

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS : THE NEED OF THE GRADUATES AND THE EMPLOYER

1. INTRODUCTION

Securing a good job after college and finding an exiting place to begin the career is the prime focus of every fresh graduate. How to influence the hearts and minds of the employer? The question always looms large in the minds of every fresh graduate who wishes to unlock the secret to impress and win over the employer. Desire of success in the job market and how to click the first job becomes an issue of survival. In such a situation it becomes even more vital to understand and accept the fact that the degree alone is not sufficient to survive the Job Market. It certainly makes their candidature eligible to apply for that particular job. The subjects / specialization and grades/marks obtained etc. are also equally important. However in the present competitive scenario there is a strong possibility of abundance of equally qualified and competent candidates.

There has always been a gap between employers expectations and what the colleges produce , one has to understand and accept the fact that the employers are looking for attributes beyond the qualification .*Employers look for people who would 'Fit In' and become a valued part of the organisation and can start contributing to get the job done without delay. While high chances are that most of the employers will be on the lookout for some job-specific skills but it is also true that at the same time they also want the candidate to have some general skills. During the recruitment process a candidate may face questions about both job-specific skills and general employability skills with equal emphasis.*

Now the big question is how does a fresh graduate equip him/her self to face the challenges in the job market and what are unique combination of skills , attributes and values that are most sought after by the employers from fresh graduates.

A graduate's achievements related to the subject discipline are viewed as necessary by the employers but not sufficient for them to be recruited. In some employment contexts the actual subject discipline may be relatively unimportant. Achievements outside the boundaries of the discipline (such as the possession of so-called 'soft skills') are generally considered to be important in the recruitment of graduates¹

The employers seek a range of skills or in other words the Employability Skills, which are some times referred to as the Generic skills, in a graduate during the hiring process. They are looking for a mix of skills, abilities, interests, values and personal qualities. Most of these skills are

common to a number of different career areas

The employability skills are both important to the employers for recruitment of right candidates but also to an individual for being able secure a job, retain employment and move flexibly in the job market as well as for lifelong learning. Employability involves much more than the ability of an individual to secure that first job. It entails having the capability to network and market oneself, traverse through a career and remain employable throughout life. It requires the ability to ask questions, acquire new skills, identify and evaluate options, flexibility, adapt successfully to changes and to take initiatives.

What are skills for employability? Why are employability skills important? and How can a fresh graduate develop these skills. Answers to these questions are dealt with here.

2. WHAT IS EMPLOYABILITY?

Employability Definition: The ILO defines employability skills as: The skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance a worker's ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure another job if he/she so wishes or has been laid off and enter more easily into the labour market at different periods of the life cycle. Individuals are most employable when they have broad-based education and training, basic and portable high-level skills, including teamwork, problem solving, information and communications technology (ICT) and communication and language skills. This combination of skills enables them to adapt to changes in the world of work.

Employability can be defined as: 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy'³

Employability is an assessment of the economic worth of a graduate at the time of employment. Employability can be defined as the enhanced capacity to secure and maintain employment. It is a set of transferable skills.

Whilst Graduateness may be seen as a statement of a level of knowledge skills and understanding, employability is concerned with the way in which those who have completed university courses can be assimilated into national / international work environment.⁴

A group of essential abilities that involve the development of a knowledge base, expertise level and mindset that is increasingly necessary for success in the modern workplace. Employability skills are typically considered essential qualifications for many job positions and hence have become necessary for an individual's employment success at just about any level within a business environment.

It is not the same as getting a job, rather it implies to a graduate's capacity to survive in a job and be able to move between jobs, thus remaining employable throughout life. It is the possession of skills and competence to survive in a work situation. Skills necessary for self advocacy and networking to cope with the changing circumstances, be active in the maintenance of continuous learning and capable of working within changing teams.

Traditionally these skills were learned on-the-job but the changing nature of work place is such that employers expect workers to come with employability skills in hand, employers are seeking recruits who are job ready, not just those with technical skills.

3. EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS CATEGORIES

Employability skills can be categorized based on three factors.

- Communication Skills
- Technical/ Professional Skills
- Core Employability Skills or Personal Attributes

Even though the *Core Employability Skills* are the most important they can only be measured in relative terms through psychometric analysis abilities of the interviewer. *Communication Skills and Professional Skills* are the ones which are measured easily during the recruitment process.

