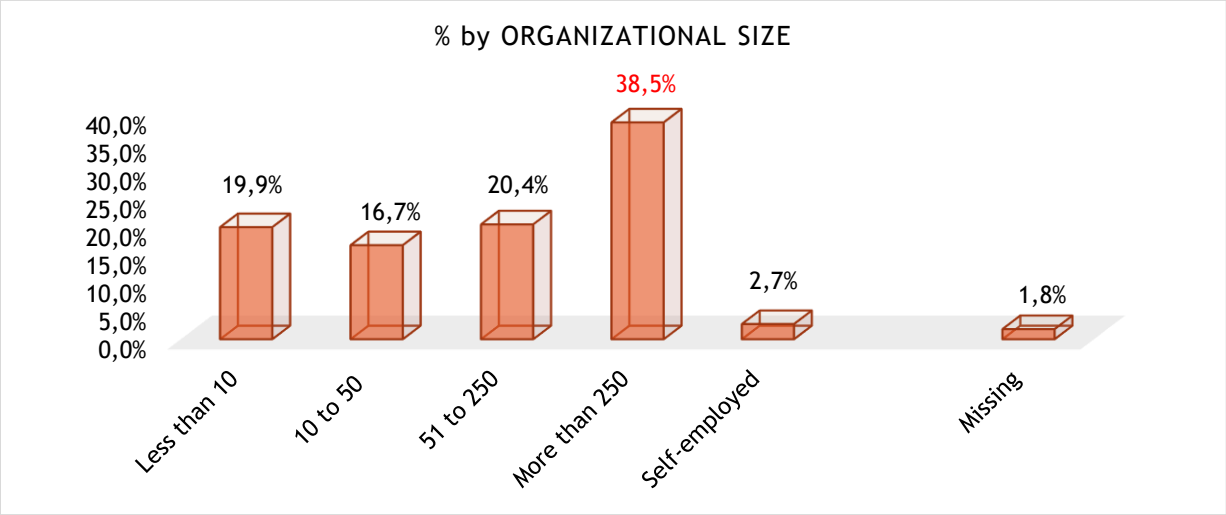
Chart 7 - Market (n=212)



n= number of total respondents

When asked about the size of the organization, 38,5% was in the large business class. Micro-sized organizations have 19,9%, Small-sized have 16,7% and Medium-sized companies yields 20,4%. Only 2,7% are Self-employed (Chart 8).

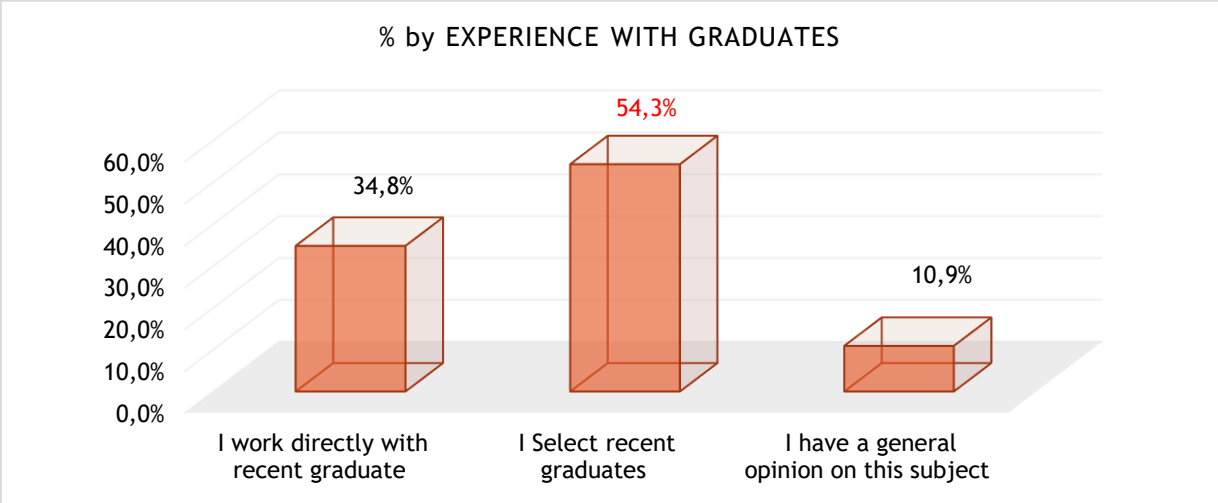
Chart 8 - Size Organizations (n=217)



n= number of total respondents

When asked about their experience with graduates, 34,8% had direct experience, 54,3% selected recent graduates. Only 10,9% said they only had one opinion (Chart 9).

Chart 9 - Experience with graduates (n=221)



n= number of total respondents

What stands out from this characterization is a majority of female respondents, aged 31-45, with higher education, operating in the area of Consulting, Scientific, Tech and Business Owners, working in SME's in National and International Markets.

2. MOST IMPORTANT SKILLS A RECENT GRADUATE SHOULD HAVE

The questionnaire started with an open question where we asked employers to describe which skills they considered most important in recent graduates. Although we repeated this question further in the questionnaire, using a close question based on the skills list previously defined in this project, we considered important to allow employers to express themselves freely without any influence of a predefined skills list. After manual content analysis of the free-text responses based on our skills list previously used in this project, frequencies were calculated for each skill. Subsequently, frequencies were converted to percentages in order to allow comparisons with previous studies. The results obtained are presented in chart 10.

Willingness to learn, Flexibility, Knowledge in a specific technical-scientific area, Teamwork and *Interpersonal relationships* were the skills that were more chosen by employers (12,8%, 11,9%, 9,5%, 8,3% and 6,1%, respectively). On the other hand, skills that are less identified by employers as being part of a recent graduate's repertoire are: *Non-verbal communication; Diversity Sensitivity; Conflict management; Leadership* and *Planning* (0%, 0,7%, 1,1%, 1,1% and 1,4% respectively). Some of these skills are more to be expected of experienced professionals and in certain positions, others are not so clear to understand. The skill, *Non-verbal communication*, had no free choice on the part of employers. Eventually it seems so obvious that they do not even believe that it was no longer fully achieved during the development process, or simply comparing this skill with others does not really consider it relevant.

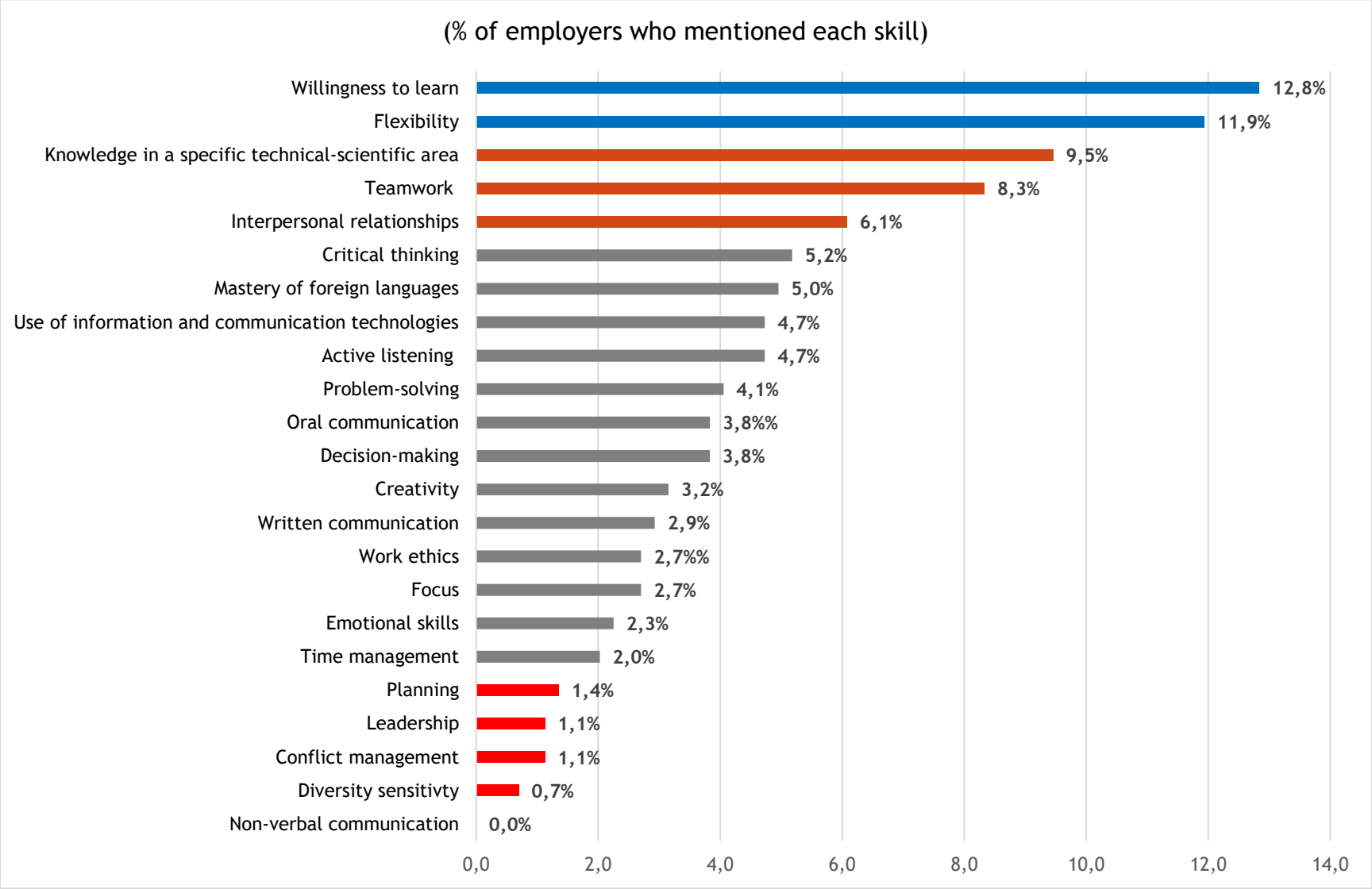
Some of the skills mentioned by employers as the most important ones did not fit to any skill of the label list and these were tagged as “other”. These text units (n=74) were submitted to content analysis and organized in three groups based on meaning similarity.

Table 1 – “Others most important skills” organized after content analysis

Proactivity	**N**	**Commitment**	**N**	**Other**	**n**
Proactivity	*14*	*Commitment*	*13*	*Humbleness*	*12*
Goal-oriented	4	Motivation	8	Self-awareness	4
Iniciative	4	Enthusiasm	5		
Open mind	2	Resilence	4		
		Responsability	4		

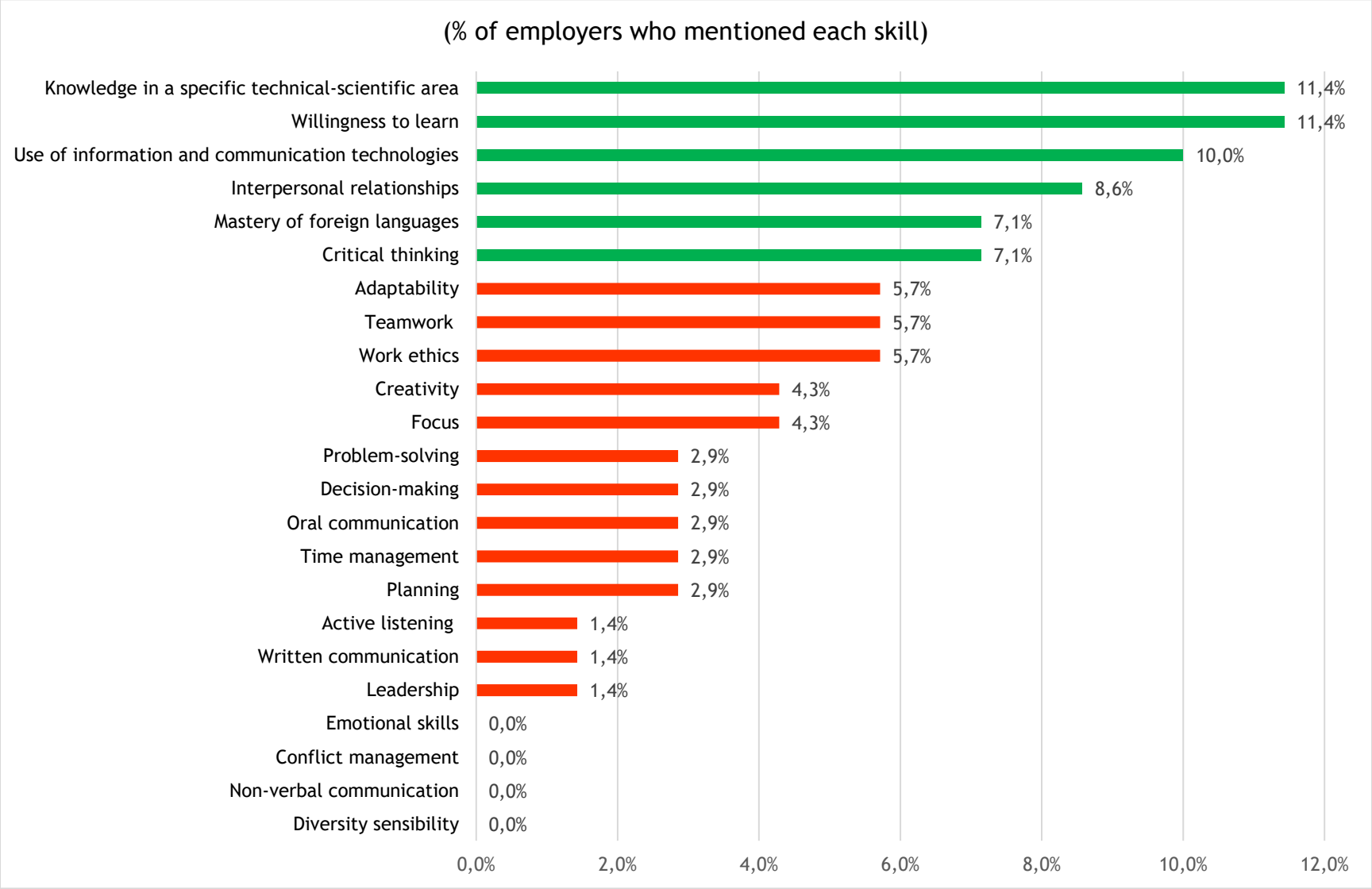
As observed in Table 1 proactivity and commitment were the most important characteristics identified by employers, followed by humbleness.

