

IMPORTANCE AND NECESSITY OF SOFT SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMS: THE NEED OF THE HOUR

Soma Banerjee^{#1}

[#]Faculty- Department of English

Yogoda Satsanga Mahavidyalaya- Centre for Vocational Studies,
Jagannathpur, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

¹Email: soma@ysmcvs.org

Abstract-This paper aims at exploring the necessity and impact of teaching personality development and communication skills. This paper also makes a study of the importance of soft skills in students' lives both at college as well as after college, in their professional life and puts emphasis on necessity of soft skills training programs. It also discusses how soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job and how the student could be trained to do so. India is one of the developing countries. It is blessed with a lot of manpower resources but it is not being utilized in an appropriate way. The young generation has lots of qualification and many of them are getting good job opportunities also, but employers prefer to hire and promote those persons who possess soft skills. Hard skills and experience are not enough to survive and shine in the corporate world. The employability may be achieved by inculcating some skills, such as: Self-Management, Good Communications Skills, Expert at Managing people and tasks, Mobilizing Innovation and Changing mindset. This paper is an attempt to emphasize the necessity of incorporating soft skills training programs in curriculum, highlighting the objectives of soft skills and various teaching methods to be applied.

Keywords— soft skills, communication skills, training, personality development, curriculum, importance, success

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's world, where only the fittest of the lot survives, it has become very essential to sharpen one's technical skills, and more importantly, one's soft skills. In today's fast paced life, everyone is asked to do more with less resource. In such a scenario effective communication holds the key. The success of an endeavour depends upon the ability to communicate effectively and efficiently. Effective

communication revolves around the usage of words, speed of delivery of words, pitch modulation and body language. Using the right tools to communicate the right message at the right time can save a crisis and motivate people to work towards success. Truly said, communication works but for those who work at it. Communication skills are as important as technical qualifications for youngsters aiming at a bright career. Poor communication skill, low confidence, improper body language and lack of soft skills have resulted out in job race. Proper communication skills help people in understanding each other and working towards a goal.

Technical skills can be acquired, applied and measured to a certain level, but the same is not true when it comes to soft skills. Soft skill is a sociological term that is used to define an individual's Emotional Intelligence (EQ). It can be more clearly defined as personal credits that enhance an individual's job and career prospects. Be it face to face customer interaction or indirect correspondence like-telephonic conversation or through e-mail, an employee's mastery over soft skills can achieve both individual as well as organizational success. According to Serby Richard (2003), modern corporate requirements have become such that now they look specifically for those candidates who can add value to their organization with their soft skills and it is the ability to develop and use soft skills in a perfect way which can make the difference between a job offer and enjoyment of new employment.

This requirement of soft skills in a job has made the competition for job acquisition and job sustainability even tougher than ever before. Every career oriented candidate who wishes to get an edge over their competitor is expected to refine his soft skills. Thus in order to succeed in this competitive era, besides the domain of knowledge today's professionals have to encompass a high soft skills quotient. For inculcating soft skills in them they must be provided with trainings which has today become an essential part of the curriculum. This will help them groom their complete personality which in turn will help them secure a respectable position in the corporate world and society at large.

It is said that hard skills contribute to only 15% of one's success while remaining 85% is made by soft skill (Watts M and Watts R. K, 2008). To ensure commendable placements it's very essential that soft skills trainings are incorporated in the curriculum.

Let us Look into what Actually Soft Skills Mean?

Before debating about the importance of soft skills we need to clarify the question "What actually soft skills mean?" This is not an easy question to answer, because the perception of what actually soft skill is differs from context to context. To start with we can say that soft skills are personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, career prospects and job performances. Social graces, way of communicating, use of language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that characterize relationships with other individuals and society at large, everything comes under one roof and that is soft skills. A subject may be considered to be soft skill in one particular area, while it may be considered as hard skill in another. These skills are also defined by abilities that can be practiced, such as leadership, empathy, communication and sociability.

Wikipedia says "Soft skills refer to the cluster of personality traits, social graces, and mastery over language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark people to varying degrees.

