Essential Soft Skills for Employability – A Longitudinal Study

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Abstract—*Skills define the personality of an individual. Traditionally, technical skills also known as the hard skills were considered necessary for employment, but in the present context, soft skills or people's skills have become critical for industrious performance at workplace. This paper is an extensive longitudinal study with the aim of bringing out the key soft skills which are demanded by the employers in the corporate world. These soft skills may be known as the skills necessary for employability in the present context. From this extensive literature review, very clearly we can arrive at a list of important soft skills which can be considered a must for workplace success, and these are : communication skills, leadership skills, team building skills, strategic thinking skills, critical thinking skills, analytical & problem solving, interpersonal skills , imagination or creativity, Presentation Skills.*

Keywords – *Soft Skills, communication skills, leadership skills, team building skills.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Time and again the importance of soft skills have been emphasized by various authors and organizations (Carnevale and Smith, 2013; Klaus, 2010 ; Mitchell et al., 2010; Glenn, 2008; International Labour Organization, 2008; Watts & Watts, 2008). According to a research conducted by Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center 85% of job success comes from having well-developed people skills and soft skills, and only 15% of job success comes from technical skills and knowledge (hard skills).

A range of nomenclature have been given to soft skills by various authors, such as - social skills (Azim et al, 2010), interpersonal skills (Gillard, 2009), human skills (Pant & Baroudi, 2008), key skills (Simpson, 2006), soft factors (Caupin et al, 1999; Wohlin, 2005), people skills (Flannes, 2004), personal skills (Murch, 2001), critical skills (Lee et al, 1995).

Soft skills have been defined in different context and included different perspectives, as per various authors at various times. Soft skills are nontechnical and not reliant on abstract reasoning, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular contexts (Hurrell, Scholarios, & Thompson, 2012). Parente,

John Stephan, and Randy Brown (2012) defined soft skills as people management skills. Fogle (2011) while defining soft skills included "teaming skills" in its perview in addition to communication and social skills. In addition to this Hargis (2011) classified "work ethic, critical thinking, and problem solving" skills as part and parcel of soft skills.

Soft Skills and Employability

It has been emphasized that soft skills play a crucial role in increasing the chances of the candidates to get an employment. Technically, it helps the candidate improve its employability skills. Keller et al. (2011) claimed that employability skills are a classification of attributes and skills, in which attributes speak to non- skill related behaviors and attitudes, while skills refer to the ability to carry out a technical task.

It has been claimed that integration of soft skills into the business curriculum promotes hiring of students in today's workforce (Glenn, 2008; James & James, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2010; Perreault, 2004; Wilhelm, 2004). But, as per National Union of Students (2011), new graduates are falling short of employers' expectations.

Purpose and Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to know the important soft skills that the employers are looking for in their employees. This would help the employees know what they should equip themselves before approaching for a job in the corporate world.

Research Methodology

This is a theoretical paper. It is based on an extensive longitudinal study. This study has tried to cover researches of last 12 years. The data is collected from various sources like journals, reports, magazines, newspapers, websites and research articles written by various scholars from various countries and cultures. As per the data collected from different sources, the findings are explored

Literature Review

There is a background and historical evolution to soft skills ,and that is what is going to be studied here in a longitudinal study over the years. It all started during the 1200-1600 CE when people had to be trained on hard skills and hard skills were enough to get work for artisans but as time progressed and with industrial revolution in 1800, to be able to keep the work moving at a steady pace to avoid bankruptcy many ideologies came up like division of labour .Then in 1900 with the invent of machinery where coordination and team work became of prime importance and filtering out people was no longer an effective option was where we saw the birth of soft skills. Interpersonal and social skills had to be fostered as the immediate need of the hour.

Gradually as we all know with the age of internet soft skills gained further important role in most of the activities and understanding and responding to the needs of the customers became the most integral part of an organization which required people at work to be more sensitive towards concerns on soft skills wherein they engaged in a mutual environment for a win - win situation to all their dealing internally and externally.

In today's era and time, soft skills has come to play an important role for the benefit of the society and there have been numerous studies on the same to report that it became a combination of soft skills along with hard skills to hone the personality of an individual and very importantly for graduates or students seeking employability to bridge the gap between campus and corporate on essential skills required by the employers.

