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Soft Skills – Need of the Hour

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Abstract: Unemployability is today a greater issue than unemployment. Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, Former President of India said, "It is not unemployment that is the major problem; it is the question of unemployability that is the major crisis in this competitive arena..." According to a NASSCOM-McKinsey report, The Indian Industry is currently facing its biggest challenge ever: a talent shortage of 3.1 million knowledge workers, across Industry, compounded by the fact that only 25 per cent of fresh engineers; and a mere 10% of fresh graduates are actually employable!

In an increasingly global, technological economy, they say, it isn't enough to be academically strong. While your technical skills may get your foot in the door, your soft skills are what open most of the doors to come. Thus the task becomes more daunting for entry-level professionals especially if they are found lacking in the basic skills necessary for employability. The present paper highlights the key issues pertaining to soft skills for professionals.

Keywords: Unemployability, Technical Skills, Soft skill, Professionals.

I. Introduction

There has been much pressure from within the engineering and management profession, and from external sources, to widen the scope of the engineering and management curriculum. A common demand is for the curriculum to include 'soft skills' as a specific skill in its own right and because of its central role in the development of other desirable skills. Most corporate recruiters have to say that Today's engineering business graduates have an abundance of technical knowledge. They can do linear programming problems, calculate a discounted rate of return and crunch numbers on a computer spreadsheet. But most lack the interpersonal and social skills necessary to manage people. If there is an area where engineering and business schools need to improve, it's in developing the "people skills" of their graduates (Robbins & Hunsaker, 1996). A Similar research conducted with Fortune 500 CEOs by the Stanford Research Institute International and the Carnegie Melon Foundation, found that 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills, while only 25 percent on technical knowledge. A study of head hunters hiring CEOs ranked the ability to communicate and motivate as necessary attributes for positively affecting the bottom line. Another study found traits like conscientiousness and agreeability to be equally accurate predictors of work success as cognitive ability and work accuracy.

In a survey of 1000 personnel managers, "the results indicate that communication skills are most important for business jobs and career success." (Curtis et al, 1989). A survey of 175 personnel managers found that "both oral and written communication skills are the most important and valuable skills a graduating student can have or acquire." (Benson G., 1983). Researchers of DePaul University concluded that recruiters want institutes to pay more attention to people-oriented skills like leadership and communication.

In response to these criticisms and other views of the future of engineering and management education, many under-graduate and graduate courses are introducing skills development into their curricula. Some even are including specific modules to target skills development. A key area is Soft skills. There are continuing calls to develop Soft skills but effective pedagogy appears to be scarce.

II. The Indian Scenario

Recruiting agencies always report that the number of "employable" engineering, technology, science, business and management graduates in India continues to be low. This, indeed, is a paradoxical situation. There is enormous and spectacular growth in well-paying job opportunities, a huge number of engineering and other graduates are produced every year, but there is a severe dearth of employable graduates. The globalization of the industries and the consequent spurt in the job scene has suddenly found us wanting in the area of soft skills; in fact, the economic boom is now threatened because the effectiveness and growth of India's talent pool has been seriously constrained due to a deepening soft skills crisis. The recent NASSCOM report endorses this fact by stating that 75 % of the engineers are not employable since the focus is always on academics and theory.

Though the soft skills crisis is a universal phenomenon, the problems and reasons in the Indian Subcontinent are peculiar because of the following reasons:

❖ Our educational system is so designed forcing students to concentrate more on rote-learning than on developing a spirit of enquiry, which is the most predominant factor to achieve success at work place. As Variyar (2009) points out, “A study across four engineering service industries in India revealed the top challenges as - Not asking enough questions, assuming customer/authority figure is always right, Being afraid to ask questions and assuming everything is understood based on whatever customer has told us.”

❖ During their high school education, many engineers would have neglected studying humanities, and arts as a result of parental and peer pressure to master science and mathematics, subjects that help clearing competitive entrance exams. In this process, an all-rounded development of complementary human intelligences and faculties like creativity and inter-personal skills is stunted. (Variyar, 2009)

❖ The syllabus of most Indian Universities is not frequently updated and so they remain outdated resulting in a wide industry-academic gap. This is the crucial challenge that needs to be targeted.

Now, the leading corporations have taken steps to train the teachers as well as introduce value-added courses for the students: Wipro 10x, CCNA by CISCO, and Infosys-Campus Connect are a few such initiatives.

