

Role of soft skills for management graduates in Career Advancement- A critical review

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Abstract - Possessing good soft skills is important, both for personal and professional development. These skills are also highly sought after by employers while recruiting management graduates. Soft skills courses in management education help in enhancing the employability skills of graduates. Skill shortage remains one of the major constraints and impedes the growth of the Indian economy. Effective soft skills make a graduate more employable and build a necessary attitude for success. Apart from technical skills, soft skills possessed by an individual, are identified as competencies for new hires as a requisite in the recruitment process and ensures chances of smooth career progression. From this review paper, readers can fortify their historical understanding of 'job readiness from both the employer and graduate standpoint. Also, the paper identifies soft skills which are considered trending as desired employability skills for business graduates. The critical review done ascertains how management graduates can learn and hone the necessary soft skills as they make the transition from the campus to the corporate.

keywords - Soft skills, Communication skills, Management graduates, Career Success, Workplace success

I. INTRODUCTION

I.1 Soft skills is a term often associated with a person's "EQ" (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, interpersonal skills, managing people, leadership, etc. that characterize relationships with other people.

I.2 Soft skills are a combination of people skills, social skills, communication skills, character or personality traits, attitudes, career attributes, social intelligence, and emotional intelligence quotients, among others, that enable people to navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, and achieve their goals with complementing hard/technical skills. The Collins English Dictionary defines the term "soft skills" as "desirable qualities for certain forms of employment that do not depend on acquired knowledge: they include common sense, the ability to deal with people, and a positive flexible attitude."

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature has been reviewed to understand the importance of soft skills for management students in career development.

Dubey, Goyal, and Rajput (n. d) explored the gap between industry expectations and the quality of recent college graduates. In this study, 12 determinants emerged (namely-soft skills, leadership qualities, suitability, analytical power, ethical component, dressing sense, language, appearance, manageability, training needs, industry's view, and professional commitment).

Rathee and Rajain (2018) found management students' perceptions regarding the importance of a Business Communication course. For this data was collected from 200 management students studying in both governments as well as private institutions located in the National Capital Region. The sample was selected using a non-probability convenience sampling method. The research instrument used for the study included a questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. The data were analyzed and interpreted using the SPSS version. 23. The results of the study suggested that even though the students understood the importance of a Business Communication course, they were still not able to apply it and make good use of it. The performance was not up to the mark in group-discussions, presentations public speaking, role-plays, etc. One of the reasons for this is the usage of English in most of the business communication programs which is not the first language of the students. Students are generally comfortable communicating in their Mother Tongue. This shows that more concentration and focus is needed in its basic, these areas to help students improve their level of communication. Cracking a job interview, participate in business meetings, document minutes of the meeting, making and delivering presentations and qualities of a good public speaker is basic for an individual to sustain and progress in a corporate world. The facilitator should encourage students to participate in all activities during business communication classes.

James, Warhurst, Tholen, and Commander (2013) analyzed the UK labor market and have recommended the need to empirically pursue the demand, development, and employment of graduates. Furthermore, the need to ascertain the skill development of the graduates within their academic and life circumstances is to be examined. Jog (2013) focusses on the mismatch that exists between the educational system provides for the development of employability skills and the employers' requirements from the graduates. The skills required by the labor market are to be ascertained and incorporated into the educational arena. Surve and Pradhan (2013) attempted to establish the dire need of grooming the workforce in communication/employability skills for global competitiveness. Their paper also suggested changes in the design of the subject - Communication Skills in the basic curricula of professional undergraduate, postgraduate and diploma courses to bridge the gap between the demands of industry and the availability of the skilled workforce. Rizvi, Teckchandany, and Ahuja (2013) state that, the financial sector in India comprises of financial institutions, banks, insurance companies, and various non-banking finance companies which offer immense

opportunities to management graduates looking for specialized jobs in the finance area. Some of the skill sets required for such jobs are analytical ability, quantitative skills, strong knowledge of basics of accounting and finance, basics of statistics and MS Excel Application and so on. The objective of the study has been to identify and analyses the specific skill sets required by the Financial Sector Players for management graduates. Erozkan (2013) examined communication skills, interpersonal problem-solving skills, and social self-efficacy perception of adolescents and the predictive role of communication skills and interpersonal problem-solving skills on social self-efficacy.