Soft skills and hard skills, both are the occupational requirements of a job and many other activities and they both complement each other. They are related to feelings, emotions, insights and an 'inner knowing': i.e. they provide an important complement to 'hard skills' and IQ.

Table I
Showing Examples of Soft Skills

Communication skills	Responsibility
Critical and structured thinking	Etiquette and good manners
Problem solving skills	Courtesy
Creativity	Self-esteem
Teamwork capability	Sociability
Negotiating Skills	Empathy
Self-management	Work ethic
Time management	Integrity / Honesty

All the examples mentioned in the table fall under soft skills. Wikipedia says 'If communication skill is the ability to convey information to other and putting forth ones opinion effectively and efficiently then critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of skilfully and actively conceptualizing, applying, analysing, synthesizing, and evaluating information generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, and communication, as a guide to belief and action'. Likewise 'creativity is the tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others'. Besides all these, ability to work, co-operate and lead the team, having a perfect time management, being self-esteemed and having empathy, capacity to share and recognize emotions experienced by others are also essential tools of soft skills and these need to be developed which is not possible without proper training and guidance.

II. NEED OF DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS

Technical and job-related skills are a must, but when it comes to progressing up the ladder even these are not sufficient. Soft skills play a very

crucial role in this strong commercial age. Today a huge mass of qualified job seekers exist in the society and the competition within them for job acquisition and job sustainability has become much tougher as compared to previous time. To get an edge over their competitors they are left with no other choice but to blend their hard skills with soft skills in a perfect way to exhibit their true potential. If one has gained mastery over advanced soft skills, then definitely he will be able to establish himself as distinct amongst other job seekers.

Citing the importance of including soft skills in colleges, Thacker and Yost (2002) noted that students require training to be effective team members. Employers often face a typical situation and that is- "most of the business graduates lack good team leadership skills". Similarly, according to Knell and et.al. (2007) employers are continually asking for a work force rich in creativity, communication skills and cultural understanding.

The National Employers Skills Survey 2003, reported that employers regard shortages in soft skills, including communication, teamwork, and customer focus and responsiveness as far more crucial than hard or technical skills (Watkins, 2004). Poor soft skills like communication skills create a negative impression with employers during the recruitment phase and may exclude a graduate with good technical skills from being selected for employment and rather one having good command on communication skills as well as technical skills is preferred (Pauw and et al, 2006).

III. CAN PERSONAL TRAITS AND HABITS BE CHANGED?

We now know that a large part of soft skills are related to personal traits and habits. Thus, an interesting question that arises here is- can a person's traits and habits be changed or improved. Anybody who is dealing with children or students from various backgrounds or living with a partner, who has irritating habits, might instantly come up with the answer that

the task of changing personal traits may not be impossible but it is extremely difficult. The corporate trainer and instructional designer Rukmini Iyer has a strikingly simple answer to this question: "There is a lot of argument in industry as to whether it is possible to enhance soft skills in a few hours of training, especially when one considers the fact that a person has lived with those traits all his life. To this, the answer is harsh but real -- a professional who wants to do well in his / her career does not really have a choice." (Iyer, 2005).

As a German proverb states:

"Self-recognition is the first step towards improvement". As soon as one could identify any deficit in oneself, he/she can start working for its elimination. For example many people are not much fond of doing small talks. The actual reasons might vary from shyness to introvert character, boredom to unwillingness and many more. However, these little talks are an important part of communication skills which is necessary to display social competence. Once a person could acknowledged this truth, he can undergo a simple self-training or guided training to improve the skill in which he is lacking behind. So, it can be said that negatively perceived personal traits could be changed or successfully overcome by undergoing self-imposed training. The only condition is that one could acknowledge one's weakness and take the right decision at right time to change it. Training will most likely be unsuccessful if one is not fully convinced that it will lead to any improvement or that the improvement will be beneficial for them but once a person actually starts working towards it with full devotion, it could bring miraculous results.

