

**A STUDY ON PERCEPTUAL CHANGE AMONG MANAGEMENT STUDENTS REGARDING THEIR
MANAGERIAL ABILITIES AFTER IMBIBING SOFT SKILLS TRAINING**

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive study proposes to analyse the perceptual change among Management students regarding their own abilities after having gone through training in soft skills. The training was conducted at Kalka Institute for Research and Advanced Studies, Meerut (Affiliated to U.P. technical University, Lucknow and C.C.S. University, Meerut and Approved by A.I.C.T.E) for duration of three months (Dec, 2014 to March, 2015). The students trained belonged to the second & fourth semesters of MBA and P.G.D.M programme. This study has taken NACUE's top ten most desirable skills that the industry looks for in the young Management pass-outs. The soft skills taught to the students included ability to communicate and create or analyse written report, ability to work as members of team, ability to negotiate and convince others, ability to plan & organize activities and prioritize events, awareness of IT technology trends, Technical knowledge related to the Job/ function, Decision making and problem solving, Developing positive attitude, Work well under pressure, motivate and lead others.

The findings revealed that the Mean Weighted discrepancy scores (MWDS) were highest for communication and negotiation skills and least for awareness of IT technology trends, technical knowledge related job/function, decision making and problem solving and work well under-pressure. Finally the study uses the Borich (1980) needs assessment model to identify those skills to be given highest priority in upcoming training modules in order to enhance student's confidence level in handling managerial assignments and competency. The paired T-test statistics by using SPSS were also used in this study to measure the impact of three months training in Soft Skills. The study revealed that after having undergone the training in Soft Skills, the students perceived a positive improvement in their managerial abilities and had improved self-confidence levels.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the global recession of the years 2007 – 08 there has been a slowdown in the hiring of fresh Management Graduates by India Inc. The Corporations are mostly restricting their recruitment to the pass-outs of the top Management Institutes. So, where do lakhs of MBA graduates produced by thousands of B-Schools all over India, go? It's a gloomy scenario. Much study has been done to find out the shortcomings among the fresh Management Graduates. Inadequate soft skills have been identified as a major cause of the bias against the MBA fresher's. One of the ways to improve the managerial abilities of fresh MBA's is to humanize management education which gives spirit to management world where we have to lay greater emphasis on Soft Skills and not on pure maths (NARAYAN, 2005). In India, a Public – Private initiative has been taken to organize the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) which main purpose is to contribute significantly to the overall target of skilling 500 million people in India by 2022, (Press Release of NSDC). RAO, (2000) also suggested that the Management Institutions must develop among the students Soft Skills that would enable them to take decisions on the basis of limited information in situations marked by uncertainties.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To analyse the Pre & Post Training perception of Management students after undergoing training in Soft Skills.
2. To identify Soft Skills that students perceive to be of most importance to them.
3. To identify the five highest priority skills for future training curriculum enhancement.

In the interface between the industry & the Academia, it has often been brought out that the fresh Management Graduates who pass out from innumerable B-Schools in the country are often lacking in certain basic skills necessary for young managers. These skills are generally referred to as soft skills such as ability to communicate and create or analyze written report, Ability to work as members of team, ability to negotiate and convince others, ability to plan & organize activities and prioritize events, awareness of IT technology trends, Technical knowledge related to the Job/ function, Decision making and problem solving, Developing positive attitude, Work well under pressure, motivate and lead others & so on.

This study has taken NACUE's top ten most desirable skills that the industry looks for in the young Management pass-outs. The training in soft skills was imparted to the OBC & SC/ST category of MBA & PGDM students at KIRAS from December, 2014 to March 2015 for a period of 3 Months. Their perceptions towards their own abilities prior to & after receiving Soft Skills training were recorded. Also recorded were their own judgements on the importance of various soft skills in helping them to become more competent and confident in handling managerial assignments. This has done through SPSS based t-test, the study also analysis the skills where the mean weighted discrepancy scores are the highest entailing the skills which need to be given high preference in future soft skills training modules.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'Soft Skills' is widely used, but scarcely defined. Conrad (1999) states uncertainty of the precise origin of use of the term 'Soft Skills'. Early reference was discovered in Military Training documents from the early 1970s. In a 1972 training manual the US army defines soft skills as job related skills involving actions affecting primarily people and paper, e.g., inspecting troops, supervising office personnel, conducting studies, preparing maintenance reports, preparing efficiency reports, designing bridge structures" (Fry and Whitmore, 1972). Many definitions, however, are vague. Joubert et al (2006, p. 28): "There is no ultimate definition of soft skills, but they include such skills such as ethics, attitudes, interpersonal abilities, communication and being a lifelong learner". Or even worse, "soft skills are doing the right thing at the right time, and doing it nicely" (Joubert et al, p. 29). Soft Skills is most commonly based on competence management. Often they are restricted to interpersonal or social skills (e.g. Staden et al, 2006). Fan et al. (2005) give the following skills: coordination, persuasion, negotiation, communication with supervisors, peers, or subordinates; communication with persons outside the organization, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Klaus (2007) states that soft skills encompass personal, social, communication and self-management skills. Examples mentioned are: self-awareness, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, critical thinking, attitude, initiative, liability, influence, risk taking, problem solving, leadership and time management. In an extensive literature study and research on the development and construct validation of a measure of soft skills performance KANTROWITZ (2005) found 107 soft skills.