Chart 10 – Skills ranking by importance based on open questions – Global sample (n=221)



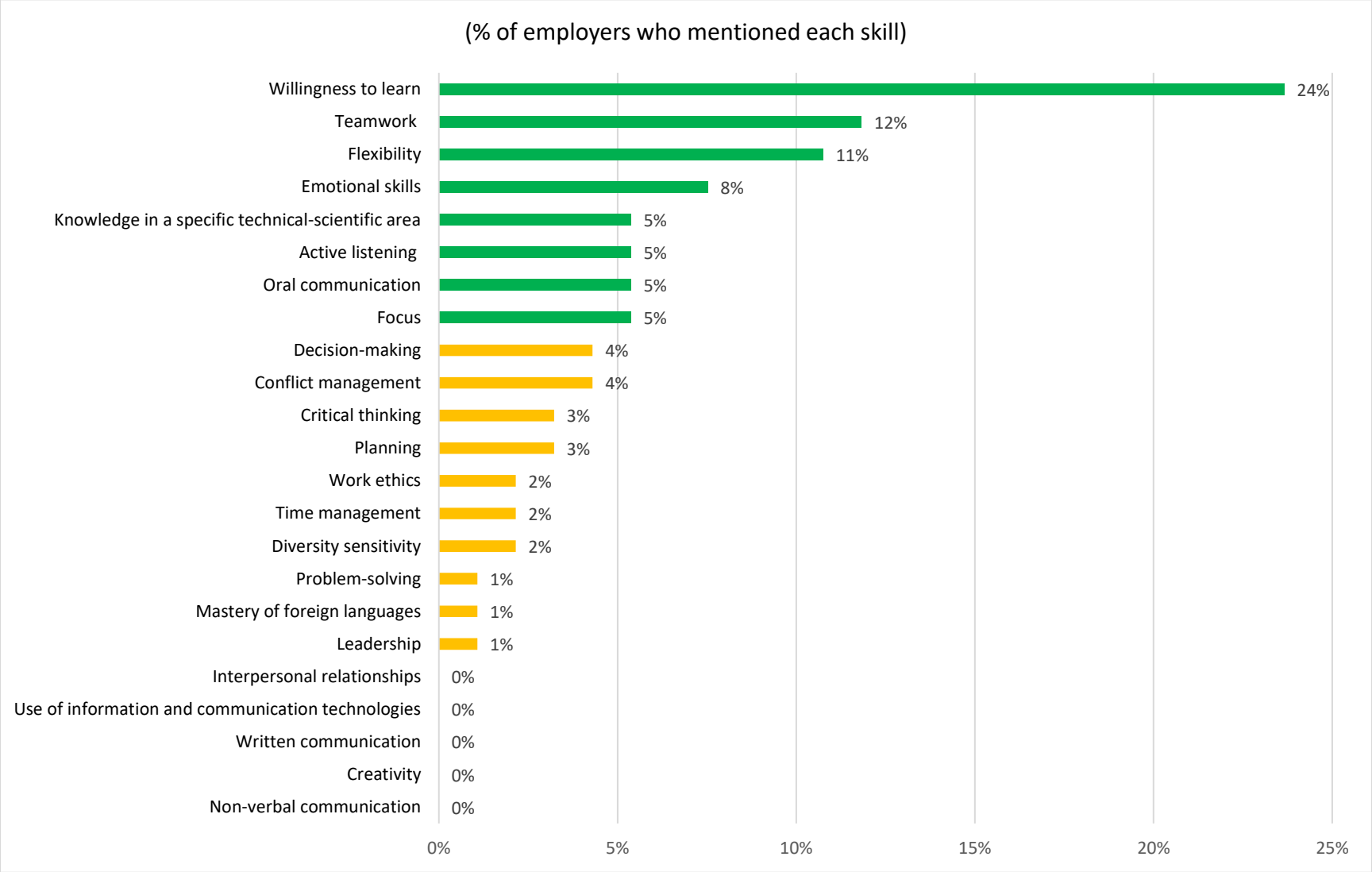
n= number of total respondents

Chart 11 – Skills ranking by importance based on open questions - Latvia (n=48)



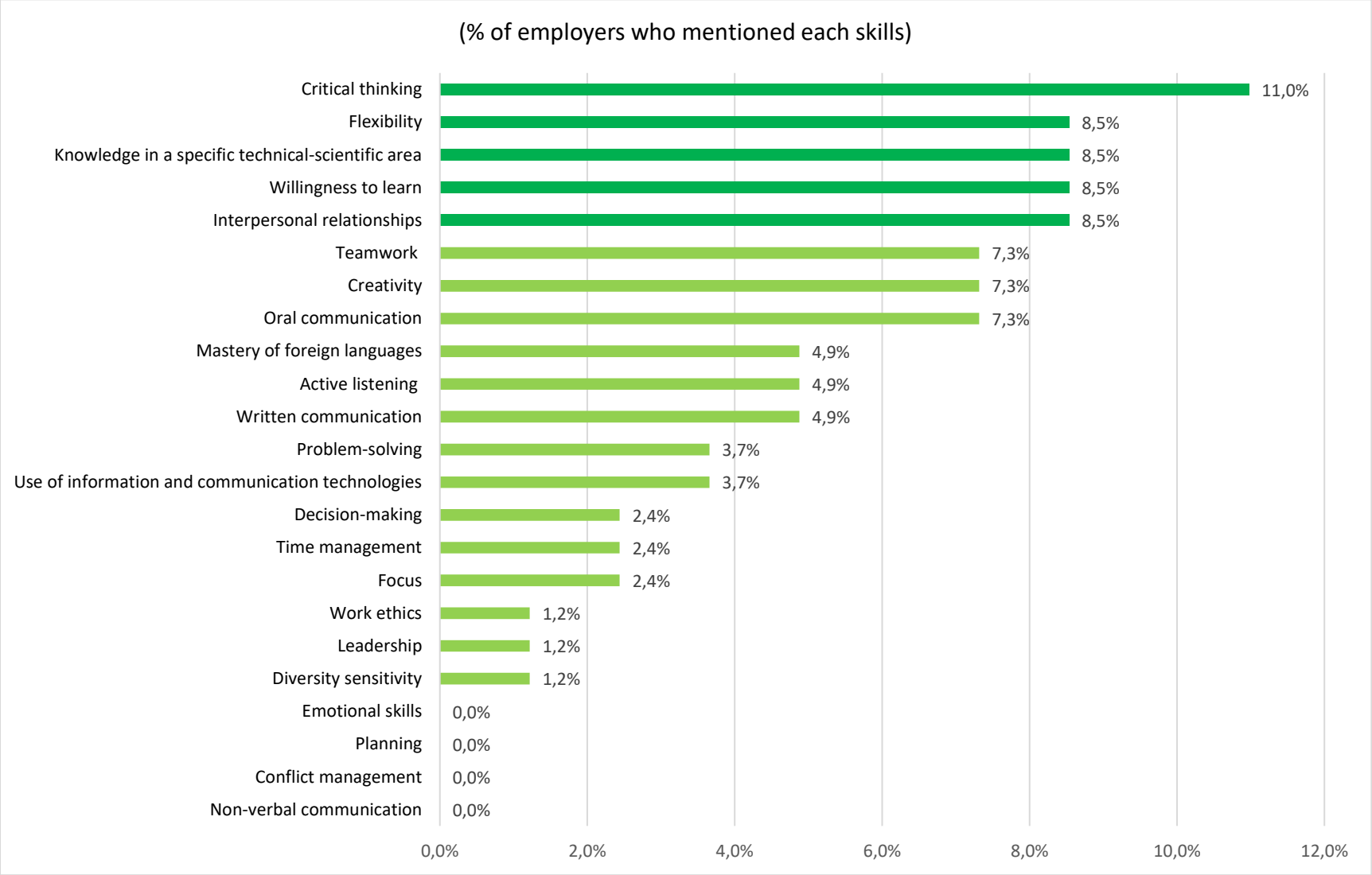
n= number of total respondents

Chart 12 – Skills ranking by importance based on open questions - Spain (n=43)



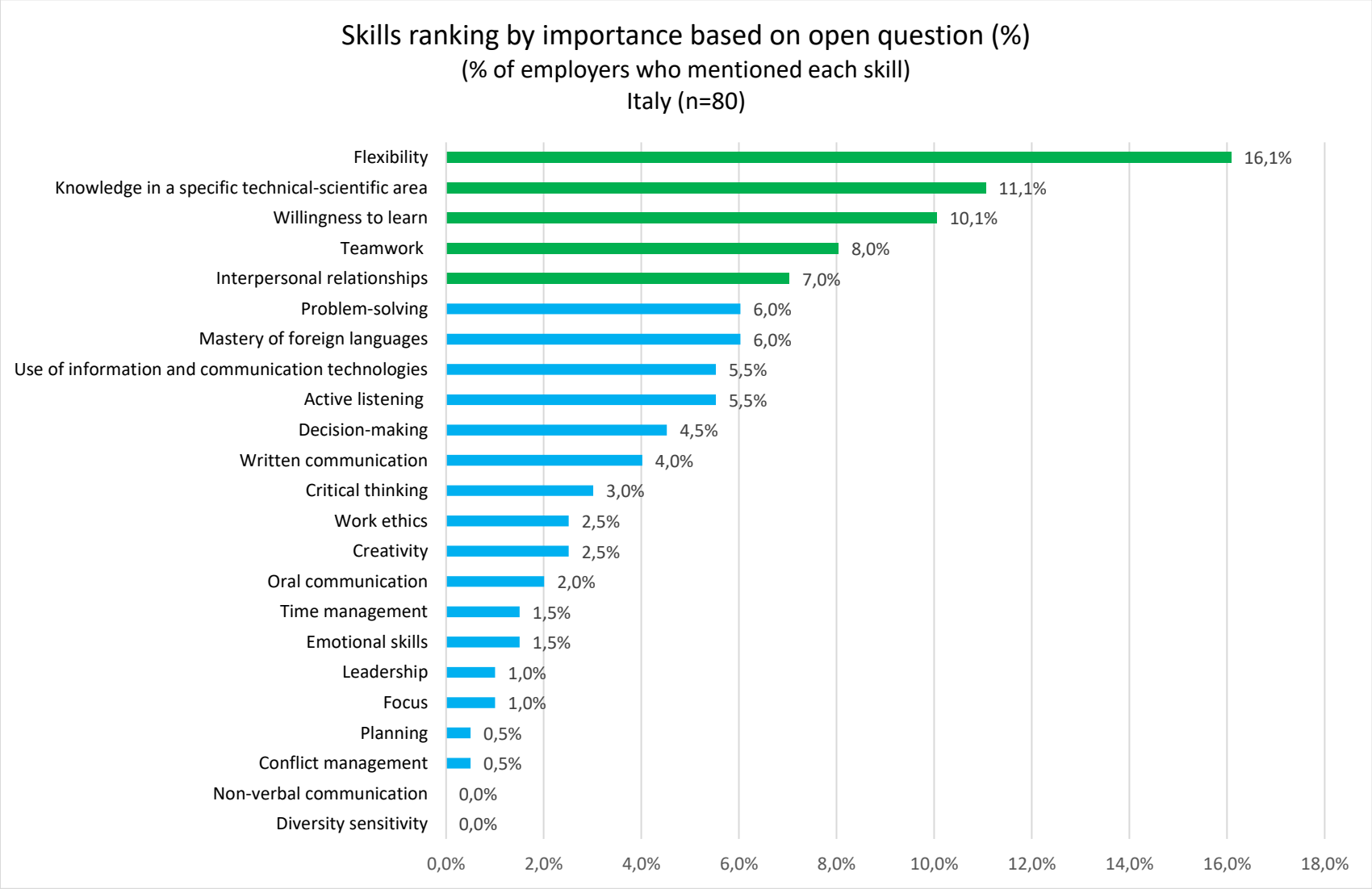
n= number of total respondents

Chart 13 – Skills ranking by importance based on open questions - Portugal (n=36)



n= number of total respondents

Chart 14 – Skills ranking by importance based on open questions – Italy (n=93)

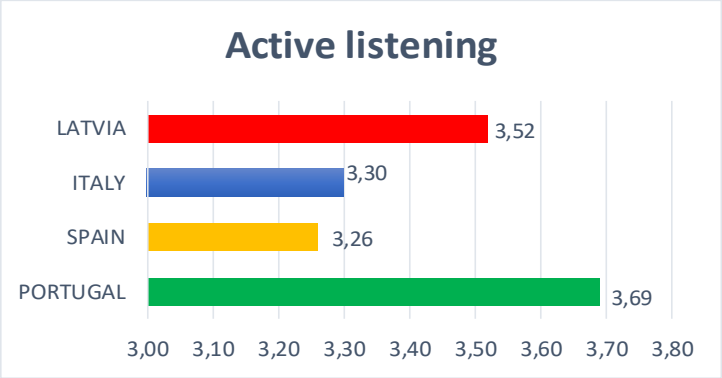


n= number of total respondents

3. SKILLS LEVEL OF RECENT GRADUATE

Employers were asked to assess the graduates' level of knowledge of a list of skills. The different competences by country that graduates must have when leaving higher education are presented.

