# THE PREEMINENCE OF SOFT SKILLS: NEED FOR SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

The progresses of industrialization, rapid technological developments and adaptation of sophisticated technology by industries have resulted in a mismatch between requirements of industry and the products of engineering institutions. As such the technical education has to face many challenges and the quality revolution, therefore, assumes tremendous importance in the highly competitive world. In this increasingly globalized world and the internationalized nature of the workplaces, the young engineering students of India are found short of many skills and their chief deficiencies are identified in the areas of soft skills. Over the past few years there has been a growing awareness for the need of soft skills development among the academia and the corporate. Indeed, many institutes have also introduced a component of soft skills in the curricula. But these initiatives are a proverbial drop in the ocean as the most haven't had the desired impact. One now needs to review the situation and develop strategies to overcome these problems without undermining the importance of technical skills. Thus, this paper attempts to research and identify skill sets and their right mix needed for sustainable employability of engineering graduates as the technical institutional also have to play a key role in promoting national well being and socio-economic prosperity of the country.

**KEYWORDS:** education, employability, human capital, soft skills, sustainable.

## Introduction

Soft skills training become all the more relevant in a country like India where the education system does not delve into personality development. From the call centre job to flight attendant or from service sector to manufacturing industry, what the professional world expects from the graduates is their ability to demonstrate interpersonal skills, empathy, assertiveness, problem solving skills, and positivism.

With the rapid expansion of ISO: 9000 and economic liberalization in our country, it has become imperative that in order to be competitive in the national as well as in the international market the engineering education system must be ready to accept the challenges of the 21st century. According to a recent consulting study conducted by Mercer, only 25 percent graduates in India are employable. The figure indicates that there is a huge gap between the pace of change of university curriculum and the technology needs of the current industry. As a result, students have good theoretical knowledge but they lack problem solving skills due to lack of exposure to practical projects. "Given the situation, it is imperative that industry and academia collaborate to improve the quality of students who are entering into the industry for the various roles and positions," asserts Sachin Tikekar, Chief of People Operations, KPIT Cummins Infosystems.[1]

With the changing times, the face of the educational and the corporate world is also changing. Wherein the need-of-the-hour is to have state-of-the-art professionals who are agile enough to meet the growing demands of the industry.[2] In this changing milieu with the versatility in educational courses and the availability of masses of qualified personnel, the competition for job acquisition and job sustainability is becoming tougher. Up until now professional qualification was enough, but in contemporary times, besides having a superb degree one also needs to have an extraordinary personality and the right attitude. Some people are born with the grace and charm required to make that killing success, while some others have to acquire it! And those who refuse to wake-up to the call of the hour are sadly jolted out of their reverie when sudden need arises.[3] Thus 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. Keeping these requirements in the mind this paper is designed to address all aspects of information that a potential achiever requires. The paper focuses on guiding young professionals to perceive opportunities in every challenge. Moreover with an increasing youth population – a major asset to the nation – such guiding tools are essential to provide a roadmap for achieving their destination.

**Hard Skills VS Soft Skills**

The survival of the fittest is the slogan the institutes have to follow to face these challenges. Thus the technical education system should attempt to strive for excellence and pay more attention to the generation of application oriented qualified engineers for socio –economic development of the country and for their own survival.[4]

Success at the workplace for engineers is determined primarily by two skill sets. The first are the hard skills and the second are the soft skills. Before we can take the discussion further, it is important to understand the difference between the two.

Hard Skills/ Technical skills are specific skills, tasks or activities that are needed to be proficient or eligible for a particular job. Hard Skills are easy to identify and define with respect to a particular profession. These are the technical skills that are associated with a respective profession. For example in the case of a mechanical engineer the hard skills would be the personnel's ability with machines, for a software engineer it would be his or her proficiency level with a programming language. One must have proficiency in these skills in order to become a good professional in one's chosen fields and to earn decent living. They are bread and butter skills. Hard skills are important and one should never undermine them as they are more rational types.

