

**SIGNIFICANCE OF SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE**
**Dr. Swati G Shukla**
*Assistant Professor, Business Communication, Jaipuria Institute of Management, Lucknow*
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**Corresponding author.**

E-mail : swati.shukla@jaipuria.ac.in

**ABSTRACT**

Gone are the days when an academic degree alone could guarantee a good job. In the present times, job readiness has come to be associated with a blend of soft skills and hard skills in a fresh recruit. It is said that hard skills can get you an interview but it is your soft skills that will help you stay and grow in an organization. For someone aspiring for a career in corporate, an MBA or PGDM degree is considered essential as it grounds a student in major concepts, practices and functions of Business Management. While the degree validates that a holder is equipped with the required hard skills, it provides no guarantee that those hard skills are complemented with the required soft skills. Consequently, there is a need to examine the perception of job readiness Business Graduates carry at the end of their management program and find if it matches with the expectations of the employer. Most often a huge gap is found between the two and prime reason is lack of understanding of significance of soft skills among Business Graduates. The concern over lack of soft skills in Indian Graduates has often been expressed in various magazines, newspaper articles and surveys but no serious study has explored the question of responsibility in Indian context. The present paper helps in understanding what are soft skills and how are they different from hard skills, addresses the question of responsibility in Indian context by exploring causes of lack of soft skills in Business Graduates and finally suggests ways in which management education can not only enhance the employability factor of its Business Graduates but also ensure their success upon entry into the work place.

**Introduction**

Gone are the days when an academic degree alone could alone guarantee a good job. In the present times, job readiness has come to be associated with a blend of soft skills and hard skills in a fresh recruit. It is said that hard skills can get you an interview but it is your soft skills that will help you stay and grow in an organization. For someone aspiring for a career in corporate, an MBA or PGDM degree is considered essential as it grounds a student in major concepts, practices and functions of Business Management. While the degree validates that a holder is equipped with the required hard skills, it provides no guarantee that those hard skills are complemented with the required soft skills.

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reality is, if you ask a fresh business graduate about his job readiness, he would answer in the affirmative but that perception gets shattered for some by failing to crack an interview, and for others, on failing to live up to the expectations of their employers upon entry into the workplace. Most employers point lack of soft skills as the prime reason. The concern over lack of soft skills in Indian Graduates has often been expressed in various magazines, newspaper articles and surveys but no serious study has explored the question of responsibility in Indian context. The present paper helps in understanding what are soft skills and how are they different from hard skills, addresses the question of responsibility in Indian context by exploring causes of lack of soft skills in Business Graduates and finally suggests ways in which management education can not only enhance the employability factor of its Business Graduates but also ensure their success upon entry into the work place.

### Literature Review

It is said that change is the only constant. The employability scenario that existed more than a decade ago has undergone a drastic change. In the past when one's hard skills alone could have guaranteed a job soon after graduation, in the present times, such an expectation would be viewed as unrealistic and impractical. Literature Review shows change in the definition of skilled workforce. Only individuals that possess a fine blend of hard skills and soft skills qualify as skilled workforce in the present times. Globalization, rapid advancements in technology and rise in service sector are some of the prominent factors to have affected this shift.

The changes in the work environment and the resultant change in the expectations of the employer were observed much earlier in the West than in India. For instance, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, former US Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich, stressed upon the importance of a skilled workforce. A look back at the literature during those years indicates a gradual transition from a world with national boundaries to a global world where exchange of money, goods, and services knew no borders and new employee skill sets needed to evolve as per the demands of a global workforce (Reich, 1987 and 1992). It was claimed that a skilled labor force alone would lead to success in information-driven, global and competitive economy (Reich, 1987).