Chart 15 - Active listening (n=221)

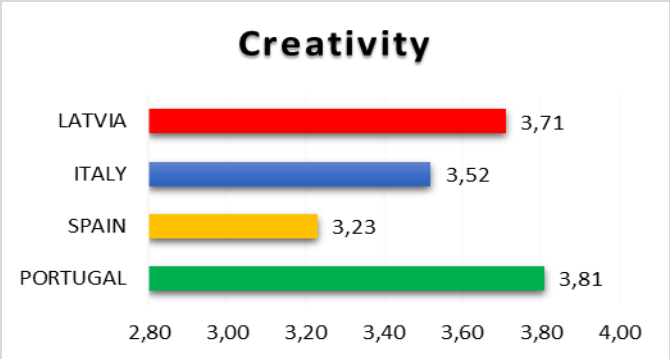


n= number of total respondents

Chart 16 - Conflict management (n=221)

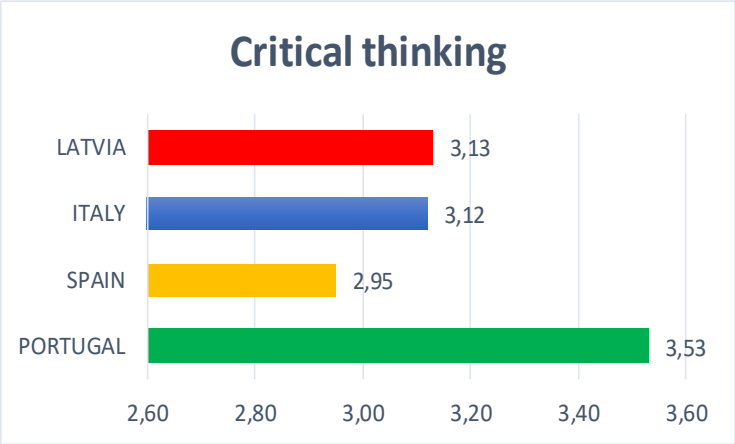
n= number of total respondents

Chart 17 - Creativity (n=221)



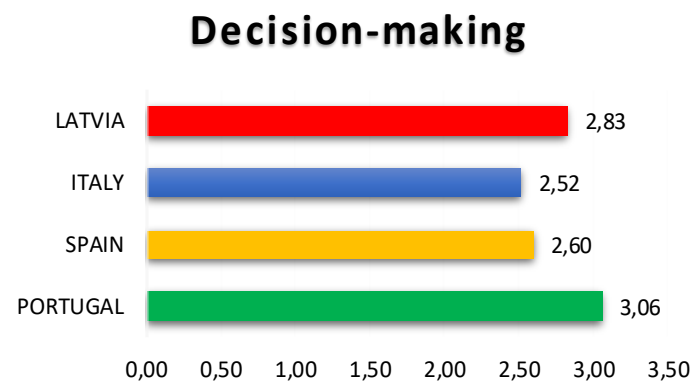
n= number of total respondents

Chart 19 - Critical thinking (n=221)



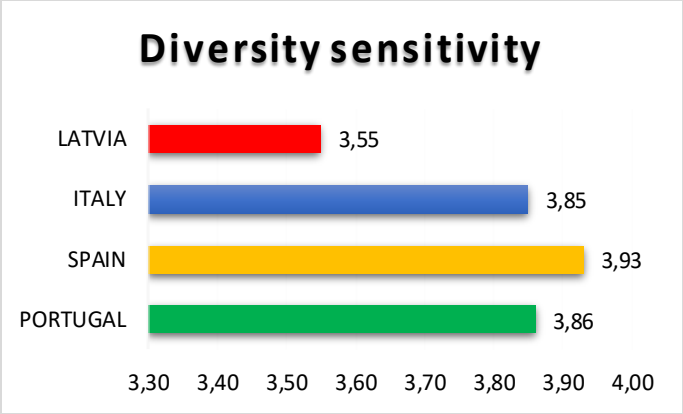
n= number of total respondents

Chart 20 - Decision-making (n=221)



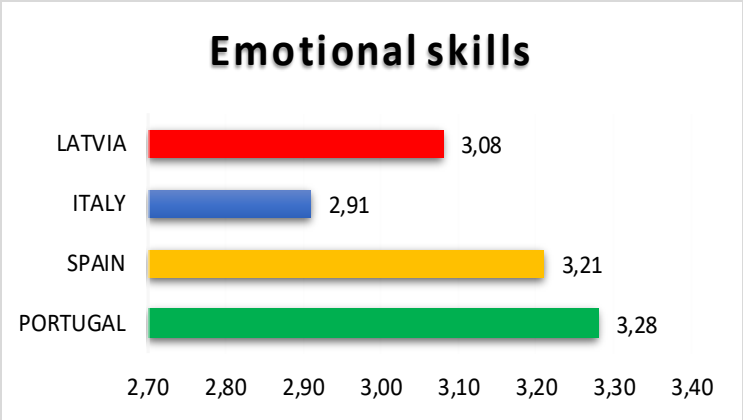
n= number of total respondents

Chart 21 - Diversity Sensitivity (n=221)



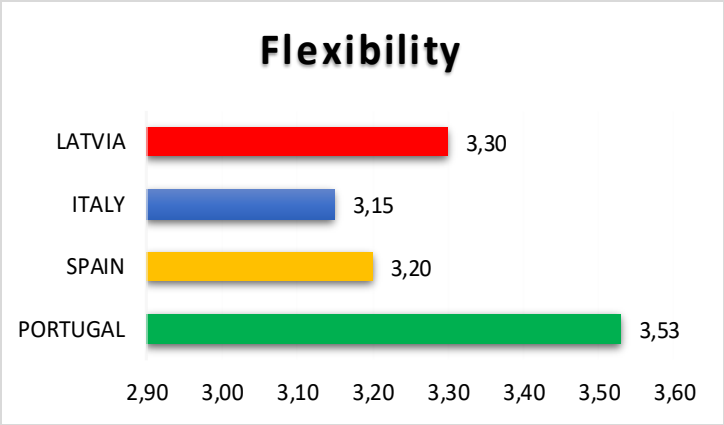
n= number of total respondents

Chart 22 - Emotional skills (n=221)



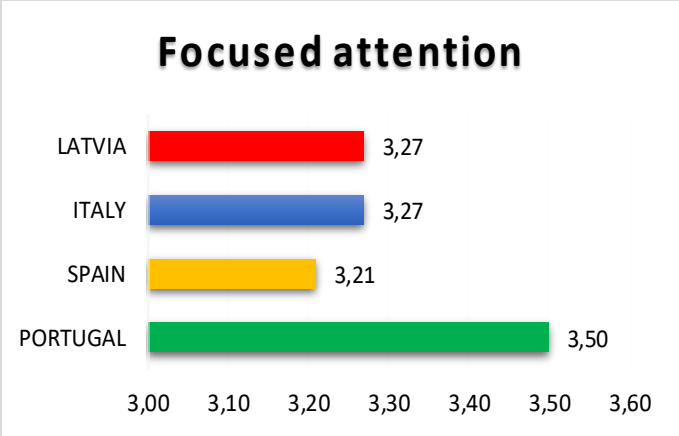
n= number of total respondents

Chart 23 - Flexibility (n=221)



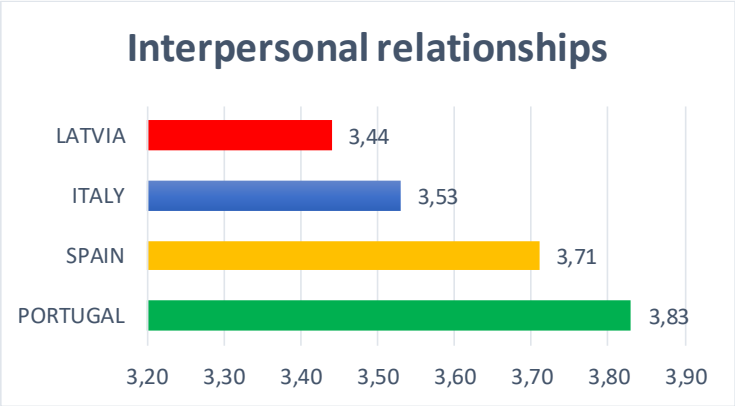
n= number of total respondents

Chart 24 - Focused attention (n=221)



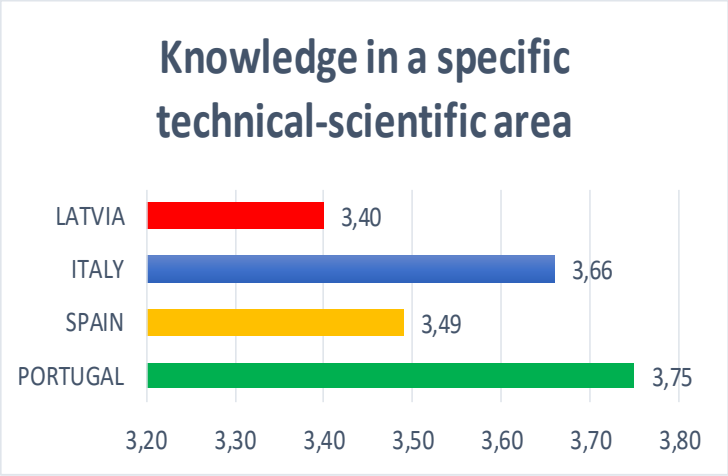
n= number of total respondents

Chart 25 - Interpersonal relationships (n=221)



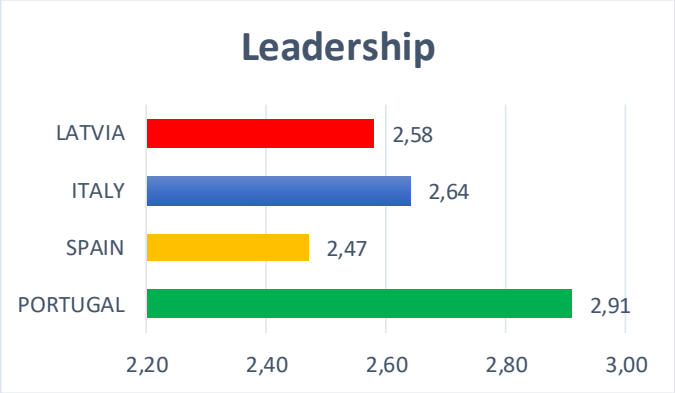
n= number of total respondents

Chart 26 - Knowledge in a specific technical-scientific area (n=221)



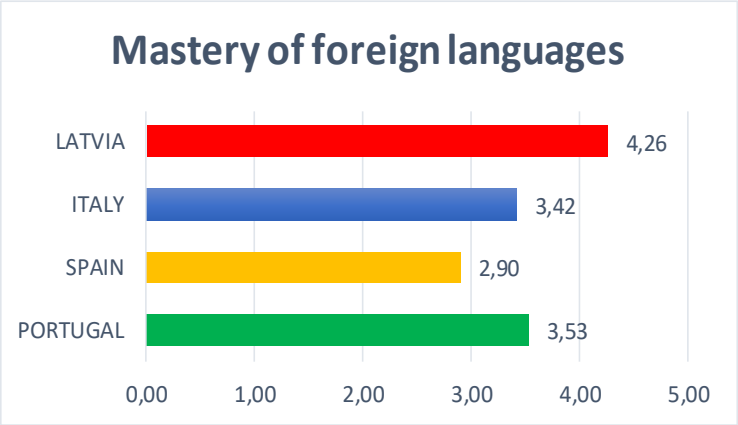
n= number of total respondents

Chart 27 - Leadership (n=221)



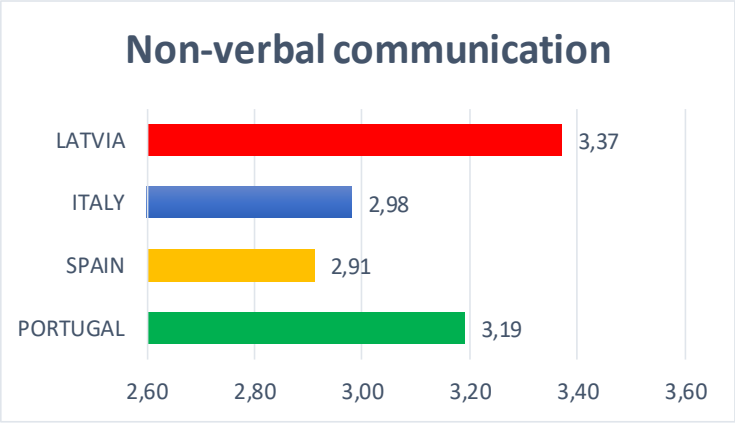
n= number of total respondents

Chart 28 - Mastery of foreign languages (n=221)



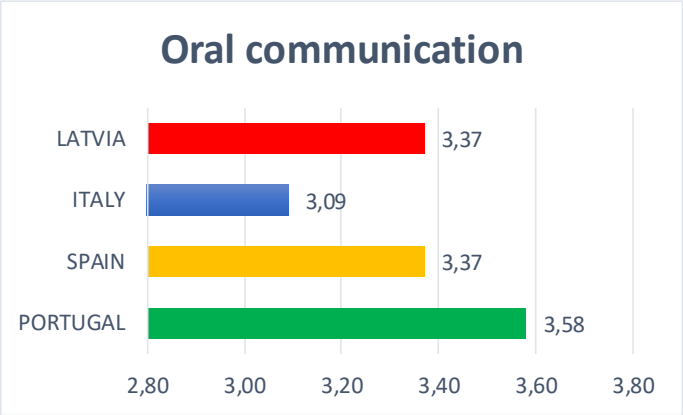
n= number of total respondents

Chart 29 - Non-verbal communication (n=221)



n= number of total respondents

Chart 30 - Oral communication (n=221)

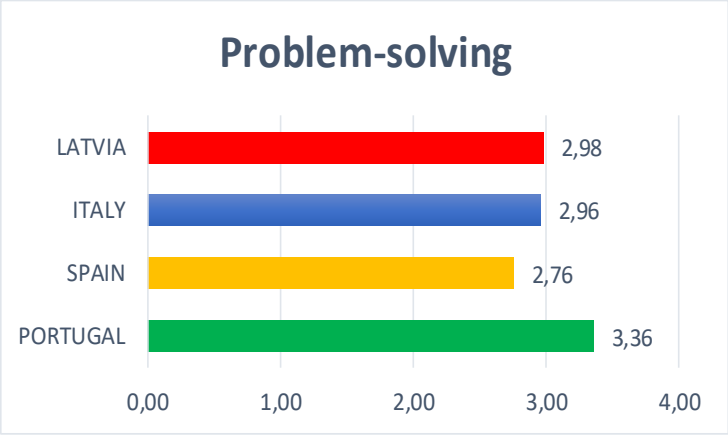


n= number of total respondents

Chart 31 - Planning (n=221)