III. What is a Skill?

A skill is learned ability and capacity to carry out pre-determined steps needed to pursue career in professional objectives with minimum of time and effort. Robbins and Hunsaker (1996) defined ‘skill as a system of behaviour that can be applied in a wide range of situations’. Skills are needed in every area of human endeavour. Individuals need a broad range of skill sets for attaining their career objectives to suit every fast changing technology they need to work with in their respective organizations. Basically there are two types of skills. They are soft skills and hard skills.

❖ **Soft Skills:** adaptable, motivator, good listener, team player, dependable, conscientious, punctual, analytical, organized, honest, energetic, artistic, enterprising, outgoing, productive, responsible.

❖ **Hard Skills:** These can take variety of forms e.g. 'operate a forklift', 'develop a computer code', operate a machine, take a photograph, read a GPS, 'drive a vehicle', 'perform surgery' etc.

IV. Need of the Hour: Soft Skills Development

Skill can be developed in a conducive environment by a group of experts, where they find a stimulus for skill development which can also be measured and analyzed. Honing soft skills should address the development of attitudes and attributes as well as improvement in communication skills. This will, in turn, result in the ability to communicate thoughts and ideas effectively and interact with the right attitude. Soft skills or behavioral skills basically relate to behavioral aspects such as managing individual behavior, action or reaction under a given situation. Life skills or soft skills refer to a group of psycho - social and interpersonal skills which can help individuals make informed choices, communicate effectively, develop coping-up mechanisms, and self-organizing skills that may help them lead a healthy and productive life.

Dentists need to know how to fill cavities. Secretaries need to type 100+ words per minute. Beyond the technical skills, though, which dentist do you go to? The one who is pleasant and takes time to answer your questions; or the one who treats you like a number in a long line of numbered mouths? Which secretary do you retain when times are lean? The one whose attitude is positive and upbeat, and who is always willing to help; or the one who is inflexible and has a hard time admitting mistakes?

In these situations, it's the soft skills that matter. HR departments rate soft skills, such as interpersonal skills, communication skills and management skills, as some of the most valuable skills they look for when selecting new employees. However employees with well-developed soft skills are hard to find, and once people have joined the organization, employers struggle to provide training in these areas.

Top 10 Employability Skills – Employers look for while hiring a candidate

1.	Communication Skills
2.	Honesty/integrity Skills
3.	Interpersonal Skills
4.	Teamwork Skills
5.	Analytical Skills
6.	Decision Making Skills
7.	Negotiation Skills
8.	Computer Skills
9.	Presentation Skills
10.	Leadership Skills

Source: Job Outlook 2015 (Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employers)

Employability skills are those skills that apply across a variety of job and life contexts. Lack of these skills may hamper candidate's prospects at the interview stage itself. So a powerful program that aims to impart these skills in a candidate implemented while the student is pursuing his graduation should make him/her completely employable by the time he is out of college and into the job hunt. The paper demands that equal importance be given to skill building and practical training to give the graduates a competitive edge.

V. Advantages of soft skills

Your soft skills or people skills decide how fast and well you climb the ladder of success. Here are some of the advantages that your soft skills can reap for you:

- ❖ They help you grow in your career
- ❖ They give you an eye to identify and create opportunities
- ❖ They help develop relationships with your colleagues and clients
- ❖ They develop good communication and leadership qualities in you
- ❖ They help you think beyond dollars.
- ❖ They help you take appropriate decisions.

VI. Soft skills that help you grow

❖ Communication Skills - Every individual is confronted daily with numerous communicative situations with colleagues, employees, managers. The success of a person is therefore strongly linked to his communication skills. Professionals who are proficient in communication skills have a considerable edge over those who have not. Lack of communication skills will certainly make a professional short of resources. It has been revealed that professionals face several tough challenges in the global job market if their communication skills are not up to mark. Three major segments that need to be worked upon to enhance communication skills are:

*) Written Communication - Writing evaluates a person's proficiency. Indications: spelling, grammar etc. Errors committed while writing circulars, reports & agenda considerably spoil the image of the writer.

*) Verbal Communication - Verbal communication can be defined as communicating your thoughts through words. Such thoughts may be ideas, opinions, directions, dissatisfaction, objections, your emotions and pleasures. When it comes to business, verbal communication is very important for the reason being that through out the day dealings are with people. It has been cited that verbal communication is 10% what you say and 90% how you say it.

