

Career Success in a Competitive World: Soft Skills – a Need of an Hour

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ABSTRACT

According to a recent report by a global research firm that indicates that the Indian IT industry is targeting multifold growth in exports in the next couple of years. There is an estimated demand of 8, 50,000 IT professionals and 1.4 million IT personnel. Since Indian academic world adds close to 3.5 million graduates and post graduates every year so this does not seem to be a major challenge. However a great number of these young professionals are not satisfactorily equipped to face the greatly competitive and challenging environment of the corporate world. Most of their focus remains limited to working as one man army reproducing what they studied but with little emphasis on application and creativity. This makes it difficult for them to survive in the competitive world. There is a need to cultivate and polish their skills with respect to disciplines for their all round excellence. Soft skills are the remedy. They are very essential irrespective of which profession they are in. Soft skills enhance their employability. Now, professionals have understood that mere a degree or a set of technical skills are not adequate to help them grow. Soft skills have become popular with professionals with the time and an integral part of professional training and understanding. The contemporary global market has become competitive. If one wants to survive or grow, one needs not only traits that form eligibility but an extra edge over others also. Academia should ingrain soft skills into our professionals by catching them young. This will enable them to perform better when they get into the professions. This paper attempts to study the role of soft skills for successful career.

Key words : Soft skills, Employability.

A recent report by a global research firm has indicated that the Indian IT industry is targeting multifold growth in exports in the next couple of years. There is an estimated demand of 8, 50,000 IT professionals and 1.4 million IT personnel. Since Indian academia adds

nearly 3.5 million graduates and post graduates yearly and therefore this does not seem to be a major challenge. But a huge number of these young professionals are not adequately equipped to face the highly competitive and challenging environment of the

corporate world. Employers criticize university output as having their heads full of theories, concepts and principles but graduates are often ill-equipped to deal with real life situations. Companies are going global, and often, technical experts are called upon to do a variety of non-technical tasks requiring soft skills. Most of their focus remains limited to working as one man army vomiting out what they studied without emphasis on application and creativity. This makes them lesser competent in this ever changing global market. It makes difficult for them to survive in the world. Therefore there is a need to cultivate and polish their skills with respect to disciplines for their excellence in respective disciplines.

Soft skills are complement to hard skills and make one's efforts much more effective.

TO define, "Soft skills" encompass a range of interpersonal skills such as courtesy, respect for others, work ethic, teamwork, self-discipline and self-confidence, conformity to norms, language proficiency, and behaviour and communication skills (Career directions, 2003; Career Opportunities News, 2002).

These skills comprise a cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism which individuals attain as they grow and mature. Other soft skills are active listening, negotiating, conflict resolution, problem solving, reflection, critical thinking, ethics, and leadership skills. "When you do something repeatedly—trying to perform up to an explicit standard— your mind gets the 'feel' of doing it proficiently. The 'feel' of doing is the skill." (Szul, L. F. 2002).

Soft skills are also referred to as

- Employability skills
- Key skills
- Core skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Transferable skills

Soft skills are the employability skills that speak to a worker's interpersonal skills and character. As important as hard or technical skills are, the corporate world also puts tremendous emphasis on soft skills. At the same time, it seeks and recruits people with exceptional soft skills from among technically skilled people.

The first one is used to perform the

required verification duties at work and the second one helps in planning an approach to solve the impending issues or problems. The bottom line is that a good professional will have a blend of both technical and soft skills. Having a proper balance of hard and soft skills is one way to level the playing field when competing against hundreds of other applicants in a tight job market. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirement of a job. Life skills mean those essential skills developed through a higher order thinking, that enable a person to perform effectively in his or her life, and thus become a socially acceptable and successful person. Hard skills tend to be specific to a certain type of task or activity, soft skills are broadly applicable. It is often said that hard skills will get the person an interview but he/she needs soft skills to get the job.

Soft skills play a vital role for professional success; they help one to excel in the workplace and their importance cannot be denied in this age of information and knowledge. Good soft skills in the highly competitive corporate world will enable us to stand

out in a environment of routine job hunters with run of the mill skills and talent. Soft skills are acquired and experienced and cannot be developed by just reading textbooks. It will equip us to excel in our professional life and in our personal life. It is a continuous learning process. Soft skills are now recognized as key to making businesses more profitable and better places to work. Increasingly, companies aren't just assessing their current staff and future recruits on their business skills. They are now assessing them on a whole host of soft skill competencies around how well they relate and communicate to others.

Measuring these soft skills is no easy thing. Soft skills have a lot to do with career opportunities. Soft skills refer to abilities that make people better employees and open doors to opportunities, that aren't directly related to the subject matter for their jobs. In simpler language, soft skills refer to a person's ability to relate to others, to get him or herself organized, to communicate in written, spoken or other forms, to conduct research or gather information about various topics as

assigned and so forth. A person's soft skill is an important part of their individual contribution to the success of an organization. Particularly those organizations dealing with customers face-to-face are generally more successful if they train their staff to use these skills. Soft skills are increasingly sought out by employers in addition to standard qualifications.

Effective communication skills are very important for our professional, personal success regardless in what business we participate. The purpose of communication is to get your message across to others clearly and unambiguously, and the communication becomes successful when both the sender and the receiver understand the same information as a result of the communication.

In the last few decades in India, there has been a mushrooming of demand for well rounded employees- people who are not only technically savvy, but also have the complementary soft skills. This spurt in demand is essentially due to a large increase in corporate employment opportunities. For 'advantage India' to work and for India to be competitive in

the world arena, several educators and employment consultants have suggested that we re-double our efforts in educating our college students and young professionals in the virtues and basics of soft skills. We believe that already giant steps are being taken to achieve a high degree of 'soft skills literacy' through formal and informal channels and we see our book as just a part of these efforts.

