

Teaching Soft Skills to Technical Professionals Technology versus Practical Intelligence

Dr. K. R. Vijaya, Assistant Professor

Department of English, SRM Easwari Engineering College,
Ramapuram, Chennai

Abstract: *More and more Engineering Institutions, Business schools and corporate offices around the world recognize the importance of soft skills in their students and the employees. They firmly believe that if the employees possess soft skills and if they know how to handle themselves at work and how to relate with their customers and their friends, they in turn can increase the productivity of an organization. In this context, the Engineering colleges and the corporate companies have training programs to teach the soft skills through web technologies. This article throws light on teaching soft skills through web technologies and reviews how far it is effective for the trainees. It also compares practical intelligence and the technology for learning soft skills and points out which is more reliable.*

Introduction

Soft skills or employability skills are a vital part of the Engineering curriculum. When corporate companies hire professionals, their spotlight is often on the 'hard' skills to complete the tasks of the company rather than any other skill. However, there is a growing awareness that technical skills alone are insufficient for success in companies especially in the present day's dynamic, distributed and complex workplace. Companies are outsourcing and off shoring in order to become more flexible and profitable. As a result, the technical professionals are in a compulsory state to acquire a set of soft skills other than their traditional technical skills. The students generally are not fully skilled in soft skills, when they enter the industries. Some Students train themselves to pass the psychometric tests, whereas some really do not appreciate the importance of these skills as they do with hard skills. The trainers of Soft skills take much effort to make the students understand the importance of soft skills. Even, they use web technologies like mobile phones, Pod casts, blogs, Wikis to enhance their teaching with the extensive use of e-learning in the classrooms. But the positive impact of this use of technology is really questionable, Since they lack practical intelligence; the intelligence which is otherwise, the managerial, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills. A professional essentially requires all these skills to resolve work-related problems. Considering the time, effort and the expenditure involved in planning and implementing web-based courses, it is disappointing when the results are not up to the expectation of the trainers. This article highlights the problems and the questions on the use of these web technologies to teach soft skills to future Professionals.

The Role of Soft skills in Corporate offices

Most of the leading Business schools and corporate offices around the world expect their employees to be well trained in soft skills like marketing, leadership, decision making, persuasion and

negotiation skills. The economic fluctuation has made these skills more sought after and now the employers are keen to look for something more than cognitive skills. Academic degrees are no longer seen as a reliable sign of students' technical intelligence. The business scenario has totally changed and knowledge is now recognised as the force of productivity and economic growth, leading to a new focus on the importance of information, technology and learning in economic performance. In such a situation, the employees can perform effectively, if they visualize the interpersonal relationships in the workplace, change, update and share themselves with fellow workers. Whether they start their career or change a job, the fundamental problem will be the same as they have to learn, and win in the unpredictable challenges of the work place. As a result, the students of Engineering colleges today need not only to master the technical skills of their job but also master various soft skills, including the ability to communicate, coordinate, work under pressure, and solve problems. Every company has started feeling that soft skills as a core competency that all employees should possess. Because, they have observed that the students who did well academically in the colleges need not necessarily perform well in the work place. The reason may be that the problems that they confront everyday work life often are not connected to their academic intelligence. Practical intelligence is, therefore, quite different from the intelligence associated with academic success. Soft skills could be learnt beyond classroom environment and should be learnt more effectively through real-life situations and practical interactions. As a result, practical intelligence in managing one's career includes knowing which assignment to accept or decline or how to structure the project assignment. Practical intelligence in the workplace is typically obvious, when individuals apply their managerial, self management, interpersonal abilities, knowledge and skills to work-related situations. It is an indicator of entrepreneurial success. A professional with practical intelligence knows which task should be done first. The implicit nature of practical intelligence shows that practical intelligence can be inferred only from actions taken or from statements provided. Moreover, practical intelligence is often suited only to a particular context and may not be suited for other contexts. This implicit nature of practical intelligence differentiates the experts from novices. It suggests that observing and inviting new experiences from the outside world to the contexts in which they work would better help in the growth and success of an individual.

