A Study of Select Employability Skills Desirable across Various Job Types: Bridging the Skill Gap among Job Aspirants through Industry-Academia Interface

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Abstract

A large section of Indian youth walks in job markets with inadequate employability skills and thus struggle to acquire job placement of their aspiration. This is largely because Indian education system has not kept pace with the changing demands of the industry. Several 'industry majors' reveal that Indian youth have more of unemployability rather than unemployment problem as there is a gap between the skills that companies expect from their candidates and the skills that employees possess. Employability skills differ from country to country based on requirement. However, apart from job specific skills known as hard skills, there are certain personal and interpersonal skills which are commonly expected by the industry such as effective communication, time management, work ethic, problem solving and so on. These skills are referred to as soft skills. Students can enhance their employability and meet the industry expectations with a blend of soft skills and hard skills.

This research paper is the result of investigation which tried to narrow down select soft skills which are crucial for acquiring and sustaining recruitments across various job types and urges educational institutions, and individual teachers to train students in such soft skills. The paper also lays emphasis on Industry-Academia interface for bridging the skill gap among the job seekers.

Keywords: employability skill, job, industry, academia, interface, hard skill, soft skill, skill-gap

Introduction

It has been observed that despite having an excellent academic record and immensity of employment opportunities, students face difficulty in obtaining a suitable job. Among a large number, only a small number of graduates secure good placements and most fall short of meeting the requirements for the job they aspire to as they are not equipped with the skills essential for

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employment known as 'employability-skills'. Eliciting the distinction between the terms 'employment' and 'employability', Pillai and Fernandez (2018) remarks, "Employment is to be working in a job and employability is the overall capability that you have to possess in order to be offered a job; which means having career ready skills, attributes and values. Employability is something much beyond merely having a degree in your subject and having only job-specific skills. It is a measure of your being able to handle day to day requirements at your workplace and also contribute meaningfully to the organization you join." Sherer and Eadie, 1987, p.16 (as cited in Singh & Singh, 2008) state that Employability skills are not job specific, but are skills which cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs from entry level to the chief executive officer.

Most employers in the corporate world feel that there is a huge gap between the talent that is graduating from colleges, and the talent that corporate industries look for in their workforce. This gap between academic education and industry requirement is sometimes referred to as skill gap. A report of *The Economic Times* (2018) mentioned that the top 10 I.T. companies take only 6% of the engineering graduates because the students were found to be inadequate in the required skills. It was also revealed that some top companies have learning centre to train employees and make them suitable for their concerned jobs.

Even after having commendable academic records a large number of students find themselves short of employability skills. Consequently, they have to go through extensive training to comprehend the nature of their job and meet the requirements of the industry. The scarcity of requisite skills in fresh recruits is largely because the curricula in the Indian education system emphasize knowledge diffusion and sidelines job creation. Therefore, the current problem which lies among students is not unemployment rather it is their unemployability which hinders them from getting a job. Explaining the difference between 'unemployment' and 'unemployability', Rao (2016) says "Unemployment problem exists when there is suitability, capability and eligibility for the jobs but there is a dearth of employment opportunities. On the other hand, unemployability exists when there are employment opportunities but people lack suitability and capability in spite of having eligibility for employment". With the increasing cut throat competition and changing needs of corporate world, it has now become important for job seekers to enhance their employability to make themselves suitable for employment. Kubler and Forbes (as cited in Rees, Forbes, and Kubler, 2006) assert that employability consists of cognitive skills, generic competencies, capabilities, technical abilities, business awareness, and critical evaluation, reflection and review abilities. Therefore, a perfect blend of personal qualities, soft skills and hard skills will definitely contribute to enhancing graduate employability.

While hard skills are job specific skills that students generally learn in their academic institution, on the other hand employability skills are hardly been taught to students. Therefore, teaching of employability skills in colleges and universities is the need of the hour to put an end to the industry-academia mismatch.

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Review of Literature

In today's challenging business environment the possession of subject skills alone is no longer sufficient for a new graduate in meeting employer requirements; increasingly it is becoming necessary for them to gain transferable skills which will enhance their prospects of employment (Cox and King, 2006; Fallows and Steven, 2000; Harvey et al., 1997; Warn and Tranter, 2001). An endless number of studies have been undertaken on employability skills and soft skills. However, in recent years due to growing competition and skill demand in the job market, this concept has received greater attention and has become one of the most talked about topics in India and abroad. Some of the studies in the area of soft skills, employability and industry-Academia collaboration are discussed below:

Several skills such as communication skills, team building, time management, leadership skills etc. have been found more important than technical skills. Researchers have acknowledged that employers look for employees who are skilled in both technical and non-technical domain as academic skills alone are insufficient for personal and institutional success. Therefore, students must be equipped with employability skills i.e. a mix of academic qualification, vocational skills and personal skills to match the demands of the industries. (**Harvey et al (2002), Archer and Davison, 2008; and Rajkumar Paulrajan, 2011)**

Gunn et al (2010), Padmini. I (2012), Bhagwat et al (2013) and Madlani. M.B (2014) have found in their research work that it is necessary for academic institutions to update their syllabi regularly as per the needs of the industry to make graduates skilled and ready for the job. The researchers have also emphasized the teaching of employability skills, generic skill, and other corporate etiquettes at academic institutions and concluded that the curriculum development must focus on such techniques which enhance learning and interpersonal skills in students.