Jackson and Chapman (2012) surveyed the perceptions of managerial level employers of business graduates and academicians of business schools, on most needed workplace skills and behaviors. The study participants were confident in the non-technical skills of the graduates but had deficient in specific managerial skills. There was no significant difference in the respondents' perception in terms of the business graduates' discipline. Iksan et al. (2012) investigated the level of communication skills among university students. Communication skills were measured via a self-administered questionnaire and it assessed ten elements in communication skills, including oral, written and social behavior. The reliability of the questionnaire was good, with $r > 0.08$ in each sub-construct.

Noronha (2011) empirically examined the state of business education in the Indian context. The researcher has surveyed education from its curricular, physical facilities, employability standards, and involvement of stakeholders in the teaching-learning processes. The study findings point towards the strengthening of the pedagogy to prepare the graduates employable in the global and national arena. Specific focus on empowering the faculty to deliver skill-based learning and research incorporation is emphasized. Wilton's (2011) views on employability differ in terms of the employment market which holds to its traditional values which do not consider skill enhancements acquired from undergraduate education. Babic and Alavokic (2011) in the research paper Soft And Hard Skills Development: A Current Situation In Serbian Companies presented at the International Conference Management Knowledge and Learning, found that there was no difference in the attitudes of corporate managers across industry sectors in the perceptions of the importance of soft skills such as teamwork, flexibility, communication skills, enthusiasm, and negotiation skills. However, they found that there is a statistically significant difference in their perception of soft skills such as time management and leadership. The research was conducted by them to test whether there is a difference in the attitude of company managers towards the importance of soft skills and hard skills are alike. As per the study, the soft skills which were most valued by the managers across sectors were the ability to learn, teamwork and communication skills and those least valued were leadership skills. The article is highly relevant for the current study which aims to test the perceptions of respondents towards different soft skills and training needs which need to be given to the professionals. Temtime and Mmerek (2011) examined the degree of satisfaction and perceived relevance of the Graduate Business Education (GBE) program at the University of Botswana. A self-administered questionnaire and face to face interviews were used to collect data from Master of Business Administration (MBA) participants on their reason for studying MBA, level of satisfaction, and the extent to which the skills and experiences obtained correlate with those required by the corporate world. The data were analyzed using simple descriptive statistics. The majority of the respondents were male adults attending part-time MBA classes and working full time in administrative positions in the public and private sectors. The study found that improved managerial skills, career development, and broader business insights are major reasons for joining the MBA program, while employability and economic gains were ranked low as driving forces. Even though the overall satisfaction with the program is mixed and inconclusive, the MBA program has assisted participants to develop basic management and administration skills. However, the program puts greater emphasis on conceptual, technical and analytical skills than on problem-solving, innovation, communication and entrepreneurial skills, which are perceived to be most needed by employers, implying a relevance gap.

Shafie and Nayan (2010) conducted this study to determine whether employability skills can be enhanced by studying English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) among undergraduates in Malaysia. Also, it investigated whether undergraduates can identify attributes that employers seek. The results of this study have useful pedagogical implications for the teaching of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) as the data obtained may be used to prepare teaching materials to enhance undergraduates' employability skills. Gokuladas (2010) investigated the importance of technical and nontechnical education, in the employability of undergraduate engineering students. Employability was determined according to students' success in campus recruitment drives by information technology companies, that is, whether they received an offer of employment. The study used a sample of two 25 cohorts consisting of more than 500 undergraduate engineers in total, drawn from one of the leading engineering colleges in South India. Independent variables consisted of marks scored at the higher education admission stage, grades in engineering at graduation and performance in non-technical education. The last-named comprised verbal reasoning, logical reasoning, and soft skills. The dependent variable was whether or not they were offered employment. The results obtained through correlation and ordinal regression revealed that the performance of students in non-technical education was a stronger predictor of employability than was grade obtained in technical education. According to Ihmeideh, Ahmad and Dababneh (2010) and Cleland, Foster, and Moffat (2005) they found that fostering a positive environment provides opportunities for students to learn how to communicate, and thus, have better communication skills. Therefore, university students need to be given opportunities to communicate to be better prepared for the job market after the completion of the management course. Students need to put in the effort to develop their communication skills to be able to succeed in their chosen profession (Ihmeideh, et al. 2010). Communication is more effective if the receiver (of the information) can understand and practice the skills. Further, communication will be more meaningful if the physical, spiritual and social factors are taken into account during the communication process. A management graduate who is ready to start a dream or chosen career, he/she should participate in activities that can holistically develop communication skills in a wider and complete sense. There are many types of communication skills, but generally, it involves oral and written skills. The process of communication generally involves four elements, which are the speaker, the receiver, communication channel, and feedback. A few researchers have defined communication as verbal communication, written communication, non-verbal communication, listening and giving feedback (Nur'ashiqin Najmuddin, 2010). At the same time, Rodiah Idris (2010) proposes that communication as a non-verbal skill, giving

feedback, presenting ideas verbally and in written form, doing presentations and negotiating to achieve a goal and getting support/agreement. In our globalized world, university students need to master communication skills in different cultural contexts (Penbek, Yurdakul, & Cerit, 2009). Harlak et al. (2008), propose that university students be exposed to activities that can develop their communication skills starting from their first year at university. Hence, universities must provide many more activities to develop the students' communication skills to meet the challenges of the globalized world.

