Soft Skills to Complement Professional Students' Technical Skills to Enhance their Employability Rate

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Abstract

There is a long-standing debate going on whether higher education system in India promotes soft skills on par with technical skills in its curriculum. Of late, several research reviews mention that it is high time for Indian education system to bridge the yawning gap between technical skills and soft skills to fine-tune students' existing language skills and behavioural traits besides enhancing the rate of employability. In spite of being highly qualified and receiving adequate training in the universities/colleges, majority of the outgoing students remain redundant. One of the principal reasons for this sad state of affairs is the current academic system. It gives more priority to teaching technical skills than imparting soft skills and behavioural attributes to the students. Moreover, the existing job market looks for candidates with sound technical knowledge, good language and attitudinal skills. Consequently, majority of the Indian students, despite being qualified, are unable to make it to the job market; some aspirants who have already started working in the industry are losing their jobs due to poor soft and interpersonal skills.

The purpose of this study is to present some of the glaring problems faced by many professional students is due to lack of attitudinal/interpersonal/soft skills. Furthermore, a modest attempt has been made here to differentiate between soft skills and technical skills. In addition to this, the paper presents the necessity of teaching soft skills on par with the technical skills across all the branches of U.G. and P.G. courses and its positive impact on students' academic and professional success. It highlights the expectations of the industry, existence of the skill gap amongst the students. It is concluded with some of the steps government has taken to bridge the lacuna (skill gap) and to improve career prospects of the professional students.

Keywords: Behavioural traits, Hard skills, Skill-set, Soft skills & Technical skills

Introduction

The recent research reviews of several academic and industrial establishments state that Indian education system needs a dynamic change (Brand & Crow). It is further mentioned that educational

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policies and proposals should keep abreast of the changing times and provide training in specific set of skills (i.e. imparting soft skills on par with technical skills) required for the students of the present millennium of information and communication (Murphy & Slawinska). Contrary to this, the present education system is progressing slower than expected in taking up any concrete and thoughtful measures to address this longstanding problem. Although the system of higher education in India is providing adequate training and support for the students to master core technical subjects and hard skills in colleges and universities, its efforts are not bearing fruit because of the significance of soft skills remains neglected in the overall curriculum framework. Consequently, a majority of the professional colleges focus exclusively on technical knowledge, and overlook critical areas like industry exposure and soft skills development.

Absence of imparting soft skills training is one of the contributing factors for the existing sad state of affairs. As a result, many professional institutions remain unsuccessful in equipping their graduates for interview procedure and work environment besides making them struggle while facing the competencies in professional realm (Duggal). Subsequently, lower rate of employability and difficulty in nailing a job offer prevail across many states of India.

In order to overcome the current situation, there is a pertinent need to equip graduates with employability and interpersonal skills along with essential behavioural traits. In addition to this, it is indispensable requirement to develop expertise in soft skills on par with technical skills amongst students. It is because the present industry expects its manpower to attain required proficiency in soft skills and behavioural training besides required proficiency and knowledge in their technical domain. Moreover, today's workplace demands specialized skills, personal attitude and attributes besides the skill to transfer knowledge tailored to the occupation (Padhi 2). In addition to this, another key skill the industry expects its employees to possess critical thinking, problem solving and analytical skills. In the recent times, many large-scale longitudinal research surveys mention that employees and aspiring candidates who seek jobs should be dynamic and update their knowledge, soft skills and abilities on a regular basis to suit to the existing industry requirements.

A recent study, published on MMM Training Solution Blog, (Mathew para 1) states that that Indian graduates and employees are smart and hard working. Moreover, such individuals and employees thrive in companies in India and abroad. But the Indian employees are not free of their troubles; they are woefully lacking one thing that the job market today deeply requires –Behavioural skills training. Another recent study conducted by the Hay Group research reports that most of the graduates in India unsuccessful in giving priority to people skills, with 77 percent surveyed believing they will succeed in the workplace regardless, 57 percent not realising the value of "pandering to the feelings of others" in their team and 77 percent saying that people skills get in the way of getting the job done (People Matters para 7).

Apart from this, National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM), conducted another study and reported that only 20% of the 400,000 engineering students who graduate every year meet corporate requirements. The principal reason for this unpleasant situation is many

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students fall short in the areas of presentation skills, social skills, team work and interpersonal skills. Pointing the existing skills gap, Dilip Chenoy, the then CEO of National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) said "Skill development could emerge as one of the biggest challenges for the country" (Ghosh para 7). According to a 2014 survey conducted for Career Builder, reported that 77% of employers believe that soft skills are as necessary as technical skills in contributing to the professional accomplishments of their workforce and bridge the skill gap.