Hamatteh and Jufout (2003), Rajsekaran and Rajashingh (2009), and Guimón (2013) have stressed the need to bridge the gap between industries and academic institutions through industry-academia collaboration as such collaborations lead to mutual benefits. The studies have revealed that such collaborations are extremely crucial for generating soft skills among students that companies need and can lead to mutual benefits. Some researchers have suggested the formation of a national level committee comprising members form education and industrial sector for identifying each other's need and to find ways to fulfill them.

Employability skills

Robinson (2000) while expressing his views on employability skills says that employability skills are those basics kills that are necessary for getting, keeping, and doing well on a job. These skills include basic academic skills like reading, writing, science etc., higher order thinking skills like learning, reasoning, thinking creatively etc. and personal qualities like responsibilities, team spirit, honesty, adaptability & flexibility, good work attitude etc.

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Employability Skills apply across a variety of jobs and life contexts. They are sometimes referred to as key skills, core skills, life skills, essential skills, key competencies, necessary skills, and transferable skills. (Gandhi, 2013)

Employability skills are as significant as hard skills, yet these skills are neither taught in schools nor in colleges and universities. Consequently, several corporate companies themselves give training of employability skills after recruiting the candidates by spending more time and money on them. Hence, blending the teaching of both technical skill as well as employability skill into the curriculum is the need of the hour. According to Bennet, Dunne, & Carre, 1999; Stephenson & York, 1998 (as cited in Chamorro et al, (2010), over the past decade politicians, educational researchers, and practitioners alike have emphasized the importance of fostering a set of non-academic attributes, such as the ability to cooperate, communicate and solve problems, often referred to as generic or soft skills in higher education. Employability skills can be acquired through soft skills. Soft skills are often referred to as employability skills as these skills help in acquiring employment.

Soft Skills

Soft skills are character traits, attitudes and behaviors-rather than technical aptitude or knowledge. These are the intangible, non-technical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator. While 'Hard skills' are the technical expertise and knowledge needed for a job, soft skills are interpersonal qualities, also known as people skills and personal attributes that one possesses (Robles, 2012, p.457). Ali (2017) says "All the positive qualities of one's personality could be referred to as soft skills", for example, good communication, time management, leadership quality, team building, self-confidence, motivation, stress management, listening skills, writing skills, presentation skills to name a few are soft skills. These skills are the collection of various skills, or abilities that help a person in better presentation of their hard skill i.e. domain knowledge or technical knowledge. These skills are also known as people skills, emotional intelligence, social skills and interpersonal skills.

Though there are endless skills that can be termed as soft skills, different scholars have mentioned different sets of soft skills which they consider most desirable at work place, for instance, according to **Bortz (n.d***)* communication, team work, adaptability, problem solving, critical observation, conflict resolution, and leadership are the most important soft skills for professionals and workers. **Vozza (2018)** considers problem solving, adaptability, time management, organization and oral communication as the most important soft skills that recruiters want. **Omoth (2016**) is of the view that strong work ethic, communication skills, creative problem solving, time management, team work and leadership are important soft skills employers look for in the workplace. **McFarlin (n.d)** says work ethic, communication skills, teamwork, Decision making and problem solving are some soft skills which carry importance at

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workplace. **Hayes (2017)** views critical thinking, communication skills, curiosity, creativity, responsibility, and conflict management as soft skills that matter most for millennials in the workplace. **Robles (2012)** in his study identified the top 10 soft skills as the most important skills perceived by business executives: integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic. According to **Sławińska and Villani (2014)** "good communication skills, strong work ethic, initiative, interpersonal skills, problem-solving abilities, team working and confidence" are seen by employers as fundamental for success in the workplace. **Lorenz (2009)** identified strong work ethic, positive attitude, communication skills, time management abilities, problem solving skills, acting as team player, self confidence, ability to accept and learn from criticism, adaptability, and the ability to work well under pressure as top 10 soft skills for job hunters.

According to a report published in **www.Esoftskills.com** Top 10 soft skills one needs to be successful are Communication, teamwork, problem solving, time management, attitude and work ethic, adaptability/flexibility, self-confidence, ability to learn, empathy, and emotional intelligence quotient. (10 Soft Skills You Need To Be Successful, n.d.)