- **Communication Skills:** Survival in today's corporate environment involves interaction with clients and managerial staff on a day to day basis. Communication skills are the media for sharing knowledge, interests, attitudes, opinions, feelings, and ideas in order to influence and ultimately lead others. Communication skills include the ability to: listen and express verbally as well as non verbally to gain understanding both formally as well as informally.

These skills usually get displayed during an interview conversation and when targeting success in the Interview as well as the workplace makes it necessary to give adequate importance to good communication. During direct interview emphasis is given on way the candidate converses and conveys his/ her views and ideas across to the listener. The candidate's ability in verbal and written communication, ability to clearly articulate thoughts, fluency using correct grammar, good vocabulary and comprehension skills are

important things that are assessed by the recruiter during the hiring process.

Good command over communication abilities is given high importance where the job requires the employee to make regular presentations and direct interaction with the client/ customers. Soft skills in English are stressed during evaluation of communication skills⁶

Listening Skills: One needs to be an active listener, good listening ability is vital for interpersonal communication. During the interview giving an appropriate response to a question is possible only when one is able to listen (i. e. actively listen)

Verbal Communication: The ability to express ideas clearly and confidently in speech comes under verbal communication. It is the main form of communication during a face to face or telephonic interview. Grammar and fluency in English language, good vocabulary, command over pronunciation, diction and voice modulation etc. and above all confidence will help the candidate to convey his or her message to the interview.

Written Communication: Conveying of the ideas and the message through written text is considered under written communication skills. Importance is given to good written communication in the jobs where the ability to write well enough to be understood in emails and memos is required.

Reading Skills: To be able to understand and comprehend the message and drive out the relevant information from written text. Ability to follow instructions from written information gives an edge during job survival.

- **Professional Skills:** These skills are the ones even though developed through education but are required to compete, enter and sustain the professional world. These include various shades of Academic skills

Aptitude Skills: An **aptitude** is a component of a competency to do a certain kind of work at a certain level which can also be considered as talent Aptitudes may be mental aptitude or physical or some times both are taken into consideration like in defense services.

While researching, the job requirements and job description, candidates may come across something about aptitude listed among the requirements. For example, to work in a particular field an aptitude for science may be required. Other occupations require having an aptitude in math, visual arts or performing arts; verbal or spatial abilities; or manual dexterity or motor coordination. But, what exactly is an aptitude?

When ever aptitude is listed in the job description, among the qualifications required to work in an occupation, it

referrers to a natural talent or the ability an individual has acquired through life experience, academics or training. It may also pertain to the capacity of the applicant to acquire a skill.

Analytical Skills/ Data Analysis : The ability of inspecting, cleaning, transforming, and modeling [data](#) for the purpose of obtaining and assimilating useful [information](#), suggesting conclusions, and supporting decision making.

Computer/ Technical Skills: Technical skills are required in occupations that involve the ability to perform certain tasks in a specific discipline or department. Examples of technical skills include learning new procedures and adapting them at work, analyzing data, analyzing problems, advising people, innovating and thinking of new solutions, evaluating data, locating missing information, listening to others, delegating, managing people, motivating other people, communication, analyzing information, developing plans for projects and refining the existing plans as necessary, and coordinating with the deadlines.

Academic Knowledge: Academic skills are obtained through formal education or apprenticeship. They can be further divided into domain specific skills and domain-general skills these include Learning Styles, Concentration, Time Management and Comprehension ability

Some of these skills get assessed during the written tests, and then during a face to face interview. Internship and project work undertaken during the course usually reflect a lot about the candidate's capability and the subject knowledge and its application. From an employer's perspective it is important for a fresher to understand and appreciate sound academic knowledge.

4. CORE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS OR PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

Skills that make the candidates stand apart from the general lot, essentially the 'Attitude ' of the candidate.

Good Personal Presentation: The first impression on a potential employer can make a big difference. The first judgment an interviewer makes will be based on how professionally well dressed the candidate is. That's why it's always important to dress appropriately. Personal grooming and dress conveys a strong, professional, positive image to others which inspires confidence

Timekeeping and Personal Organization: Manage time effectively; prioritizing tasks and able work to deadlines, able to plan activities & carry them through effectively are sought after by the interviewer.

