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EXECUTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF TOP TEN SOFT SKILLS AT WORK: DEVELOPING THESE THROUGH SAIF

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THESE THROUGH SAIF**

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Hard skills are technical competencies and domain knowledge. Soft skills are a combination of people skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, and emotional intelligence amongst others. Soft skills are vital at the workplace today. These skills are distinctive because they stress on action. They have become crucial for every person in the present context. This paper deals with the significance of soft skills for getting a job and for sustenance and development at the workplace. Flexible, excited people with a blend of hard and soft skills are sought after by organizations as part of their growth process. This study identifies top 10 soft skills as perceived the most important by business executives: communication skills, teamwork and leadership qualities, positive attitude, integrity and work ethic, responsibility, interpersonal skills, stress and time management, flexibility, professionalism and courtesy. Based on an integrated approach, SAIF has been proposed to develop these soft skills systematically.

Keywords*: soft skills, training, important*

SOFT SKILLS: INTRODUCTION AND IMPORTANCE

According to James & James (2004), "Historically, technical skills, also known as hard skills, were the only skills necessary for career employment; but today's workplace is showing that technical skills are not enough to keep individuals employed when organizations are right-sizing and cutting positions." Perreault (2004) defined soft skills by stating that these are personal qualities, traits, or the level of commitment of a person that set one apart from other individuals who may have similar skills and experience. James and James (2004) observed that soft skills are a new way to describe a set of abilities or talents that an individual can bring to the workplace. Soft skills describe certain career characteristics that individuals may acquire such as team skills, communication skills, leadership skills, customer service skills, and problem solving skills.

According to the National Business Education Association (NBEA), skills emphasized in the twentieth century must be revisited. In order to be successful, students entering the twenty-first century workforce must acquire non-technical soft skills along with technical competence (PCBEE, 2000). A complex labor market has been generated due to the multifaceted twenty-first century business world; therefore, organizations are seeking versatile individuals, who possess professional skills, even for entry-level jobs (Employers Value Communication and Interpersonal Abilities, 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sutton (2002) found that soft skills are so important that employers identify them as "the number one differentiator" for job applicants in all types of industries (p.40). He believed that soft skills are extremely important in all types of occupations. Glenn (2008) appended that hiring individuals who possess soft skills perform an active role in high-performing organizations to preserve competition. Wilhelm (2004) accepted that employers rate soft skills highest in importance for entry-level success in the workplace. Christopher (2006) concluded that employers want graduates with powerful interpersonal skills. Moreover, Nealy (2005) rightly maintained that the current and future business leaders are emphasizing the development of soft skills because they have realized that soft skills are critical for being industrious in today's workplace. A study by Klaus (2010) found that 75% of long-term job success depends on people skills, while only 25% is dependent on technical knowledge.

A survey conducted by Harvard University proved that 80% achievements in career are determined by soft skills and only 20% by hard skills. In the book, *Lesson from the Top,* the authors – Neff and Citrin talk about ten top success tips, out of which eight are concerned with soft skills and only two dwell on hard skills.

Studies by Stanford Research Institute and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation among Fortune 500 CEOs established that 75% of long term job success resulted from people skills and only 25% from technical skills. This can be observed at other levels as well. S, Deepa & Seth (2013) stated, "For effective performance in the workplace, companies need their employees to have not only domain knowledge, technical and analytical skills, but also the skills to deal with the external world of clients, customers, vendors, the government and public; and to work in a collaborative manner with their colleagues."

Literature claims that soft skills proficiency is very significant from employers' perspective. Nevertheless, many employees in business are reported to be wanting in soft skills. This brings forth the idea of carrying in-depth research in the area of soft skills so that business education incorporates these in their curriculum with an objective of producing an efficient and productive workforce.

Ganzel (2001) confirmed that the paradigm shift in the twenty-first century workforce has forced employees to be well armed with soft skills. This emphasizes the belief of Evenson (1999) training students in soft skills could make a difference in obtaining and retaining the jobs for which they have been prepared. Wellington (2005) propounded that although technical skills are a part of many excellent educational curricula, soft skills need further emphasis in the university curricula so that students learn the importance of soft skills early in their academic programs before they embark on a business career.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of conducting this research was to understand how the present-day executives perceive soft skills and their importance, and develop a model for the development of these skills. The executives shared the top ten soft skills required at the workplace and their perception about the importance of soft skills at various stages of their career. This information may be utilized by educators to enhance the soft skills of students entering the workforce and effectively include employability skills in their courses. In addition, these inputs may be used as pointers for self-development at soft skills.

