
A Study on the Employability Skills and Workplace-Challenges Experienced by Management Graduates

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ABSTRACT

Past research revealed that organizations that hire fresh management graduates are generally satisfied with their academic and technical skills. However, the employers complain that there is a significant 'skill gap' between the organizations' expectation and requirement of employability skills and the level of skills among the newly hired Graduates from Business Management Schools. The objective of this study is to examine the gravity of this problem through a survey of challenges faced by graduates of selected two-tier B-Schools in Bangalore City.

This cross-sectional exploratory study was carried out with a two-fold investigation. Firstly, an extensive review of the relevant literature was conducted to identify the most popular set of employability skills required by the employers who hire fresh Masters' (Post) Graduates in Management. Secondly, a survey was conducted among the young professionals who graduated in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017. In all, 183 graduates of the selected schools participated in the survey (online and paper-pencil). The survey inquired about various employability skills and challenges faced in their initial jobs.

The results supported the view of the employers from different sectors that the newly hired management graduates are academically and technically qualified. Overall, graduates expressed that the training they have undergone helped them to go through the interview process and perform well in the initial jobs. However, they faced challenges in a variety of employability skills. The findings of this study would form a strong basis for developing and delivering training interventions to strengthen the employability skills required and expected in the management roles.

Key Words: Employability skills, Work place challenges, Employability skill-gap

INTRODUCTION

“Although employability skills are not a substitute for specific knowledge and technical skills, they make the difference between being good at a subject and being good at doing a job.” (UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES))

1.1 Background

According to All India Council for Technical Education there are currently 5,500 Business Management Schools in India with an enrolment of four lakh students (AICTE, 2016). There has been a ‘mushroom growth’ of these in the last five years. To monitor the quality of education delivered by the schools, AICTE has a rating process that resulted in closing nearly 200 colleges that failed in meeting the standards. Bangalore City is a hub of Business Management Schools (B Schools) affiliated to Bangalore University (BU), Visvesvaraya Technological University (VTU), and several young deemed universities. Large number of Indian and multi-national organizations are housed in Bangalore, a large city in southern India. Hence, this is the most sought-after destination for youth who aspire to become management professionals and seek employment of their choice. Students come from all over India with varied academic and socio-economic back grounds. Depending on these backgrounds their levels of competencies do vary.

The MBA or PGDM (Post-graduate Diploma in Management) programs deliver the syllabi designed by the Universities or Institutions such as All India Management Association (AIMA) covering about 21 subjects in four-semesters. As per the University norms there are a specific number of hours designated per subject. Instruction typically involves traditional class room lectures about 80% to 90% of the time and 20% to 10% devoted for guest lectures, Industry visits, workshops, seminars, professional skill development and pre-placement training. Further, it is mandatory for the students to conduct organization study with a minor project(summer internship) during third semester and problem based dissertation project in the fourth semester which expose them to the industry. Work experience is not mandatory for admission into PG Management programs. Hence, for majority of the students this will be the first-time experience with the business enterprises. Recruitment process of prospective employers begins while the students are in their third semester and the selected ones join the companies as soon as they complete their fourth semester. Some may join earlier than that if the employers require them to do so.

A study by Hayward & Fernandez (2004) describes that changing workplace environments in all the sectors require employees with higher and more technical skills and ‘employability skills’ such as problem solving, team work, communication and numeracy skills. B-Schools obviously are unable to meet these demands. Therefore, there is a glaring ‘skills’ gap that challenges productivity and competitiveness.

According to the National Employability Report on MBA Graduates – 2012, by Aspiring Minds, a) *about 40 % of ‘employable students’ did not fall in the category of top 1,000 colleges.* Hence, they could not attract the recruiters, b) *60% did not get desired placements because of their average/poor English communication skills and c) 50% of students were found weak in finance, marketing and HR domain knowledge:* (Agarwal, 2012). Another study by Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) (2012) reported that only 10% of MBA graduates from Indian B-schools get suitable placements soon after graduation and the majority struggle to find jobs they desire. This gives an

impression that graduates being employed even before they are 'ripe enough' to meet the corporate expectations. They are not being trained to match up with the industry requirements.