Teamwork, Collaboration and Co-Operation: the ability to be good at working productively and effectively with people towards a common goal. This includes both workmates and

other people who come into contact with the organisation. Teamwork requires to work confidently within a group, recognising & respecting different perspectives being open to the ideas & views of others. Teamwork is a high priority for most employers; being able to work well with colleagues is essential. Employers, therefore, are looking for individuals who can bring different strengths to teams – monitoring or evaluating progress; urging the team on when needed; contributing innovative new ideas.

Leadership/ Management Skills: To be able to motivate and direct others are an indicator to the growth potential in a job and future in the company. The ability to encourage teammates to succeed, take charge and guide discussions all reflect leadership skills.

Good Work Ethics: Employers want candidates who are able to get on with the work independently and reliably without someone having to check up on every five minutes. To be able to stay on and comply with their own deadlines and be able to delegate tasks to make sure things get done on time are the skills covered under good work ethics.

A small example of candidate not coming on time can question is/her *Reliability and Self-discipline*. There is no scope for false information. Honesty towards oneself should always be given top priority, even if one gets through with a lie, it will never take them far and eventually would lead to problem.

Positive Attitude: Displaying a 'can do' approach or in other words putting across the philosophy of approaching life with optimism and confidence reflects the positive mindset of the candidate. All employers greatly appreciate the positive attitude in the candidate.

Willingness to Learn: the professional world is far ahead than the academic curriculum covered in the college. A candidates willingness pick up new things quickly, inclination for continuous learning throughout life and develop the competencies needed for current & future roles will influence the interviewer in your favour.

Self Awareness: Awareness of achievements, abilities, values & weaknesses, candidates views on the current and future plans i.e. what they want out of life are considered important by the employer. This helps in recognising development opportunities – for the benefit of candidate and the organisation.

Problem Solving and Decision Making Skills : In order to succeed in the workplace (and in life generally) individuals need to be able to evaluate information or situations; break them down into their key components; consider various ways of approaching and resolving them; and decide which is the most appropriate. These managerial skills help to determine the best course of action, evaluate options based

on logic & facts to arrive at a workable solution is appreciated at the workplace and include recognizing long-term consequences of solutions to problems and probing, devising, implementing, and evaluating a plan of action for problem resolution.

Employers want workers who will take the personal responsibility to make sure targets are met; who can see that there might be a better way of doing something and who are prepared to research and implement change; people who don't panic or give up when things go wrong but who will seek a way around the problem.

Negotiation Skill and Networking : Ability to influence and convince others, to discuss and reach agreement, to be able to build and nurture contacts and relationships with others, and to utilise them appropriately in order to support the development of self, other individuals involved and the organisation.

Reliability, Integrity, Dependability: The candidates ability to adhere to standards & procedures, maintains confidentiality and question inappropriate behavior is given value by the employers.

Flexibility: While working on the job there are good chances of changes in the nature of the job and to the structure of workplace. To be able to cope and adapt successfully to changing situations & environments, is a skill which will help in surviving on the job The ability to take on new tasks and to meet the needs of a changing workplace is considered under flexibility skills.

Initiative and Enterprise: Employers give value to the candidate's ability to think creatively and to positively contribute in making improvements to the existing things.

Consistency in performance: To be able to withstand stress and pressures with demonstrated efforts to continuously perform as per the requirements. A go getter attitude is a definite winner. Determination to get things done, make things happen & constantly looking for better ways of doing things all reflect a candidate's ability of consistent performance.

Use of Modern Tools and Technology: Modern office is 100 percent Technology driven. Familiarity and competence over computer and other equipments that are generally used on the job will be an added advantage. Knowledge of other technology related to the area of specialization is also expected from the candidate..

The list is long and for those just embarking on the professional world after finishing studies but it's intimidating. Most of these skills are not occupation specific and not all these skills and abilities are required for every job, nor does every job-seeker need every single one of

them, but a good combination of the broad skill categories is desirable. It is important to keep in mind that many of the skills/abilities listed get developed as one gains more and more experience in the workplace.

Some recruiters refer to this set of skills as generic, catalytic, core and/or employability. They define a person rather than his/her academic knowledge. It is relatively challenging to measure these skills in a candidate with-in a short time, but face to face interview conversations does reveal and help uncover these skills.

