

Soft Skills Significance for Learning and Career Achievement

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Abstract

A correct soft skill plays a vital part in a prosperous career as well as throughout social interactions in the culture. These skills are also extremely required after by employers recruiting fresh graduates. The foremost aim of this was to study students' insights of the significance of soft skills for their learning and employ. A study was lead to collect information and 190 undergraduate business management students from four university campuses in India contributed in this study. It is find that a mainstream of the respondents sensed that soft skills were useful for community communication and for profession improvement. Though, they did not assume that these skills add meaningfully to their academic performance. The maximum five significant soft skills accepted by the student were: collaboration and teamwork, problem-solving, critical thinking skills and time management. This paper recommends certain methods for improving soft skills of students which may also help recover their employment perspectives.

Introduction

A diversity of features, today's business environment is attractive more complex, uncertain and competitive. All kinds of organizations reflect human resources as their key advantage, which plays a serious role in organizational concert and achievement. Most proprietors are probable to hire, retain and endorse persons who are ethical, resourceful, and reliable having effective communication, self-directed, eager to work and learn, and having confident attitude [1]. Employers usually favor to see a well blend of capabilities in their staff and, in addition to discipline-based knowledge and skills, satisfactory levels of soft skills are considered necessary for moving forward in the profession [2]. They feel specialized and practical skills alone cannot assist achieve organizational goals and objectives. It is because their staff will also be involved in different levels of leadership and decision-making activities. Employees also require communicating efficiently within the organization, with their clientele and other investors.

Mainly, soft skills bring up to attributes, personalities qualities and personal behaviour of persons. Soft skills comprise certain abilities such as problem-solving, communication, time management skills, decision-making and self-motivation [3]. A study by Burchell and Hodges [4] studied the insights of business owners of the prominence of various skills. It was stated that eight out of top ten skills were soft skills which comprised the aptitude and willingness to learn, cooperation, and team work interpersonal communication, passion and energy, and problem-solving's skills. A study covering over 50 various occupations with more than 7,000 managers in India recognized soft skills of employees as the main capability in approximately all the

professions, even in the technical atmospheres [5]. Though it is currently a well-established fact that employers are progressively setting more prominence on soft skills, it is equally essential that students should also sufficiently escalate the worth of such skills and make thoughtful determinations to obtain them. Porter [6]. Stated that several business students do not put much value to emerging soft skills. Perhaps that is why, as recommended by Rynes et al [7], the business students' approach towards interactive courses, with considerable coverage specified to soft skills growth, is usually bad together with their unwillingness to register for such courses. As a outcome, there is an consciousness gap subsequent in shortage of soft skills among business graduates inflowing the effort force.

Accordingly, there is now more pressure on educational institutions to improve soft skills of their students. Kumara and Sahasranam [8] used a core soft skills record test to examine soft skills of engineering students in India. They stated that, with well-organized training programs, it is likely to tune, shape and develop inspiration and soft skills among entire students. Addams et al [9] understood the communication skills of business students, mainly for inscription persuasive business letters, can be enhanced by designing projects using real-life organizations and circumstances. Lane, Miller and Alshare [10] studied insights of faculty and students of the competence of soft skills in information systems programs in various universities in the INDIA. It was stated that usually students were happier than faculty about the coverage of soft skills. Understanding the significance of soft skills, some studies have also highlighted the point that these skills should be entrenched in the prospectus, thus creating it stress-free for students to obtain them [11, 12].

The literature review proposes that a mainstream of the studies on this subject have been done from proprietors' viewpoint and only a partial numeral of studies have focused on the attitudes and perceptions of students towards soft skills. In addition, a higher percentage of such studies were lead in India with different learning situation and work culture then in many Asian countries. It is, therefore, worth exploring students' insights of soft skills from a new angle and setting. The foremost objective of this study was to examine the insights of business organization students of the significance of soft skills for their education and employ. Some areas enclosed by this study were: students' insights of the value of soft skills, self-efficacy of the level of skills controlled by them, skills requiring further development, contribution in skill growth packages, and the role of academic organizations in emerging soft skills.