1.2 Study Objectives

The two objectives of this study are:

- a) to find out the important employability skills required for the Management graduates through extensive literature review and
- b) to study the challenges Management graduate face during their initial jobs.

2. 0. METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out with two-fold investigation. Firstly, an extensive literature review was conducted to identify the most relevant set of employability skills required by the employers who hire fresh Masters' (Post) Graduates in Management.

To address the second objective, a cross-sectional exploratory study (quantitative) conducted a survey to gather information on the challenges faced by the fresh management graduates.

2.1. Objective 1: Methodology for Literature Review

Extensive literature review was conducted to study the definitions of employability, to identify the employability skills required by the organizations and to understand why there is a mismatch between the expectations of the employers and the level of employability skills of the fresh management graduates. It has been observed that the discussions on 'employability skills' started from early 1980 onwards. However, this study included the literature on this topic from 1990s. Scholarly national and international publications from databases of 'J Gate', 'Research Gate' and 'Shodhganga'; reliable online publications, Ph D theses of reputed University Scholars and reports published newspapers and magazines were included in review of Literature.

2.1.1. Review of Literature: Employability Skills

The International Labour Organization (ILO) (2000) describes 'employability as self-belief' and an 'ability to find and retain employment'. According to Andrews and Higson (2008) employability is a complex construct and has no standard universally accepted definition yet. Employability is an ability to compete in the job market and be able to change jobs if necessary. This can happen effectively only if the graduates are endowed with employability skills and ready to learn new skills for new job opportunities.

The study by Grubba and Kalman (1994) revealed that business communities expressed their concern about the sub-standard levels of workers with respect to speaking, reading and writing skills, weak computation skills which are detrimental to the growth of the economy. In the context of fast pace changes in the competition in the in the global market and technological advancement, Bailey (1997) and Packer (1998) believed, organizations are under pressure to compete in a world market and adapt to fast pace technological progress. Hence, congenial work environment has been the need of the hour to accomplish high-performance workplaces. It expects workers at all levels to solve problems, to be creative to adapt to the new changes and be effective team players.

Employability skills are referred as 'practical skills' by Dewson and Eccles et al. (2000), as 'soft outcomes' by Lloyd and O'Sullivan (2004), the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES 2009) explained these skills as 'the skills the job seekers need commonly to perform almost any job' and 'soft skills' or 'character capabilities' by Margo, Grant et al. (2010). Though these are given different names they are all equivalent sets of attributes that are required for industry-readiness.

According to Hayward & Fernandez (2004), modern workplaces require competent employees who have multi-skills, more importantly soft skills such as problem solving, team work, communication, numeracy, and management. Unfortunately, college preparation includes limited training in developing such skills.

Falconer and Pettigrew, Nabi and Zinser and WEFO (2003), Lloyd and O'Sullivan (2004), Harvey (2005), Bhanugopan and Fish (2009) describe employability skills as set of achievements, understandings, skills and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.

Especially after the great recession period (2008-2012), to manage businesses in this VUCA World (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world), organizations require employees not only effective technically but also fluent in communication skills and possess team spirit to achieve the competitive goals of the organizations. Thus, 'employability skills' have been evolving as critical attributes of graduates since the last two decades. Talent shortage survey report (2005) revealed that there is enough potential in India to meet the world demand for educated workforce but due to lack of employability of the graduates throws a challenge for India's growth.

The views of ILO and Little (2003), Little and Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team, Yorke and Knight, Sirca, Nastav, Lesjak, and Sulcic (2006), Global talent risk-seven responses survey (2011) Ofsted (2012) and White (2013) also agree with this view. Blades et al (2012) emphasized that 'employability skills' focus on the personal, social and transferable skills seen as relevant to all jobs, as opposed to job specific technical skills or qualifications. The first and necessary step according to them is gaining employability skills for a rewarding long-term employment.