The most recent employability surveys of the West also underscore the importance of soft skills for increasing the employability factor of the fresh graduates. According to the Corporate Recruiters Survey 2017 of the Graduate Management Admission Council, a non-profit organization of 220 leading Business Schools across the world, employers rank skills under communication and teamwork domain out of the listed five domains as most important in hiring business graduates. The skills under communication domain include: Oral communication, Listening Skills, written communication and presentation skills. Skills under team work domain include: adaptability, valuing other's opinions, ability to follow a leader and cross-cultural sensitivity. In UK, The Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) 2016 Annual Survey Report shows nine key skills which AGR employers have identified as important for employability/on-the-job performance. These are Managing Up, Dealing with Conflict, Negotiating/

Influencing, Commercial Awareness, Business Communication, Self-Awareness, Problem Solving, Interpersonal skills, Teamwork

Coming to the Indian context, the India Skills Report 2017 prepared in collaboration with The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), LinkedIn, Association of Indian Universities (AIU), United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) mentions nine skills that employers look for in a new recruit. These include Integrity and Values, Communication, Learning Agility, Cultural Fitment, Result Orientation, Adaptability, Interpersonal Skills, Domain Expertise and Numerical and Logical Ability. Interestingly, out of a cluster of these nine skills, barring the last two skills, all other seven skills are soft skills.

The report provides an insight into the skill landscape of India which is quite alarming. It reports that of all the students entering the job market across India barely 2/5th of them would fulfill the employment criteria set by the employers. Keeping in mind, the rising economy with new jobs emerging in E-commerce, Energy, Retail, Telecom, Hospitality and Financial Industry, there aren't enough skilled workforce available. As a result, Government of India has given national priority to the skill development project. But it also increases the responsibility of the academic institutions to direct their efforts towards bridging this gap in employability skills.

A recent survey conducted by Economic Times in 2016 on 750 respondents claims that 60% employers feel that soft skills are very significant in hiring employees, but 70% employers out of the above 60% affirm that it is very difficult to find employees with the required soft skills.

An article published in India Today, reported the results of a survey of 303 employers across the country conducted by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in 2010 which found that a majority of graduates lacked adequate "soft skills" to be employed in the industry. According to the survey, only about one-third employers were satisfied with the communication ability of their employees and about 26 per cent with their employees' writing ability.

There are other studies that point out a recent increase in service jobs and the resultant rise in demand of employability skills like problem solving, decision making, communication, flexibility, self-confidence,

social skills, team skills, professionalism, and self-management (Carnevale, 1991; Peddle, 2000; Robinson, 2000; Doria et al., 2003; Apparaju, 2016; Lim et al., 2016; Sake, 2016).

In addition to the above surveys, there are also studies that have reported employer's lament at the lack of soft skills like well-developed communication skills, problem-solving skills, motivation, persuasion, and critical thinking skills among new hires at the turn of the 21st century. (Peddle, 2000; Doria et al., 2003; Minton-Eversole, 2012; and Apparaju, 2016).

#### Methodology

The research paper is based on secondary data and does not use any kind of primary data. Secondary data was collected using both, the paper based sources including books, journals, abstracts, research reports, conference papers, newspapers and magazines. Also, various electronic sources such as internet and online databases were accessed by the researcher for the purpose of writing this paper.

#### Difference between Hard Skills and Soft Skills

Hard Skills, also known as technical skills or domain specific skills refer to the specific teachable skills that can be quantified, measured and learnt and developed easily. Soft skills, also known as people's skills or interpersonal skills refer to intangible, behavioral qualities or personality traits that are difficult to teach or learn. They have gained a greater significance in the present times as lack of soft skills can lead to missed opportunities or result in derailed careers. Peggy Klaus, in the book, *The Hard Truth About Soft Skills – Workplace Lessons Smart People Wish They'd Learned Sooner*, writes that "soft skills get very little respect, but can make or break your career."