1. Methodology

A survey was used to gather figures from undergraduate business organization student from four higher educational institutions in India, i.e. Vishweshwaraya University (VTU), Central University Karnataka (CUK), Osmania University of Hyderabad (Osm), and Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University (JNTU Hyderabad) .The questionnaire was mainly consisted of multiple choice and rating scale matrix questions to solicit responses. Most of the questions were close-ended, however wherever needed, the respondents were provided with the flexibility to make comments or provide additional information. The ethics approval of the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University. The survey participants were selected through the convenience sampling technique. Business management undergraduate students at the four selected universities were approached with an oral request to participate in this study. A copy of questionnaire was provided to those students who expressed their willingness to participate. The survey lasted for two weeks in the second quarter of 2011, and a total of 188 students participated in this study.

3 Findings

The following sections provide data analysis and findings of the survey.

3.1 Respondents' summary

A similar number of contributors from the four academies contributed in this study: VTU (51), CUK (50), OSM (49), and JNTU (44). Five respondents did not fully complete the survey; therefore, the data study is created on 180 completely filled-in survey forms. The percentage of India and overseas students was 68.5% and 32.4% respectively. In terms of gender, more feminine respondents took part (56.7%) than their male counterparts (40.7%). As for the year of study, there were 70 respondents (39 %) in their second year of study and it was the largest group, while 41 (22.8%) were in first year, 54 (26.9%) in third year and only 19 (9.7%) were in their fourth year of study. Five students did not indicate their year of study.

3.2 Awareness of soft skills

The contributing students were requested what skills, in their opinion, can be categorized as soft skills. The purpose was to investigate if they have a clear understanding of soft skills. Based on literature review, a list of 14 skills was developed. Out of the 180 respondents, less than 40 (21.3%) students selected all the skills, which reflect their limited understanding of soft skills. The topmost four soft skills, as recognized by the student, were leadership, communication, negotiation and persuasion skills (see Table 1).

Table 1. Skills considered as soft skills by the respondents (multiple responses)

Ranking	Soft Skills	Frequency (n=180)
1	Communication skills	142
2	Leadership skills	117
3	Persuasion skills	111
4	Negotiation skills	106
5	Conflict management	92
6	Time management	74
7	Problem solving	70
8	Teamwork spirit	71
9	Creative problem solving	71
10	Personal effectiveness	63
11	Strategic thinking	62
12	Confident work attitude	55
13	Enthusiasm to learn	49
14	Desire towards work	43

Certain of the personality qualities such as positive work attitude, willingness to learn and passion towards work were not observed as soft skills by a mainstream of the students. Other soft skills

3.3 Professed significance of soft skills

A set of statements were used to examine students' complete insights of the significance of soft skills. A mainstream of the students whichever granted or powerfully agreed with the declarations that soft skills were very main for career improvement, extremely sought after by employers, and for getting a improved job (see Table 2). In the same way, 103 (55.1%) of the respondents agreed with the idea that soft skills are hard to learn related to expert knowledge and skills. On the conflicting, a mainstream of the respondents either distressed or strongly disagreed with the statements that soft skills cannot be improved through repetition and that these skills were not as significant as expert knowledge and skills. This shows that students have a good thoughtful of the significant and worth of soft skills.

Table 2. General perceptions of soft skills (n=187)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Soft skills are serious for career improvement	7	8	40	84	53
Soft skills are extremely sought after by employers	7	9	42	89.5	35
Soft skills are important for getting a better job	6	9	49	96	35
Soft skills are hard to learn compared to professional knowledge	4	30	47	82	21
Soft skills cannot be enhanced through practice	26	82	46	29	7
Soft skills are not as important as professional knowledge	49	52	39	32	13

SD: strongly disagree, D: disagree, N: neutral, A: agree, SA: strongly agree

Students were also requested to rate the significance of soft skills for various purpose, using a 7-point semantic variance scale. As shown in Table 3, soft skills were considered the utmost vital for 'receiving along with people' (mean score 5.70), followed by 'career advancement' (mean score 5.46). Though, the students felt that such skills were relatively less significant for their academic performance.