Loretto (2018) finds a positive attitude, a strong work ethic, excellent communication and interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, time management skills, flexibility, work well in a team environment, computer/technological skills, project management skills, self confidence, ability to accept constructive criticism, strong research skills as top 12 soft skills employers seek. With regard to the above discussed set of soft skills mentioned by different scholars, some soft skills that are commonly preferred by most of them are Good communication, Adaptability, Problem solving, Time Management, and Strong Work Ethic. These soft skills are discussed below:

1. Good Communication

One of the most desired attributes in an employee is the ability to communicate and convey complex ideas orally, in writing, and interpersonally (Reinsch & Gardner, as cited in Meeks, 2017). Communication skill is not only about transfer of ideas through verbal and non verbal media; rather it is the ability to give and understand instructions and to communicate in ways appropriate to the situation and audience. The first impression of an individual reflects through his/her communication skills. Several companies insist on group discussion to test certain skills among the candidates like leadership, communication, assertiveness, listening skills and team spirit to name a few. Rao (2016) considers communication skills as heart of soft skills without which soft skills are irrelevant.

How we survive at a job is largely depended on how we communicate with our superiors and subordinates. Being able to communicate well is a quality not everyone is blessed with. Pillai and Fernandez (2018) put their view on communication at work place and say "Communication at workplace is not so simple. It can mean anything from how you converse with a client to how well

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you get your point across in inter-office emails. You cannot turn up in your boss's cabin and say REPORT. Such communication is never only about the words, sentences or grammar that you use. You would politely ask your boss permission to enter the room and then submit the report using suitable words and body language. Thus communication at workplace is about your environment and how you express yourself by following the accepted norms of behavior and etiquette."

2. Problem-solving

Problems are inevitable in personal, social and profession life making problem solving a pre-requisite and one of the desired skills. Employees with Problem solving skill are preferred as companies need employees who can think logically and come up with ways to work around problems in tough situations. Talking about problem and problem solving skills, Ram (2017) says "A problem is the difference between the actual state and the desired state and problem- solving is a mental process that involves discovering, analyzing and solving problems. The ultimate goal of problem-solving is to overcome obstacles and find a solution resolves the issue." A problem can also be an opportunity; it forces us to view things from different point of views and to do things in a different ways, as an American industrialist Henry Kaiser once quoted "Problems are only opportunities in work clothes".

3. Time Management

Another soft skill which is most desirable across different job types is 'Time Management skill'. We possess equal amount of time but utilize it differently. Time management is the art of simply being on time. This includes delivering things before deadline as well as being on time for work and meetings etc. Good time management is about prioritizing the most important tasks, and then deciding which actions will produce the maximum output with the minimum effort. Proper time management takes pressure off you and ensures that you do not end up doing most of your work at the last minute. Tracy (2013) says "Time is the most precious asset as it cannot be saved, nor can it be recovered once lost.

One's success and failure depend largely on the way one utilizes the time. According to Kumar, Sreehari, and Savithri, (2015) "Effective time management is an essential skill that can help you achieving your personal and professional success which involves proper goal setting, prioritization, managing interruptions, beating procrastination and effective scheduling". One's success or failure is determined to a large extent by his/her ability to manage time. When employees skip their work for the next day, their work gets piled up, as a result they miss the deadline of task completion. This leads to frustration and stress. Therefore, time management should be learned to avoid such trouble at work place and outside it.

4. Teamwork Skill

Teamwork refers to the ability to work with others in a professional environment. It is a collaborative effort of a team to achieve a common goal or to complete a task in the most effective and efficient way. According to Stout, Cannon Bowers & Salas, (1996) "Teamwork can be defined as an

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identifiable set of behaviors, cognitions, and attitudes that contribute to the team's overall functioning". Teamwork is important in almost any work setting. If an employee works on a number of group projects, she needs to be able to get along well with others, sharing the workload with colleagues to complete a goal. Even if an employee does not do a lot of team projects, he still needs to be able to get along with his colleagues, working hard to achieve the company goals.

5. Adaptability

In much of the literature, 'Adaptability' is commonly referred to as problem-solving skill. However, O'Neil et al. as cited in Brungardt (2009), define adaptability as the ability to monitor the source and nature of problems through an awareness of team activities and factors bearing on the task. According to these authors, an important element of adaptability is the ability to detect and correct problems. Kimball & Holyoak, 2000; Smith, Ford, & Kozlowski, 1997 as cited in Nelson, Zaccaro, Herman, (2010) says Adaptability has become increasingly important to leaders at all organizational levels as the nature of work grows in complexity, change, and ambiguity. Learning how to adapt to change is a soft skill that will not only make you a top candidate when applying for roles, but one that has the capacity to give you a renewed optimism about your work. It's a brilliant life skill that has great application in both your personal and professional life. (Half, 2018)