As a result, hard skills are defined as a science (Belzer, 2004) which comprises processes, tools and techniques applied to projects whereas soft skills are often described as an art (Conger, 1998; Belzer, 2004; and Ravindranath, 2016) that requires high levels of emotional/social intelligence, language ability, and training in the art of persuasion (Cialdini, 2012). Soft skills are now considered essential in "the process of managing and working with people, guaranteeing customer satisfaction with the purpose of retaining them, [and] forming a favorable atmosphere to deliver high quality products within budget, on time, consequently

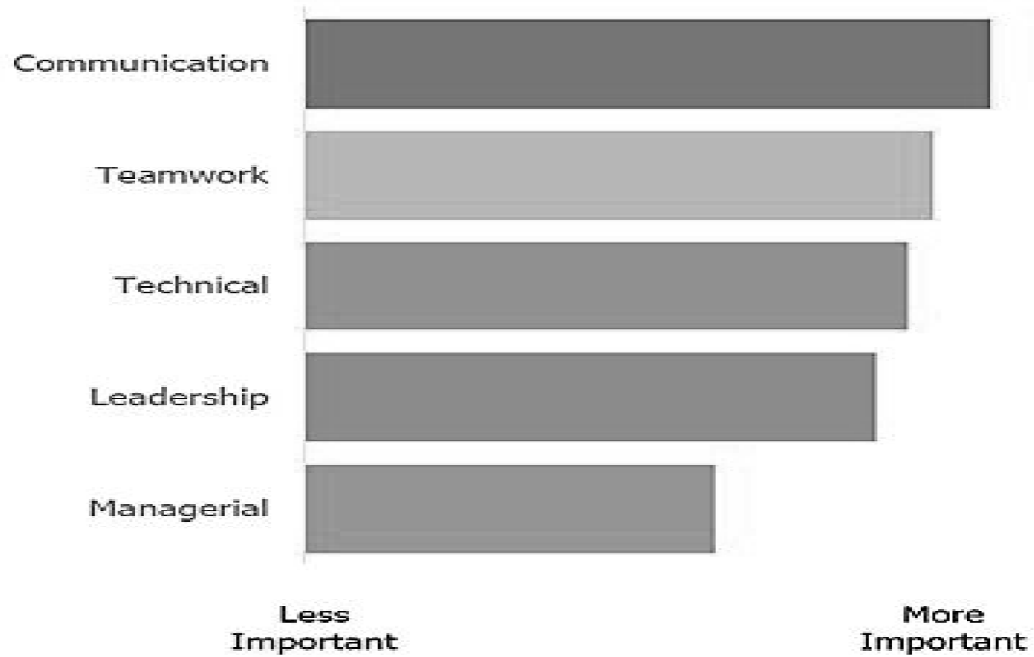
going beyond the expectations of the stakeholders" (Ravindranath, 2016, p. 16). An ideal employee would be one who possesses both hard skills and soft skills.

#### Significance of Soft Skills in Management Education

The management of all sectors in the present time requires constant interaction between the various stakeholders---employer and employee, company and client, customer and consumer, employee and peers etc. and soft skills are at the center of all human interactions. Stephannie Vozza in her article in daily newsletter, *Hit the Ground Running* quotes Susan Vitale, Chief Marketing Officer for HR software provider iCIMS, "Hard skills are what you do, and soft skills are how you do it". For example, if one has to sell a product to a customer who has several options available for one category of product, in such a scenario of fierce competition, knowledge of principles of management alone may not prove handy as would commercial awareness of that sector and awareness of self that I possess the art of persuasion would do, all three of which are soft skills. Negotiation again is a soft skill that comes into play while cracking profitable deals and is a soft skill that comes through practice and experience. Interestingly, successful negotiation or persuasion, both require good communication and active listening skills.