Table 3. Importance of soft skills

Purpose	n	Mean (1~7)	SD
Getting along with people	188	6.10	1.36
Career advancement	188	5.48	1.62
Finding a job	188	5.01	1.62
Academic performance	188	4.23	1.81

To additionally verify students' insights of the significance of soft skills, they were requested to rate the comparative significance of a set of 14 skills, resulting from earlier studies, for the purpose of employment. The five top skills were: teamwork, problem solving, leadership, time management and decision-making (see Table 4).

Table 4. Importance of soft skills for employment

Soft Skills	n	Mean (1~7)	SD
Leadership	187	5.33	1.45
Teamwork and collaboration	187	5.27	1.38
Decision-making	187	5.23	1.53
Problem-solving	186	5.58	1.29
Time management	187	5.54	1.26
Passion and optimism	187	5.19	1.15
Critical thinking skills	183	5.17	1.35
Willingness to learn	187	5.56	1.47
Self-motivation and self-direction	186	5.26	1.50
Making presentations	187	4.05	1.64
Small group discussions	187	4.00	1.60
Writing business communications	187	5.91	1.22
Writing proposals	187	5.68	1.19
Writing memoranda	186	5.62	1.14

It was a problem of worry that five communication-related soft skills were apparent to be the least significant looking for employment. It was mainly bamboozling as previous the maximum number (145 or 75.2%) of the respondents reflected it as a soft skill. It means although they reflect communication-related skills as part of soft skills, they do not think these skills are significant in looking for employment in spite of the detail that they want to prepare their job applications and look for interviews.

3.4 Importance of soft skills for different professions

The students were requested to specify the significance of soft skills for various business related professions. Students felt that soft skills were additional significant for those jobs where business professionals need to often communicate and interact with customers and other stakeholders, such job positions as marketing executives, sales personnel and insurance consultants (see Table 5). On the conflicting, they sensed that professionals involved in back office jobs such as financial analysts, auditors, and accounts, need comparatively lesser levels of soft skills. Although business professionals engaged in such jobs probably less frequently communicate with external customers, they still need good soft skills to effectively discharge their responsibilities within the organization.

Table 5. Level of soft skills required by different category of professionals (n=188)

Profession	Mean (1~7)	SD
Marketing Executives	5.56	1.11
Sales Personnel	5.64	1.50
Insurance Service Consultants	5.42	1.40
Media & Advertising Executives	5.22	1.40
Corporate Communications Officers	5.56	1.27
Human Resource Officers	5.54	1.29
Project Management Executives	5.47	1.26
Financial Service Consultants	5.22	1.21
Business Administrators	4.66	1.57
Stock Brokers	4.77	1.66
Bank Executives	4.66	1.67
Financial Analysts	4.66	1.29
Auditors	4.29	1.60
Accountants	3.88	1.66

3.5 Students' perception of the level of soft skills possessed by them

The students were requested about their self-valuation of the level of soft skills possessed by them. The top five soft skills, as demanded by the students were: willingness to learn, teamwork, passion and optimism, time management, and self-motivation and self-direction (see Table 6).

Table 6. Self-assessment of the level of soft skills possessed by the respondents (n=188)

Soft Skills	Mean (1~7)	SD
Willingness to learn	5.42	1.22
Teamwork and collaboration	5.42	1.24
Passion and optimism	5.01	1.20
Time management	5.02	1.34
Self-motivation and self-direction	4.97	1.24
Decision-making	4.97	1.21
Problem-solving	4.98	1.20
Leadership	4.91	1.32
Critical thinking skills	4.91	1.36
Small group discussions	4.83	1.26
Writing proposals	4.63	1.13
Making presentations	4.63	1.46
Writing business communications	4.54	1.22
Writing memoranda	4.42	1.23