Now, the concepts of soft skills and professionalism have percolated down to other spheres as well-beyond the campuses of the corporate world. It is now considered generally a good idea to inculcate a measure of soft skills into anyone's skill-set, as a way of charging him or her with skills for life and as a lesson in civics.

In most businesses today, work almost seamlessly flows across geographies. If you take the example of the manufacturing industry, raw materials may come from India, assembling can take place in Taiwan; the finished goods may be transported to and sold in the US. An employee in Australia may enter his expense report into a central system, this may get processed by a BPO outfit in

India and the payment may be made through an American bank. This cross border workflow has necessitated increased communication and has placed additional demands on soft skills. One may have to interact with many, many people from different cultures. Both the quantity and diversity of interactions have increased substantially. This brings about several additional challenges.

First is the linguistic challenge. An individual should be able to articulate his or her thoughts so as to cross the language barrier. Even between India and the USA where one can argue that English is the common language, the usage and conventions used are different. A second challenge is the cultural challenge. As we said earlier, soft skills transcends communication. The diversity of cultures in different countries has necessitated that people adapt themselves to the cultures of each of these countries. When interacting with people from more than one country, this quick adaptation becomes a serious challenge. A third challenge-perhaps where the effect of technology is highest-is the proliferation of the different media of communication and collaboration.

Communication and collaboration today has to be effective through various means like e-mail, chat, video conference, phone calls as well as face to face meetings.

The first step would be to know the final picture your entire team or organization is aiming for. That will give you important information as to what type of picture it is. You will also assimilate other facts about the picture. You will then use these facts to arrive at a plan of how you will distribute the work among the team members. All of you are working towards a common goal.

Our present day work culture is predicated upon working efficiently in groups and most of us have been indoctrinated into these concepts even before we started our careers. The conventional wisdom is that the group's well being is far more important than your individual well being and that you should surrender your individual identity at the gates of your organization and perform only as a member of your team. Your individual performance will be whitewashed by the larger performance of the group. Never lose an

opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues. It is your responsibility to seek feedback and work on improvement. Once you start being an integral part of the team and start cherishing and living the team goals, your own stature and importance will grow in the organization. You will find that you will start enjoying being in the team and soon you will start appreciating the fact that it takes different types of people to achieve the shared team vision. Diversity awareness is not an easy skill to acquire and polish. Time management is a matter of attitude, reinforced by strict discipline. You have to realize that there is not an unlimited supply of time, even though it may seem like there is always a tomorrow. We all have to realize that we should not let time pass us by, but rather, actively partition our workdays into time slots and allocate them appropriately to different tasks and carry out this plan perfectly. Time is precious and you should treat it exactly like you would treat money or anything that you only have a limited supply of. Do not treat it unwisely and squander it away.

Good positive attitude is a behavioural

skill, which cannot be taught. However it can be developed through continuous training. We spend a good part of our lives at work. We even derive our identities through our jobs. We get all sorts of rewards and recognition through work. And for many of us, this is probably the only path to success available in life. So, it behooves us to be exemplary workers and make a mark at our workplaces. Hard work starts with vision. But, it does not end there. As an old saying goes, the vision must be followed by the venture. It is not enough to stare up the steps-we must step up the stairs.

Body language is the most potent vehicle of communication. It is absolutely essential to hone the skills in harnessing this vehicle. Body language supersedes everything else-your words, slides and even voice. Different elements of body language work in unison-a positive improvement in one constituent usually has ripple positive influence on others. To start with, we may not have all the constituents functioning at the same level of effectiveness, but realizing the positive energy among these constituents, build upon your greatest

strengths to fine tune what may not be so well developed.

Your voice dictates who you are. People judge you by your voice. They come to conclusions about your confidence level. Our voice is a powerful instrument in communication that can make the delivered message more convincing and more appealing for the audience and could display your passion in what you are communicating. There are certain important constituents of a good voice channel. These are Pronunciation and articulation, Emphasis, Pace, Pitch, Volume and Pause.

Soft skills teach one to succeed and to exceed expectations. There are situations that we come across during our day today work life as a design or verification engineer in which one person performs better than the others just on the basis of soft skills –be it winning an argument with someone on the basis of his/her communication or finding multiple task effectively because of superior organizational abilities.

Our reactions in a complex setting vary widely with situations, emotions, time, belief, knowledge and expertise. Therefore, the quality of a job done by an

engineer is directly proportional to his or her psychological maturity and profoundness required, adopted and developed with age and experience. Soft skills get developed and matured in the course of time. Traditional soft skills continues to be relevant and these include adaptability, open mindedness, problem solving, decision making, communication skills, self learning, empathy, team work, knowledge discovery, motivation, attitude and a spirit of enquiry.

The HR practitioners stand by the slogan of ‘Recruit for Attitude, Train for Skill’ during the interview thereby further strengthening that soft skills are employability skills. Everyone already has some form of soft skills. They just need to look at areas at in their personal life where they get on with others, feel confident in the way they interact, can solve problem, are good at encouraging. The best news of all is that soft skills can be developed on an ongoing basis through proper training, insightful reading, observation and of course practice, practice, practice. We should ingrain soft skills into our professionals by catching them young. This will enable

them to hit the road running when they get into the professions. And we should continually reinforce these skills at all levels, till they become a habit for them. This paper attempts to study the role of soft skills for successful career.

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Challenges are what make life interesting; overcoming them is what makes life meaningful.

-Joshua J. Marine