

Soft Skills: A Requisite for Young India to bridge the gap between ‘Qualified’ and ‘Employable’

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine and analyze the practicality of Soft Skill enhancement due to changing demands of work culture. In addition, this paper also discusses suggested group of skills that can prove to be valuable for entrepreneurs or employees to enter and sustain in the market. With the pervasive impact of global economy, a sea-change has come about in the realm of industries because of the rapid transformation in the work -ambience with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Among the cluster of skills that cater to this changing scenario, personality and soft skills are playing a major role in a person’s career progress. Communication skills both verbal and nonverbal, problem solving skills, interpersonal skills, motivation and positive attitude are some of the most important soft skills that the organizations expect from their employees. Though various universities endeavor to inculcate soft skills in their students, they seldom realize that there exists a gap between the skills they try to develop in their students and the ones that the workplaces really demand from their employees. Degrees and credentials are important, but the development of soft skills—skills that are more social than technical—are a crucial part of fostering a dynamic workforce and are always in high demand.

INTRODUCTION

India is a multilingual, culturally diverse and a country with varied traditions and customs. Moreover, India is moving fast towards being a developed country. This makes it essential for the youth of this country to think and act globally. Our education system should be upgraded and improvised accordingly. Along with accumulating knowledge from books, youth also requires to gain a lot of practical skills. Here comes the significance of soft skills. It has become a mandatory requirement for industries as it ensures better work environment, culture and productivity. For the task of making the generation work ready, an appropriate environment needs to be given right from the formative years. We, in India are majorly facing this problem of a severe gap between qualifying our youngsters who are still not ready for adapting to a demanding work atmosphere. To make our coming generation more adaptable and productive, we need to focus on some very basic aspects: the teaching learning process, situation based learning and realization of the need to enhance soft skills, which include behavioural skills, team building, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, stress management, emotion management, etc.

Qualified: The definition of ‘qualified’ given by United States Agency for International Development is, ‘Qualified candidates are those being considered for any competitive placement action who meets all established minimum eligibility and

qualification requirements for the position.’ The criterion of being qualified for a particular job largely depends upon the academic background of the youth. This may be the initial step towards acquiring the career or job, but does not assure final recruitment. To secure a desired job commensurate with the qualifications and experience, one has to be both skilled and employable. One cannot assume that solely qualifications will open doors. They are indeed an essential element. But it is also important to be exposed while studying and obtain the necessary proof of this experience in order to be able to provide it during the interview process. How employable you are is not only about the academic qualifications, it is about the core competencies that are needed for a particular role.

Employable: How employable you are is crucial for securing a job yet many young people are accused of lacking vital employability skills, such as a suitable grasp of English language, good communication skills and a “can-do attitude. In the globalization era, especially in the global marketplace, a competitive advantage is determined by performances that are being evaluated by a combination of knowledge and skills. Various types of knowledge, skills, and proficiencies should be imparted to enlarge the view of today’s challenging workforce environment that deals with market globalization [Stock & Hansen, 2004]. The impact of globalization has changed the international situation to where human resources now

serve as the important role of boosting the development and infrastructure of a country. Moreover, globalization is creating numerous opportunities for sharing knowledge, technology, social value, and behavioral norms and promoting development at different levels including employee and organizations across different countries and cultures [Cheng, 2004, p.8]. The trend of globalization has lead to the different demand in employee skills to meet this phenomenon. Employees with a skills set and knowledge will benefit from integration into the global economy, while those who have lack of skills and knowledge are destined to fall further behind. There are two types of skills demanded by the organization, hard skills and soft skills. Many researchers emphasize the importance of soft skills that employers value, rather than focusing heavily on intellectual skills [Dench, 1997; Hunt & Baruch, 2003; Nabi, 2003]. In that matter, graduates must compete with changes in order to prepare themselves for the current work environment. Furthermore, employers are no longer interested in hiring graduates who have only specific skills, but lack other relevant skills, especially the soft skills. To achieve organization goals, employee skills become assets that are valuable as capital and are acquired throughout a lifetime. In today’s economy, chances to qualify for a good job and benefit from it depend upon the knowledge and skills graduates have and build on over time. Thus, graduates must be able to apply skills and knowledge in the workplace environment because both knowledge and skills required are diverse from time to time. When environment, technology, and market demand changes, it automatically changes the workers’ knowledge and skill requirements. Organizations need highly trained employees with academic, technical, and social skills to meet the demands of ever-changing technology, global competition, and increasing social diversity [Zinser, 2003, p.403]. Organizations expect a high level of ability and thinking from graduates in performing tasks in the workplace. Together with the investment, organizations only select graduates that demonstrate knowledge and skills to join them.