5. WHY ARE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS GIVEN SO MUCH IMPOTANCE?

These skills are important for both the employers as well as those on the threshold of starting their careers and entering the job market

As recent as the last decade, employee training was commonplace, meaning that new recruits learned these skills on the job. The shift from extensive training began after the 2003 recession as companies became more cost conscious and did not want to spend on workers to gain skills and learn about work culture only to watch them defect to competitors. This intensified in the economic and employment crisis of 2007-2009. In the current globalised world the work place are becoming more complex , profits are getting slimmer, companies are becoming leaner and the employers expect the workers to become productive much faster than ever before. Today the recruiters seek assurances that graduates applying for jobs have at least strong foundation skills and can deploy their knowledge to solve problems, take initiative and communicate with team members, rather than just follow prescribed routines.

For the fresh graduates having employability skills is essential not only to gain employment but also to survive on the job. They will be able to respond quickly to the situation, offer new ideas and perform more effectively Enhanced flexibility means that they will be able to adapt and adjust easily to technological change and organizational restructuring. Similarly, learning ability allows managing time and work, while leadership skills and team working where interpersonal and managerial skills are required is effective to get the best out of the groups and teams. Problem-solving helps to develop a systematic approach to tackling the various problems encountered on the job.

6. HOW CAN A FRESH GRADUATE DEVELOP THESE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS? AND HOW TO DEMONSTRATE THAT THEY HAVE THESE SKILLS?

Although these skills are a part of the collection of qualities that combine to make an individual employable, but this does not mean that these skills are as fixed as one's physical

attributes like height, or as difficult to change as the shape of one's facial features like eyes & nose. **Employability** skills can be acquired, developed and enhanced.

There is clearly no set technique or trick to inculcate these skills in an individual but an overall cooperative approach by the employers, academic institutions as well as the students together will work. Traditionally the best way to learn these skills was on the job. But today, many employers are no longer prepared to take on new recruits without demonstrated ability in this skills set. These skills cannot be learnt from a textbook, but can be acquired through good quality education. But this is also true that a school/ college based curriculum cannot help someone evolve into being highly productive on the job within a week, employers also need to contribute. Studies show that key employability skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving, is dependent on deep content knowledge and cannot be acquired in isolation. Awareness about current affairs, their surroundings and the world at large and above all understanding how the corporate world operates can give fresh graduates a better understanding about the job work.

7. WAYS TO IMPROVE OR DEVELOP EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Projects, dissertations, extended essays and similar works undertaken during the course, can be particularly valuable in developing skills of independent research, and planning and organising work, sometimes the topic or area of study can also be relevant to the type of work field one wish to enter, giving an edge to a fresher's resume'.

Analytical Skills: are capabilities in a candidate of analysing data, interpreting and constructing statistics and presenting it in graphical format. Research projects, database analysis from experiments, case study, interpreting complex material, and picking out discrepancies in reasoning etc. all of these help in the development of analytical skills.

Written Communication : can be increased through writing reports; proper writing up of experiments and projects.

Verbal Communication : Debates, seminars and classroom discussion help in developing verbal communication skills and ability of thinking quickly.

Planning and Organising : A knack for managing the workload of several courses simultaneously; meeting class assignments deadlines; designing and carrying out research surveys etc.; balancing academic work with extra-curricular activities and/or employment all help in planning and organising capabilities in a graduate.

Teamwork : Group projects and seminars train in team work.

Technical Skills : knowledge of specific techniques through practical lab sessions strengthen a candidates' technical skills.

Internship and Work Study Programs will play a major role. The graduate if takes the internship seriously and honestly can get an insight into the real corporate working environment. This will be vital in developing and enhancing their employability.

Active participation in extra-curricular events and activities like team sports help in developing skills like teamwork, abiding by the rules, lateral thinking, time management, problem solving and decision making abilities as well as communication.

8. CONCLUSION

As discussed above the employability skills are a unique combination of skills, attributes and values that are required in order to secure the first job as well as navigate in the career. The employers too are eager to hire those candidates who are 'job ready' with clear evidence of job specific skills and can be made productive readily.

Although employability skills are not a substitute for specific knowledge and technical skills: *"They make the difference between being good at a subject and being good at doing a job."*⁷

The bottom line is that for an employer, a fresh graduate could be one of the very good potential employee, but to the graduate this is a foundation of a career and a beginning of a new life as a professional. To have the competitive advantage in the job market, graduates require to develop their employability throughout their time at the course. One has to remember that Attitude, Aptitude, Communication and Adaptability will differentiate the best from the average.