Improving Soft Skills of students to make them employable

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Abstract
This paper makes a survey of the importance of soft skills in students’ lives both at college and after college. It discusses how soft skills like leadership, decision-making, conflict resolution, negotiation, communication, creativity and presentation skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job the student is trained to do to put him in the drivers’ seat during and even after the interview. Ever-increasing global competition and the varying nature of most technical professions have made soft skills more than simply a prerequisite. It is of high importance for every student to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. In this paper an effort has been made to guide students of North Bengal to put strides in the right direction to improve their employability chances in the job market in this LPG era. Remedial approaches to training as well as polishing soft skills have also been the focal point of the paper. The paper also exhorts educators, with all due respect, to take special responsibility regarding soft skills, because during students’ college time, educators have major influence on the development of their students’ soft skills. Embedding the training of soft skills into hard skills courses is a very effective and efficient method of achieving both an attractive way of teaching a particular content and an enhancement of soft skills. Soft skills fulfill an important role in shaping an individual’s personality.

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Introduction

Post 1992, owing to Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) many multinational firms have set up their facilities in India, leading to employment opportunities at every level and change in the recruitment process as well. Until very recently, there was a general consensus that technical knowledge and certification were the prerequisites for an ideal candidate for well-paying jobs in these multinational corporations. But this is not true any more as there has been a paradigm shift in the demands of the corporate world. Managing human capital multiplies one’s chances of success. Thus the key now lies with how effectively you use your people.

In many technical professions, the focus of education and training is towards technical topics related to a career or discipline. Students are generally engrossed in mastering various mathematics skills, science skills and technical skills directly related to the specific disciplines they are planning to enter. Though this learning is essential for their success yet the fast-paced and global marketplace of today is demanding more. To achieve this magical transformation, soft skills are essential. As Carole (2002) puts it, “More and more corporations around the world recognize that, in order to gain a competitive advantage, they also need to make sure their people know how to handle themselves at work and how to relate with their customers and peers”.

The million dollar question: What exactly are soft skills?

Before digging any further into the importance of soft skills I would like to clarify the question “What exactly are soft skills?”

The online encyclopedia “Wikipedia” gives a very broad definition of soft skills: “Soft skills” is a sociological term relating to a person’s “EQ” (Emotional Intelligence Quotient), the cluster of personality traits, social graces, communication, language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that characterize relationships with other
people. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the occupational requirements of a job and many other activities.”

In fact, ‘Hard skills’ are technical skills. Like writing programs for computers, preparing a balance sheet, working on a particular machine for a particular process in a manufacturing workshop, acting in a television serial or a cinema film, carrying out a surgery etc. One must have proficiency in these skills in order to become a good professional in one’s chosen fields and to earn decent living. Hard skills are important and one should never undermine them. They are one’s bread and butter skills, while ‘Soft skills’ are behavioral in nature. Basic interpersonal skills such as self-awareness, social awareness, relationship management, conflict management, diversity management, leadership and teamwork, empowering others, emotional intelligence, negotiation skills, change management and team problem solving qualify as soft skills.

Highly specialized skills, advances in technology, amazing inventions, spectacular breakthroughs in arts and sciences have limited value unless one does not possess soft skills. Soft skills are very important not only for smooth running of a business enterprise but they are also equally, if not more, important for the success and growth of individual executives and professionals. In the age of globalization, soft skills are of paramount importance. The lack of proper soft skills creates barriers and distortion in communication which can have some very negative repercussions for any company or business set-up. Thus proficiency in soft skills has become a mandatory requirement for any professional working in a global business environment. Employers expect the workforce to possess excellent soft skills apart from knowledge and expertise in their respective technical field. For example, how do one communicate with the people, how good one is making his business presentations, how empathetic one is with the people he come across, can one work as a team member, and so on. These skills make all the difference. Mere technical skills allow one only a certain degree of success. One can achieve higher degree of success if he equip himself with soft skills.