Research Findings and Discussion: On the basis of survey conducted professors of BITS Pilani in 30 MNCs including TCS, WIPRO, INFOSYS, CTS, HCL, IBM, CSC, Polaris, TechMahindra, etc., to name a few, and talking to 200 HR professionals who visit various educational campuses for interviews to select students; it is evident from the following figure (Figure 1) that almost all the HR Managers (98%) emphasized on problem solving ability followed by communication skills (92%), inter personal skills (88%) and time management skills (65%) to select a student in campus placements.

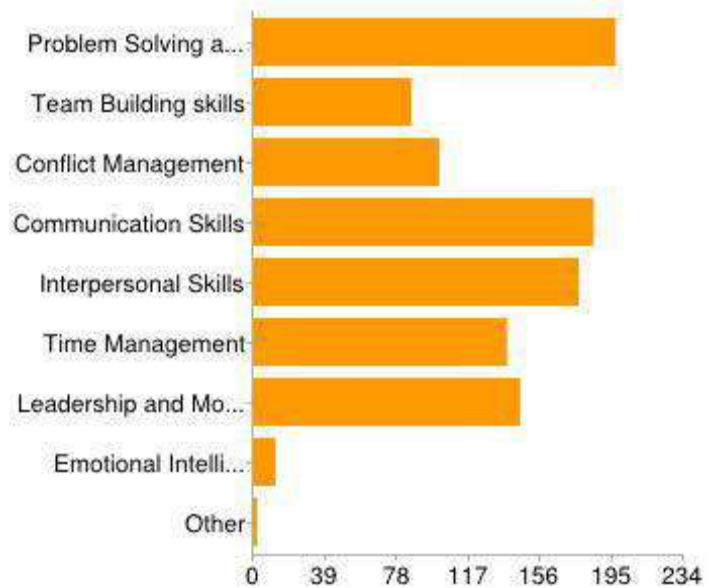


Figure 1 *Emphasis on Specific Soft Skill while Recruiting Students*

Figure 2 reveals that 57% of HR managers want a minimum period of six month long industry internship for the students. 38% of HR managers want it to be greater than six months. It can be concluded that six months minimum period of internship would be sufficient for the students to minimize the gap between university training and industry expectations in terms of their soft skills

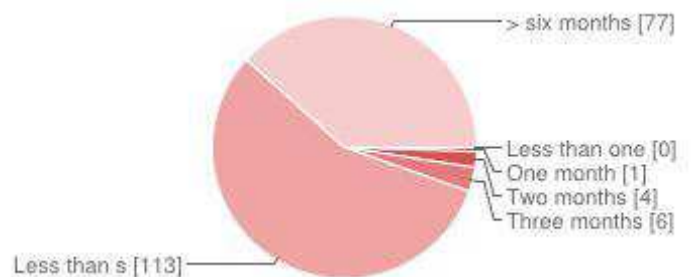


Figure 2 *Period of Internship for Students Findings:*

1. Organizations expect not just hard skills which include academic and technical knowledge but also soft skills such as problem solving skills, presentation skills, negotiation skills and time management skills, to name a few.
2. Multi-national companies always prefer to employ candidates who are productive from the early stages; those having good soft skills are promoted to higher level as they are considered as wealth producers.

3. In order to survive in the job market, candidates aspiring for good profile jobs must have to bring competitive edge that distinguishes them from the other competitors with similar qualifications. Only then, they can get this competitive advantage of having soft skills.

Soft skills required to Enhance the Employability of Youth: Degrees and credentials are important, but the development of soft skills—skills that are more social than technical—are a crucial part of fostering a dynamic workforce and are always in high demand. Soft skills are general skills—like the ability to accept feedback, work collaboratively, manage time, etc. These are the skills that help in a wide range of jobs, not just the target job that is applied for.

Here are some essential soft skills in demand for today's job market:

1. Communication skills: It's more than just speaking the language. Communication skills involve active listening, presentation as well as good command over non verbal skills, especially body language. One highly sought-after communication skill is the ability to explain technical concepts to partners, customers and coworkers that aren't tech savvy.

2. Interpersonal skills: One of the soft skills that organizations require in selecting employees is interpersonal skills. The ability to work in teams, relate to people and manage conflict is a valuable asset to the workplace. Personal accomplishments are important on the resume, but showing that one can work well with others is important too. According to Barker [2002], interpersonal skills are the most important skills for the workplace.