Sarkara et al. (2016) explain that employability skills concern behaviour and attitude of the graduates with no definite performance metrics like in the case of hard skills. However, they are crucial skills that enable graduates to obtain and retain work, progress in career and succeed in life. Measures of these soft outcomes, using quantitative and/or qualitative indicators, are critical to assess the performance of employees.

The Economic Times Jobs (2016), based on the responses of 750 employers, revealed that 60% strongly believe that employability skills are a significant factor while hiring and 30% stated that they are somewhat significant. The study further added that 75% expressed that soft skills are more essential for junior and middle level employees. Nearly 95% of the employers quoted that it is hard to find desired level of soft skills in the employees. According to this study the employability skills, in the order of importance of are: (a) listening skills, (b) communication skills, (c) confidence, (d) team work, (e) positive attitude, (f) creativity, (g) persuasion, (h) flexibility, (i) alertness and (j) accountability.

From this extensive literature review the following commonly mentioned skills have been compiled under five separate categories with a view to identify the most relevant skills for this study.

Table 1: Categories of Employability Skills

Table 1

Category of Skills	Sub-skills
I. Communication Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Written and verbal communication 2. Command on English language 3. Business presentations 4. Conveying information orally one-to-one and in group situations 5. Listening to other points of view 6. Responding to others' comments during conversations confidently 7. Professional writing skills in project / internal / external reports
II. Skills required for personal and professional advancement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-motivation towards your responsibilities 2. Self-confidence in performing the tasks 3. Commitment towards your responsibilities 4. Monitoring progress of your tasks as per your plan 5. Revising plans to include new information 6. Setting priorities of your tasks 7. Ability to work independently 8. Time management in completing the tasks 9. Using alternative ways in meeting objectives 10. Maintaining a positive attitude 11. Adjusting to work related demands such as shift timings / learning new skills / relocation 12. Being open to change to enhance productivity
III. Adaptation skills and Flexibility, Interpersonal and social skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Developing and maintaining effective professional relationships with superiors 2. Professional relationships with colleagues 3. Responding positively to constructive criticism 4. Convincing skills 5. Delegating responsibility to peers 6. Delegating work to juniors 7. Level of comfort to function effectively as member of a team 8. Leadership skills to drive the team forward
IV. Intellectual and Technical Skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Computer Skills required for management related jobs 2. Analytical skills and techniques of problem solving 3. Identifying cause-and-effect relationships 4. Numeracy and computational skills Numeracy and computational skills
V. Understand Organization's vision and development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understanding how an organization functions in relation to its competitors 1. Keeping up-to-date with external influencing factors related to your company operations 2. Understanding external influences, if any, (such as demonetization, Brexit, GST etc.) on the organization and its strategies accordingly 3. Visualizing your role in response to the above changing strategies

This exploratory study intends to examine if the academic competency and the employability skill training the management graduates receive at their alma maters make them competent to cope

with workplace demands. The findings of the study will lay the foundation for future training interventions to groom management students to be effective in their workplaces.

2. 2. Objective 2: Challenges faced by graduates in their initial jobs:

The second part of the study concerns the challenges faced by management (post) graduates in their initial jobs.

2. 2. 1. Study Participants

Out of 214 AICTE – approved business Management Schools in Karnataka State 52 are in the city of Bangalore churning out (about) 4,000 graduates each year. Sample was drawn from eight Tier-2 AICTE approved Bangalore based Business Schools which were selected using simple random sampling technique. Convenience sampling technique was used to draw the sample of 25 from each of the eight participant colleges. The Sample size of graduates was 200. Tier-1 Business Schools such as IIM, XLRI and the like are not included in this study as the best of the students who get through the stricter eligibility criteria get admission in those institutions. Those who cannot get into tier – 1 schools compromise with tier – 2 Business schools.

The Google link for on-line survey questionnaire was shared with the participant colleges, which in turn was shared with the graduates who graduated in the years of 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017. In all 183 graduates of the selected tier-2 Business Schools responded to the on-line survey via Google docs or took paper-pencil survey.