Imeideh et al. (2010) reported that the necessary attitude towards learning communication skills, which particularly among university students are high. This means that it is easier for educators to develop the communication skills of students as they have the willingness to learn. Fostering a positive environment for learning business communication, provides opportunities for students to participate, practice and become confident professionals. Also, the lecture, tutorials, and workshops should create as many learning activities, exercises as possible to stimulate students to be self-driven and to practice and hone their communication skills.

Stock (2009), in the article "A Cost-Conscious Method for Soft Skill Training" stresses the need to find a more creative and cost-effective solution to train people in soft skills instead of only focusing on expensive formal training programs. Chaturvedi (2009), in the conceptual paper "Training in Organizations: A Developmental Perspective" advocates the cause of training in organizations in developing people's interpersonal skills, decision making and leadership skills, resulting in better work performance. While speaking of the role of training in organizational effectiveness she also refers to modes of learning like e-learning and so on.

Jagadeesan. & Krishnan (2008) in their edited book *Soft Skills Development- Training and Evaluation* have discussed the importance of Soft Skills and the need to acquire it through training. On assessing how these skills can be imparted to employees, he reflects on the various methodologies to hone these skills. Right from on the job training, where he talks about Project Management, Team Work, Coaching, Mentoring and Off the Job Training where he speaks of Role Play, Simulation, Classroom, and other training methods. What he does not comment on is the efficacy of these training methodologies. Neither does he comment on which of the forum, i.e. on the job training or off the training is more effective in imparting soft skills.

Theogaraj, Laurainne (2007) in the article *A Hard Case for Soft Skills: Gaining a Competitive Advantage with Soft Skills* makes a case for soft skills by presenting how important soft skills are as against hard skills and sets guidelines for effective soft skills training modules. She recommends continuous practice sessions instead of mere seminars and presentation of concepts. According to Redford (2007), effective soft skills training programs will have an impact on behavior. It is important to be clear on what behavioral changes one requires to make a potential impact on business performance. It is only then that we can translate these changes into clear metrics and measure the financial impact. It is also important to take feedback from delegates" line manager and team 360- degree reviews as well as pre- and post-training assessments training solution to be aligned with core business needs. Riemer (2007) discussed various aspects of the communication skills required of modern engineers. The various elements of communication skills are: speaking, listening, writing, visual, inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural. The impact of emotional intelligence (EQ) is also presented. Suggestions for communication skills development are recommended that communication skills courses should be integrated into the curriculum and revised from time to time as per the industry needs. This will as part of engineering curricula, to reinforce learning and application of communication skills subjects for students especially those who are not so adept and come for the vernacular background.

Glynn and Wood (2005) described the efforts of a business school to elicit evaluative opinions of its graduating seniors in an attempt to evaluate the curriculum, its delivery systems, and the overall educational environment. Accounting students, especially females had higher ratings than males on 13 of the 17 items including all five of the items that displayed statistically significant differences – Written Communications, Use Computers Effectively, Cultural Diversity Appreciation, Environmental Issues, and Global Issues in Business. According to Lachance competency is "...An underlying characteristic of an employee (i.e. a motive, trait, skill, aspects of one's self-image, social role, or a body of knowledge) which results in ineffective and/or superior performance." Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat has defined competency as "...Knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors that an employee applies in performing his/her work and what are the key employee-related levers for achieving results that are relevant to the organization's business strategies." Mohd Helmi (2005) proposes that there are essentially three types of communication, which are interpersonal communication, management communication (communication in a group), and public communication (speech-making) which can make help in career progression.

Purcell & Elias (2004) in a short report by The Higher Education Career Services Unit published in June 2004- *Seven Years On Graduate Careers in a Changing Labour Market* reports that in the higher education sectors and for job available to the higher education sector, over and above their graduate educations, the other skills considered most important are spoken communication, followed by problem-solving skills and then by the ability to work in teams.