Table 7. Correlation between perceived importance and skills level

Soft Skills	Correlation
Willingness to learn	.395(**)
Teamwork and cooperation	.384(**)
Passion and optimism	.355(**)
Time management	.231(**)
Self-motivation and self-direction	.416(**)
Decision-making	.244(**)
Problem-solving	.235(**)
Leadership	.186(*)
Critical thinking skills	.305(**)
Small group discussions	.524(**)
Writing proposals	.121
Making presentations	.529(**)
Writing business communications	.184(*)
Writing memoranda	.259(**)

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

3.4 Desire for improving soft skills

The respondents were asked to choose what soft skills they would like to improve. The top two soft skills that students wanted to improve were leadership and communication skills (see Table 8). Earlier these skills were also picked as the two utmost significant soft skills (see Table 1). However, it was interesting to note that when communication skills were divided into more specific communication skills (see Table 4), these skills received the lowest ranking. It appeared there were some misperceptions among the students about the scope of different Communication skills

Table 8. Soft skills needing improvement (multiple responses)

Ranking	Soft Skills	Frequency (n=188)
1	Leadership skills	88
2	Communication skills	87
3	Persuasion skills	83
4	Negotiation skills	80
5	Conflict resolution	79
6	Time management	71
7	Strategic thinking	68
8	Problem solving	63
9	Personal effectiveness	62
9 (tied)	Creative problem solving	62
11	Positive work attitude	39
12	Willingness to learn	38
13	Teamwork spirit	35
14	Passion towards work	34

The next two soft skills that students wanted to improve were persuasion and negotiation skills. Four soft skills that only 20% or fewer students wanted to improve were positive work attitude, willingness to learn, teamwork spirit, and passion towards work. It was probably because earlier only a very lesser number of the students considered these skills as part of soft skills (see Table 1).

3.7 Barrier to developing and practicing communication skills

As many previous studies suggest that a majority of the students lack adequate communication skills, students participating in this study were asked about the barriers encountered by them in developing and practicing different communication skills. The top four barriers, as identified by the students, were: lack of confidence, nervousness, shyness, and lack of proper training (see Table 9).

Table 9. Barriers to practicing communication skills (n=188)

	Barriers	Frequen cy
1	Lack of confidence	89
2	Nervousness	88
3	Shyness	59
4	Lack of proper training	58
5	Non-encouraging environment	51
6	Language deficiency	48
7	Lack of knowledge	47
8	Cultural barriers	38

Although around one-third of the respondents were from overseas, limited English language proficiency and cultural difference did not appear as the major barriers to communication. It appeared that proper training and adequate opportunities to practice are likely to improve communication skills of the students.

3.8 Efforts by academic institutions for imparting soft skills

The students were asked about the avenues and opportunities provided by their respective universities for developing soft skills. Around 54% of the students said that soft skills were usually embedded in different academic courses. Another 47% of the students mentioned that they had taken some credit courses that focused on developing certain soft skills. Some examples of such credit courses, as quoted by the students, were: Business Communication, Strategic Management, Leadership and Team- Building, Management Communication, Effective Communication, Fundamental Communication, Creative Problem-solving, and Strategic Thinking.

In addition to integrating soft skills in certain professional courses and specialized soft skills development credit courses, the universities of the participating students were also providing many opportunities to their students to improve soft skills. A list of such activities, compiled through discussions with business students and their school administrators, was provided in the questionnaire to allow the respondents to indicate their level of participation in these activities. Table 10 shows that, except for 'students coffee sessions', other programs were 'often' participated by less than 20% of the students. Most of the programs that could help develop students' soft skills were 'rarely' participated by a majority of the students. It appeared that the students were heavily relying on business professional courses as well as specialized courses designed for improving certain skills and to lesser extent on other soft skills development programs.