Soft Skills are essentially people skills - the non-technical, intangible, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, listener, negotiator, and conflict mediator. Soft Skills is a term which refers to personality traits, social graces, and facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark people to varying degrees. Soft Skills play a significant role in one's success in life, particularly in one's profession. They help one to excel in the workplace and their importance cannot be denied in this age of information and knowledge. Soft Skills play an important part for the success of an organization. Organizations, particularly those dealing with customer face-to-face, are generally more prosperous if they train their employees to use these skills. With the boom in outsourcing taking root across industries, many professionals and subject matter experts directly dealing with their clients on a regular basis, soft skills have become absolutely essential for the success of the organizations and the individuals. "Soft Skills are very important in business. It is essential to be technically sound, but one should also have the ability to convey the idea to the masses in the simplest possible manner". "Planning is necessary but execution is also equally important. And it takes soft skills to execute any idea because it involves dealing with people directly". Soft Skills cannot be taught. However it can be developed through proper training Majority of the managers observe that many potential job seekers lack the "soft skills" that a company needs.

The importance of 'soft skills' or emotional intelligence has been acknowledged in several occupations, (e.g., Managers, Boyatzis, 1982; pilots, Damitz, Manzey, Kleinmann, & Severin, 2003; entry-level workers, Holzer, Stoll, & Wissoker, 2004), across cultures (e.g., Nonaka & Johannson, 1985) and across

job and pay levels (Wilson, 1997as reported in Strauser & Waldrop, 1999). This literature review focuses on the importance and nature of soft skills for Management Students.

A comprehensive review of current literature on managerial skills and surveys by government, non-profit and Industry-affiliated organizations from the US, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia laid the a framework for identifying the range of soft skills relevant for new graduates.

Over 80 articles and publications were examined to understand what information already exists on important soft skills.

In a recent survey, 348 IT Managers were asked to rate the importance of various skills (Aasheim et al; 2009, p. 353.) Soft skills were rated high while hard skills were rated lower. These ranged across written communication, leadership, use of new technology, appreciating diversity etc.

Soft Skills are vital for all graduates to acquire, regardless of their field of study. These skills such as communication skills, analytical, critical and problem solving skills, lifelong learning ability, entrepreneurship and management skills are the ones that employers value as important skills for potential employees to possess. Acquiring soft skills has been acknowledged as important amidst the stiff competition for jobs in the industry today and the large number of graduates produced locally and abroad (Abang Abdullah, 2005).

For this study, the top ten skills spelt out by NACUE as most desirable skills for the fresh management graduates, have been adopted for analysis. The research aims to analyse the perceptual change among management students regarding their managerial abilities before & after undergoing the training in soft skills. Also under study is the importance attributed by the trainees to the various soft skills taught to them. The responses of the trainees were obtained through the medium of questionnaires administered to them before the commencement of soft skills training & after completing the three-month training.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The population for this study was MBA and PGDM students at the Kalka Institute for Research and Advanced Studies, Meerut, Affiliated to UPTU, Lucknow. The respondents were the current students in MBA & PGDM IIND semester and IVTH semester of MBA & PGDM(Batch 2012 – 14 and 2013 - 15) (Population Size N = 141), A Convenience sampling method is used to collect the data. The responses of the 106 students were obtained through the medium of Questionnaires administered to them. The actual submission of the filled questionnaires after completion of training was 94wherein 11questionnaires contained only pre-training responses, thus providing 83 questionnaires readily available for the study.