Williams (2003), in the book *"Managing Employee Performance – Design and Implementation in Organization"* includes training as part of the performance monitoring process design. He advises that employees need to be informed/ explained the performance evaluation process before they are trained so that the training impact can feature somewhere in their performance evaluation.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since it's a qualitative research paper, secondary data was used. Journals were identified from the time frame of 2006-2018. 30 papers were selected using the keyword soft skills and management graduates. Content was analyzed and detailed review was performed.

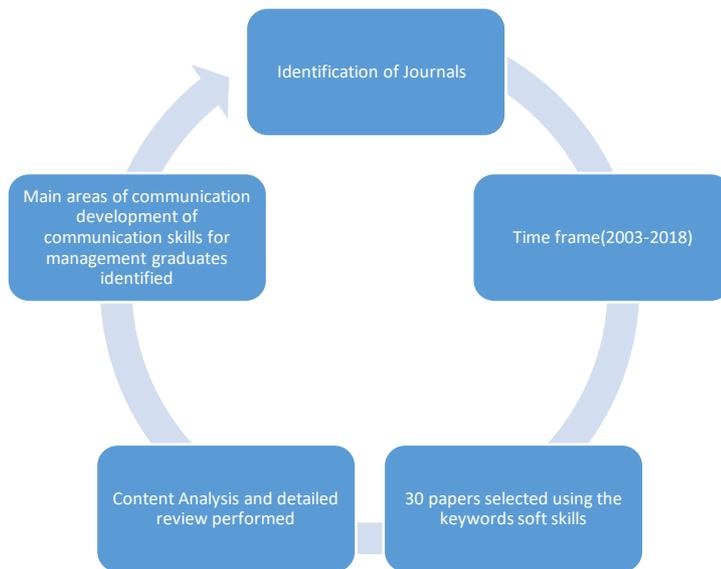


Figure 1: Methodology adopted

IV. WAY FORWARD

IV.1 Theoretical and technical knowledge of your domain, coupled with effective communication skills can reap magnificent results. Professionals should acquire the skills and knowledge needed to maximize every opportunity to communicate with their peers, superiors, clients, and customers. Effective communication is important for graduates from the stage of job hunting to any stage as they advance in their careers. Executives, business managers and heads of organizations utilize communication channels, tools, and techniques to the job effectively as also attain their KRAs and career goals. We cannot negate the fact that effective communication is an essential component for organization success, whether it is interpersonal, intrapersonal, intergroup or intragroup communication.

IV.2 Out of the array of soft skills, communication skills are identified as most essential for the successful future career of a student. In today's dynamic world, communication skills are the most sought-after quality of a management graduate. Reading, writing and listening carefully, are the three primary skills essential for graduates. Out of these skills, communication skills sound too familiar, as a result of which we take it for granted. Being able to communicate effectively is perhaps the most important of all life skills. It is what enables to give information to others and to understand what conveyed.

Communication skills are essential for getting the desired job and ensure a smooth career progression. Every step of our life, wherever we are, we need to communicate, verbally or non-verbally daily to convey our ideas, thoughts, feelings emotions, verbally or non-verbally. It is a continual process that evolves from our birth until death. The individual, as well as an organization, cannot thrive without efficient employees, can communicate effortlessly. The future and effectiveness of every organization are also based on its open communication channels. Effective Business communication fosters strong partnerships, promote products or services, as well as relay information within a particular organization. It is imperative therefore that any form of communication should be done, efficiently, and accurately, as it can have a great impact on a company's reputation and credibility. It also speaks volumes about the level of professionalism of an organization and the effectiveness of an organization. The administrators, employees, sellers and buyers or employees in any field or department must communicate smoothly with minimal barriers to promote business. Even the entry-level employee like a vendor or salesman with his persuasive skills attracts more customers.

IV.3 Writing emails, making and delivering presentations, report writing, public speaking, are mostly a part of the B- School curriculum. This has been introduced in schools and colleges for the overall development of students. What deserves more attention is that most of the students do not feel competent and confident while public speaking or facing interviews. Having realized the importance of these contemporary communication skills, premier B- Schools have made Soft Skills courses an integral and ongoing part of their curriculum as it is the need of the hour.

IV.4 The ability to express our feelings, thoughts, and emotions successfully to anybody internal or external to an organization is essential for any individual. Listening is a very important part of communication skills, which the learners tend to forget. Listening skills are also an important skill that should be taught to a student. Listening skills should not only be limited to the classroom but also in a normal conversation. Students should be taught how to give undivided attention to a person through listening exercises and practice. Also, students should be taught to give respect to the speaker.