1) Dr. Ramesh Chandra Babu in 2016 investigated the employability skill gaps prevailing among management graduates in India. The findings revealed that the portfolio of employability skills required out of management graduates are: Domain expertise / technical skills, quantitative skills, communication skills, leadership skills, team building skills, strategic thinking skills, critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, global skills, loss and stress coping skills, negotiation skills, computer skills(ICT), ability to re-skill/multi-skill, and the ability to see the larger picture. Apart from skills mentioned earlier, the management graduates are expected to possess the following attributes: discipline, flexible, emotionally stable, positive attitude, loyalty, reliability, common sense, maintain enthusiasm, sense of humor, motivated, resilient, adaptable, honesty and integrity.

2) NACE's Job Outlook 2016 survey was done with the objective of finding "The attributes employers want to see on new college graduates resumes", the results revealed that they are looking for leaders who can work as part of a team. Employers also cited written communication skills, problem-solving skills, verbal communication skills, and a strong work ethic as important candidate attributes.

3) M. Raman and A. S. Koka (2015) conducted a survey in 2015 to understand the importance and requirements of soft skills in the IT industry and also the causes behind the lack of soft skills in students. The study has revealed that problem solving skills (98%), communication skills (92%) , interpersonal skills (88%) , time management skills (65%) and team building skills (43%) were among the top 5 skills which are sought after and these are followed by the other skills like emotional intelligence, motivation, positive attitude, presentation skills and decision making skills.

4) B. Sangamitra and N.S Vishnu Priya in the year 2015 conducted a research with the title "Employability with soft skills: An overview". During the study, it was found that there were 8 skills which were considered important from employability point of view and these skills are Collaboration/teamwork, Communication skills, Initiative, Leadership ability, People development/coaching, Personal effectiveness/personal mastery, Planning and organizing, and Listening skills.

5) In 2015, a research was conducted under the title "Key soft skills that foster youth workforce success: towards a consensus across fields" by Laura H. Lippman, Renee Ryberg, Rachel Carney and Kristin A. Moore. And, it was found that there are five critical skills most likely to increase odds of success across all outcomes and which employers expect employees to have, and these skills are social skills; communication; and higher-order thinking skills (including problem solving, critical thinking, and decision-making); supported by the intrapersonal skills of self-control and positive self-concept.

6) The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) a Bethlehem, PA non-profit group that links college career placement offices with employers, ran a survey from mid-August through early October 2015. The survey came out with results which stated that degrees are important but employers want the new recruits to work well in teams and who are decisive problem-solvers. They came out with 10 skills which employers seek in order of their importance, and these are : Ability to work in a team structure, Ability to make decisions and solve problems (tie), Ability to communicate verbally with people inside and outside an organization, Ability to plan, organize and prioritize work, Ability to obtain and process information, Ability to analyze quantitative data, Technical knowledge related to the job, Proficiency with computer software programs, Ability to create and/or edit written reports, Ability to sell and influence others.

7) Chavan and Surve in 2014 tried to "Assess parameters of employability skills from employers' perspective" with the help of questionnaire survey. The employability skills were ranked and results showed that all 14 employability skills were considered important by employers with integrity and honesty, problem-solving, team work, self-confidence, communication skills are highly amongst the skills demanded by employers.

8) Kelebogile Paadi in 2014 wanted to find "Perception on employability skills necessary to enhance human resource management graduates prospects of securing a relevant place in the labor market", for which they conducted a qualitative study and collected data using semi structured interviews with open ended questions. Results indicated that generic skills are the most sought after in the workplace. Some of the most sought after skills or desirable graduate attributes in the workplace as per the findings of the study are team work, communication, analytic and critical thinking and computer skills.

9) N. Seetha in the year 2014, under the heading "Are Soft skills Important in the Workplace? – A Preliminary Investigation in Malaysia", wanted to explore and examine the importance of soft skills competencies at the Malaysian workplace and to identify critical soft skills that are needed at the workplace. The results showed that communication skills received the maximum weightage of 28%, with positive attitude as a close second at 24%, followed by teamwork and interpersonal & social skills at 17% and 16% respectively, analytical & problem solving skills got 9%, while leadership received 6% weightage at the lowest.

10) Prof. Ritu Goswami in the year 2013, wanted to find out the importance of Soft Skills in the employability of IT students. The results stated that skills for employability are Communication skills, managerial skills, critical thinking and problem solving skill, skills to work in a team, Time Management, Stress Management and Anger Management skills, Leadership Skills, Decision Making, Motivation, Perception Building, Goal setting skills.