2. 2. 2. Survey Instrument and Data Collection:

Data were collected using a questionnaire, which was specifically developed based on the five categories of skills specified in Table 1, to measure workplace challenges related to employability skills (soft skills) faced by management graduates in their initial jobs. The survey included demographic variables (gender, age, academic degree) and items (sub-skills) that represent each of the five categories of employability skills.

The items in the survey were developed based on relevant studies in the field (e.g. O’Neil, Allred., and Baker, 1992; Ward and Riddle, 2003; Smith, Ferns, and Russel, 2014; Times of India, 2016 and Gray, 2017) and adopted to suit the measurement of variables required for the study. Questions concerning prior job experience during post-graduate studies, and whether the pre-placement and employability training programs they underwent at their institutes helped to get a job and perform job roles in the initial placement serve as independent variables. The dependent variables are challenges they faced at their workplaces. Each question was asked in a statement form and the graduates rated their agreement or disagreement on 4-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree= 4; Somewhat Disagree= 3; Somewhat Agree =2; and strongly agree=1). For each of the statements, the participants reported on whether they faced any challenges at their work places pertaining to that specific skill in their initial jobs.

Further, the respondents also rated the training they received while attending the college in each of the five employability skill areas (Excellent = 1, Good =2, Satisfactory = 3, Needs improvement =4).

2. 2. 3. Data Analysis:

All statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS version 24.0. Descriptive analyses were conducted on demographic variables to understand the distribution and the final version of variables was computed by regrouping categories to ensure enough sample in each category. For example, those who strongly agreed or somewhat agreed were regrouped under 'yes' category to indicate that they faced challenges; and those who strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed were grouped as 'no' indicating that they did not face challenges concerning specified skills listed in Table 1: Categories of Employability Skills.

Demographic variables include age, gender, study field, study medium (English or local language), and full or part-time job experience. Respondents were grouped into three categories based on the academic performance in their post-graduation: Level A: 70% or CGPA 3.5 and above; level B: between 60% and 69% or CGPA between 3 and 3.4 and level C between 50% and 59% or CGPA between 2.5 and 2.9.

3. 0. RESULTS

3.1. Participants:

A total of 174 graduates responded to the survey. Twenty one graduates (21%) from 2014 batch, 45 (25.9%) from 2015 batch, 32 (18.4%) from 2016 batch and 76 (43.7%) from 2017 batch participated in the survey. Sixty six (37.5%) were female respondents. Mean age of the participants was 24.32 (SD=2.29; Range=20-35 years). Post graduate degree for the majority (91%) was MBA from Bangalore University (BU) or Visvesvaraya Technological University (VTU) and the remaining had PGDM / PGDBM degrees.

The most chosen specialization was Marketing by 86 (49.4%), the second most was Finance by 48 (27.6%) followed by Human Resource Management by 33 (19%) and the fourth one was Operations by 5 (2.9%). Dual specialization was opted by 47 graduates (27%). Marketing, human resources, and finance, in that order, were most opted courses for the dual specialization.

For the majority (94.3%) of participants, English was the medium of instruction for their undergraduate degree. The minimum percentage in the UG Degree Program, to be eligible to get admission into Post-Graduate Business Management Programme in the Universities of Karnataka state, is 50. Out of 174 respondents only 157 responded to this question. Nearly 30% (n= 51) fell under level A, 53.4% (n=93) fell under level B and a small percentage (7.5% (n=13) fell under level C.

A little over one third (36%) reported having either part-time or full-time job experience prior to their graduation. More females (46.2%) than males (30.3%) reported job experience ($\chi^2 = 4.44$, df=1, p=.035). The majority (83%) agreed that pre-placement and employability training programs during PG Programme helped them to obtain suitable employment and helped them perform in the given job roles (75.3%) in the initial placement.

3.2. Challenges Experienced by the Management Graduates in the initial Jobs:

Table 2 represents the percentage of graduates who agreed that they experienced challenges in following five major areas in their employment and job performance. Data were tested for gender differences, however, since no significant differences were observed, total percentages of graduates who experienced challenges was provided.