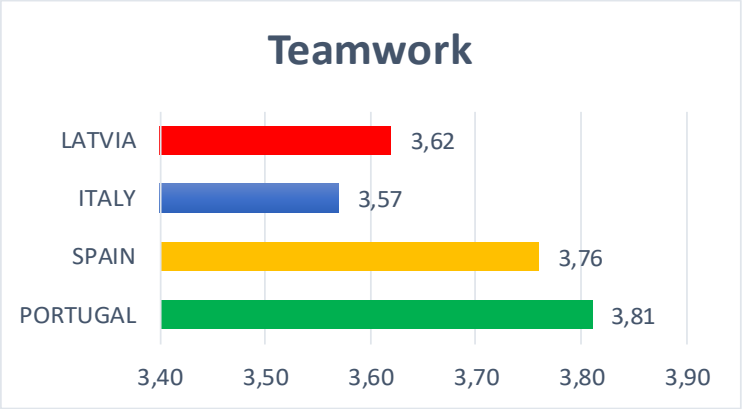
n= number of total respondents

Chart 32 - Problem-solving (n=221)



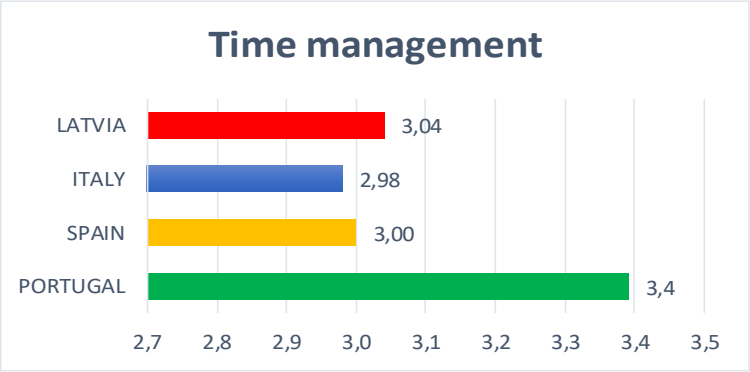
n= number of total respondents

Chart 33 - Teamwork (n=221)



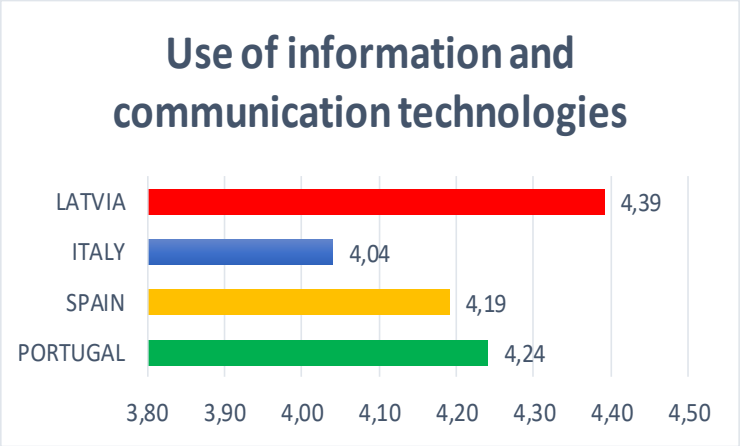
n= number of total respondents

Chart 34 - Time management (n=221)



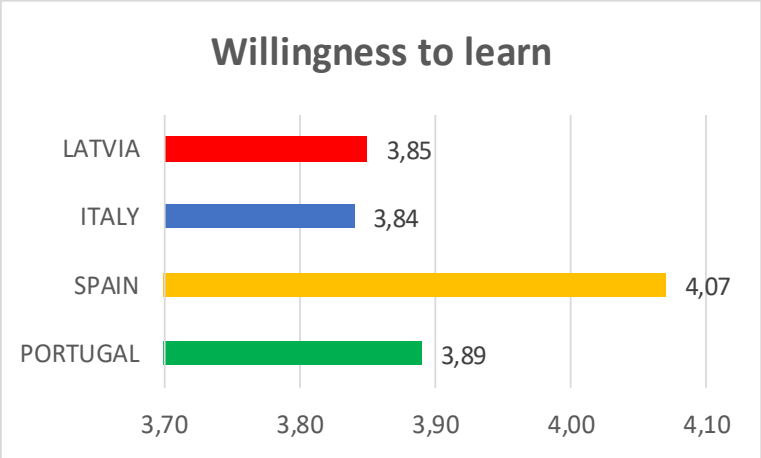
n= number of total respondents

Chart 35 - Use of information and communication technologies (n=221)



n= number of total respondents

Chart 36 - Willingness to learn (n=221)

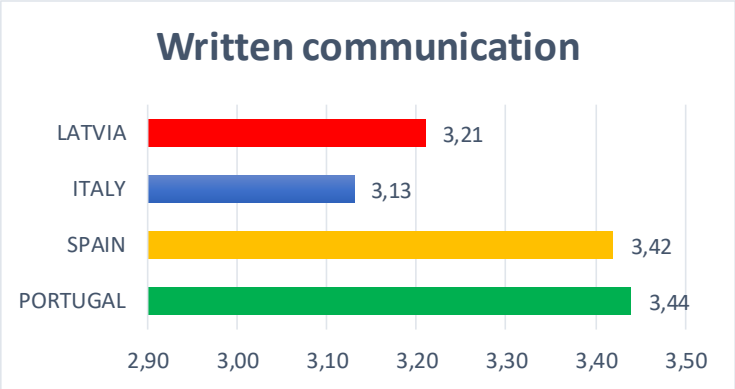


n= number of total respondents

Chart 37 - Work ethic (n=221)

n= number of total respondents

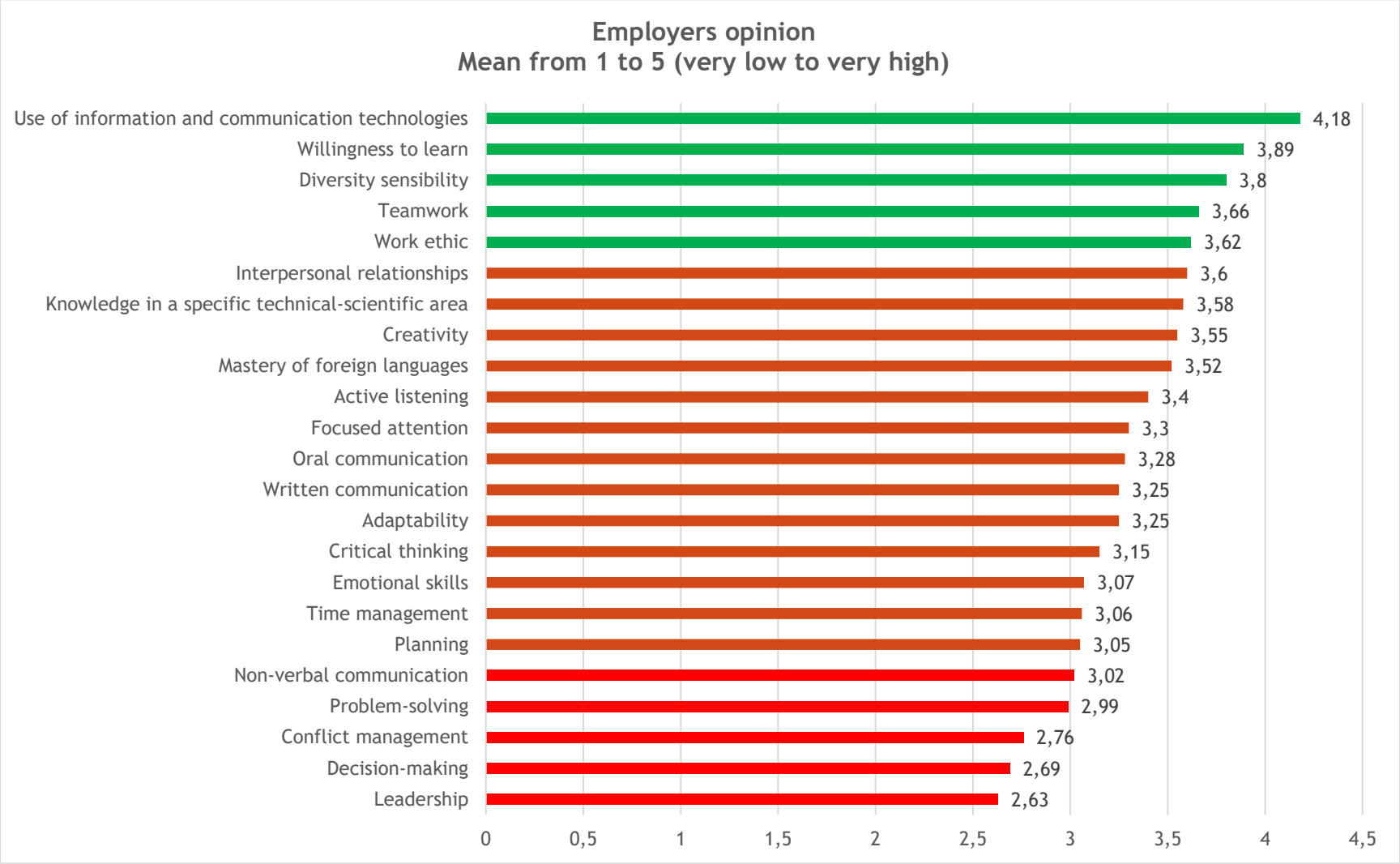
Chart 38 - Written communication (n=221)



n= number of total respondents

In this sample, the participants from Portugal are generally more generous in their assessment of graduates' competences leaving higher education. In the case of Portugal, the most salient differences are: *Active Listening, Critical Thinking, Flexibility, Focus Attention, Time Management* and *Non-verbal Communication*. In the case of Spain, we highlight the skills of *Diversity Sensitivity* and *Willingness to Learn*. Latvia is more salient in *Non-verbal communication* and *Use of information and communication technologies*. Italy are more parsimonious in their assessments, assessing these skills positively on the grading scale 1 to 5. If we consider the whole sample, the *Use of information communication technology, Willingness to learn, Diversity Sensitivity, Teamwork* and *Work ethic* where new graduates are well versed according to employers. The areas in which they are assessed as having the least skills are: *Leadership, Decision-making, Conflict management, Problem-solving* and *Non-verbal communication* (Chart 39).

Chart 39 – Recent Graduates Skills Level - Global Sample (n=221)

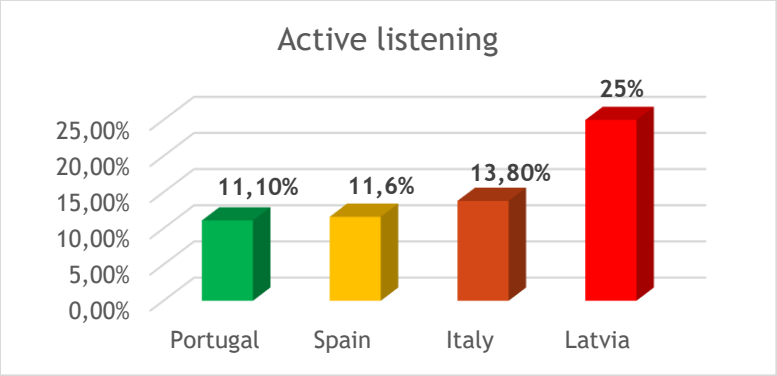


n= number of total respondents

4. MOST VALUED SKILLS IN THE NEXT 5 YEARS

Following are the results of question number 4 of the questionnaire, in which participants are asked to choose the skills (from a list of 23 items) that they believe will be the most important in the next 5 years. We will present data by skill comparing by country.

Chart 40 - Active listening (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)

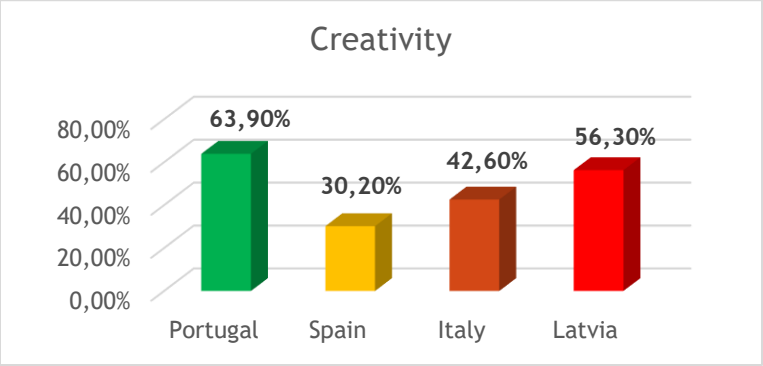


n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 41 - Conflict management (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)

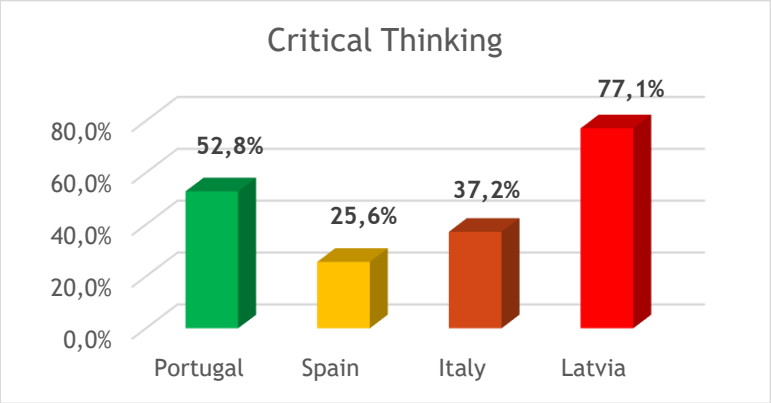
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 42 - Creativity (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