*) Body Language or Non-Verbal Communication - Face is the index of the mind and it clearly displays the person's interest. Body language presents to the audience what we feel & think about a particular matter. e.g.: head. Nodding one's head Body language (e.g., arms crossed, standing, sitting, relaxed), Emotion of the sender & receiver (e.g., speaking clearly, enthusiastic)

Porter points out that two critiques of management education that appeared in the late 1980's (Porter and McKibbin, cited above, and the GMAC Commission report, *Leadership for a Changing World: The Future of Graduate Management Education*) independently of one another and with different inputs both reached the same conclusion: "business education had stagnated in recent years and that major change was needed." Together these two reports provide a rationale for four major recommended changes one of which is "continuing attention to the improvement of students' written and oral communication skills." (Porter, L., 1997). Technical and Business institutes that keep themselves well stocked and well equipped in terms of communication will only be able to meet the language requirements of the globalized world.

❖ Honesty/Integrity Skills - Being an expert food critic does not make a great cook. One must be cognizant of his/her knowing-doing gap. This does not mean that you do not practice what you know in a rigid way; it means that your performance level is not matching your words in a consistent and coherent manner. If what you say is important, then your actions should reflect that. Leaders need to model the attitudes and behaviors they expect others to display. Speaking and acting consistently allow others to learn from your example. Shooting from the hip by making promises with an expectation of performance might work in the initial days of your company. There is a difference between empty, rhetorical motivational drivers and strategic motivation primers, which lead to concrete execution. At some point, however, processes and agreements with people, who can deliver on your promises, will be essential.

❖ Interpersonal Skills - Interpersonal skills are the ability to relate to others in a socially appropriate, meaningful way. They are a set of skills that enables one to get along well with others. Schlundt and McFall (1985), define it as "the specific component processes that enable an individual to behave in a manner that will be judged as a 'component'. Skills are the abilities necessary for producing behavior that will accomplish the objectives of a task". Hargie (1997) defined interpersonal skill as 'the process whereby the individual implements a set of goal - directed, inter-related, situationally appropriate social behaviors which are learned and controlled'.

❖ **Teamwork Skills** – Teamwork has become a very important part of corporate work culture today. Forming the right kind of team, causing the right chemistry to work and creating the right working atmosphere is an important part of getting the desired results. The famous quote, attributed to Tom Wilson, *‘Many of us are more capable than some of us, but none of us is as capable as all of us’*. Teamwork may be defined as ‘any work that is accomplished through cooperation and coordination of individuals’. The success of any organization largely depends on in the coordinated efforts of its employees. It mainly refers to the agreeableness & co-operation among the team members. Phil Condit, the current CEO and Chairman of Boeing as well as Alan Mulally, the CEO of Boeing Commercial Airplanes, are known for their focus on “working together.” It was considered the key theme behind the successful development of Boeing’s 777 planes.

❖ **Listening Skills** - Listening is an essential part of communication. It is an active process, which involves hearing what the speaker says, processing what is heard and evaluating what is understood. There are two types of listening: casual listening and focused listening. There are linguistic, physical and psychological barriers to listening.

❖ **Delegation Skills** - According to Mike Cronin, General Partner, Weston Presidio, creating a central voice for the team should not [slow down] healthy delegation. “Good leaders also find great people and let them go.” It shows that they are really appreciated and it communicates ability to trust them. The attitude that “nothing gets done here without me...” fails to appreciate the roles that others play in the enterprise.

❖ **Give credit to those who deserve it** - Give credit where credit is due. Pass on praise or recognition from superiors to team members who deserve it. Many traditional managers as well as entrepreneurs forget this and that lands them in trouble. Appreciating what others have contributed will enhance their loyalty and increase the chances of continuing to do the work that brought the appreciation to begin with. It is important to boost morale by recognizing small things that others contributed and appreciating what it took to make those contributions.

❖ **Presentation Skills** - Presentation is considered an art. The well known communication expert Paul Watzlawick once made the statement, “It is not possible, not to communicate”. Now a days business organizations pay special heed on presentation skills. A recent research study observed that “engineering graduates are expected to give oral presentation as part of their work.” Presentation skills encourage oral communication of the engineering professionals and provide them a suitable platform to transform their information and knowledge. It also helps to develop confidence level and reduces hesitation. Group tasks and presentation enhance interpersonal skills.

❖ **Negotiation Skills** – In organizations of today, with the increased need for collaboration and cooperation, negotiations have become a must for managers and for all people in decision making positions. Webster’s dictionary defines negotiation as ‘to deal with some matter or affair that requires ability for its successful handling’. It is an act of discussing an issue between two or more parties with competing interests with an aim of coming to an agreement. It involves the process of reaching an agreement by conferring or discussing and the transfer of rights in a negotiable instrument by endorsement and delivery or merely by delivery. There are two types of negotiation approaches:

*) **Integrative or win/win approach** – In these negotiations, prospects for both sides are encouraging. It is characterized by open and empathetic communications and is commonly referred to as partnership agreements.