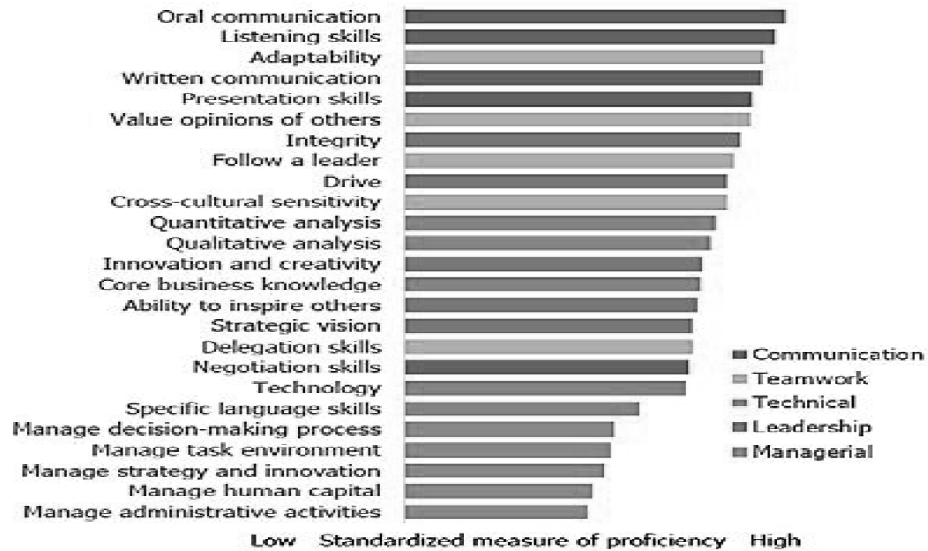
Also another truth of the present times is that no one can remain untouched with the effects of rapid advancements in the field of technology. In a dynamic and competitive world that we live in, one cannot survive if our hard skills are not complemented with soft skills. The most important soft skills that would help employee to stay and excel in an organization now-a-days would be good communication skills, adaptability/flexibility, ability to handle stress, effective time management. Also, for sustainability organization in the present times need constant innovation that requires employees with creative and critical thinking skills. Each day brings a new situation so problem solving skill is equally important to effectively resolve day to day issues and we all know, best solutions to problems are discovered by working in teams. Further, the significance of soft skills is established through various surveys in which either the major focus is on soft skills or they occupy the top most positions:

### Relative Importance of Major Skills Sets Employers Require for Mid-Level Jobs

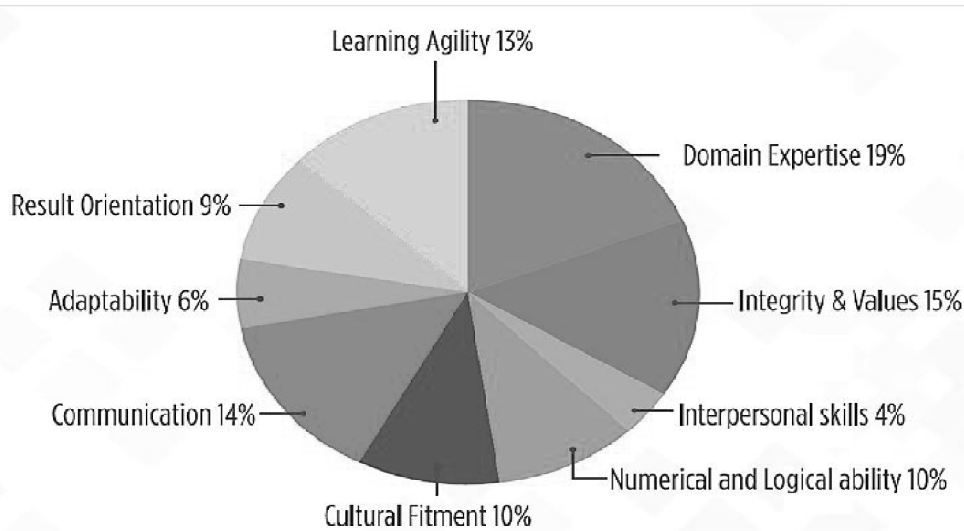


*2017 GMAC Corporate Recruiters Survey*

**Skills Companies Seek in Graduate Business School Hires, Based on a Standardized Analysis of Skill Proficiency**



GMAC Corporate Recruiters Survey, 2017



India Skills Report 2017

### Causes behind Lack of Employability Skills in Fresh Business Graduates

The fresh business graduates are from the Millennial generation that have mastered advanced technology skills more than any other generation but unfortunately lack soft skills needed to compete for high level positions in the corporate. They end up either being jobless or getting a low-wage job that leads to further dissatisfaction and frustration as it does not match with their expectations of the outcome of their Management degree.

