

Soft Skills: The Employability Success *Mantra*

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Abstract

The mushrooming of engineering and technical institutions in India today has led to a paradoxical situation where there is no scarcity of engineering graduates or companies to recruit them; rather, there is a severe dearth of employable engineers. These graduates with their professional degrees are found to be unfit for the corporate world and their scope to acquire a job is highly constrained due to a lack of various soft skills. Presently organizations evaluate candidates' suitability and employability not only by their academic record but also by a set of personal and interpersonal skills which help them to be industry-ready and sustain in the corporate world for long. This paper proposes a few suggestions about how these soft skills can be instilled in students in the English class by incorporating a few creative and interesting tasks with the objective of bridging the gap between academia and industry.

Key words: Employability, industry ready soft skills, effective communication.

Lack of Employability Skills

Many engineering students possess domain skills but are lacking in employability skills. They are deficient in interpersonal and communication skills and are unable to present their ideas in a convincing and persuasive manner. Consequently they fail to prove themselves as suitable candidates for the recruiters since employers prefer professionals who are endowed with technical competence as well as soft skills which are essential in the workplace.

“Yawning Skill Gap”

Thus they become engineering graduates but they fail to become engineers with the required skills. A. Radhakrishnan Nair, in his article “Yawning skill gap cause for concern” (Jan 21, 2015, The Hindu) observes that the problem now is not of unemployment but of employability. He shares the following statistics which speak for themselves: Wheebox's India

Skills Report for 2014 states that only 17 per cent of engineering graduates in the country are employable. Aspiring Minds, in its National Employability Report of Engineering Graduates for 2014, has stated that “less than one out of four engineering graduates are employable in the country” and that “of the 1.2 lakh candidates surveyed across multiple states...73.63% lack English speaking and comprehension skills.” These figures speak volumes of the need to equip our students with training that will make them employable.

Equipping Engineering Students

In this paper the authors have emphasized the need for engineering students to acquire soft skills. Motivated by the objective of equipping the students with the much needed soft skills to make them industry ready, the authors provided them with an exposure to an array of such skills since technical skills alone will not be sufficient to help them to get an appropriate job. Students were enabled to identify Soft skills which “refer to a cluster of personal qualities, habits, attitudes and social graces that make someone a good employee and compatible to work with. Companies value soft skills because research suggests and experience shows that they can be just as important an indicator of job performance as hard skills.”

Soft Skills and People Skills

Soft skills include people skills. They are broadly applicable across industries. Companies value workers with the capacity to speak and listen well, understand others' points of view and feelings, respond appropriately and ensure that people work well together in teams. “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” (Usha Menon and C. Alamelu). It is in this context that the authors took time to throw light on providing awareness about Soft skills, their importance, how they differ from hard skills, business/employment communication, or English @ work through lectures, skits, group discussions, mock interviews and power point presentations.

Comprehension Test for Engineering Students

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Using the above methods to enlighten the students on various soft skills, their level of comprehension was tested by using various tools like oral question and answers, filling a questionnaire with true or false statements, fill in the blanks and match the following. Through these tests the students could assess their strengths and areas for improvement and work towards meeting the industry requirements.

“Wisdom is knowing what to do next, skill is knowing how to do it, and virtue is doing it.” David Starr Jordan.

Improving Their Own Versions!

Engineers need to strive to become higher versions of themselves by enhancing self-awareness and improving their soft skills which in turn help their hard skills to shine. Mastering soft skills requires hard work, but the rewards are tremendous. As Peggy Klaus observes, “Whether you are an extroverted marketing person or an introverted engineer, mastering the soft skills will serve you well.”

Proper Grooming and Etiquette to Improve the Image of Organizations

An organization’s image is reflected through the image presented by employees in that company. Therefore, an awareness of proper grooming and etiquette will increase one’s poise and confidence and leave a positive impression in formal, professional and social situations. A corporate professional should look presentable and be able to communicate and behave in a professional manner. One must learn to differentiate between formal versus informal and workplace versus social situations. Professionalism includes basic business etiquette – the way one looks, dresses, speaks, and behaves in a work setting.