Furthermore, it seems that the higher education system in colleges and universities of India is promoting an intense focus on achieving academic excellence focusing solely on obtaining marks, grades, and distinction. During this process, the key issue of skill gap in the area of soft and behavioural skills is neglected. Some of the research studies, in their findings, have clearly stated that Human Resource (HR) departments conspicuously look out for such skills. And absence of these skills invariably leads an average aspiring job seeker in a rather awkward state of affairs to be in the competition. Moreover, such job aspirants often find themselves ill equipped in the areas of social and life skills. It further throws light on the dearth of professionals with requisite skill-set. Subsequently, all the high growth and emerging industries are finding it difficult to recruit right candidates during placements. Besides this, many new employees lack specific set of skills essential to carry out their duties efficiently. To overcome this, the companies are investing heavily in training their employees in nature of work, company culture, soft and hard skills which are essential for working with colleagues, customers, suppliers, and with their counterparts across countries and cultures.

The practical problems mentioned here highlight the significance of soft skills in academics and professional life and its role in complementing technical/hard skills of the students for building successful career. This discussion further leads to an interesting question as to identify which skills (i.e. soft skills and hard skills) are more important in different phases of life. It can be answered by stating that in the flowering years of one's career, one's technical abilities are important to get projects in one's workplace. However, when it comes to growing in an organization, it is one's behavioural traits that matters. It is applicable especially in a large firm where many people often compete for a rise or a higher position. Hence, polishing one's soft skills is an indispensible quality in country (i.e. India) where there is very little academic exposure given to soft skills. Supporting this view, an eminent research analyst Sumit Mehta says "Soft skill training is essential because we do not have it in our academic curriculum" (Padhi 2). Therefore, corporate houses have shouldered the responsibility of grooming employees who are the link between the company and the external world; so that they are able to present themselves better. This is the reason why training on soft skills becomes more relevant in engineering and management colleges where the education system does not delve into personality development (Nigam, 69).

Incorporating personality development (i.e. soft skills) into educational system will be a paradigm shift in the existing academic structure and it will contribute to strengthen connections between institution and industry. Hence, there is an attempt made to understand these terms in detail.

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Difference between Hard (Technical) Skills and Soft Skills

Hard skills and soft skills are essential for one's own professional success though, both of them are different in their purposes and functions.

Hard Skills

Hard skills are specific and fixed skills which students can master through hard work and conscious effort. These skills can be learnt in schools and colleges through textbooks, training manuals or on the job. Solving mathematical problems, executing and using a computer programme typing speed, reading and writing will come under hard skills. Furthermore, these skills are teachable abilities or skill-set which can be quantified with time and effort.

In the words of Doyle (para 2), hard skills are the skills that students can write in their cover letters and resumes to impress their recruiters. They are:

- Proficiency in a foreign language
- A degree or certificate
- Typing speed
- Machine operation
- Computer programming

Soft Skills

Soft skills are more challenging to develop than hard skills as they have very little to do with knowledge or expertise. Sharing a few more differences, Lei Han (para 3) said "Hard skills are the skills where the rules stay the same regardless of which company, circumstance or people you work with. In contrast, soft skills are skills where the rules change depending on the company culture and people you work with".

Soft skills are closely associated with a person's character, feelings and attitude. Developing soft skills means one has to put one's conscious effort, practice with commitment and strive for self-development. Speaking in this context, a soft skills specialist asserts that they are also known as interpersonal skills or people's skills and they are related to the way one relates to and interacts with other people in society (Doyle para 4). She further shared some examples of certain essential soft skills:

- Communication
- Flexibility
- Leadership
- Motivation
- Patience
- Persuasion
- Problem solving abilities
- Teamwork

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- Time management
- Work ethics

The information discussed here provides the essential differences between soft skills and hard skills. Understanding and cultivating both skills are necessary to succeed in everyone's academic and professional life.

But contrary to this, the education system is not completely successful in teaching soft skills along with the hard skills. The reason being the formal education focuses more on the hard skills than attitudinal and behavioural factors. Hard skills, unlike soft skills, can easily be learnt such as programming, designing or executing. There is no formal education or training imparted on developing soft skills such as being conscious of people's feelings, empathising with people, communicating effectively, being receptive and responding positively.

Speaking about the current system of education an educational theorist said that "we have a system of education that is modelled on the interest of industrialism and in the image of it. Schools are still pretty much organized on factory lines - ringing bells, separate facilities, specialized into separate subjects. We still educate children by batches" (Robinson para 2).