What are the most important soft skills?
‘Soft skills’ can be said to incorporate all aspects of generic skills that include the cognitive elements associated with non-academic skills. Soft skills are identified to be the most critical skills in the current global job market especially in a fast moved era of technology.

Vast research and expert opinions have been sought in the effort to determine the specific soft skills to be implemented and used in higher institutions of learning. Based on the research findings obtained, seven soft skills have been identified and chosen to be implemented in all institutions of higher learning here. They are:

- Communicative skills.
- Thinking skills and Problem solving skills.
- Team work force
- Life-long learning and Information Management
- Entrepreneur skill
- Ethics, moral and professionalism
- Leadership skills

Each of the above soft skills comprised of several sub-skills. These sub-skills are divided into two categories of implementation. The first category delineates the soft skills that every individual must have and the second category represents soft skills that are good to have. Despite the emphasis being put on the soft skills that must be present (must have), it is also encouraged to inculcate the soft skills that are good to have. All elements of soft skills must be acquired by each individual student and evaluated effectively and comprehensively. Table 1 shows the seven soft skills and the two categories of sub-skills respectively.

The ‘must have’ soft skills must be acquired by each and every individual in the institutions of higher learning without which, the student is regarded as incompetent in the above skill. The ‘good to have’ soft skills can be regarded as the additional generic
skills and a bonus to the student. If these skills are acquired by the students together with the ‘must have’ soft skills.

It can be observed that education is an essential tool for achieving sustainability. We all realize that the current economic development trends are not sustainable and that public awareness, education and training are the key elements to move our society towards sustainability. Only a quality future human capital can envision development of its nation to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Therefore, the inculcation of soft skills among the students will be two prongs, to produce quality human capital and to develop their knowledge, understanding, values and skills as well (Jain).

**What an Employer Looks for in Technical Professionals**

Effective communication and interpersonal skills are crucial to increase employment opportunities and to compete successfully in the business environment. The real key to the effectiveness of professionals is their ability to put their domain knowledge into effective practice. In this context, soft skills have a crucial role to play. If Technical Professionals know how to deal with people at the emotional level (peers, subordinates, superiors, clients, suppliers, etc.) through Emotional Intelligence (EI), they can build and sustain effective relationships that will result in mutual gain. Following are the traits which employers of LPG era search out in employees:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical</th>
<th>Non-Technical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical expertise in the field</td>
<td>Teamwork skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analytical capabilities</td>
<td>Written and oral communication skills</td>
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<td>Continuing knowledge growth</td>
<td>Presentation and selling skills</td>
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<td>Placement and practical work experience</td>
<td>Understanding of finances</td>
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<tr>
<td>Design experience</td>
<td>Business and travel etiquette</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multidisciplinary experience</td>
<td>Managing without authority</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Leadership with a global view</td>
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**Training Engineering & Technology Students for the Prevalent LPG Locale**
In this ever changing LPG era the graduates, of all institutions including, the top tiers, and of all degree programs, are facing the challenges of unstructured problems demanding a ‘focus on the process rather than the result’, resulting in sustainable future of these graduates. By unstructured problems I mean where the problems itself is not specifically defined. Thus, the students should strive to be as well rounded as possible. They must continue to master the basic theory and fundamentals of their engineering but additional focus must be dedicated to engineering from a business perspective. In many developments, the toughest challenges are not at the implementation or design level, but more at the business level. It has been observed that many multinational companies have integrated product teams. Today, industry is interested in people who can do teamwork. New employees must understand how to work with teams that are not of the same culture. This is due to companies merging. Engineering today requires more than knowing subject matter. It is critical to know how to work with people and learn from people. Thus it is found that sharpening 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.

**Restructuring Curriculum of Budding Technical Professionals**

The present curriculum is so designed that it does not include practical knowledge of all the four language skills, namely, reading, writing, listening and speaking. These skills should be learned along with soft skills. A change is required in designing the curriculum, which should be oriented more towards equipping the student to manage and excel at the work place.