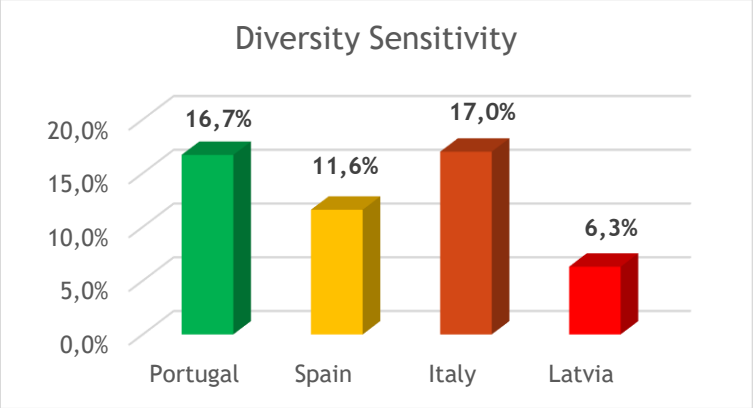
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 43 - Creative Thinking (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



n = number of participants that chose this skill

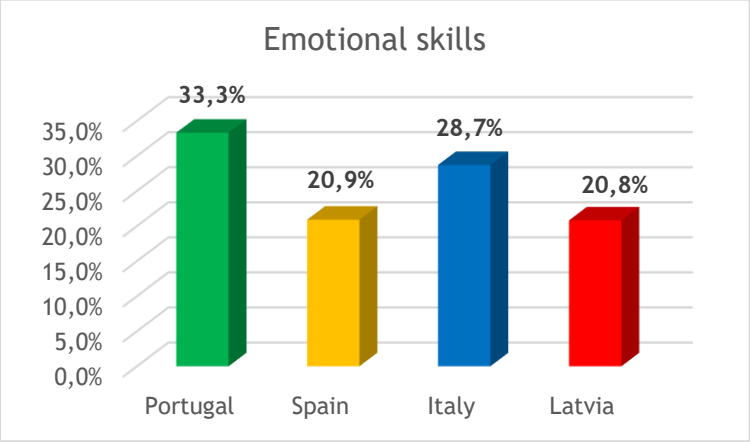
Chart 44 -Diversity Sensitivity (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



=

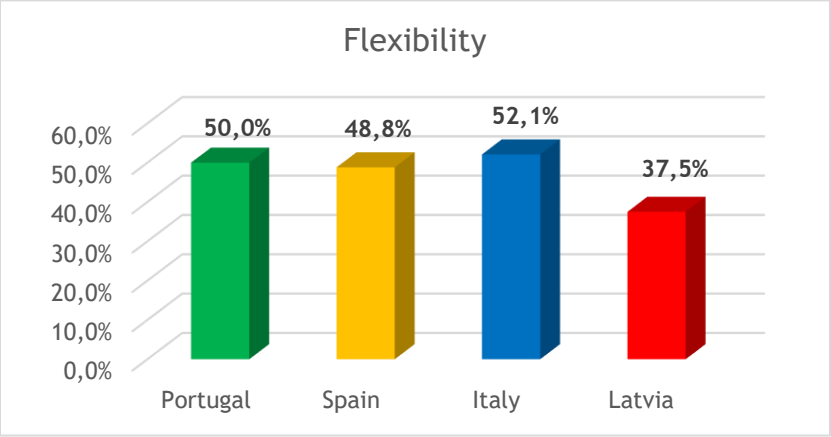
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 45 -Emotional skills (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



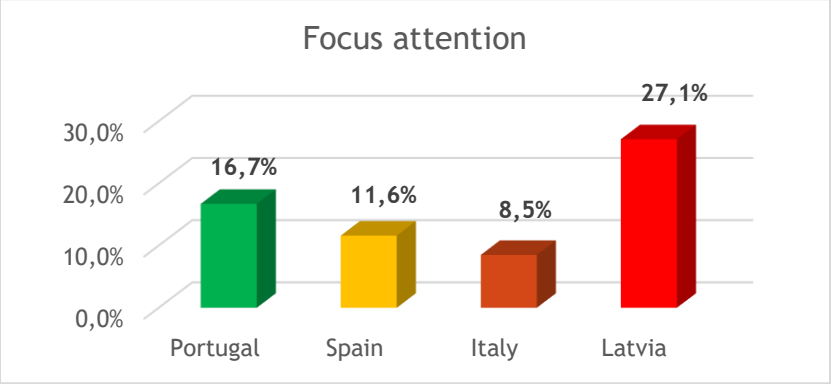
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 46 -Flexibility (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



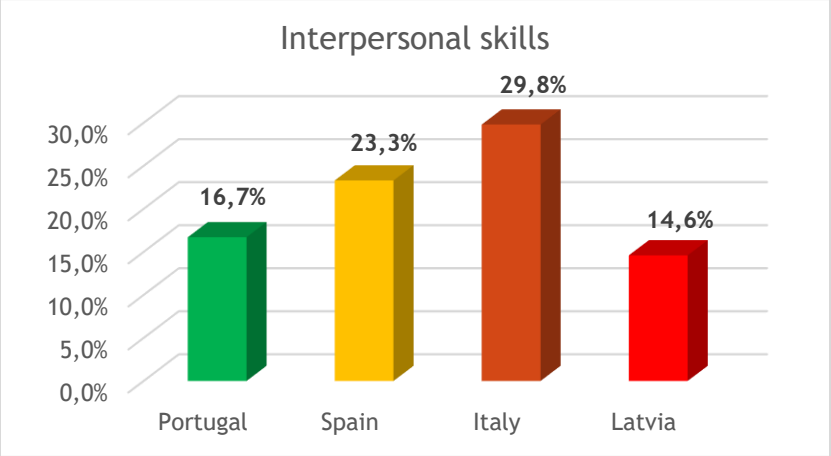
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 47 -Focus attention (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



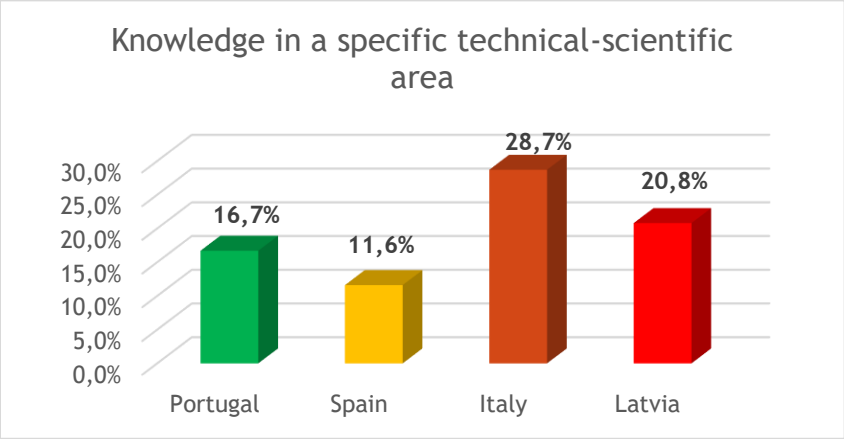
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 48 -Interpersonal skills (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



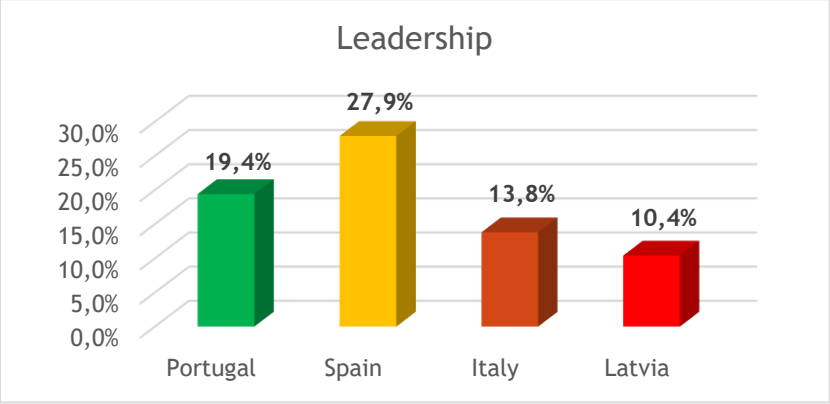
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 49 -Knowledge in a specific area (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



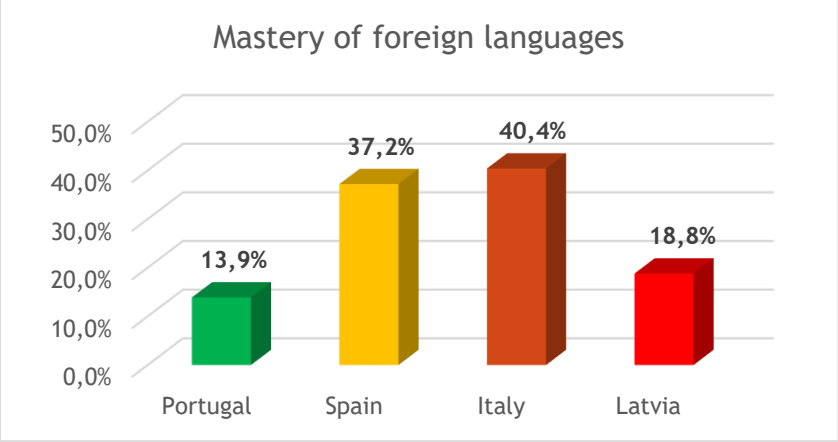
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 50 -Leadership (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



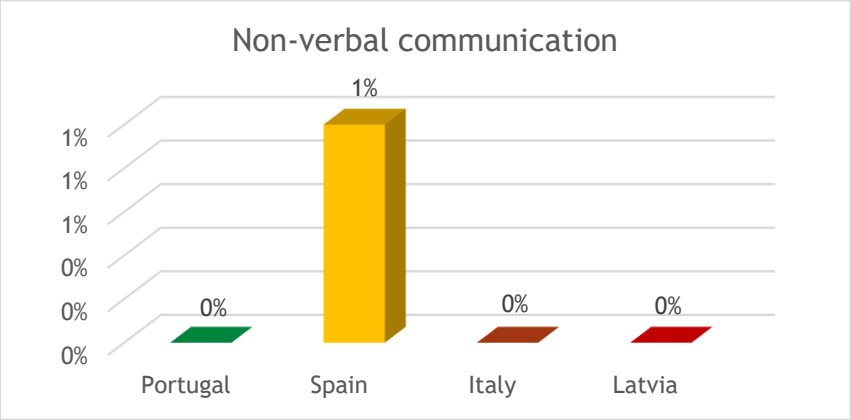
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 51 -Mastery of foreign languages (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



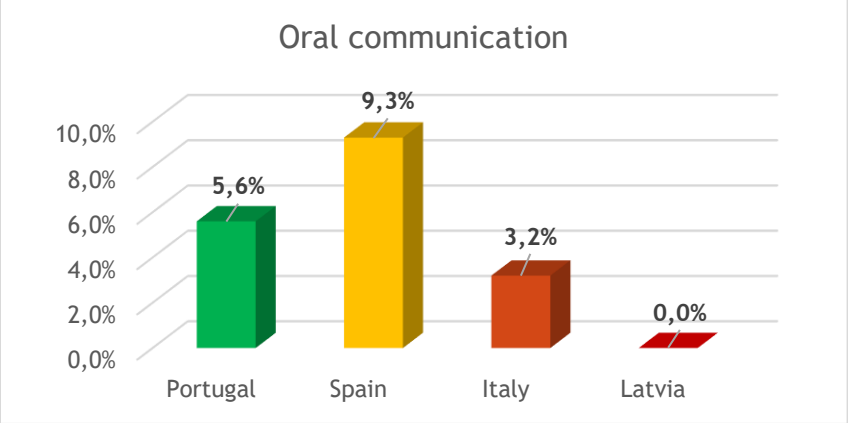
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 52 -Non-verbal communications (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



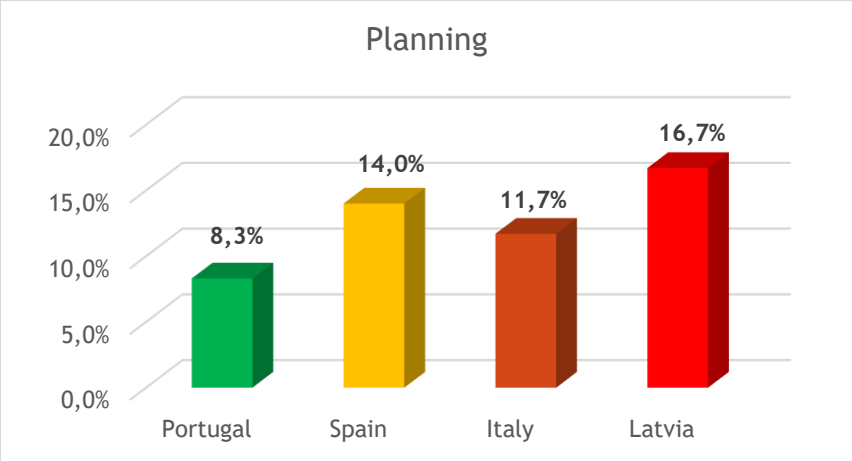
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 53 -Oral communication (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



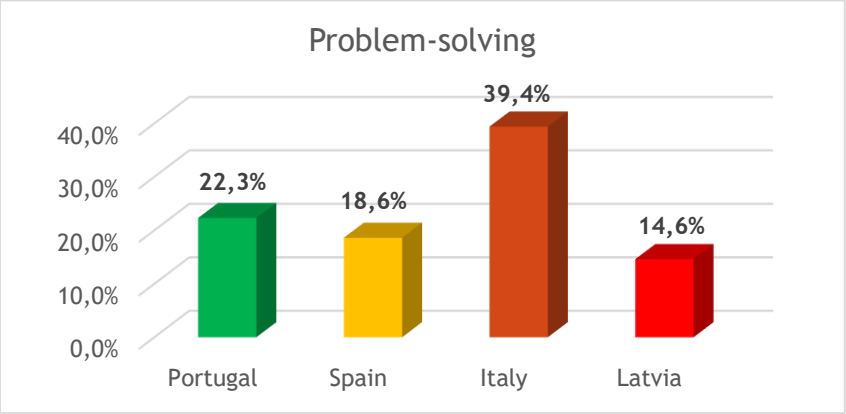
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 54 -Planning (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



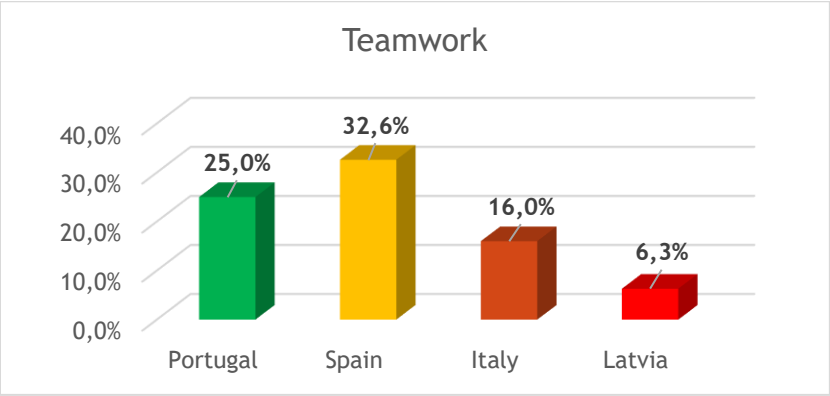
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 55 -Problem-solving (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