11) Ilana Lavy and Aharon Yadin (2013) conducted a research under the heading, "Soft Skills – An Important Key for Employability in the : Shift to a Service Driven Economy Era", the main aim of the research was to access the market need for IT professional's soft skills. The research was conducted in the first half of August 2012. The study revealed that the human interaction skills were high on the demand list (41.2% of the soft skills ads), common (or general skills) were in second place (22.8% of the ads), task interaction were third (20.2% of the ads) and organization skills were the least requested (15.8%).

12) From January 9 to 13, 2013, Hart Research Associates conducted an online survey among 318 employers whose organizations have at least 25 employees. The important skills demanded by employers are : Innovation (95%), capacity to think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems (93 %). More than 9 in 10 of those surveyed say it is important that those they hire demonstrate ethical judgment and integrity; intercultural skills; and the capacity for continued new learning. More than 75% of employers say they want *more emphasis* on 5 key areas including: critical thinking, complex problem-solving, written and oral communication, and applied knowledge in real-world settings.

13) Kasey Windels, Karen Mallia, and Sheri Broyles (2013) used field observations, formal interviews, and informal conversations from six advertising firms to explore soft skills important in the advertising industry. They found that the four most useful skills were critical thinking, interpersonal communication, presentation, and persuasion skills.

14) Dr. Sukhwinder Singh Jolly conducted a research in 2012 under the heading, "Developing Soft Skills for Enhancing Employability of Engineering Graduates". He identified seven skills which are given due importance and these are : 1. Communicative Skills 2. Critical thinking and problem solving skills 3. Team work 4. Life-long, Learning and Information Management skills 5. Entrepreneurship skills 6. Ethics, Moral & professional 7. Leadership skills.

15) Marcel M. Robles (2012) conducted a research to find out the critical soft skills that employers want from their employees so that business educators can promote these skills in their curriculum to improve the employability of graduating business seniors. The results revealed that the top ten skills needed in today's workplace are : 1) Integrity 2) Communication 3) Courtesy 4) Responsibility 5) Interpersonal skills 6) Positive attitude 7) Professionalism 8) Flexibility 9) Teamwork skills 10) Work ethic.

16) Lowden et al., (2011) identified that employers require graduates to have broader skills and attributes than simply the technical and discipline competencies from their university course in order to be considered work-ready. These broader skills include team work, communication and leadership skills, problem solving and critical thinking abilities. As evidenced by the analysis of the data, there were four distinct themes that emerged: 1. Adding value immediately; 2. Understanding of process/environment; 3. Skills in team work; and 4. Confidence.

17) Furnham et al., (2010) created an inventory of fifteen soft skills based on previous literature: self-management, communicational, interpersonal, team-working, the ability to work under pressure, imagination or creativity, critical thinking, willingness to learn, attention to detail, taking responsibility, planning and organizing, insight, maturity, professionalism, and emotional intelligence.

18) Bridgstock (2009) also notes that not only do graduates require generic skills for employability; they also need the skills to manage and build their own career path once they enter the workforce.

19) Information technology (IT) managers and faculty teaching IT courses ranked thirty-two entry-level hard and soft skills derived from the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) IT curriculum and prior research. The thirty-two traits were categorized into: (1) technical skills, (2) organizational and managerial knowledge or skills, (3) personal skills or traits, (4) interpersonal skills or traits, and (5) experience or grade point average (GPA). The

three middle categories most closely map to other conceptualizations of soft skills and included such abilities as project management skills, knowledge of the company, knowledge of industry, mastery of business functions, leadership skills, interpersonal communication skills, ability to work in teams, honesty or integrity, analytical ability, flexibility or adaptability, motivation, creative thinking, organizational skills, and entrepreneurship or risk taking. The faculty and managers both ranked interpersonal and personal skills highest, followed by technical skills, organizational and managerial skills, and experience and GPA.

20) Martin et al. 2009 in his paper presented the main results obtained from 40 in-depth interviews with persons in charge of human resources and/or company directors, and from a questionnaire targeting 872 companies surveyed from a data base of the 5,000 main Spanish companies. The results came out with 14 employability skills: communication, team-working, problem-solving, literacy, numeracy, general information technology (IT), timekeeping, business awareness, customer-care, personal presentation, enthusiasm/commitment, enterprising, vocational job-seeking and advanced vocational job-specific skills.