Table 2. Challenges experienced by the graduates in their jobs (N=174)

TABLE 2

Category of Skills	Experienced challenges %
I Communication Skills	
1. Good command over English language (ability to use proper grammar, spellings, convincing expressions and punctuation)	69.0
2. Conveying information and your views orally on one-to-one confidently	71.0
3. Presentation skills (in Seminars / conferences)	76.4
4. Listening to others' points of view	64.0
5. Responding to others' comments during conversations confidently	73.0
6. Professional writing skills in project / internal / external reports	71.1
II Skills required for personal / professional advancement	
1. Self-motivation towards your responsibilities	66.7
2. Self-confidence in performing the tasks	68.3
3. Commitment towards your responsibilities	71.0
4. Monitoring progress of your tasks as per your plan	68.0
5. Revising plans to include new information	70.6
6. Setting priorities of your tasks	69.5
7. Ability to work independently	69.5
8. Time management in completing the tasks	75.0
9. Using alternative ways in meeting objectives	75.0
10. Maintaining a positive attitude	71.0
11. Adjusting to work related demands such as shift timings / learning new skills / relocation	80.0
12. Being open to change to enhance productivity	69.0
III. Adaptation skills and flexibility Interpersonal and social skills for Entry level jobs	
1. Developing and maintaining effective professional relationships with superiors	67.1
2. Developing and maintaining effective professional relationships with colleagues	66.0
3. Responding positively to constructive criticism	69.2

4. Convincing skills	67.3
5. Delegating responsibility to peers	73.0
6. Delegating work to juniors	70.0
7. Level of comfort to function effectively as member of a team	67.6
8. Leadership skills to drive the team forward	71.5
IV. Intellectual and Technical skills for Entry level jobs	
1. Computer Skills required for management related jobs	60.4
2. Analytical skills and techniques of problem solving	75.2
3. Ability to identify factors that cause problems	76.0
4. Identifying cause-and-effect relationships	73.5
5. Numeracy and computational skills	64.5
6. Decision making skill based on analysis of the situation	69.0
V. Understand Organization's vision and development Important for Entry Level Positions	
1. Understanding how an organization functions in relation to its competitors	71.6
2. Keeping up-to-date with external influencing factors related to company operations	73.1
3. Understanding external influences, if any, (such as demonetization, Brexit, GST etc.) on the organization and its strategies accordingly	75.6
4. Visualizing your role in response to the above changing strategies	70.0

A high percentage of Graduates (between 60-80%) reported facing challenges in all areas of skills required in their employment. In communication, over 70% of the students reported facing challenges in professional writing, oral presentations, discussions, in particular responding to others' comments. Regarding professional advancement, the majority (80%) reported facing challenges with time management to complete the assigned task, adjusting to work related demands such as shift timings, learning new skills or relocation. More than three-quarters reported experiencing difficulty with analytical and problem solving. More than 70% of the graduates lacked comprehensive understanding of role of their organization and broader factors that influence its function.

3.3. Graduates rating of training programs:

Graduates also rated the training they received during the study period in the five categories employability skills as Excellent, Good, Satisfactory, Need improvement.

Table 3. Graduates rating of the training programs they participated at their institutes (N=174)

TABLE 3

The training that you received during your study period in these areas had been	Excellent %	Good %	Satisfactory %	Needs improvement %
1. Communication skills	9	41	48	2
2. Skills required for personal/ professional advancement	7	29	57	7
3. Adaptation skills and flexibility Interpersonal and social skills	5	24	53	17
1. Intellectual and Technical skills for Entry level jobs	7	19	41	33
2. Understand Organisation’s vision and development	7	17	29	47

Note: Percentages are rounded to the nearest integer.

There is minimal appreciation for the training underwent by the graduates at their respective alma maters. Very few participants rated training programs in all the areas were excellent. They have rated that training interventions during their study period were mostly satisfactory or good, probably rated with respect towards what the alma maters offered. The data reveals that majority of the 2-tier Business Schools seem to be focusing more on communications skills followed by skills required for personal and professional advancement, probably due to the ease of conducting and evaluating training in those areas than in the other areas. Training programs concerning adaptation skills, intellectual and technical skills, and understanding organization’s vision and development, which seems to be crucial from the stand point of the organizations, definitely need substantial improvement.