Table 10. Participation in soft skills development programs (n=187)

Programs/Activities	Never	Rarely	Often
Workshops/ guest talks	11.2 %	70.1 %	18.7 %
Job hunting skills	18.2 %	65.8 %	16.0 %
Company orientation sessions	22.5 %	58.8 %	18.7 %
Career advising sessions	27.8 %	55.6 %	16.6 %
Students coffee sessions	27.8 %	49.2 %	23.0 %

In addition, a set of statements were used to capture students' perceptions of the possible benefits of different school-based initiatives in improving their soft skills. These statements presented both positive and negative sides of these programs. More than 61% of the students either agreed or strongly agreed with three statements suggesting that soft skills programs provided them opportunities to gain hands-on experience, boosted their skill levels, and showed ways to apply soft skills in different situations (see Table 11). However, split responses were received for two statements suggesting that content of these soft skills programs were less relevant and cannot be easily applied into practice. More respondents disagreed than agreed with the statement that these programs were only theoretical in nature. In other words they believed that skills taught through these programs had their applicability.

Table 11. Perceptions of the benefits of soft skills programs (multiple responses)

Statements	SD	D	N	A	SA
Provided opportunities for hands-on experience	5	5	54	99	24
Provided me opportunities to boost my soft skills	6	5	57	85	34
Showed adaptability of soft skills in many situations	3	11	59	92	22
The contents are not so relevant with soft skills improvement	7	45	75	53	7
The contents cannot be easily applied into practice	10	42	77	45	12
Showed the usefulness of soft skills only in theory	19	41	74	37	15

SD: strongly disagree, D: disagree, N: neutral, A: agree, SA: strongly agree

3.7 Suggestions for improving students' soft skills

The respondents were requested to suggest measures that universities should undertake for improving soft skills of their students. Over 60% of the students recommended that more soft skills development activities should be incorporated into the curriculum (see Table 12). Two other measures suggested by around 45% of the students were to organize more soft skills development workshops and hands-on activities. Once again it appeared that, instead of attending specialized soft skills development workshops, a majority of the students desired that such skills should be embedded in appropriate professional courses.

Table 12. Soft skills development measures to be undertaken taken by universities (multiple responses)

Suggested Measures	Frequency
Incorporate more soft skills development activities into the curriculum	114
Organize more workshops	84
Organize more hands-on activities	81
Arrange more internship programs	75
Organize more company orientation talks	54

In addition, the respondents were requested to suggest measures that students should undertake for improving their soft skills. Nearly one-half of the respondents suggested that students should attend professional training workshops for improving their soft skills (see Table 13). It was also suggested by 42% of the respondents each that students should join those hobby clubs and students' union activities that can help improve their soft skills.

Table 13. Soft skills development measures to be undertaken by students (multiple responses)

Suggested Measures	Frequency
Attend professional training workshops	93
Join hobby clubs providing soft skills development opportunities	79
Participate in activities organized by the student unions	72
Read books and articles on soft skills-related topics	70

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine students' perceptions of the importance of soft skills for education and employment. The results showed that generally business management students in India were aware of the importance of soft skills for employment and career advancement. However, many students felt that their actual soft skills were less than the desired levels. It was also found that communication skills were perceived to be the least important by the students and probably that is why they did not try to improve these skills. It was a matter of concern as many previous studies, investigating competencies sought after by potential employers, reported that communication skills were among the most desired soft skills. Thus there is need to create awareness among the students about the importance of communication skills for career advancement and how to develop and practice such skills. Another related finding was that a majority of the students expressed the opinion that soft skills training should be embedded in appropriate business courses. Probably this approach was preferred because it could provide an opportunity to the students to understand how to apply these skills in a specific situation. It is also possible that they feel overloaded with professional courses thus less inclined to attend specialized soft skill development programs organized by their universities. It is, therefore, desirable that business schools as well as other schools should carefully review and incorporate the desired soft skills into their curricula. However, they should also continue running specialized training workshops to help students further improve their soft skills. It is equally important that students should also make efforts for improving their skills level through self-directed readings and participation in appropriate skills development programs and activities.

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