21) Chenicheri Sid Nair and Arun Patil (2008) in their research report "Industry v/s Universities: Re-engineering Graduate Skills - A Case Study" using a Likert Scale conducted a survey over a four month period on 109 employers wherein about 23 attributes were used in the survey. The research highlights the attributes required in the engineering industry specifically such as Oral communication skills ,Interpersonal skills with colleagues and clients , Written communication skills Capacity to analyse and solve problems , Ability to develop new or innovative ideas, directions, opportunities or improvements, Time management skills , Capacity for co-operation and teamwork , Ability to apply knowledge in the workplace, Ability to cope with work pressure and stress and Capacity to learn new skills.

22) "The Importance of Soft Skills: Education beyond academic knowledge" by Bernd Schulz in Namibia (2008) indicated its evidence based on secondary data on the importance of soft skills in students life. The results indicated that soft skills play a very integral role wherein communication skills were identified as the most important and different personal and interpersonal skills were highlighted in the research.

23) In "Graduate Employability, 'Soft Skills' Versus 'Hard' Business Knowledge: A European Study" a research article by Jane Andrews and Helen Higson (2008) highlights most important skills related to business and individual skills which are required by the employers of business graduates and holders of higher qualifications. The findings reported that Presentation Skills and Work Based Learning were in demand but was lacking considerably.

24) Roselina Shakir (2008) in the article "Soft skills at the Malaysian institutes of higher learning" highlighted the soft skills elements required by the ministry of higher education, Malaysia which were to be introduced to the undergraduates of Higher Learning in Malaysia. The research indicated seven soft skills namely communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, team work, lifelong learning and information management skills, entrepreneurship skills, ethics, and professional moral and leadership skills in the development of human capital.

25) "Soft Skills: The New Curriculum for Hard-Core Technical Professionals" by Bancino and Zevalkink (2008) highlights importance of soft skills even for hard core technical professionals in the field of disciplines such as mathematical skills, science skills, information technology, engineering, architecture and other technical disciplines. Even in the fast paced environment demand for soft skills has been increasing. The study says that the demand for soft skills such as personality development , social skills, fluency in language, optimism and interpersonal skills is ever increasing.

26) Smith and Krüger conducted an exploratory study in the year 2008 under the heading "A critical Assessment of the perceptions of potential graduates regarding their generic skills level". The aim of the research was to investigate empirically the generic skills level of potential Business Management graduates and to provide a generic skills inventory checklist for curriculum developers. Random probability sampling technique was adapted and the data was collected from 435 final year business management students through self administered questionnaire. The generic skills identified during the study were : Basic skills (Literacy, Numeracy, IT Literacy), Communication skills (Negotiation, Presentation , Conflict resolution), Management Skills (Planning, Organising, Leading, Controlling, Administration, Decision-making, Transferable), Environmental awareness Skills (Business awareness, Ethical awareness, Social responsibility), Intellectual Skills (Critical reasoning, Creative thinking, Problem-solving, Analytical, Information-handling) , Self and Career Management Skills (Self-confidence, Self-assessment , Self-promotion, Flexibility, Developmental focus), Interpersonal Skills (Team working, Assertiveness , Political, Networking).

27) A paper written by Sanjeev Kumar and J. Kent Hsiao on "Engineers Learn "Soft Skills the Hard Way": Planting a Seed of Leadership in Engineering"(2005) highlights on engineering education and leadership with incorporating service based learning and problem based learning as key important pedagogies to be included for education in the twenty first century .Critical review of the article illustrates a significant focus on leadership skills amongst students from engineering specifically. Apart from this the other skills which are given due importance are teambuilding and team cohesion, leadership skills to

motivate, inspire and plan, clear understanding of the conceptual skills, strategy execution, values and ethics, communication skills and active listening among others.

28) "Learning the soft skills of leadership" by Rowena Crosbie (2005) studied the importance of soft skills for leadership skill development for personal and interpersonal development and identified the training methodology towards the same. The findings reported learning as a complex process of personal and interpersonal skills required to be developed for leaders.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to the 2007 "Every Promise, Every Child: Turning Failure into Action" report, a large percentage of young people preparing to enter the workforce over the next two decades are significantly lacking in the "soft" or applied skills. Therefore, in this study an attempt was made to identify the key soft skills which are essential for employability. From this extensive literature review, very clearly we can arrive at a list of critical soft skills which can be considered a must for workplace success, and these are : communication skills, leadership skills, team building skills, strategic thinking skills, critical thinking skills, analytical & problem solving, interpersonal skills , imagination or creativity, Presentation Skills.

This study may be helpful for the educators/trainers because the findings of this study have reported the most critical workforce skills demanded in workplace. This will help the educators/ trainers to draft the curriculum in such a way so as to increase their employability.

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