The view was supported by another study stating that it implies that Industrial economies demand quantifiable, standardized skills. So, it has made sense back in the day to build an education system that trains people accordingly (Patterson para 2). It further throws light on the necessity that there is an immediate need to encourage academicians and curriculum designers to focus both on soft and hard skills while preparing materials so as to improve employability skills and reduce skill gap among students.

Skill Gap

One of the conspicuous problems which has led to the low employability rate in India is skill-gap and it is identified as a major challenge for a country like India which aims at recording 8-10% growth rate a year.

Apart from this, a study conducted by the International Credit Rating Agency (ICRA) Management consulting services present a huge demand of 240 million workers in 21 critical sectors in 2022. Additionally, the survey implies that that there will be a high demand for skilled and trained manpower to occupy millions of jobs to be generated in India in the near future. It necessitates a plan of action in the form of a customized training to be imparted to all the existing graduates and workforce to address the skill gap issue.

The chief contributing factor for skill gap is the existence of gap between the curriculum and meeting the changing times and technological advancements. Besides this, the present world is progressing rapidly with sophisticated attitudinal and behavioural traits (soft skills) besides high-tech

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advancements such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, machine learning and big data. Because of the impact of automation and lack of required professional training, many students and professionals have become outdated and redundant.

Consequently, there exists a great demand for these skills in the IT industry. Contrary to this, the present academic curriculum is unsuccessful to a great extent in imparting such advanced skills to the students and making them industry ready professionals.

While discussing a similar issue, TATA Technologies, an IT giant, mentions: "Engineering and IT-services firm Tata Technologies wants to target the issue of the skill-gap among engineering students. Through their Ready Engineer Programme, the company is looking to address the twin-challenges of core skills as well as the softer skills needed in a job" (Saraswathi para 1).

The aim of the programme, as opined by the writer, is to impart necessary core and soft skills amongst the engineers to bridge the skill gap. This besides, TATA's programme equips engineers with required skill-set and groom them for the job from the day one.

Taking such surveys and studies into consideration, the government of India has taken up a lot of progressive steps to bridge the skill gap and to improve the rate of employability in Indian graduates. Some of such initiatives are public-private partnerships in training and skilling students and professionals.

Public–Private Partnership to Bridge the Skill Gap

A public and private partnership has been necessitated in India to overcome the prevailing unpleasant situation of skill-gap. One of the recent initiatives of TATA Technologies (TT) is noteworthy in this context. Sharing the role and contribution of the TATA, Anupal Banerjee, Chief Human Resource Officer of TT said that their proposal is to groom engineering graduates for the professional world from the day one. Speaking further on how they are planning to bridge the skills gap, he said that TT has collaborated with 35 engineering institutions across India and has worked with around 80 aspiring candidates per college (Saraswathi para 3).

Furthermore, Banerjee mentioned that the programme spreads across four semesters and more than 4,600 engineers get covered. Responding to the design and specific factors of the programme, Benerjee added: "We look at four factors, including the engineering concepts and fundamentals, contemporary technology, soft skills, and employability. The idea is to have engineers to have skills relevant to the current times. This includes a process of learning as well as unlearning redundant concepts" (Saraswathi para 4).

After a meticulous study on the contributing factors of skill-gap in India, TT has devised "Ready Engineer Programme" and collaborated with engineering institutions and trained professors to equip their students with necessary skills relevant for the current times.

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Apart from the effort of TT, the government of India has started exclusive institutes called "finishing schools" to overcome skill gap and help graduate students with basic skills to work dynamically at their workplace. The Indian School of Integrated Learning (ISIL) and British Firm, Speak First are in collaboration in a joint venture as part of a two-million-dollar project to set up finishing schools in Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad and Bangalore with an aim to train potential employees on different types of soft skills. This move clearly implies that the government has given great priority to training its workforce. The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) has been funding and working with private sector to train 150 million people by 2022 (Agencies 22).

In addition to these, efforts are being made with optimism by National Vocational Qualifications Framework (NVEQF) and National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) to bridge the skill gap with continual training programmes. The aim of these initiatives is to promote a paradigm shift in employment from being "qualification based" to "skill-based", making educational institutions focus on imparting skills which lead to employability rather than doing out with certificates and degrees (Duggal para 7).

Conclusion

The discussion across the paper emphasises the significance of incorporating and imparting soft skills while teaching technical skills to the engineering graduates to improve the rate of employability. Soft skills such as being receptive, collaborating with others, presenting ideas, communicating with members in the modern workplace are highly valued. Additionally, strong interpersonal skills assure productive, collaborative, and healthy work environment and will contribute positively in the highly competitive world. Hence, it is essential for students to balance both soft and technical/hard skills for their academic and professional success.

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