METHOD

Participants

The respondents are 101 executives pursuing the Executive Program in Management from the satellite campus of Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode, Kerala at Kochi (see Tables 1 and 2 for demographics of the executives).

Procedure

In the current study, the questionnaire method was chosen to know the views of the executives involved in interviewing and recruiting people and also their perceptions about the expectations from new recruits.

The questionnaire comprised questions based on the perceived importance of soft skills at the workplace. The respondents were also instructed to list the 10 most important soft skills they felt are of utmost importance at their workplace. A list of 259 soft skills (with repetition) was created. On coding the soft skills with like terms and ideas, 21 soft skills resulted. The ten soft skills that most of the executives listed were then incorporated in a questionnaire to be rated by importance. A few examples of the "like" terms that were grouped as one of the ten most referred to soft skills are listed (see Table 3).

After identifying the top ten soft skills, a 5-point Likert-type scale was created to measure the strength of importance of each skill. The executives were expected to rate the level of importance of each of the ten soft skills. The range of very important (1), important (2), moderately important(3),of little importance(4), and unimportant(5) was used. The data was then analyzed and the results were compared to the former beliefs and premise. The results further were used as the basis to conceive the SAIF for the development of soft skills.

RESULTS

The findings of the first questionnaire were generally on expected lines where 90 percent respondents agreed that soft skills are indeed very important to succeed at the work place (see

Figure1).On their view about the quality of new workforce today, 53 percent said that the new workforce does not have the necessary soft skills to thrive at the workplace (see Figure 2). And an overwhelming majority, that is 89 percent respondents, accepted that there were gaps between what the industry needs and the youth produced by the education system today (see Figure 3).Furthermore, 88 percent were of the firm opinion that adding soft skills in college curricula will make the workforce better (see Figure 4).

In response to the second survey instrument, the executives indicated that communication skills, and teamwork and leadership qualities and positive attitude were the top three soft skills needed by employees in today's workplace. Almost all the executives indicated that these three skills were very important or important. The details involving the perceptions of the business executives can be seen in Table 4.The mean score and standard deviation of each of the soft skills related to its perceived level of importance is shown in Table 5.

SAIF Model: An Integrated Approach for Developing Soft Skills

Research clearly indicates that soft skills can certainly be imbibed, and studies have recognized a number of top practices for teaching them (Bush, 2012).A four-dimensional model is proposed to an integrated approach to develop soft skills in the new workforce. It has been termed as the SAIF Model (see Figure 5).

Self (S)

Altering personal characteristics requires consistent practice and therefore self-training occupies the place of utmost importance in the development of soft skills. Self training plays an important role in developing soft skills. A keen sense of observation and awareness can equip one better in soft skills. One needs to identify the areas where one needs to be polished and accordingly take steps towards improvement thereof. Another way of acquiring soft skills is usually based on books. Electronic Learning (e-learning) is in vogue from the last decade. In the article "Yes, web based training can teach soft skills," Horton (2007) emphasizes the practicality of this approach. Conscious socializing with an aim to augment soft skills is yet another way of self training. It enhances a plethora of soft skills e.g. communication skills (verbal and non verbal), etiquette, self- esteem, confidence, listening. A keen observation of the behavior of people around creates an impression on the subconscious mind. These may be family, friends, relatives etc. An initiative to solve small, routine problems inculcates not only problem-solving skills but also negotiation skills, ethical behavior, and positive attitude.

Academia (A)

As reported by Magazine (2003), "Technical skills are taught so that graduates can meet the job

expectations and knowhow." Evenson (1999) observed that hard skills are easily justified and quantified, but equipping students with soft skills could enable them to find and maintain the job as per their qualification. McGee (2007) rightly pointed out that integration of soft skills with technical skills is critical. Studies (Cafasso, 1996; McGee, 2007) observe that information technology professionals can enhance their job security by assimilating the required soft skills crucial for their job with their technical competence. Onisk (2011) opined, "The results can be easily quantified in information technology as returns are often immediate and the alternative costs would not be acceptable because the inherent value of these soft skills programs is intuitive at every level of the organization."

Evenson (1999) stated, "Very often, educators are already trying to cover more content than reasonably possible in the classroom, so asking for a unit on soft skills can be burdensome to those teachers who are already dealing with a tight curriculum schedule." A balance needs to be maintained by schools to prepare students for both high-tech jobs and office jobs (Zehr, 1998).