Engineers Without Borders!

Today’s engineers are engineers without borders. The world has shrunk to a global village. Personal attributes enable one to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people. Engineers should be aware of the cultural context in which they work. Business meetings and communication would fail to serve the purpose if an engineer is not aware of the subtleties of cultural differences.

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Business-like Conduct

Conducting oneself in a business-like way in every aspect related to work and projecting a confident and positive image are the true prerequisites of professionalism. Thus from the very beginning an engineer should strive to embrace corporate grooming and social graces. Good manners and politeness are two very important etiquette essentials.

Effective Communication

Soft Skills include effective communications. An engineer may have a brilliant idea but he/she should be able to articulate it with clarity and conviction. He/she must learn to use language as a tool for effective business; this includes conversation skills, e-mail etiquette and telephone etiquette. Most successful people possess excellent leadership and communication skills, ability to work in a team, inspire action and deliver results – all of which are soft skills.

Time and Stress Management

Ability to manage time and stress are two very important aspects of soft skills. As William Shakespeare says *Make use of time, let not advantage slip*. Managing time effectively and being able to handle stress in a productive manner is essential for work-life balance. Time management can be encapsulated in one word: prioritize. As Stephen Covey observes, it is important to put first things first and pay attention to things which are not only important and urgent, but also those which are important but not urgent, for instance, spending quality time with family and friends, taking time to exercise and relax.

The importance of managing time effectively for engineering students was emphasized in various ways. Group Discussions were used to elicit from them, the link between time management and productivity, the importance of punctuality, elimination of distractions, and the necessity of keeping telephone conversations brief. Quotes, stories, poems, skits were used to highlight various aspects of time such as prioritizing, ill effects of procrastinating. For example:

- *“If you want to make good use of your time, you’ve got to know what’s most important and then give it all you’ve got.”* Lee Iacocca
- *“A year from now you may wish you had started today.”* Karen Lamb

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- “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives.” Annie Dillard

Some Additional Exercises

A few other exercises are mentioned below:

- i) Write a paragraph on the following lines in not more than five minutes:

“Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that's the stuff life is made of.”

Benjamin Franklin

- ii) What thoughts come to your mind when you watch athletes on TV, winning races by a fraction of a second? Share your thoughts with your group.
- iii) Recall and present in the class an instance in your life when you had to pay dearly for not realizing the value of time. for e.g. Missing a train, bus or flight by just a few minutes.
- iv) Conduct a group discussion on the consequences of procrastination in the life of a student.
- v) Speak for just a minute on these words of Lord Chesterfield: “Take care of the minutes and the hours will take care of themselves.”

Students were asked to think about practical ways in which they could be more productive by using their time in the best way possible.

What Is Expected?

An engineer is expected to be calm, composed and maintain equanimity in stressful situations. A true professional possesses abilities and attributes to create a peaceful and enjoyable work environment. While the positive side of stress can motivate one to perform one's tasks excellently meeting the deadlines, an excessive workload, uncongenial environment, and being burdened with too many demands may lead to frustration impacting the quality of work.

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An organization's morale and overall productivity may suffer if its employees are under stress at work for an extended length of time.

Harold Jarche in his article 'Soft skills are foundational competencies', while speculating about workplace learning in ten years, states that soft skills, especially collaboration and networking, will become more important than hard skills....The soft skills require time, mentoring, informal learning and other environmental supports. Once one has the soft skills to perform in a networked workplace, one will have foundational competencies.

What Should Engineering Students Do?

Engineering students need to work on their Soft skills since these skills will continue to be in great demand in the years to come. Students therefore, must take time to introspect, read materials on enhancing self awareness, emulate how others handle difficult interpersonal situations, and ask family and friends to provide constructive feedback for further improvement. Mastering soft skills takes persistence. Students need to equip themselves with an array of self management skills for an inspired and purpose driven life. As Tom Hopkins says, "You are your greatest asset. Put your time, effort and money into training, grooming, and encouraging your greatest asset."

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