Causes can be traced back to different levels. For instance, one can begin from parenting in the very first place. When parents out of their blind love for their child keep instilling in him or her that he/she is the best irrespective of what might be the reality. The pampering of parents does more damage than good---it incapacitates the child to be able to reconcile with a more realistic assessment of his/her capabilities in college or even as late as upon entry into the workplace. This also constitutes as one of the reasons behind gap in student's perception about his job readiness and employer's assessment.

Another reason that contributes to lack of employability skills is students is complete lack of awareness of the significance of soft skills and their prime focus on core subjects that help in the development of hard skills.

Moreover, the problem gets complicated further when industries and technology change at a rapid pace but the curriculum or pedagogical focus or strategy does not get upgraded accordingly. This is very important as Apparaju rightly posits "a vast disconnect emerges when the [business communication] course either fails to incorporate the necessary skills or when it fails to address the context of the workplace" (2016, p. 26). For instance, an outdated curriculum and pedagogy focusing more on content knowledge rather than providing holistic education. A holistic education aims at equipping students with both hard skills and soft skills.

Finally, one of the reasons could also exist at the level of teacher when teachers are guilty of creating lenient environment by allowing students to turn in late assignments or projects. Such a practice totally hampers the possibility of building responsibility, self-motivation, strong work ethic or punctuality in graduates. On the contrary, it encourages casual attitude among students who fail to recognize the importance of acquiring these critical soft skills until they enter the workforce, a workforce that provides minimal to no training.

### Ways to Bridge the Gap in Soft Skills

In the context of Management education, all Indian B-Schools through careful planning can provide both in classroom and outside classroom learning opportunities for developing these soft skills. Business communication courses can serve the purpose of bridging this gap the best by consciously incorporating development of soft skills as one of the key learning outcomes in their curriculum achievable through clear pedagogical strategies for in classroom learning and creating meaningful opportunities for learning outside the classroom.

In the classroom, the faculty can promote collaborative learning by assigning group tasks or projects that focus on both individual and collaborative learning. Also, planning activities like role plays, simulations, case analysis etc. would help enhance student's critical and creative thinking and problem solving skills. For positive motivation, faculty can reward students for their good performance.

Under learning outside the classroom, the students can be given field projects or provided internship opportunities for proper industrial exposure and experiential learning in real time setting.

### Conclusion

Significance of soft skills needs to be instilled in students pursuing management education through conscious integration of soft skills into the business communication curriculum by mapping them as desired course learning outcomes of various classroom activities and assessment criteria as students primarily focus on development of hard skills and often undermine the significance of soft skills until they enter the workforce. Sadly, by then it is too late. At workplace, employers assign tasks and set targets to be achieved leaving the most challenging part of 'how' to be deciphered by the employee himself or herself. Significantly, it is the 'how' to deliver that holds the key to success and where the soft skills of the employees undergo real test and not 'what' to deliver. The employees that prove themselves to be an asset for an organization are the performers by virtue of possessing great soft skills like communication skills, problem solving, teamwork ability, adaptability, time management and critical and creative thinking skills through which they report great outcomes and not the ones who report problems. This reality check is to be given to students from time to time and they are to be trained to work in a result-oriented manner by learning to own the responsibility of the task assigned to them

and delivering it in time. For instance, ensuring strict adherence to submission deadlines of assignments and projects.

In addition, the significance of soft skills can be regularly reinforced through clear pedagogical strategies that promote collaborative learning and help in the development of problem solving and critical and creative thinking skills through simulations, role plays, case analysis, field projects etc. This way management education can prepare students that have the perfect combination of hard skills or domain expertise as well as soft skills or the desirable behavioral or personality traits as expected by the employers today. It would lead to a win-win situation both for the students as well as the employers. Students will not only be able to get jobs but also stay and grow in their respective organizations and the organizations would equally benefit from a balanced workforce with the right mix of hard and soft skills.

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