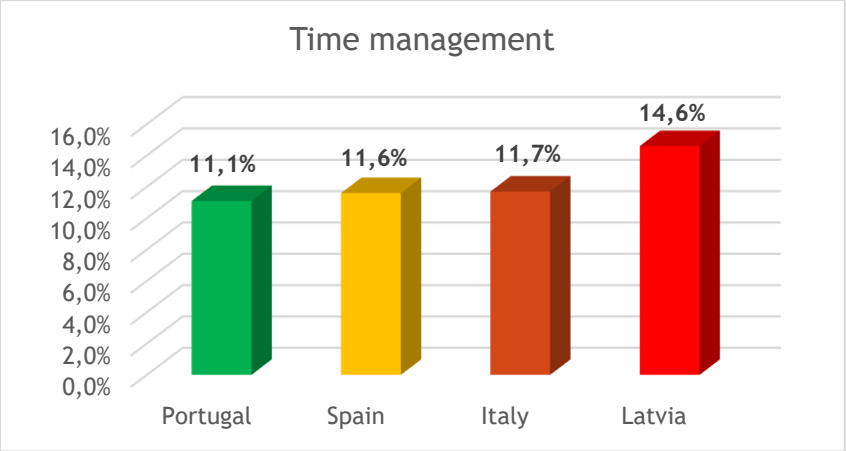
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 56 -Teamwork (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



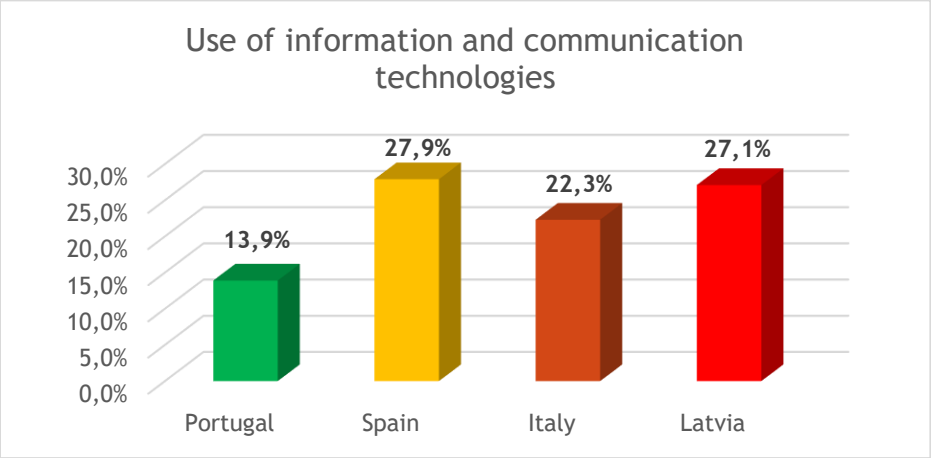
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 57 -Time management (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



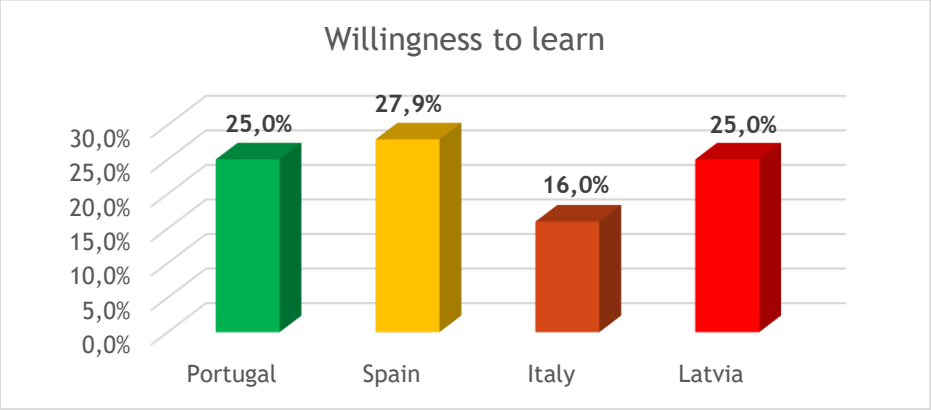
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 58-Use of Inf. and comm. tech (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



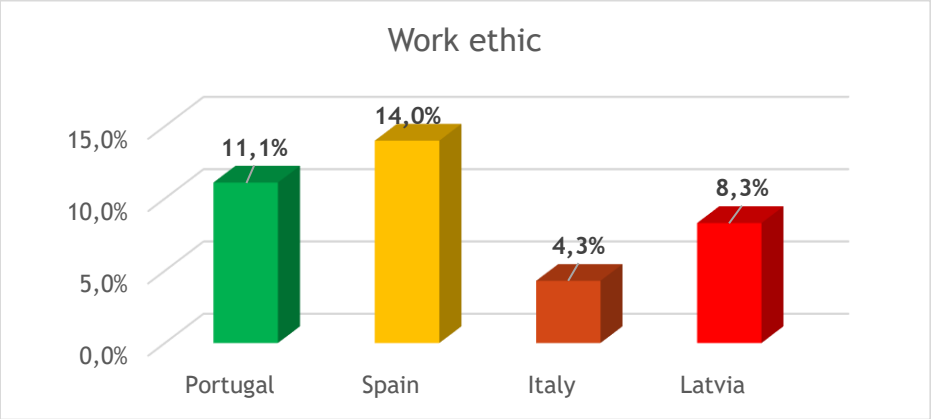
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 59-Willingness to learn (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



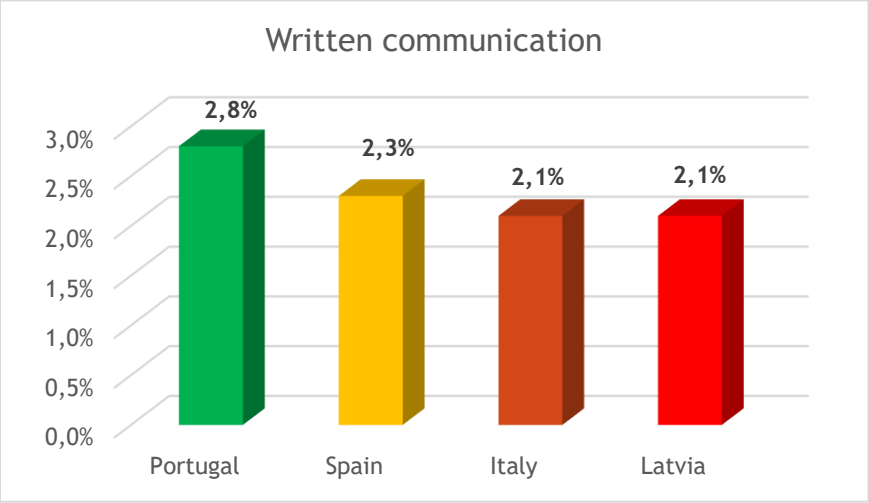
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 60- Work ethic (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 61- Written communication (% choices over key skills over next five years) (n=221)



n = number of participants that chose this skill

From the charter analysis we can see that there are some differences between the 4 countries. Latvia participants stand out in their choices in *Active listening, Critical Thinking, Focus attention* and *Time Management*. Participants from Spain stand out in *choosing Leadership, Teamwork, Oral communication* and *Conflict management skills*. Participants from Italy differ in the *Problem solving, Interpersonal skills* and *Mastery of foreign languages*. Participants from Portugal stand out from others in *choosing Emotional skill* and *Creativity*.

When employers were asked to choose the five skills, they considered would be the most valued by the market over the next 5 years, *Flexibility, Creativity, Critical thinking and Decision making,* were the most valued skills chosen by 48%, 46,6%, 46,2% and 44,8% employers, respectively (Chart 62).

Participants in the study (when asked openly) what the most important skills the graduate should have, point out: *Willingness to learn, Flexibility, Knowledge in a specific technical-scientific area, Teamwork,* and *Interpersonal relationship*. On the other hand, when asked to point out the 5 competencies that they consider to be the most important in the next 5 years they point out: *Flexibility, Creativity, Critical Thinking, Decision-making*, and *Mastery of Foreign Languages*.

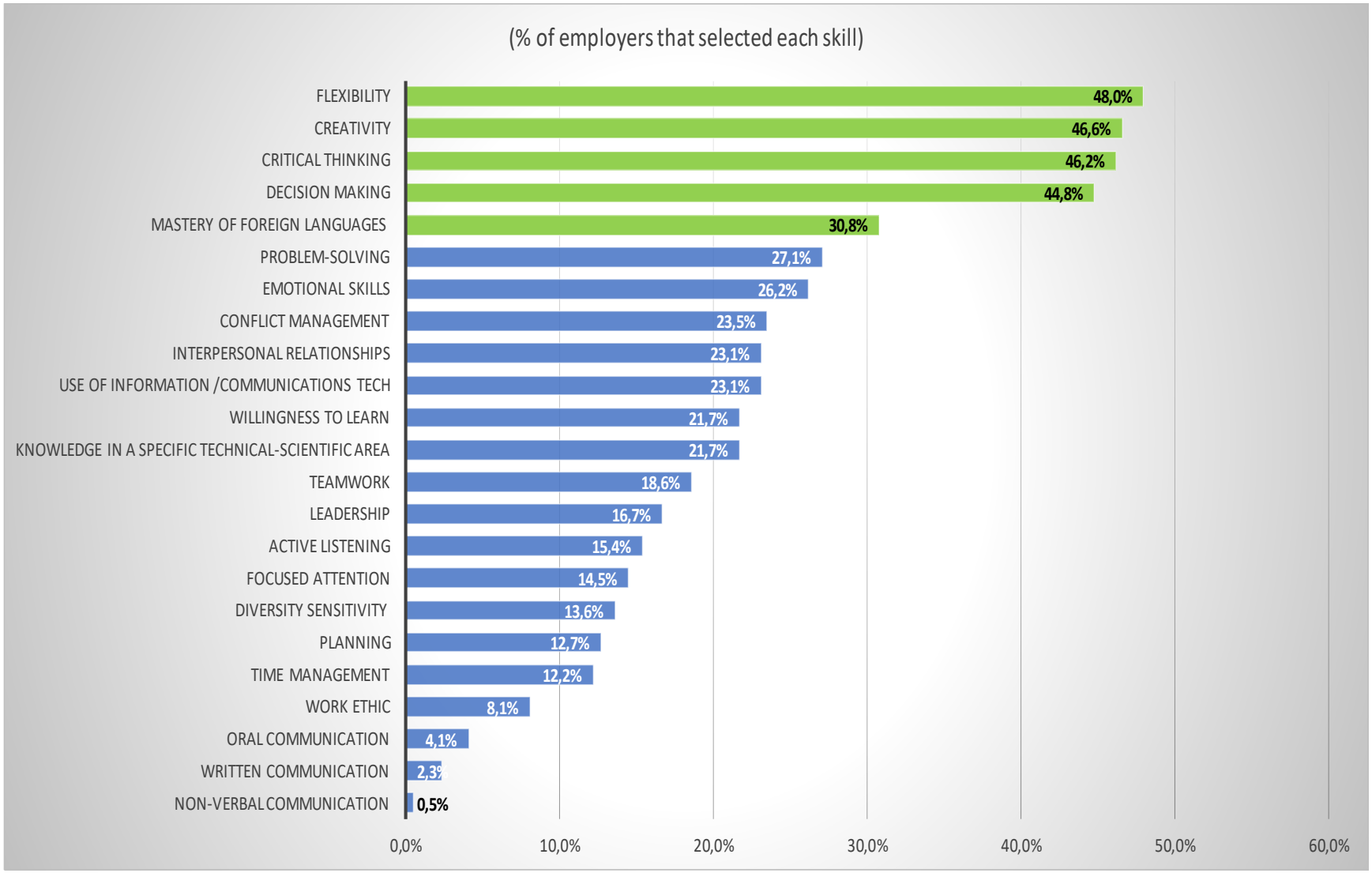
We can verify that only one of the competences coincides in the two questions and it is the *Flexibility*. Participants in the study believe that, either when they leave higher education or in the coming years in terms of market trends and professional demands, Flexibility is a major factor.

While it is true that having knowledge in a specific area, having good relational skills, knowing how to work in a team and a willingness to learn, are good skills from the outset that any graduate should have, this is not enough to deal with the demands that VUCA environments (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) imply.

Participants (knowledgeable human resources planning experts) believe that in order to meet this challenge, professionals must develop beyond *Flexibility*, their Creativity, Cr*itical thinking, Decision-making* and *Mastery of Foreign Languages*.