Mitchell et al (2010) pointed out that faculty development for business professors should be planned to facilitate the assimilation of interpersonal skills into the business syllabus. Boyce, According to Mitchell et al (2010), "When designing business curricula, soft skills that ranked low should still be emphasized because there could be a lack of value placed on the skill, or a lack of understanding of how to integrate the soft skill into the business curriculum."

An integrated approach from the self, academia and industry is required to create awareness about soft skills among the youth. These stakeholders need to join hands to promote an improved and well-equipped workforce. An in-depth research of the student needs can provide the academic guidelines to prepare flexible curricula with flexible learning styles. Teaching in teams, where the faculty and industry experts come together to give the students the true flavor of concepts by assimilating theory from faculty and its application in real world from industry experts. This facilitates the students to relate effectively concept with practice. Also, an exposure to the corporate world enables the learners to customize their learning to the industry expectations.

Active learning is the need of the hour. Role plays, case studies, debates, situation handling, group discussions, movie clippings and drama play an effective role in getting across the message successfully. The merit of active learning is that students are not restricted to only listening to the faculty. They learn by doing and are forced to do a lot of critical thinking because of competition. Their energy level rises and formation of random teams helps in cohesiveness across the class. Academia should try to promote talents, develop their strong bonds with the alumni, and conduct training programmes and workshops in order to make the students better employable. More interaction among students from cross disciplinary courses may encourage students to work together with their uniqueness to solve anintricate problem that requires diverse education backgrounds.

Industry (I)

The industry, on the other hand, also has a crucial role to play. They should share with academia, their expectations from the new workforce so that awareness may be accordingly created among the students. They should emphasize on the finer skills during the induction programs. They also need to identify and train their employees as per the requirements. There is a need to understand that the cost incurred on providing soft skills training is, in fact, a long-term investment, which promises a high yield and accordingly sufficient budget allocation is required.

The corporate setting is an ideal place which coerces managers with basic employability skills to get trained by gaining hands-on soft skills. However, the rationale behind such training is to improve behaviors, not attitudes. In the words of Hughey and Mussnug (1997), "keeping the training objectives focused on skills and competencies, leads to attitudinal changes."

The entry-level employees often feel insecure and need to be trained on how their language and behavior influence others and identify their stress triggers and strongest motivators. According to Jain and Syed (2013), "Managers also need to be trained on the old-fashioned and under-used skills of listening to employees, colleagues, customers; questioning and enquiring on doubts and developments and finally on observation skills."

Family (F)

Like so many other lessons our kids learn, the best place to start is at home. Families play a key role in helping their children learn expected behaviors, understand the unspoken rules of the workplace, and deal with personality conflicts. As observed in an article by The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (2011), parents understand their child's strengths and can build upon those assets in the process of developing soft skills. Parents need to ensure that their children understand their career interest, and try career exploration during the school years. By discussing the different types of communication one might with different people such as with friends, in the classroom, with professionals, and with family, they implicitly make their child understand what might be all right and projected in one setting may not be suitable in another. Parents should model proper posture communicating confidence, demonstrate good listening skills by paying attention to the speaker, paraphrasing what has been said and asking questions for better comprehension. Nonverbal behaviour like eye contact and body language should be exemplified for the children to follow.

As rightly pointed out by Clark-Jones (2014), children need to be encouraged to indulge in sport and develop communication skills, cooperation, following rules, decision making, and self-discipline in the process. Parents should model personal hygiene and dress to give their children a feel of professional grooming. When children are provided with chances to explore different places and things it opens up creative thinking and problem solving.

Parents need to be flexible and open-minded when their wards select their course of study. The child's natural drift and interest in subjects need to be motivated and appreciated. This leads to quick and everlasting learning. Parents should sensitize their children to seek information about the industry expectations to enhance their chances of employability and comprehend the tactics of sustainability.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although technical expertise is expected while recruiting, it is worthwhile to note that the softer nuances of the personality are also scrutinized by recruiters before and during the interview process. This study has also shown that recruiters, even though prefer people with experience, they gauge, at the same time, for certain other qualities in the applicants. This is so because if the technical skills are not adorned with the motivation to keep learning new ones, they become obsolete. As a result, recruiters seek flexible and passionate people to join their team in the process of development. According to Beck and Yaeger, "the ability to effectively communicate with the managers, superiors, bosses, coworkers play a definite role in workplace success."

The results in the study indicate that hiring managers do think that the new workforce should be better ready with soft skills along with hard skills. On the basis of these results, the researcher has tried to facilitate the educators in devising the soft skills course curriculum to overcome the gap that exists between the existing one and the industry outlook.