A 10 item structured questionnaire was developed with responses ranging on a 4-point Likert Scale from 0=no importance for managerial skills /self-confidence and competence to 3= major for managerial skills /self-confidence and competence. The instrument contained two sections; A & B. Section A aimed to enlist respondent's demographic, academic, and career preference data (Annexure-II). While Section B aimed to analyse the perceptual change among management students regarding their managerial abilities and self-confidence and competence level ratings. The students were asked to mark their

ratings on their own managerial skills, self-confidence and competency level in relation with top ten skills pre training as well as after the completion of training. To establish the instruments content validity and reliability a pilot survey was conducted on 35 students who were not the part of our training, which resulted in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.949291406, thus establishing reliability and validity of the instrument (Cronbach LJ, 1951).

To achieve the objective no. 1 i.e. to analyse the pre-training students' self-perceptual change among their own managerial abilities and self-confidence level and competency for each skill. Mean and Standard Deviations are separately calculated for each pre-training importance for their managerial abilities, pre-training self-confidence and competence and post-training importance for their own managerial abilities and post-training self-confidence and competence level. With respect to each skill, Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) are calculated; Pre-training and Post-training on their own managerial abilities and self-confidence level and competency. The higher the mean (M), the higher importance in their managerial abilities and self-confidence and competence. In case of a tie, the skills corresponding to lower standard deviation (SD) is given precedence over the skill with higher SD but same mean (M).

To achieve the objective no. 2 i.e. measurement of impact of training in terms of changes brought in the students' towards their own managerial abilities and self-confidence level and competency in skills, a paired T-test was applied. Pre-Training Importance and Post-Training Importance formed one pair. While pre-training competence and post-training competence formed the other pair for t-test analysis. T-test is conducted by using SPSS software. T-statistics shows the significant impact of training upon the students own managerial abilities and self-confidence level and competency.

To accomplish the last objective i.e. no. 3. To analyse the highest priority 5 skills to be given precedence in future curriculum by employing Borich's (1980) MWDS approach to achieve this objective, both importance in their own managerial skills and self-confidence and competence level constructs are assessed simultaneously; pre and post training. Paired T-tests using SPSS are conducted to assess the impact of training programme upon students' perceived importance in their own managerial abilities and self-confidence level and competence level on 10 most desirable skills that the industry looks for in the young management pass-outs. Borich's need assessment model is applied on post-training responses. The importance scores are subtracted from the competence scores to yield the discrepancy score (DS). The weighted discrepancy scores (WDS) are obtained by multiplying the discrepancy scores with mean of importance scores. The mean weighted discrepancy scores are obtained by dividing the sum of MWDS by 83 (n=83).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic and General Inferences

The sample composition in this study had 40% female and 66% male respondents. 28% were from MBA II semester and 28% were from PGDM II semester while 25% from MBA IV semester and 25% from PGDM IV semester. 25 % of the respondents were in the age group of (19-21), 58% in (22-24) while 23%

in (25-above). 35% had I division at 10th, 52% at 12th, 50% had I division at graduation level. 15% had I division. at all levels till graduation. 77% had English as medium of instruction at graduation level. Majority had come from management background (35%) followed by Commerce (25%), Arts (21%), and Science & Technology (19%). Majority had Uttar Pradesh as their Native state. Most belonged to urban areas as their native place (77%), out of which 35% belonged to local town i.e. Meerut.

Marketing was the most preferred area of interest (45%), followed by Finance (31%), and HR (30%), majority of the female preferred HR. A substantial majority (74%) preferred paid employment (service) or want to become an entrepreneur as their most preferred career path after MBA, 18% were not interested in paid employment they want to become entrepreneur and run their own business or open self-consultancy at home. (Annexed as Figure 1-14).

The students' perceived ability to negotiate and convince others (M=2.8554, SD=0.2635), ability to communicate and create or analyse written report (M=2.8434, SD=0.2827), work well under pressure (M=2.5904, SD=0.6550), decisions making and problem solving (M=2.5309, SD=0.6342), technical knowledge about job/functional area (M=2.5301, SD=0.7546), ability to work as member of team (M=2.4096, SD=0.6536), ability to plan, organize and prioritize work (M=2.4096, SD=0.7760), awareness of I.T technology (M=2.3855, SD=0.6325), developing positive attitude (M=2.3012, SD=0.6948), motivate & lead others (M=2.2410, SD=0.7491) as the most important skills in order of decreasing importance. Hence, students rated communication and negotiation skills as the highest on their perceived importance. While they rated motivate & lead others, developing positive attitude and awareness of I.T technology lowest on their perceived importance.