IV. SOFT SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMS: NEED OF THE HOUR

Today lack of proficiency in soft skill is regarded as one of the reasons of poor rate of employability of technical graduates. It's very important that soft skill should be inculcated at

a very young age at home but the role of soft skill training in schools and colleges cannot be ignored either. Soft skills training programs aims at improving a whole range of skills right from assertiveness to negotiation skills, communication skills and the skill to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships. Soft skills are recognised as those capabilities that are inherent in an individual. These competencies exist in every individual to a certain degree but in most of the cases the individual is unaware of these inherent qualities in themselves and can't use them as desired. The aim of any soft skills training program is to remove these blocks or the barriers that prevent the individual from utilizing his/ her skills. Soft skills training makes the individual aware of his / her hidden capabilities and helps him/her refine it for an overall development and success. Everyone can get benefit from the soft skills training irrespective of the skills they have inherited.

V. OBJECTIVES OF SOFT SKILL TRAINING PROGRAMS

The objectives of these training programs are that the students should be able to- develop effective communication skills and communicate efficiently, develop effective presentation skills and able to present oneself impressively, conduct effective business correspondence and prepare business reports which can produce results, become self-confident individuals by mastering interpersonal, team management, and leadership qualities, develop broad career plans, evaluate the employment market, identify the organizations to get good placement, match the job requirements and skill sets and take part in various selection procedures adopted by the recruiters. The ultimate objective is to make an all-round development in the students and help them grow a matured outlook which will enable them to function effectively in different situations.

VI. PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT AND SOFT SKILLS

At the Soft Skills training programs training should be imparted to refine the students' attitudes, motivation, desires, feelings, values, beliefs, eagerness to learn, willingness to share and embrace new ideas, flexibility, persuasion, futuristic thinking, diplomacy, goal orientation, and various skill sets of communication, manners, and etiquette so that they could be able to deal with different situations diligently and with responsibility. Soft skills strengthen them from within and empower them to face adverse situations with confidence. Not only this, these skills empower the students with the ability to understand "who they are" and how best they can come across as competent individuals in any situation. The training in soft skills can be divided into two parts. The first part involves developing attitudes and attributes, while the other one involves fine-tuning communication skills to enable students to express attitudes, ideas, and opinions in an effective way. Attitudes and skills are integral parts of soft skills. They both influence and complement each other. Grooming of the students generally begins with a preliminary test of the English language to evaluate their level of competence in the use of English for effective communication both oral as well as written. This gives the student the basic idea that a manager's key job is to be able to express himself clearly, correctly, and concisely. To achieve optimum results module made for training programs must focus on giving stress on language, communication skills and behavioural skills.

VII. TEACHING METHODOLOGY

The teaching methods in the soft skills training must include motivational lectures, seminars, projects, role plays, debates, group discussions, quizzes, and various other participatory sessions which would provide the students a stage to exhibit their talent. This method is known as learning by doing. Since the method of training

is experiential and highly interactive, the students imbibe the skills and attributes over the duration of the program in a gradual and subtle way. The students not only learn the skills and attributes but also internalize them over a period of time. Internalization ensures that the skills and attributes that they have acquired over a period of time gradually become part of the students' nature. Subtle changes are bound to occur in their behaviour and outlook, and these will make them more self-assured and confident. Moreover, the behaviour changes will be gradual and natural and will not appear to be artificial. Thus, the changes in them will be genuine and positive. These welcome changes will further help the students in their personal as well as professional life and help them lead a successful and prestigious life.