IV.5 A facilitator, teacher or professor can polish the soft skills of his/her students through the following steps. The first step is to encourage students to do more activities individually or in groups. Teachers should limit group activities not only in the classroom but also ask students to complete assignments outside the classroom heterogeneous groups. Also, the teacher should continuously change the groups so that students can adjust to different kinds of group dynamics and remain interactive and active. The more students interact and participate, the more beneficial it is for them. The students should be given group or one-on-one feedback and told what could be the areas of improvement. Continuous practice and exercises would make students more confident and better communicators.

IV.6 As Indians, we tend to be poor listeners as compared to other countries in the West. The habit of active listening can be inculcated through listening to Ted Talks, online videos, reading passages loudly to others and answering questions and answers after listening to an audio recording. For this, the teacher should continuously motivate to read out an article from newspaper magazines and other student's questions from the text. Also, the teachers should emphasize and encourage the active participation of the students and not just be passive listeners in the classroom. By inculcating a healthy environment of competition and curiosity in students, it would become possible to develop communication skills for students. The practice is the key to success, after all, 'Practice makes a man perfect'.

IV.7 Lastly, the teachers should make an effort to motivate students for active participation not just make it a mere lecture in classrooms. The concept of flipped teaching is very powerful and motivates the students to come prepared to class. The concept of a flip classroom is easy and can be carried out in five easy steps. 1) Create a video recording 2) Share it with the students 3) Encourage students to prepare beforehand. 4) Provide in-class activities. 5) Repeat steps 1-4. It infuses healthy competition amongst students, thereby helping students hone effective soft skills.

VI. CONCLUSION

From the study following conclusion can be done as under. The soft skill required for management graduates are:

1. Communication – oral speaking capability, written, presenting, listening, clear speech & writing.
2. Courtesy – manners, etiquette, business etiquette, gracious, says please and thank you, respectful.
3. Flexibility – adaptability, willing to change, lifelong learner, accepts new things, adjusts, teachable.
4. Integrity – honest, ethical, high morals, has personal values, does what's right.
5. Interpersonal skills – nice, personable, sense of humor, friendly, nurturing, empathetic, has self-control, patient, sociability, warmth, and social skills.
6. Positive attitude – optimistic, enthusiastic, encouraging, happy, confident.
7. Professionalism – businesslike, well-dressed, appearance, poised.
8. Responsibility – accountable, reliable, gets the job done, resourceful, self-disciplined, wants to do well, conscientious, common sense.
9. Teamwork – cooperative, gets along with others, agreeable, supportive, helpful, and collaborative.
10. Work ethic – hard working, willing to work, loyal, initiative, self-motivated, on time, good attendance.

Management students and behavioral capacities are interrelated to each other. To develop the career growth student's should be aware of the company's perspective. The success of any profession is not only decided by the intelligence, skill and technical expertise but also emotional intelligence. The perceptions, if modified through adequate and qualitative stimuli, help to develop learning and personality. Improved behavior has better performance and rewards, which provide more satisfaction to the employees.

This leaves an important role for institutions to prepare their graduates to meet the demand for skills from different sectors. Institutions, therefore, have to increase their interaction with various kinds of employers. Hence, the institutions should customize program outcomes to meet the specific demand. Further, co-curricular activities such as projects and internships and involvement of institutions with the community would also help students to deepen the understanding of demanded skills and respond well to particular demanded skills.

Positive attitude, confidence, sense of gratitude, effective problem solving and decision making, team-building skills are some attributes that a management graduate must imbibe. Communication skills being the most important of all. The potpourri of these competencies and attributes can help them be successful professionals. The organization will also improve productivity and efficiency. Employees will improve the chances of promotion, earn respect from colleagues, and get better appraisals from their superiors and progress on a fast-track path. It is important to note that communication skills improve the ability to work in teams and improve group dynamics as there are minimal barriers to communication. Effective communications leads to efficient processes and improves the efficiency of an organization. Long- term benefits yielded make a work environment for happy, satisfied employees and needless to say a happy employee is a productive employee.

Students need brainpower and sharp memory to become successful in everything they want to do, to achieve their dreams. Effective communicators skills coupled with improved focus are ready to face any kind of day to day challenges in the workplace. Every student aspires to be a genius ultimately but without effective soft skills, it's not possible. Institutions need to design soft skills course that enables management graduates to face on-the-job tasks, as is recommended.

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