On pre-training self-confidence and competence to perform certain skills, the students perceived the following skills in descending order of self-confidence and competence level; ability to plan, organize and prioritize work (M=2.3614, SD=0.6731), technical knowledge about job/function (M=2.1687, SD=0.5592), ability to work as member of team (M=2.1084, SD=0.4688), decisions making and problems solving (M=2.0964, SD=0.8057), awareness of I.T technology trends (M=2.0602, SD=0.5706), work well under pressure (M=2.0482, SD=0.6421), developing positive attitude (M=1.9880, SD=0.8337), motivate & lead others (M=1.9759, SD=0.3484), ability to negotiate and convince others (M=1.9518, SD=0.6988), ability to communicate and create or analyse written report (M=1.8193, SD=0.5662). Therefore, in their own perception students' had high self-confidence level and competency in performing group, cognitive and technical skills, while they rated themselves low in their self-confidence and competence level related to communication and negotiation skills.

POST- TRAINING ANALYSIS

Perceptual change among management students regarding their own managerial skills are ranked in descending order as ability to communicate and create or analyse written reports (M=2.9036, SD=0.2969), ability to negotiate and convince others (M=2.8795, SD=0.3628), developing positive attitude (M=2.8434, SD=0.3976), motivate and lead others (M=2.6988, SD=0.4616), decision making and problem solving (M=2.6988, SD=0.5350), ability to plan, organize and prioritize work (M=2.6265,

SD=0.5568), ability to work as members of team (M=2.6024, SD=0.5618), technical knowledge about job/function(M=2.5542, SD=0.5467), work well under pressure (M=2.5542, SD=0.5896), awareness of IT technology trends (M=2.3614, SD=0.6731). Thus, the students placed negotiation and convincing skills and written & oral communication skills as the skills of highest importance. While, skills related to awareness of IT technology trends & work well under pressure were placed as lowest on importance level. Students perceived their confidence level and competency level on skills ranked highest to lowest on ability to plan & organize and prioritize work (M=2.3855, SD=0.5140), technical knowledge related to job/function (M=2.3494, SD=0.5281), ability to work as a members of team (M=2.3614, SD=0.4833), decision-making and problem solving (M=2.3614, SD=0.5539), awareness of I.T technology trends (M=2.1566, SD=0.3976), work well under pressure (M=2.1687, SD=0.4078), developing positive attitude (M=2.2530, SD=0.5901), motivation and lead others (M=2.1566, SD=0.3657), ability to negotiate and convince others (M=2.2530, SD=0.4644), ability to communicate and create or analysis written reports (M=2.1807, SD=0.5214).

Thus, the students perceived improvement in their managerial abilities like ability to plan, organize, prioritize work, technical knowledge related to job/function, ability to work as members of team, work well under pressure, communications skills, decision making and problem solving skills. A significant improvement was noted in the self confidence level and competency related to communication and negotiation skills as compared between pre – training and post – training scores.

To ascertain whether the soft skills training programme had any positive impact upon students perceptions regarding their own managerial abilities and their self confidence level and competency on skills, paired t – statistics were implied through SPSS. The results showed significant impact of training upon students on soft skills; the students perceived positive improvement in their managerial abilities and had improved self-confidence and competency levels. (T – Test results as appended in Annexure – III & IV).

Lastly, application of Borich's MWDS application revealed that the top 5 skills for curriculum enhancement were awareness of I.T. technology trends (MWDS=0.4834), technical knowledge about job/function (MWDS= -0.5017), ability to plan, organize and prioritize work (MWDS= -0.6146), ability to work as members of team (MWDS= -0.6241), decision making and problem solving (MWDS= -0.9108), work well under pressure (MWDS= -0.9793). The pre-training and post – training self-confidence and competency scores of students revealed that on almost all of these skills student perceived a positive and significant improvement in their managerial abilities and had improved self – confidence levels after training. Yet, corresponding with the importance attached to skills, the future curriculum needed to assign still more priority in these skills sectors.