This study highlights executive perceptions of the ten top soft skills required for success at the workplace today: communication skills, teamwork and leadership qualities, positive attitude, integrity and work ethic, responsibility, interpersonal skills, stress and time management, flexibility, professionalism and courtesy, and conflict management. Although all of the soft skills appear very important, not all are recognized by business executives to be equally important. This study found that communication skills, teamwork and leadership qualities, and positive attitude are the most important soft skills for success.

SAIF for soft skills development indicates that soft skills cannot be enhanced overnight. These need comprehensive efforts on the part of an individual, academia, industry and family over a period of time. Soft skills rooted in this manner stay forever and pave the way to success on every front – personal, professional, social.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study probed into the minds of executives across Indian companies and sought the importance of soft skills in their system right from the recruitment process to performing well after joining. The respondents belonged to various industries like: manufacturing, software, consulting, retail, construction, legal services, and healthcare among others. These companies have a more urgent need for employees having better soft skills. This study can further be taken

to the realm of other sectors like: banking, hospitality, aviation, and others to further look into the differences these skills will make to their bottom lines. A further detailed analysis can be done with regard to the demographic details of the respondents like: gender, position/designation, experience etc. Further research is needed to determine if other soft skills are deemed as important as the soft skills found in this study. There may be variations in approaches and methodologies from one country to another. A probe into the cross cultural factors regarding the perceptions about the top ten soft skills may provide valuable insights. Moreover, SAIF can be improvised with the help of academia, industry experts and psychologists.

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Table 1: Demographic description of executives

Gender		Age group (years)				Working level			Work experience (years)			
Female	Male	21-30	31-40	41-50	> 50	Junior	Middle	Senior	< 1	1-5	5-10	>10
13%	87%	59%	30%	9%	2%	26%	51%	23%	3%	45%	23%	29%

Table 2: Industry-wide distribution of the respondents

Manufacturing	Software	Consulting	Retail	Construction	Legal services	Healthcare	Others
15%	35%	5%	3%	3%	2%	5%	32%

Table 3.Ten soft skills categorized from executive listings

Soft Skills	Executive Listings
Communication Skills	Public speaking, listening, business writing, articulate, body language, email etiquette, presentation skills, language skills,
Teamwork & Leadership Qualities	Cooperative, supportive, helpful, coordination, working well with people
Positive Attitude	Determination, excited, motivated, confident, high morale, no negativity
Integrity & Work Ethic	Genuine, commitment, honest, sincere, hardworking, following rules
Responsibility	Dependable, reliable, accountable, self-disciplined
Interpersonal Skills	Patience, friendly, empathetic, people skills, warm, gels well
Stress & Time Management	Punctual, work-life balance, relaxed, meeting deadlines, never late
Flexibility	Adaptability, agility, quick learner, willing to change, open to ideas and views
Professionalism & Courtesy	Polite, mannerisms, well groomed, image projection, workplace & social etiquette, respect, humility, well behaved

Table 4.Perceived Level of Importance of Each Soft Skill in Today's Workplace (*N*=101)

Soft Skill	Very Important		Important		Moderately Important		Of Little Importance		Unimportant	
	1		**2**		**3**		**4**		**5**	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Communication Skills	68	67.3	32	31.7	1	0.9				
Teamwork & Leadership Qualities	65	64.3	31	30.7	5	4.9				
Positive Attitude	62	61.3	35	34.7	4	3.9				
Integrity & Work Ethic	52	51.4	37	36.7	9	8.9	1	0.9	2	1.9
Responsibility	49	48.5	48	47.5	4	3.9				
Interpersonal Skills	40	39.6	47	46.5	13	12.8	1	0.9		
Stress & Time Management	31	30.7	58	57.4	10	9.9	2	1.9		
Flexibility	25	24.8	57	56.4	18	17.8	1	0.9		
Professionalism & Courtesy	25	24.8	59	58.4	13	12.8	4	3.9		
Conflict Management	21	20.8	51	50.4	26	25.7	2	1.9	1	0.9

Table 5.Mean and Standard Deviation of Each Soft Skill Relative to Perceived Level of Importance (*N* = 101)

Soft Skills	M	SD
Communication Skills	1.34	0.50
Teamwork & Leadership Qualities	1.41	0.59
Positive Attitude	1.41	0.55
Integrity & Work Ethic	1.65	0.84
Responsibility	1.53	0.54
Interpersonal Skills	1.74	0.71
Stress & Time Management	1.83	0.68
Flexibility	1.95	0.68
Professionalism & Courtesy	1.96	0.73
Conflict Management	2.12	0.79

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