Soft skills or "people skills" are characteristics that influence an individual's personal and professional relationships, work performance and career prospects. Soft skills are critical to all facets of the venture. The term Soft Skills implies critical thinking, interpersonal communication and innovation. These are treated on par with technical skills and expertise. In fact, success in the workplace stems from having these abilities, regardless of what kind of work a person does. Soft skills are really the hardest skills to learn and to teach.[5] However, soft skills are those that everybody has to varying degrees. Many soft skills are an inherent part of an individual's personality, yet many can be acquired or learned. It is well recognized that soft and hard skills go hand in hand in any individual who has proved to be successful in management and business deliberations.[6]

## Soft Skills' Importance

After having elaborated on soft skills, the answer to why they are considered as being so important is still open. There are numerous reasons for having a critical look at a person's soft skills. One straightforward reason is today's job-market, which in many fields is becoming ever increasingly competitive. To be successful in this tough environment, candidates for jobs have to bring along a "competitive edge" that distinguishes them from other candidates with similar qualifications and comparable evaluation results. During the last decades in many societies the opinion on soft skills has changed considerably. Whereas in the past the mastering of hard skills was rated first and soft skills were considered as "nice to have", the perception has been turned upside down as the pendulum of perception on soft skills has moved back to the centre position. Soft skills are playing an important role in shaping a person's personality, they enable social competence, and they complement the hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job.[7]
The importance of soft skills as distinct from hard skills or domain knowledge is increasingly being recognized in several sectors of today's highly competitive market place. Research in many fields such as sales and marketing, software development, engineering and law, has shown that to be successful in the workplace, knowledge alone is not enough. Soft skills are needed to deal with the external world and to work in a collaborative manner with one's colleagues. [8]
There is no doubt about the fact that the hard skills are an absolute essential for an engineer to perform his job diligently and efficiently. The fact that the second skill set, that is, the soft skills along with the hard skills are an absolute essential for growth of an engineer in the organization. A blend of both is what determines the success of a professional. Soft Skills are what are termed as people skills or interpersonal skills. These determine an engineer's attitude towards his work, organization, clients and colleagues. Soft skills are not just limited to the workplace of a professional but extend to other spheres of his life too for example social and family. Soft skills is not just about communicating, but includes ability to manage stress, ability to organize, ability to provide solutions. Soft skills make a difference in the external and internal personalities. People who acquire soft skills of high order are more sophisticated, more cultured, more reformed and are found to be more successful in every walk of life. [9]

## Human Capital

The Indian economy, after liberalization, displayed a momentum that far exceeds the expectations, despite a challenging global environment. The most notable aspect of this growth is that, it is broad –based and inclusive to a great extent. India has portrayed itself not only as an economic power house but also as a knowledge hub. For India to continue surfing this kind of growth, the engineering education must continuously evolve itself while being rooted in firm principles and nurtured on right values. We need to keep pace with the ever changing world of engineering education and the aspiration of the business houses. In today's knowledge economy when human capital is recognized as the most valuable asset that a business has, the people in the organization become the most important differentiator between two companies. No wonder, corporate seeking to add to their talent pool go that extra mile to hire the best, and usually the search ends at engineering institutes.
The leaders of industry have reiterated that, in this changing milieu, they now seek potential candidates, i.e., graduates with sound technical knowledge as well as efficiency in soft skills. [10]
These potential candidates are the most valuable asset of the country and the development of human capital and mind shift of the citizens is one big challenge. If we want a move towards a knowledgeable-based economy and be a sustainable first world country, the development of

human capital should be a priori. In the context of a global world, a high human capital is a necessity and not a luxury. The approach to develop human capital should be holistic. Holistic in this sense emphasizes the development of knowledge, skills, intellectuality including literacy in Science and Technology and entrepreneurship. It also involves the inculcation of progressive attitudes and high ethical and moral values. It expects to result in a first class mindedness holistic human capital. It was observed that infusing Soft Skills into the curriculum of higher education could probably contribute to the development of a holistic human capital who can think of a future in which environment, societal and economic considerations are balanced in the pursuit of development and improved quality of life. [11]

**The Changing Nature of Challenge:**

The employee engagement has become a herculean task when the times are difficult. Business cycles of boom and depression are neither uncommon nor completely controllable. There is famous saying to the effect that a proactive human is one who, when presented with a lemon, makes a lemonade of it. This is probably one of the best-expressed ways of echoing the sentiments that a challenge is nothing but an opportunity in disguise. However, having said that, it would be need to consider in a little more depth what this implies for the Engineering graduates who aspire to be the catalyst in the conversation of challenges into opportunities.