3. Critical Thinking and Problem solving skills: The ability to solve problems and make decisions can be a huge asset to the employer and these are therefore desirable skills to develop. The ability to use creativity, reasoning, past experience, information and available resources to resolve issues is attractive because it saves the organization's valuable time.

4. Adaptability: Don't underestimate the ability to adapt to changes and manage multiple tasks. In today's technology driven and rapidly evolving business environment, the ability to pick up on new technologies and adjust to changing business surroundings is important.

5. Emotional Intelligence: Although you will most likely never see this in a job description, EI is a highly sought after skill that relates to the employee's social skills, social awareness and self-management abilities.

6. Leadership: Leadership is the ability to influence others toward the achievement of a goal. Leaders either have, or are perceived to have, strong self-confidence. Leaders are team players, allowing them

to work in a group to achieve the best results for their employer. Leaders show social skills by respecting the thoughts, opinions and ideas of others - they gain the respect of others and aim for credibility.

7. Presentation Skills: Presenting information clearly and effectively is a key skill in the work place and presentation skills are required in almost every modern employment area.

The latest QS recruitment survey (2010) lists the four most important skills sought by executive level recruiters are interpersonal skills, communication skills, strategic thinking and leadership ability.

Recommendations: HR managers suggest that employable soft skills can be developed in students by adopting the following strategies:

1. Making the teaching more practice oriented.
2. Enabling students to participate in more and more extracurricular activities.
3. Inviting hiring managers from industries to have interactive sessions with students.
4. Arranging discussion sessions between the teachers of soft skills and the hiring managers of industries.
5. Conducting a remedial course in English to enhance the English proficiency of weak students.

On the basis of the exposure to undergraduate students for the past decade, a few more inferences can be drawn based on which some more points can be highlighted as problems leading to of dearth of soft skills in youth presently.

Society: With the omnipresence of technology and its prevalence, the coherence in social setup is to quite an extent lost. Human contact and interaction is the basic need of man since the time of evolution. We are 'Social Animals', hence we learn the finesse of interpersonal relationship and its skill by quality interaction with various people in our formative years. With the influence of technology and in hand services/online services youngsters do not get a chance of experiencing situations and handling them. Another factor is that the society needs to produce realistic role models who can become a source of inspiration and motivate the youth.

Family: The first institution for any human is his/her family. Some of the very essential aspects of 'human skills', such as values, behavior, discipline, attitude etc., to a large extent, are learnt and developed in the family. It is necessary to understand the importance of spending quality time at home and have healthy discussions. This gives children lots of confidence and helps in building leadership skills, emotional intelligence and problem solving skills.

Personal Realization: The academic system in India is successful in building the concepts and theoretical knowledge of the youth. But everything cannot be

‘spoon fed’ to the students. There is a dire need to introduce ‘situation based’ learning. They have to be motivated to introspect and realize their aims and goals in life. They have to develop a target oriented approach and work towards it. This will help create self awareness and will power along with imagination to find a solution to the threats they face. This will make them adaptable and enhance their critical thinking.

Teaching Learning Process: Teaching is an art. It should be taken seriously realizing that teachers are people shaping the future of a student and in turn the future of a country. Researches clearly show that, ‘A teacher with the right attitude makes a lasting impact on the student learning.’ A teacher gets an opportunity to influence the overall development of a student’s personality by creating an ideal example. Teaching is not a job but an inspired profession or passion. Even a single inspired teacher, whether at school, college or university leaves carving impression on the minds of students, not only in terms of knowledge and training imparted, but also the values, dignity and other behavioral skills required for life.

Conclusion: The current situation in our country is very ironical where on one hand the newspapers are full with employment news, implying there are several organizations paying a good amount to attract the right talent. While on the other hand there is a large population of graduates who are still jobless. This situation is most likely caused by a huge skill gap between the qualified and the employable. Considering the fact that the global demand for soft skills has increased significantly, it is now necessary for students to equip themselves by acquiring adequate soft-skills besides acquiring academic and technical knowledge. They need to understand the barriers that prevent them from developing soft skills and endeavor to break such hindrances so as to come out of their university education with all those skills expected by their prospective employers. Along with this also let us targets the issue at the grassroots level. If there is awareness and realization of inculcation of these skills in a very informal way too, major of the youth of India will be far more reliable, self sufficient and dynamic by 2025.

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