Personality and Soft Skills

The term employability is used to mean " a set of achievements that comprise skills, understanding and personal attribute that make an individual more likely to secure and be successful in his/her chosen occupation to the benefit of him/herself, the workforce, the community and the economy" (Yorke and Knight, 2004). Lankard (1990) defines "Employability skills," as those skills used to "describe the preparation or foundational skills upon which a person must build job-specific skills. Among these foundational skills are those which relate to communication, personal and interpersonal relationships, problem solving, and management of organizational processes". In this sense, employability skills are very much needed for the professionals because they can be applied to many jobs and it can support common preparation to meet the needs of many different jobs. One can also include interview and group discussion skills in the above list. These employability skills can also be otherwise called as "soft skills" which has other names as "people skills", "interpersonal skills" and

“general skills”. Nieragden (2000) defines soft skills in his article, “The Soft Skills of Business English,” as “those personal values and interpersonal skills that determine a person’s ability to fit into a particular structure, such as a project team, a rock group, or a company”. The skills include personality traits like emotional stability, willingness to learn and to share and accept new ideas. Soft Skills are an important aspect of both obtaining employment and succeeding in the workplace. It is generally accepted that soft skills are based on the Emotional Intelligence Quotient (EQ). EQ is a measure of the ability to assess and control both oneself and others. Goleman (1998) lists out four qualities in EQ:

- a. Self- Awareness
- b. Self Management
- c Social Awareness
- d. Relationship Management

These qualities can be considered the basis of work place proficiencies such as: communication skills, team work, conflict management, Assertive skills, information literacy, reasoning, problem solving, technology skills and many more. The importance of these skills should not be underrated. These soft skills incorporate a number of skills, categorised in a different category, with a variety of definitions. Intra personal skills, Interpersonal Skills, communication skills, Thinking Skills. Stevens and Campion suggested a taxonomy of individual competencies in teamwork. They wanted to develop these skills among the professionals within the organisation. Their taxonomy defined five dimensions of competencies:

- (a) conflict resolution (managing effectively and resolving conflict)
 - (b)collaborative problemsolving (recognizing opportunities and involving all teams)
 - (c) communication (including establishing communication networks; verbal, and non-verbal),
 - (d)goal setting and performance management (establishing specific, challenging and realistic goals, then monitoring feedback on performance)
 - (e) planning and task coordination (coordinating tasks and information to establish role expectations).
- Their results from a variety of employment tests (verbal, quantitative, perceptual speed and mechanical ability) showed criterion-related validity of teamwork performance, task performance and overall job performance. One can list out soft skills as follows

- Teamwork skills – which contribute to productive working relationships and the productivity
- Problem-solving skills - which contribute to the ability to solve the problems related to assignments given.
- Initiative and enterprise skills - which contribute to innovative ideas in the execution of the task.
- Planning and organising skills - which contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning.

- Communication skills –Based on Four language skills: Reading, Writing, listening and Speaking which contribute to the harmonious relations between employees and customers
- Self-management skills - which contribute to the professional development and growth
- Learning skills - which contribute to the improvement and expansion of the employees' professional skills
- Technology skills - which contribute to effective execution of tasks.

Soft skills can be described as a blend of interpersonal skills such as Team skills, adaptability, social skills and Intra personal skills such as Self-understanding, values, desire to learn and self management. Hard skills are associated with the technical aspects of performing a job. These skills are primarily cognitive in nature and are influenced by a person's intelligence quotient source, on the other hand, include the technical procedures (ie) how to use a software, coding a program, producing a learning safety instructions, communicating any online content and the like. Though hard and soft skills differ in many ways, they are complementary. In recent years, many companies have begun to recognise the correlation between employees' soft skills and the company's success. Companies spend billions of dollars on training and the identification of soft skills and the methods to develop the skills will increase the productivity as well as the company's profit. By studying the soft skills essential to success in the business environment, a company can

- (1) improve their selection process,
- (2) enhance their initial training process,
- (3) improve their development program,
- (4) strengthen the performance evaluation process, and
- (5) reduce turnover.

Thus, it can reduce the costs related to a business, and increasing profitability. Many studies show that self- management Self-motivation are important for achieving excellence. Hence, if the professional is able to manage himself, he can increase his productivity. At the same time, he can also positively impact his fellow professionals and complete the work on time. Apart from the work at office, he may have to interact with the managers of other firms, with clients and also to his superiors in order to enter into profitable alliances. So, these inter personal skills are soft skills.