4. DISCUSSION

This cross-sectional exploratory study was carried out with a two-fold investigation to examine the skill gap and challenges experienced by the graduates in their initial employment. An extensive review of the relevant literature helped to identify the most required set of employability skills preferred by the industry while hiring fresh Masters’ (Post) Graduates in Management. A detailed list of relevant employability skills for Management Graduates is presented in Table 1 of this paper.

Majority of graduates participated in this survey were academically sound: 30% of the respondents in level A, 53.4% in level B and a small percentage 7.5% in level C. Nevertheless, this survey revealed significant challenges experienced by Management Graduates in their initial jobs. Surprisingly,

data did not reveal significant gender differences in the type of challenges they experience. The study exposes that the training they received, according to the graduates, fulfilled the basic expectations, but failed to address the challenges they to deal with in all the categories of employability skills.

The results supported the view of the employers from different sectors that the newly hired management graduates are academically and technically qualified and exposed the lack of important soft skills necessary for professional adjustment and growth. For example, for over 70% of the graduates professional writing and oral communication required for performance is a big challenge. Graduates also faced difficulties in participating in sharing and responding to others in professional discussions. Regarding professional advancement, the majority (80%) reported they experienced challenges with time management to complete the assigned task, adjusting to work related demands such as shift timings, learning new skills or relocation. More than 75% reported experiencing difficulty with analytical and problem solving. More than 70% of the graduates lacked comprehensive understanding of role of their organization and broader factors that influence its function. Time management skills, completing tasks on time and adjusting to work demand appear to be problematic. The findings of this study would form a strong basis for developing and delivering training interventions to strengthen the employability skills required and expected in the management roles.

4.1. Study Strengths and Limitations:

Firstly, the comprehensive literature search helped to gather pertinent data on the important employability skills and resulted in an instrument that can be extended to any field.

Secondly, the pilot study included eight AICTE-approved Business Schools in Bangalore city and is one of a kind as it incorporates direct feedback from the recent graduates. As Bangalore is known as education-hub in South India, large number of students with varied socio-economic and academic backgrounds from different states congregate here in pursuit of higher education and employment opportunities. Hence, modelled after this study, a larger study can be conducted that includes larger sample of colleges and graduates.

As with any cross-sectional study, this study also suffers from certain limitations. Expanding the sample size is preferred for stable estimates. Only 183 graduates responded as against the expectation of a minimum of 200. Nonetheless, the study proved to be beneficial in discovering the gap in soft skills that posed challenges in job performance.

5.0. CONCLUSION

Overall, graduates expressed that the training they have undergone helped them to go through the interview process, secure jobs and perform their job roles. However, they faced challenges in all the categories of employability skills, in particular a) Adaptation skills and flexibility Interpersonal and social skills, b) Intellectual and Technical skills for Entry level jobs and c) Understand Organisation's vision and development. The findings of this study would form a strong basis for developing and delivering programs to strengthen employability skills. The results supported the view of the employers from different sectors that though the newly hired management graduates are academically and technically qualified, they lack in employability skills which are crucial to optimize the use of resources. Therefore,

interventions to strengthen the employability skills are the need of the hour to develop competent young management professionals who are capable to analyse the situations and take appropriate decisions.

The informal discussions with the participating colleges revealed that each individual college is following its own method of training and evaluation. The time they allocate for training varies from one college to another. Some conduct the training using their own internal resources, some hire external resources and some use a combination of internal and external resources. Which means that the training outcomes also significantly differ. The major focus in all the colleges, as mentioned in the previous sections, seems to be on the first two categories of employability skills stated in Table 1 of this paper. This actually calls for further investigation to understand the design and delivery of the trainings and assess their effectiveness which must be taken up for further research. The best strategy the Universities must adopt is to provide standardized training and evaluation methodology to the affiliated colleges to bring in alignment with the Industry requirement and uniformity. The time has come to strategically design, validate and conduct standardized training programmes to enhance the employability skills of the Management graduates.

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