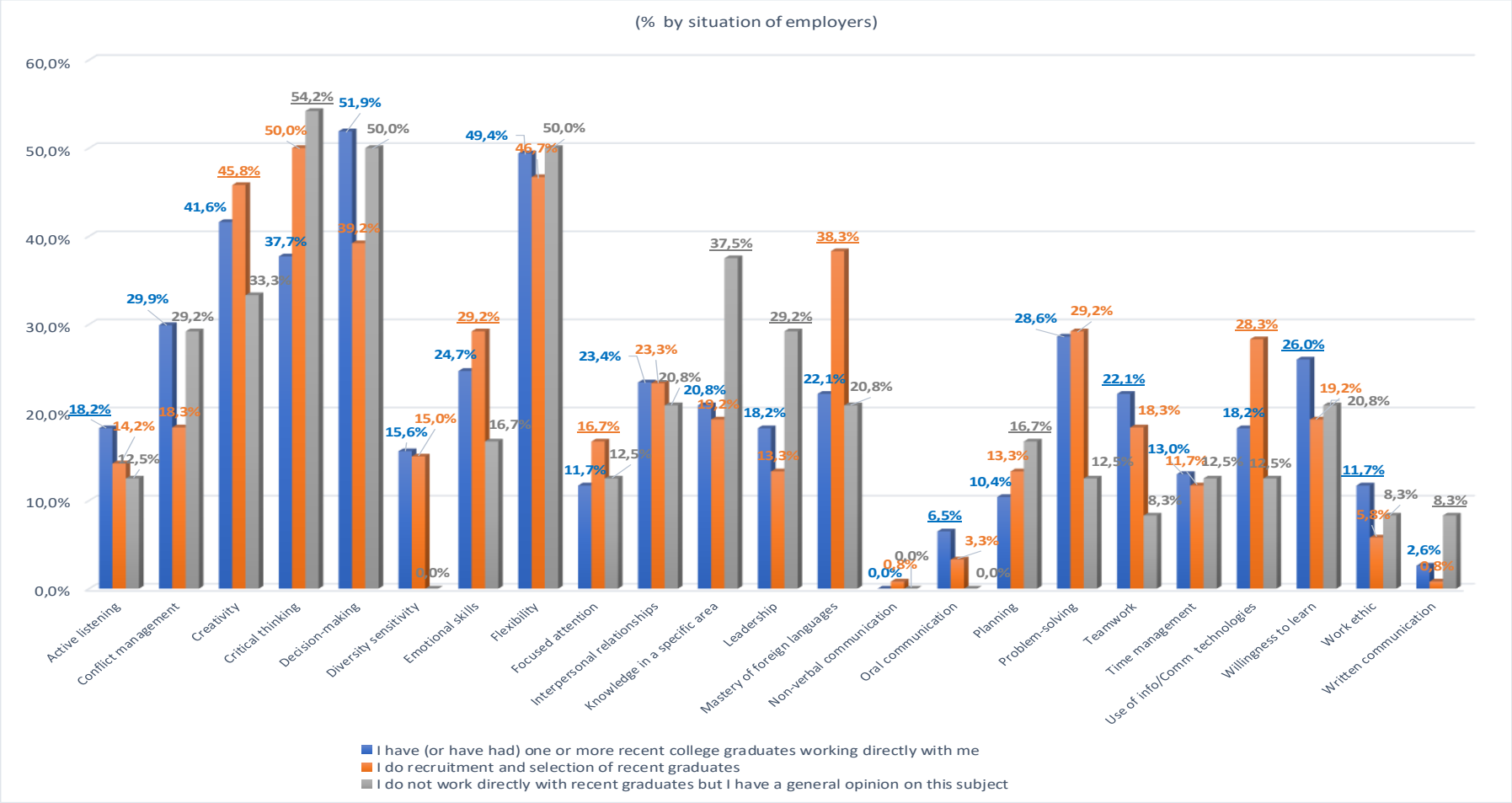
These experts are well aware of the need for graduates to remain eager to learn, to be able to decide in an Era (Digital) of so many alternatives, to be able to have rigorous criteria in the assessment of reality, as well as to be able to generate new solutions to their challenges. The Industrial Revolution 4.0 will put them to the test and these skills could be the most valuable resources for success in life and work.

Chart 62- Skills ranking by importance (% choices over key skills over next five years) - Global sample (n=221)



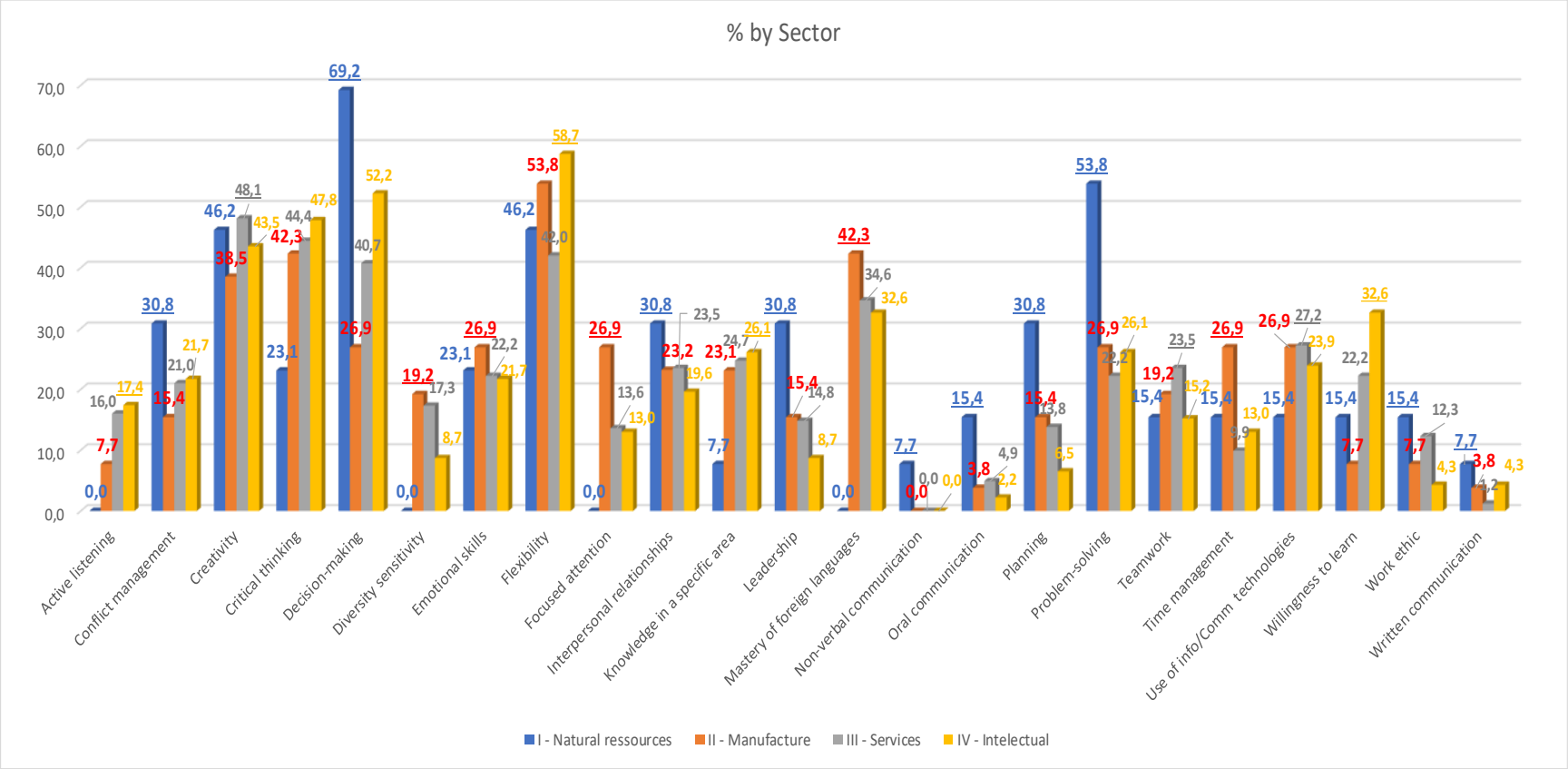
n = number of participants that chose this skill

Chart 63- Key skills over next five years chosen for different situations of employers- Global sample (n=221)



Participants that work directly with recent graduates chose more Active listening, Oral communication, Tem work, Willingness to learn and work ethic. Participants that recruit and select recent graduates chose more Creativity, Emotional skills, Focused attention, Mastery of a Foreign language and Use of info/communication technologies. Participants with a general opinion chose more Critical thinking, Knowledge in a specific area, Leadership, Planning and Written communication.

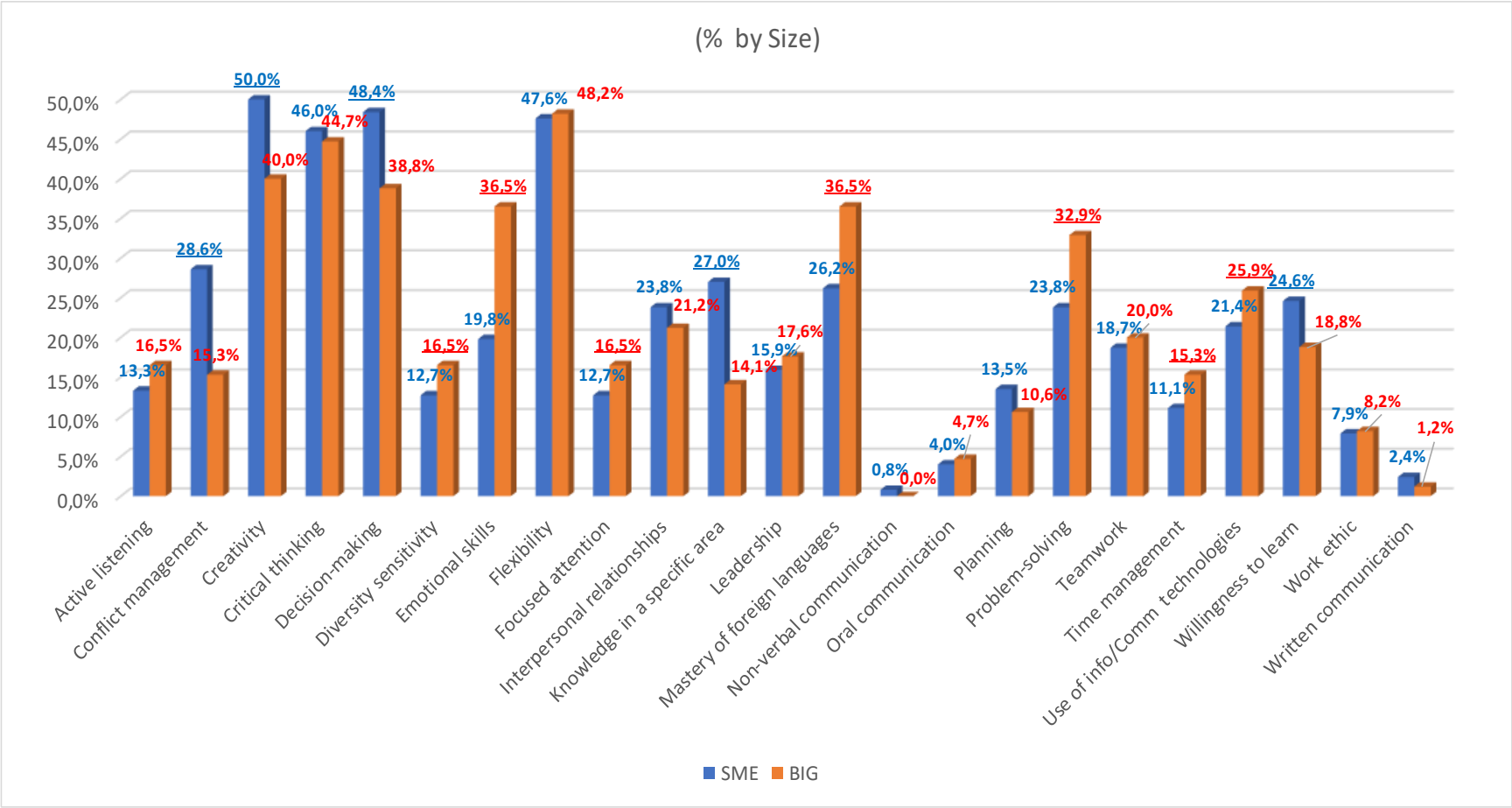
Chart 64- Key skills over next five years chosen by sector- Global sample (n=221)



n = number of participants

As we can see, the Natural Resources sector presents superior results in terms of Conflict management, Decision-making, Interpersonal relationship, Leadership, Nonverbal communication, Oral communication, Planning, Problem solving, Work ethic and Written communication. In Manufacture sector the skills more salient are Diversity sensitivity, Emotional skills, Focused attention, and Time management. In Services sector the skills more chosen for employers are Creativity, Teamwork and Use of Info/communication technologies. In intellectual sector, Active listening, Critical Thinking, Flexibility, Knowledge in a specific area and Willingness to learn are the skills that employers most predict as important in the next 5 years.

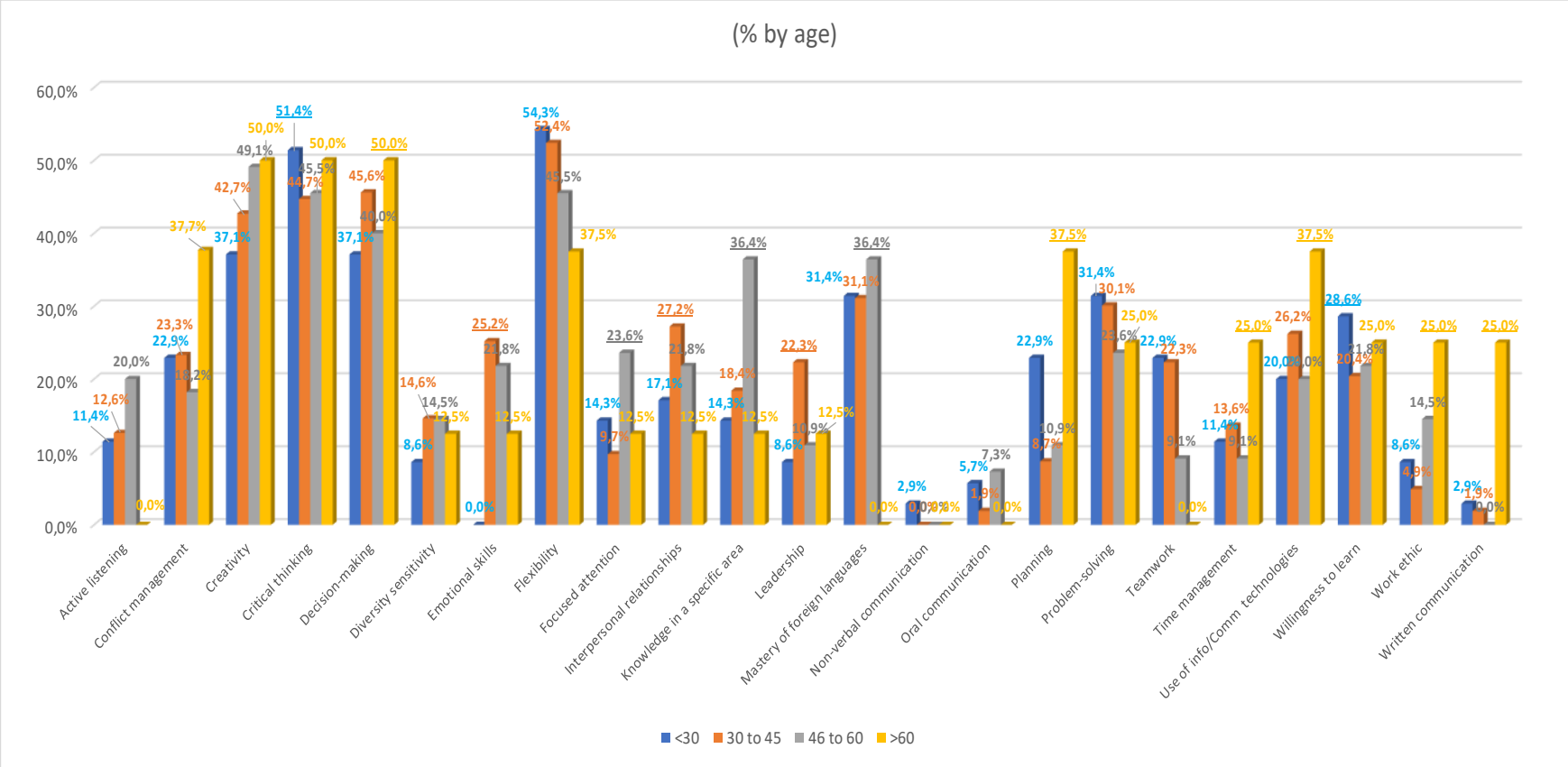
Chart 65- Key skills over next five years chosen by size - Global sample (n=221)



n = number of participants

The charter 65 made in evidence the differences between SME's and Big Enterprises. The participants for SMEs identifies over next five years the follow skills: Conflict management, Creativity, Decision making, Knowledge in a specific area and Willingness to learn. The Big enterprises respondents chose more Active listening, Diversity sensitivity, Emotional skills, Focused attention, Mastery of foreign languages, Problem solving, Time management and Use of info/communication technologies.