Hard skills are generally acquired through education and formal training where as soft skills are typically developed through personal experiences. Though employers continue to evaluate an applicant's future success based on both hard and soft skills, it is quite understood that it is often the soft skills that set a

candidate apart from the other candidates. If one is dealing with a leadership or a management issue, where there is a good deal of ambiguity and uncertainty to the best action, the challenge is to develop a degree of critical thinking, that can take into account different possibilities rather than to generate rote learning and action in it. What counts in soft-skills-framing, obviously, are the qualities of intellectual and interaction stimulation: Trainers of softskills should get students to use reasoning and evidence; they should encourage them to think about old problems in new ways, and to re-think ideas that will benefit them when they join an organisation.

Communication skills are immensely essential for a smart professional. English, being the Business language is full of foreign language words and phrases. It is not only the language of business and international politics, but also that of travel, sports and science, computer software and the music industry. In a Business world, where an Indian marketing officer goes to America for negotiating joint ventures, it is certainly good to know about the main differences between British and American English. It will be very helpful if a future professional learns to neutralise the accent.

The Use of Web Technologies for Soft Skills

Students are usually given soft skills training in educational institutions. Web technologies are widely used to provide effective management training. E-learning seeks to put the learner in control of the learning. It is based on an adult educational model providing learning resources that learner can find the way at his convenience to achieve his or her personal objectives. In that way, web technology tools like pod casts and mobile phones offer resources for effective listening. Moreover, they provide a platform for practicing aural and oral skills. The use of blogs, Skype, wikis, podcasts and mobile phones promote participatory learning and guarantee to a higher level of job performance. Students show a great interest to listen to audio files in MP3 players. Since they are familiar with mobile technology, they are trained in using pod casts and mobile phones for learning employability skills. Pod casts teach them business English expressions and vocabulary in audio format, Podcasts can be easily created by uploading the audio files, recorded in the mobile phones. In other words, it creates a platform for users to receive input from the web and at the same time, facilitates participation in using the software. As a result, the students acquire different employability skills like interpersonal and analytical skills, interview and discussion skills and etiquettes. Mastering of these employability skills may easily help the students learn managerial skills. E-learning technology is eminently suited for basic technical skills training but sometimes do not meet the needs of future professionals who need training in leadership and management education.

Appropriate Integration of Technology According to the learners' needs

The disappointment with E-learning in soft skills education stems from the fact that the effective leadership and management development usually requires a combination of both technical and soft skills education. In soft skills education, it is important to think about how one can integrate the content being communicated, the situation to which it can be applied, and the specific needs of the learner. The challenge is to integrate them in a way to facilitate the understanding and the application required for

soft skills development where and when this is appropriate. Obviously, some employees come to organisations with interpersonal behavior patterns already thoroughly ingrained. One cannot say that they all would have had training. Individuals learn how to deal with relationships and life challenges from their personal experiences. They observe how the people around them do things and decide how they can do it effectively, and they decide what works for them. So everyone has a set of people skills according to their personal experiences, their reflective interpretation and their application. By the time, the students get to a soft skills training room, they have already worked hard for the hard skills. This is why the training program cannot provide enough support to establish new ways needed to change inbuilt behavior patterns. Without reinforcement, even people who want to change are likely to return to their comfortable patterns and end with dysfunctional behaviors. Therefore, it is difficult to rely on a single strategy (ie) Technology for the enhancement of employability skills; a mix of learning and development approaches would be beneficial.

Finally, opportunities for students to develop employability skills should not be developed by faculty in isolation, believing that the students will be benefited. If students are aware of how and why their employability skills are being developed, and recognise the importance of the approach, then they will take ownership of these initiatives, offering far more chance of success. The students should be allowed to own the employability needs to be built in to any teaching principle that informs the specific approach developed for teaching soft skills.

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Author: *Dr. K. R. Vijaya is the Assistant Professor in the Department of English in SRM Easwari Engineering College, Ramapuram, Chennai. She has obtained her doctorate degree from the University of Madras for her thesis on African American Poetry. She is a member of English Language Teachers Association of India (ELTAI). Her keen interest is to enhance the communicative competence among engineering students. She has published several perceptive articles on English language teaching and learning and has presented papers in various national and international conferences.*