To achieve optimum results the curriculum should be restructured to include some of the following areas:

1. **Effective Communication Skills** – verbal, written, identifying and removing barriers to communication, acquisition of different styles of communication.
2. Theme Presentation Skills – negotiation, structuring effective presentation, assertiveness.

3. Non-verbal Cues – kinesics (body language), para-linguistics (voice-dynamics), proxemics (use of space), and chronemics (use of time)

4. Behavioral Attributes – workplace attitude, motivation, time and stress management, business and professional ethics, leadership and interpersonal skills and team building.

5. Problem-solving Skills – creative, critical and analytical thinking, managing conflict, and decision making.

Role of English Teachers in Institutes of Engineering and Technology

Teachers should react to the changing scenario and equip themselves to meet the need of the hour. Especially, the English teachers, at this crucial juncture, should play a vital role in bridging the gap between what is now available in the form of curriculum and the demands of the corporate world. As Cologne (2002) states, “we (Soft Skills teachers) should try to do our best in achieving two results simultaneously that are vital in view of the ever-changing ‘face’ of English: to enhance our students’ linguistic competence; and to prepare them for handling the extra-linguistic demands via soft skills.”

This transformation can be achieved by moving away from the traditional method of teaching language skills to the communicative method of language teaching. Instead of focusing on grammatical rules, syntactic structures, route memorization of vocabulary and using literary texts as teaching material, the present-day English teachers need to concentrate on improving language efficiency and soft skills by making use of real life situations as teaching material. For this, a more creative, analytical, logic-oriented and interactive method of teaching should be adopted. In a nutshell, English teachers should become more of a facilitator, and less of an instructor. To excel in this new role English teachers should adopt changes in the following:

Amendment in Teaching Methodology

Before adopting any methodology, the teacher should assess the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. This type of Needs analysis will guide, both the
teacher and student, to consolidate and enhance the strengths and concentrate on and reduce the weaknesses inherent in the students.

Subsequently, the teacher should explore and experiment various methods of teaching to address the different needs. It should be interactive and communicative, where students are given ample scope and opportunities to participate, interact and communicate, rather than lecture oriented. The bottom line is to make students practice, practice and more practice.

An array of issues, problem solving topics, and varied situations which the students are likely to encounter in their work place can be manipulated appropriately in a class room.

This can be accomplished by conducting individual/pair/group task based activities like debates, group discussions, case analyses, role plays, business games and so on. Media and video shows can also be effectively used to improve listening comprehension, critical analysis and for presenting model.

The teaching methodology should be so devised as to include conceptualized tasks, and thus provide integration of skills-related learning experiences. Whatever be the method, the teacher should create the right ambience and make the class room very informal, interesting, and interactive. The methodology should also offer the teachers scope to observe, listen, evaluate and provide feedback.

**Conclusion**

With the changing educational trends, versatility in educational courses, availability of masses of qualified workforce, the competition for job acquisition and job sustainability is becoming tougher. To get an edge over the competitors, students are left with no choice but to add values to their hard skills with soft skills to exhibit their true potential in the global markets. To live to the challenge of globalization which is in line with the era of information economy, the strength of a nation is strongly dependent on the ability of its citizen to be highly intellectual and skillful. The development of human capital is
thus important and necessary since it drives the nation to the envision vision and mission. Without a quality human capital, a nation will be weak as there is no human factor that is capable to embark on new initiatives and perspectives. A quality human resource comes from a quality education process. A carefully designed and well planned education system is critical to developing such human capital. Thus, institution of higher learning plays a very important role to produce a human capital that is highly knowledgeable and skillful to meet the demand and expectations of many people. The teaching and learning processes in institutions of higher learning should be capable to provide such knowledge and skills to future graduates. To conclude, soft skills training is about enabling and empowerment. In specific, by curriculum modification, Engineering and Technology Institutes will need to streamline technical courses in the curriculum and provide more business and management courses so that students will have the business skills to be able to compete effectively in the LPG era.

References