The year 1991 can be considered as a watershed year for Indian in many ways. While we achieved political independence from colonizers in 1947, it was only in 1991, after a near disaster in the Indian economy, that the power that be decided to unleash the creative spirit of the native Indian genius. There was little or no competition in the Indian economy then, politician and bureaucracy were taught to look upon business as inherently evil and businessmen as criminals. The entire thrust of engineering education is to equip the students to continually optimize the use of various resources and ensure the survival and success of organization in the face of competitive challenge, while continuing to be relevant to the customer. [12]

**Problems of the Indian Sub-Continent:**

Though the soft skills crisis is a universal phenomenon, the problems and reasons in the Indian subcontinent are peculiar. Our educational system is so designed that it forces 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. We must not mechanically repeat what we know. We need to question our methods and not merely repeat what our teachers and parents did. It requires us to be original, intelligent, creative and not merely asserting ourselves. [13] Unlike academic degrees, knowledge from extracurricular activities is not earned but learned. A good resume speaks about a candidate's approach to work and most importantly, how well candidates understand the broader implications of their work. Besides academic specifications and work experiences, most hiring managers will confirm that extra-curricular activities, in any form, can be a powerful tool as skills developed through activities involving social work, volunteer work, sports, music, debates, arts, etc. can play a vital role when the time comes to apply for jobs, thus giving a candidate an edge over his/her contemporaries, in the interview process and finally at workplace after selection. [14] Even our university education is dubbed as outmoded with little relevance to workplace responsibilities and career enhancement. It is a strange paradox that higher education contributes to the largest population of unemployed graduates.

## Redesigning Curriculum:

It is strange to hear that universities are producing poor quality graduates because they have 'lowered their standards' or they 'offer outdated curricula' or they 'do not train students to operate in the real world'. A range of unfounded statements became accepted as uncontested facts in many circles. Several assumptions underpin these arguments. The first is that higher education exists primarily to feed the economy. The second is that theoretical knowledge is not useful in itself, and that a focus on practical and real-life issues yields far better graduates. The third is that programmes in the humanities do not provide students with valuable skills and should therefore not be undertaken if graduates want to be 'successful'. We come across such arguments regularly that make strong claims about what curriculum is of most value without sufficient data or evidence to support them. From a socio-political perspective, these arguments disturb us because they focused only on education in economic terms, which devalues socio-cultural education and has the potential to undermine the democracy and citizenship dimension. It is in this context that we embarked on a journey of exploration about curriculum change in higher education. Turning from public opinion to the literature, we found that higher education has become intricately tied to society's progress and development. This in turn has resulted in increased stakeholder involvement in the business of curriculum. Therefore, it is expected that higher education actively participates in solving society's social, economic and political challenges. This has placed pressure on curriculum to become more responsive, relevant and accountable to society. Thus curriculum change is underpinned by notions of relevance and responsiveness to societies needs. As a result higher education is presently undergoing changes, which have been labelled in the literature as significant, extensive and fundamental.

This feeling that new skills are required for work has motivated some important shifts in thinking about how to best prepare young people for education and work after high school. Educators and school reformers are updating curriculum or redesigning school programs as a way to ensure that young people have opportunities to learn work-related competencies in addition to academics. Despite the interest in supporting students' development of work-related skills and attitudes, the traditional academic curriculum remains the mainstay of high school education, and many school reforms emphasize improvement in academic subjects.