VIII. WHAT CAN LECTURERS DO TO ENHANCE THE SOFT SKILLS OF THEIR STUDENTS?

The first step in improving soft skills of students is to raise their awareness about the importance of soft skills and the consequences of shortcomings in this regard. Especially in India, students are not much aware of the changing trend and have a casual approach towards such courses. First of all students should be made aware of the changing trends and they should be encouraged to enhance their soft skills by applying some effective methods like reading dedicated books, attending courses, and joining clubs or societies to broaden their horizon, like debating societies or scientific societies who offer presentations and discussions. A formal approach to the problem would be to incorporate soft skills training into a programme's curriculum. On lower levels a course that requires students to do a bit of research and present their results to the class afterwards has been proven to be effective. On graduate level a course on management skills, including some communication skills together with the management of time, conflict, cultural issues, general topic of major importance, have been well received by the students. Students

have shown interest in such courses. However, very often the curricula are already overloaded with hard skills courses, making it almost impossible to add or substitute courses. Many a times the students are not left with enough time to dedicate their time towards grooming their personality. Furthermore, it is also possible that other lecturers might be ignorant of the importance of soft skills and hence, do not support dedicated courses in this regard. A very elegant way of offering soft skills training to students is to embed it into the teaching of hard skills. This way, no changes have to be done in the programme's curriculum; instead the change will be reflected in the lecturers' teaching methodology and at the same time the purpose will also be served.

IX. METHOD OF EVALUATION

Since the Soft Skills training program is a credit course so the evaluation of the students takes place on a continuous basis. The main criteria for evaluation include- active participation of the students in various interactive activities, interest displayed by them in acquiring the necessary attributes and skills, and the commitment shown by them to improve in terms of attitudes. The effectiveness of the training session is enhanced through a two-way feedback. Wherever needed, the trainer gives feedback to individual students about their performance and to the class in general. In turn, the students also give feedback about the training sessions. They are encouraged to give suggestions regarding the content and the delivery of the training sessions so that improvements could be made in the program modules from time to time whenever the necessity is felt. The counsellors will also give a feedback to the students about their strengths and the areas where they need development. Encouraging the students whenever they become nervous or start losing confidence is also essential.

X. CONCLUSION

The trend today is such that more and more corporations around the world recognise the fact that in order to gain a competitive advantage people must know how to handle themselves at work. Hard skills are essential to get through in an interview but it is the soft skills that keep the job. Competition is fierce and it is the soft skills that make one stand out distinct from the others. Soft skills are critical for both success and survival. With the formation of knowledgeable societies, the importance of communication has increased manifold. It raises awareness and helps meet information needs. It motivates the people for a purpose and helps in the development of individual organisation, society and nation. Effective communication has a special role to play, particularly in an under developed country like India where most of the workers are illiterate. Here better communication helps in better performance in job and illiteracy there bears less importance. Effective communication and interpersonal skills are crucial in increasing employment opportunities, competing successfully in the business environment. The master key to the effectiveness of professionals is their ability to put their domain knowledge into effective practice. In this context soft skills have a crucial role to play.

To conclude, the soft skill program is about enabling and empowering today's generation. Soft skills are very essential for any individual, which are needful for development in various kinds of institutions. These training programs help the students have a smooth transition from aspiring students to young successful managers. Therefore this paper throws light on the need of soft skills training programs in colleges and workplaces and the need to reduce this lacunae that is existing in the students by introducing such training programs. The paper also puts forth some suggestions for making above initiatives more effective and for developing students fully, equipped with relevant soft skills.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Audibert,G. and James,M The softer side :Advisor today 2002,97(2),72
- [2]. Hewitt Sean(2008) "9 soft skills for success",www.askmen.com
- [3]. NAWA, Journal of Language and Comunication, June 2008
- [4]. Thacker A Rebecca and Yost A Christine(2002),"Training Students to become effective workplace team leaders" Team Performance Management,Vol.8,No3/4,pp.89-94
- [5]. Tracey, W.R. *The Human Resources Glossary*. USA: CRC Press, 2004
- [6]. Iyer, Rukmini: <http://us.rediff.com/getahead/2005/jun/30soft.htm>
- [7]. Phani, Challa Ram: <http://in.rediff.com/getahead/2007/jan/08soft.htm>
- [8]. PISA: www.pisa.oecd.org
- [9]. Wikipedia: www.en.wikipedia.com
- [10]. www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/766
- [11]. biginterview.com/.../behavioral-interview-question-problem-solving.htm.
- [12]. www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english