*) **Distributive or win/lose approach** – In these negotiations, each of the parties seeks maximum gains and therefore usually seeks to impose maximum losses on the other side. Practically, negotiations tend to involve a combination of both.

❖ **Leadership Skills** - Leadership is the key. According to Fortune's Most Admired Companies in 1998, “the truth is that no one factor makes a company admirable, but if you were forced to pick the one that makes the most difference, you'd pick Leadership.” Leadership is one of the key soft skills along with communication, creativity, learning and teamwork. A leader is a person whom people are ready to follow.

❖ **Motivate yourself and others** - As you look ahead to grow in your career you will need to deal with various people under you. You can not expect quality results from a team whose motivational level is too low. So, stay motivated and keep others motivated.

❖ **Control your sense of humor**- When you are working with people from various cultures you need to be extra careful with your sense of humor and gestures. Behaviour that is acceptable among Indian colleagues might be considered obscene or disrespectful by people from other cultures. Stay away from controversial topics or ideas in the office.

❖ **Mentoring** – In Homer’s tale, ‘The Odyssey’, Odysseus while leaving for war entrusted his son Telemachus to his friend Mentor, who was wise, a trusted friend, a counselor as well as an advisor. Thus the term ‘mentor’ came into being. It literally means a wise and trustworthy sage and advisor. A person who inspires and helps another can be a mentor to his/her colleague. This is a quality one needs to develop in order to grow. If you want to grow in the hierarchy, you need to help sub-ordinates grow. Be a good mentor. Help them understand things better. This not only improves the work environment but also improves your work

relationships. Mentors and good consultants can accelerate your journey considerably because they can mirror your behavior and help you identify holes below the waterline quickly.

❖ A never-say-die attitude - Any task that comes to you or your team, undertake with a can-do attitude. Slowly you will observe that you and your team have become the favorite of the management. Every accomplished task boosts your self confidence and pushes you one step closer to success.

❖ Managing spoil sports - While working in a team there will always be one or two people with a negative attitude. This attitude can be contagious. Employ tactics to deal with such people and improve motivation. Employers perceive 'employability skills' as important or even more, than technical skills. Training on technical skills can often be done on the job but employability skills are needed to help workers successfully negotiate complex situations at work. For instance: when somebody joins the corporate as an HR Manager s/he will be oriented on the process and will have an on-the-job training or opportunity of following the senior for a period of time, but s/he will certainly not be trained on decision making skills or problem-solving. A graduate of an engineering degree program is usually confronted in his first job with challenges that very often exceed his technical knowledge by far. Typical examples are:

❖ Engineering projects can only be managed successfully if there is a practical understanding of process and project management. This is in line with the necessity for basic leadership skills.

❖ Young engineers who start in a company are very soon confronted with the challenge to lead other people e.g. in work groups or project groups. In production related companies this might include the leading of shift workers or shift supervisors.

These are only some reasons why a specific training concept should be implemented in today's engineering, business degree programs. The image of the engineer in the German speaking world is still that of a "specialist" sitting all day in front of his computer without interacting with people. This image has only very little to do with the actual job characteristics. Once these soft skills are developed along with technical skills you will find opening of most of the doors to come.

VII. Conclusion

NAASCOMM has come out with a study which states that some of the world's most admired and respected companies such as Accenture, Convergys, Dell, Google, HP, IBM, ICICI, Centurion Bank, Microsoft, Verizon, to name a few across industry verticals, are in search of industry ready candidates. All concerned need to utilize this opportunity and make best use of delivering skilled candidates – engineering or management graduates, by making them ready for immediate selection without need for induction training in communication and soft skill development. Accordingly, curriculum, methodology and education system need be changed, in keeping with the present ongoing overhaul of higher education system in the country. A technical and professional school apart from teaching all major and minor core need to equally emphasize for development of communication and soft skills of the students. Apart from imparting technological knowledge engineering colleges also need to focus on nurturing employability skills so that they can further enrich the talent pool. The other major challenges for the teaching community is to place themselves neutrally giving needed inputs on the skills imbibed by the students through scientifically designed curriculum and measured through assessment tools to meet the present-day industry needing technologies.

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