CONCLUSION

Pre-Training results show that the management students placed highest importance on ability to communicate and create or analyse written reports, ability to negotiate and convince others, work well under pressure, decision making and problem-solving, technical knowledge related to the job/function, and placed least importance to ability to work as members of team, ability to plan and organize

activities and prioritize events, awareness of I.T. technology trends, developing positive attitude, motivate and lead others. The findings signify that the greatest importance was placed on negotiation, convincing skills and communication skills. Whereas, ability to work as members of team which was placed at Rank No. 2, by the industries was ranked at the low level of importance by the students. The pre-training confidence & competency results showed that the students perceived themselves most confident and competent in ability to plan & organize and prioritize work and technical knowledge related to the Job/function. For curriculum enhancement, the highest priority areas which identified in this research are: Awareness of I.T. Technology trends, technical knowledge related to the Job/function, ability to plan, organize and prioritize work, ability to work as members of team, decision making and problem solving and work well under pressure.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Some of the limitations of the study are as under: -

- (a) The population for the study is limited to the students from SC/ST & OBC categories only of MBA & PGDM programme at the Kalka Institute for Research and Advanced Studies, Meerut, Affiliated to UPTU, Lucknow. The most evident limitation of this study is that the population for the study is based on homogeneous stratum.
- (b) Since the study is based on the analysis of individual perceptions, certain amount of subjectivity is inevitable. To that extent the results could be less generalised.
- (c) Training in Soft-Skills is not a part of MBA curriculum of U.P. Technical University, Lucknow. Hence, the importance attached by the subject students to various skills may differ.

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Table 1: Students' Self-Perceived Importance on their own Managerial Skills; Pre-Training & Post-Training

SKILL	PRE-TRAINING IMPORTANCE		RANK	POST-TRAINING IMPORTANCE		RANK
	M	SD		M	SD	
Ability to Communicate and Create or Analyse written Report	2.8554	0.2635	1	2.9026	0.2969	1
Ability to work as members of team	2.3855	0.6325	8	2.6024	0.5618	7
Decision making and Problem Solving	2.5904	0.6550	3	2.6988	0.5350	5
Ability to plan, organize and prioritize work	2.3012	0.6948	9	2.6265	0.5568	6
Developing positive attitude	2.5301	0.7546	5	2.8434	0.3976	3

Work well under pressure	2.4096	0.6536	6	2.5542	0.5896	9
Technical knowledge about job/function	2.4096	0.7760	7	2.5542	0.5467	8
Awareness of IT technology trends	2.2410	0.7491	10	2.3614	0.6731	10
Ability to Negotiate and Convince others	2.8438	0.2827	2	2.8795	0.3628	2
Motivate & Lead Others	2.5309	0.6342	4	2.6988	0.4616	4

Table 2: Students' Self-Perceived Self-Confidence and Competence on Skills; Pre-Training & Post-Training

SKILL	PRE-TRAINING IMPORTANCE		RANK	POST-TRAINING IMPORTANCE		RANK
	M	SD		M	SD	
Ability to Communicate and Create or Analyse written report	1.8193	0.5662	10	2.1827	0.5214	7
Ability to work on team structure	2.1018	0.4688	3	2.3614	0.4833	2
Ability to make decision making and Problem Solving	2.0964	0.8057	4	2.3614	0.5539	3
Ability to plan, organize and prioritize work	2.3614	0.6731	1	2.3855	0.5140	1
Developing positive attitude	1.9880	0.8337	7	2.3373	0.5901	5

Work well under pressure	2.0482	0.6421	6	2.1687	0.4078	8
Technical knowledge about job/function	2.1687	0.5592	2	2.3494	0.5281	4
Awareness of IT technology	2.0602	0.5706	5	2.1566	0.3976	10
Ability to Negotiate and Convince others	1.9518	0.6967	9	2.2530	0.4644	6
Motivate and Lead others	1.9759	0.3484	8	2.1566	0.3657	9

Table 3: Skills Ranking for Curriculum Enhancement using Borich,s Assessment Model

SKILL	POST TRAINING	PRIORITY FOR CURRICULUM IMPROVEMENT
	MWDS	
Awareness of IT technology	0.4834	1
Technical knowledge about job/function	-0.5017	2
Ability to plan, organize and prioritize work	-0.6146	3
Ability to work on team structure	-0.6241	4
Ability to make decision making and Problem Solving	-0.9108	5

Work well under pressure	-0.9793	6
Motivate & Lead Others	-1.4639	7
Developing positive attitude	-1.4928	8
Ability to Negotiate and Convince others	-1.8043	9
Ability to Communicate and Create or Analyse written report	-2.0964	10