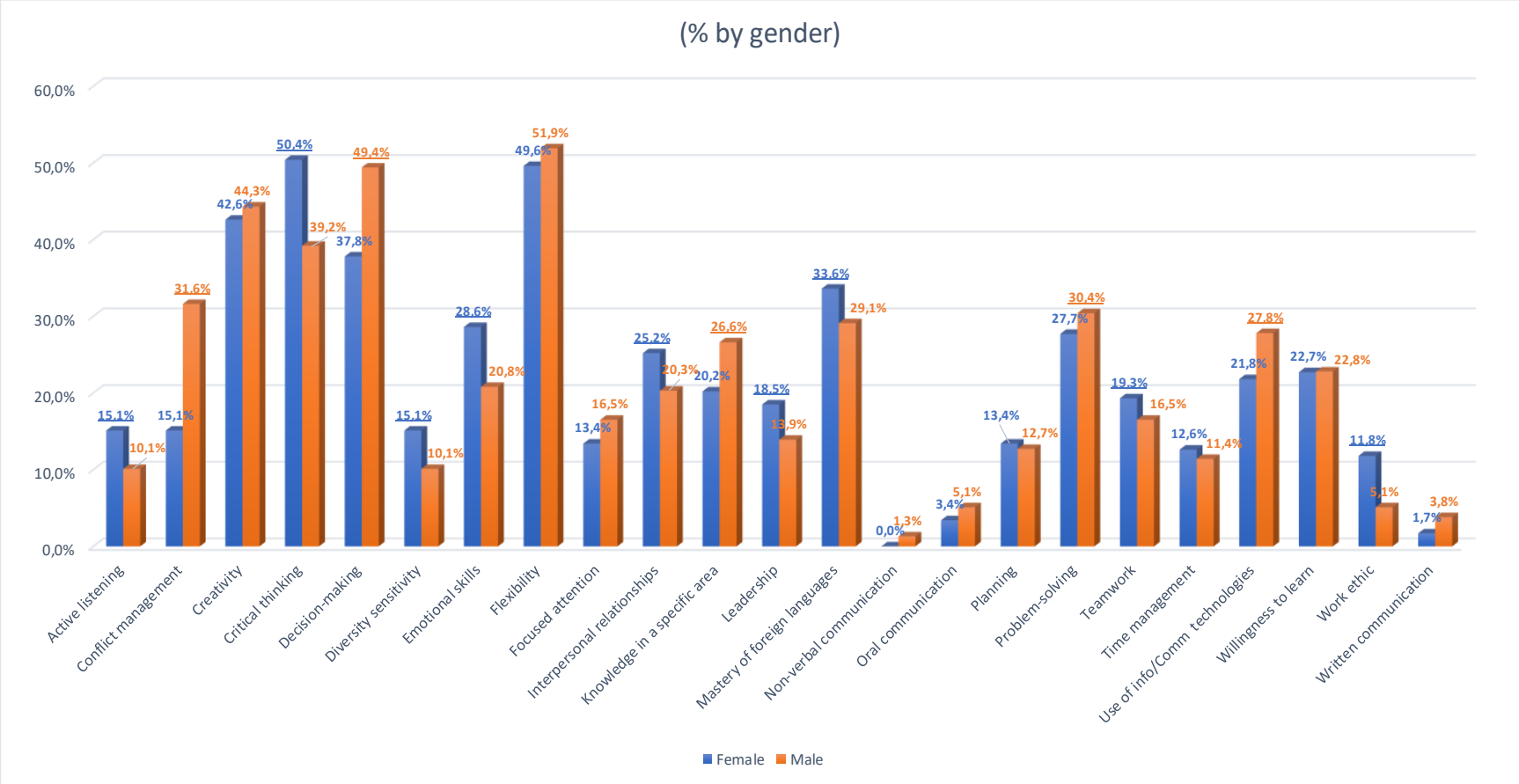
Chart 66- Key skills over next five years chosen by age - Global sample (n=221)



n = number of participants

The youngers participants chose Critical thinking and Flexibility as key skills over next five years. The elder's participants chose more Conflict management, Decision making, Planning, Time management, Use of info/communication technologies, Work ethic and Written communication. Participants from 30 to 45 years old choose as key competencies for the next five years' Emotional skills, Interpersonal relationship and Leadership. Participants from 46 to 60 years choose Active listening, Focused attention, Knowledge of specific area and Mastery of a foreign language.

Chart 67- Key skills over next five years chosen by gender - Global sample (n=221)



n = number of participants

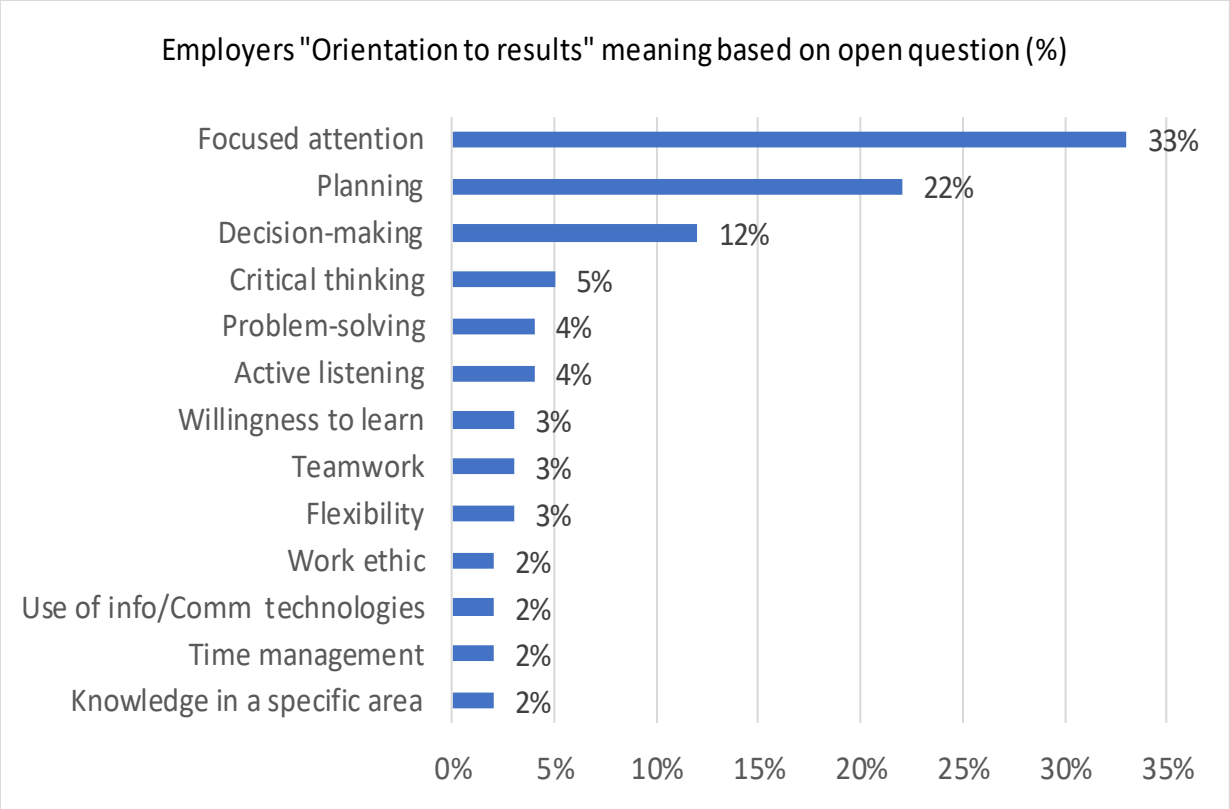
The female participants chose more the Active listening, Critical thinking, Diversity sensitivity, Emotional skills, Interpersonal relationship, Leadership, Mastery of foreign languages, Teamwork and Work ethic, as key skills for the five next years. The male participants chose more Conflict management, Decision making, Focused attention, Knowledge of a specific area, Problem solving, and Use of info/communication,

5. MEANING OF "ORIENTATIONS TO RESULTS" AND FOCUS ON CUSTOMER NEEDS"

In order to clarify what employers, mean by "orientation to results" and "focus on customer needs" the last two open questions asked them about the respective meanings.

The question about "orientation to results" originated a total of 186 text units in which 157 fitted in the label list. Focus (33% of all text units), planning (22%) and decision-making (12%) were the main skills chosen to express the meaning of orientation-to-results (charter 68).

Chart 68- Key skills that employers chose with "orientation to results" - open question (n=221)



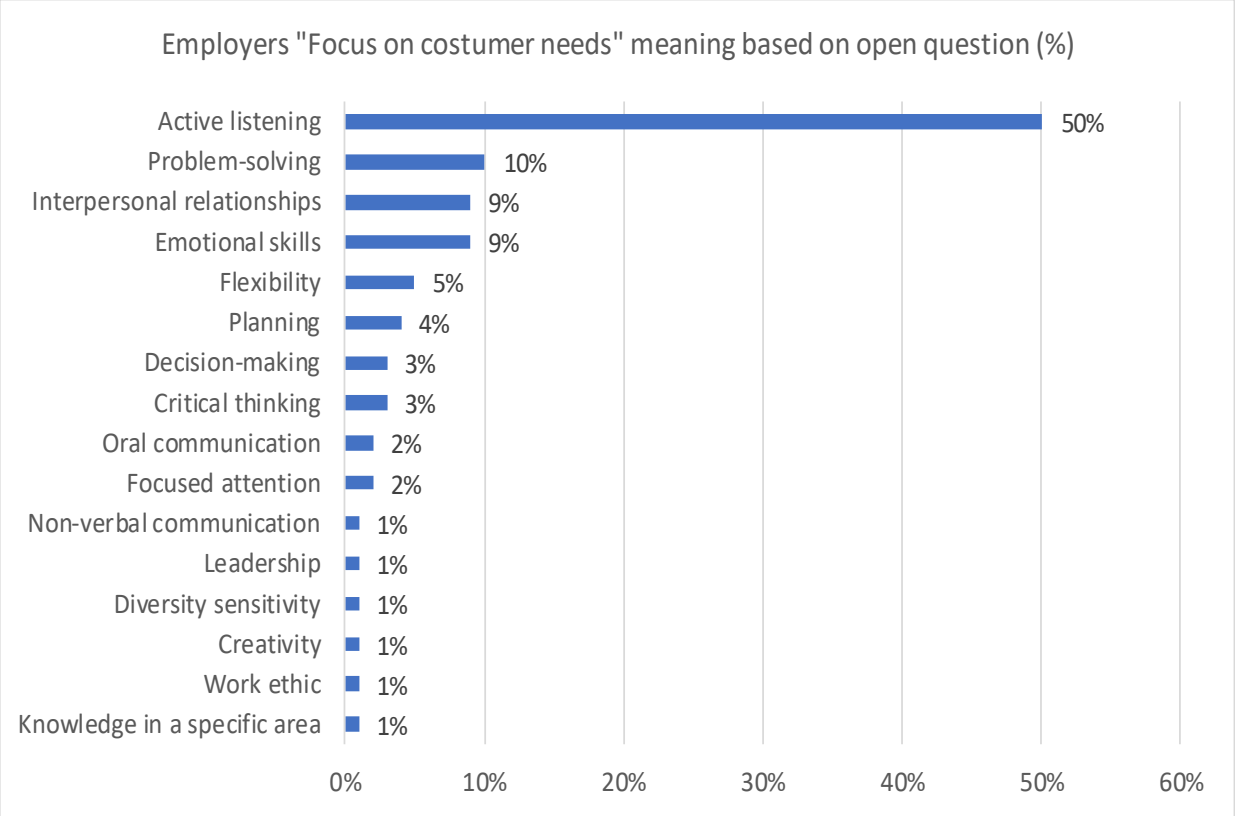
n = number of participants

The remaining 29 text units were submitted to content analysis and resulted in "goal oriented" "resilience" and "responsibility" expressed 24, 3 and 2 times, respectively.

The question about "focus on customer needs" originated a total of 194 text units in which 183 fitted in the label list.

As we can see in Charter 69, 50% of all text units referred to active listening, followed by problem-solving (10%), interpersonal relationships (9%) and emotional skills (9%).

Chart 69 - Key skills that employers chose with "Focus on customer needs"" - open question



n = number of respondents