The desire to raise academic performance and, at the same time, to provide opportunities for students to acquire other competencies creates substantial challenges for educators. Expanding the curriculum to better meet new skill demands raises some challenging questions: What should the high school curriculum look like? How can we teach problem solving and teamwork in English, social studies, and mathematics? To what extent can we incorporate demands for new skills without watering down the academic curriculum? Should we increase participation in service learning or work-based learning to enhance work-related skill development? Answering these questions requires understanding the complex relationships between academic and non-academic skills and work.[15]

## Indian Employment Scenario

There is famous saying to the effect that a proactive human is one who, when presented with a lemon, makes a lemonade of it. This is probably one of the best-expressed ways of echoing the sentiments that a challenge is nothing but an opportunity in disguise. However, having said that, it would be needed to consider in a little more depth what this implies for the Engineering graduates who aspire to be the catalyst in the conversation of challenges into opportunities.

With 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 the attributes of soft skills are to be imbibed by Indian youth to show their real potential at intra and international levels. 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. The report demands that equal importance be given to skill building and practical training to give the graduates a competitive edge.

**Teaching Strategies:**

Many scholars suggest that academics are not usually trained as teachers; they lack the expertise, experience and confidence to adopt new approaches to teaching so they recommend different teaching styles for developing skills, for example, role play, research exercises and case study. However, it does not discuss curriculum-wide teaching strategies in which the examples can be incorporated. Often skills development occurs on an ad-hoc basis, even though it is argued that programmes must start with a clearly defined and holistic view to develop skills throughout the undergraduate degree programme. We must consider what this holistic view might incorporate. Firstly, it is important to identify the approaches used to develop skills. The three approaches considered for the purpose of this work are; 'embedding', 'bolting on' and 'integrating' skills components. These are defined as clearly identified teaching strategies relating to skills development in which:

Embedding – no direct reference is made to developing transferable skills and the emphasis is on promoting the development of technical 'know-how'.

Bolting-on – skills are developed independently of the core discipline, enabling the explicit development of students' transferable skills.

Integrating – skills are developed and taught explicitly within the core discipline and the same amount of emphasis is placed on the development of transferable skills as technical abilities.

By embedding skills into the curriculum it is possible to forge learning links to develop a broad range of skills. Embedding skills are relatively straightforward compared to the integration or bolting-on of skills as unless there is an explicit awareness related to developing the skills, the associated teaching is less effective. Bolt-on (or stand-alone) skills development approaches suffer from the opposite problem. Even though skills development becomes explicit, students often fail to grasp the academic value of such an approach as learning development and skills enhancement do not thrive if they are divorced from the students overall teaching and learning experience. There is greater support for the integration of skills into the curriculum, as here the skills are integrated into regular coursework and taught by the subject teacher. If the provision of skills development is to incorporate knowledge and understanding, analysis, creativity and evaluation, then integration of skills is the only viable option and more effective approach in higher education as it is more representative of the real-life application of skills in the workplace.

It can be argued that all three approaches are necessary for developing skills in engineering degree programmes but it is also important to establish a clear pathway for applying these approaches for the 'holistic view' to be successful. [16] We need to put into the academic discourse a deep understanding of what and how we should impart skills to our youth so that we can empower them as a better and healthy citizen with proper awareness of the most pressing problems of nation, society and polity.

**Conclusion:**

Today multi-national companies that are visiting academic campuses want graduates who are flexible, can work under pressure, are good at problem-solving, show creativity and innovation and have strong interpersonal skills. The paper strongly endorses that the skill development initiatives support the supply of trained graduates who are adjustable dynamically to the changing demands of employment and technologies. This will promote excellence and meet the requirements of knowledge economy.

The increasing demand from the industry for skilled manpower has accentuated the need to address the gap between the demand and supply of trained labour force. It is now commonly accepted that changes in work and the workplace are transforming the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for successful work performance.

Globalization, in almost all areas of work, has made it imperative to deal with diverse situations involving people from divergent backgrounds. It further emphasizes the role of soft skills. It is not enough to be able to just do your work properly, but it's also about being able to proactively make a positive difference to those around you in order to take the organization a step forward to achieve its goals. Working on one's soft skills is definitely a worthwhile exercise not just for employees of an organization but also for one's personal progress in life. It is generally accepted that engineering graduates need to be prepared for the increasing use of advanced and appropriate technology in their future workplaces. The industries as well as academia, not only from the region, but also from across the globe, have to address the challenges, along with the policy makers and this paper has been written as a moderate step in this direction.

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