6. Strong work ethic

Anasthasia (2016) defines ethic as a system of moral principles and says it affects how people lead their lives. According to a survey, 85% percent of managers rated work ethic and attitude as the most important considerations in choosing a candidate and the most important attribute for employee success (Bray, 2015). Mitra (2016) considers values and ethics as the most important aspect to keep in mind at all stages of one's career. It has now become a general consensus that one's success depends largely on one's work ethic, as a result employers often cite a strong work ethic as the most desired characteristic in a new employee. (Denka, 1994; Hill & Pretty, 1995; Young, 1986, as cited in Hill and Fouts, 2005)

Need for Industry-Academia Collaboration

Indian Industrial sector needs ready for the job people i.e. people with variable sector specific skills. This is possible only when there is a proper collaboration between the industry and academia to generate knowledge among students and give them desired practical benefits of education. Emphasizing the collaboration as a mutual benefit for the industry and academia, Dasgupta (2017) says "Academia and industry share a symbiotic relationship. Academia produces graduates who are absorbed by industry. Research work in universities is taken up by the industry and turned into products and services. Industry on the other hand looks to academia for solutions to their problems. Hence, universities should tailor their courses to turn out

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graduates whose skill-set are aligned to industry requirements. Often new research topics arise out of interaction between the duos which benefit both academia and industry."

Lavanya (2013) explains why it is important to have an Industry-Academia interface and says that the changing complexity of the Business environment has necessitated the need for industry and the academia to develop close links and create a synergy. The interface between these two will lend to increasing mutual dependence to ensure their better survival in their domains. Her research concluded that the Industry-Academia interface enhances the overall teaching-learning experience as the majority of the students perceive this interface to be of growing importance.

Academic institutions and industries have been collaborating for a long time. However, perhaps due to the absence of a dire necessity to do so; such collaborations were taking place on small scales and hence did not turn out to be very beneficial for students as well as the employees. It is only in the recent years that the Government, policy makers, and educationist have realized the need to make the existing education more meaningful for skill development and to make the educated youth self-employed by improving their employability (Gandhi, 2014).
Keeping in view the above situation, several companies have started to collaborate with colleges and universities and vice-versa. For instance, Infosys has launched a program called 'Campus Connect' to help institutions grow in quality of output and to address the needs of educational institutes, so as to produce industry ready recruits. (Infosys Technologies Ltd, 2004). Wipro too has started a program called the Wipro Academy of Software Excellence, in association with BITS (Pilani) to prepare fresh graduates to create its own software professionals. (Mehra, 2007) Likewise, a recent report published in The Times of India (2018) revealed that *University of Petroleum and Energy Studies* and I.T majors have collaborated to create a sound bridge for knowledge and skill exchange to close the gap between students and industry so as to generate employable engineers.

The Centre for University-Industry Collaboration, Anna University, Chennai (1991) provides for Campus Placement for Engineering / Technology / Management Students, Interaction between University and Industry, Faculty Empowerment Programs, Arranging Industrial Training, Industrial Visit and Industrial Project for Students. Every year around 200 companies from India and abroad, visit the academic portal from Anna University for their prestigious recruitment. The campus placement offers three kinds of jobs which cover 95% of the students from Anna University. (Mishra & Mishra, 2015).

Conclusion
The world of employment has changed dramatically, technology is impacting practices and experiences, and societies are becoming more global and multicultural. With the rise of globalization, employability is becoming one of the main goals for education systems. Today's employers require employees to have soft or non-technical skills in addition to technical skills (Dean & Mansour, 2016). It has now become obvious that mere academic abilities alone will not

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be adequate for the students to make themselves employable. What is essential is something beyond the academic domain. In other words, students need a blend of soft skills and hard skills to meet the expectations of industry toward the academic institutions. Since hard skills are job specific skills as we have discussed above, thus these skills are not applicable across different job types. For instance hard skill of a software engineer i.e. to design computer applications is not applicable for an architect. On the other hand soft skills are applicable across various job types. To make students aware of soft skills is necessary for today's job market.

The research paper has tried to narrow down select soft skills commonly mentioned by different scholars as desirable across different job types. Since these skills help a candidate acquire employment, they are sometimes also referred to as employability skills. When applicants possess these skills, it becomes easier for employers also to train them in other technical skills in an effective manner.

The paper has also tried to explore the immense importance of Industry-Academia interface to bridge the skill-gap and enhance employability among job aspirants though industrial experience. Since job aspirants have poor industrial exposure, they are confined to theoretical knowledge and inadequate practical skills thus making them struggle in obtaining a secure job. Industrial–academic interface allows academic institutions to better prepare their students for employability and enter the industrial work force. Thus there is a need for both educational institutions as well as industries to work together towards bridging the skill-gap among the students through collaboration, as it is mutually beneficial for each other.

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