Management Students’ Self-perception towards their Employability Skills - A Pre and Post Soft Skills Training Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this descriptive study is to identify self-perceived importance and competence of management students towards NACE’s top ten skills emerged as the most desirable abilities in fresh graduates by employers. Using paired t-test analysis the study measures the impact of two-week foundation training in soft skills upon students’ self-perceived importance and competence in these ten skills. 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 students’ employability. The respondents were the current MBA students’ in Al-Barkaat Institute of Management Studies-Aligarh, affiliated with Mahamaya Technical University, Uttar Pradesh. The findings revealed that mean weighted discrepancy scores (MWDS) were highest for skills; ability to create and/or edit written reports, ability to obtain and process information, ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization and least for proficiency with computer software programs, technical knowledge related to job/function, ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work, ability to make decisions and solve problems, ability to analyze quantitative data. The paired T-test statistics were significant implying that the respondents perceived positive changes in their perceptions towards importance and their level of competence. The students perceived most remarkable improvements in their level of competence in ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organizations; ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work; ability to make decisions and solve problems; technical knowledge related to job/function; ability to create and/or edit written reports and ability to work in team structures. These findings reflect the need for conscientious action from Indian management institutions in terms of imparting soft skills training programme to enhance the employability of management graduates.

INTRODUCTION

Management education in India has witnessed phenomenal growth, from just 200 MBA colleges in the early nineties to around 33000 MBA colleges in 2012, producing nearly 35 million management graduates every year (Aspiring Minds; MBA-National Employability Report 2012). However, since 2008, the global recession, successive slowdowns and unpredictable markets, forced the corporate world to go slow and cautious while hiring freshers specifically management graduates. Thus, the widened gap in demand and supply of MBAs intensified the competition for induction level job opportunities. One can easily empathize with those who dreamt of great careers, funded their fees through bank loans and graduated with MBA degrees but without a decent job offer or no job offer at all. Inadequate soft skills are cited as the major cause of unemployability or underemployability of aspiring fresh MBAs. A recent survey found that only 10 per cent of our management graduates were employable while majority of these employable MBAs came from only top 20 management schools like IIMs, XLRI, and MDI
(ASSOCHAM Survey 2012). Now, the big question arises as how can we transform a large chunk of unemployable MBAs into employable human resource. Globally employers have been found repeatedly expressing their dissatisfaction over the skills of fresh graduates. One of the ways to improve the employability of fresh MBAs is developing their soft skills (Mullen, 1997). In India also, a public-private initiative has been taken in the form of the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) which aims to contribute significantly to the overall target of skilling / up-skilling 500 million people in India by 2022 (NSDC Press Release).

The objectives of this study are:

- To identify the Pre-training self-perceived importance and level of competence of students towards select 10 employability skills as deemed of highest importance by the employers.
- To identify the Post-training self-perceived importance and level of competence of students towards select 10 employability skills as deemed of highest importance by the employers.
- To examine the effect of soft skills training in terms of changes in students’ perception towards importance and competence.
- To identify the five highest priority skills for future training curriculum enhancement.

In this study, NACE’s top 10 most sought skills in fresh graduates as per employers’ survey 2013 are taken as the basis to identify the management students’ perceived importance and level of competence in these skills; also the study attempts to assess the level of improvement in students’ self-perceptions, pre-training viz-a-viz post training through SPSS based T-test. Also, the study identifies the skills where the mean weighted discrepancy scores are the highest entailing the skills which need be given high preference in future soft skills training modules.

The questions addressed in this study are of utmost importance and relevance because the answers to these questions will help identify if the soft skills training has any binding upon improving employability of management graduates, what is the perception of students towards importance and their self-perceived competence in top 10 skills as identified in NACE’s employers’ survey 2013. Most importantly the research attempts to identify the high priority skills for future curriculum enhancement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employability is the ability of the graduate to get a satisfying job. (Harvey, 2001). Employability Skills are those basic skills necessary for getting, keeping and doing well on a job. (Robinson, 2008). Previous literature (Kemper, 1999; McMurchie 1998) suggested that hard and soft skills complement each other. Similarly, a research (Spencer and Spencer, 1993) indicated that superior performers possess both technical and appropriate behavioral skills. Management Institutions also seem to recognize the importance of soft skills, often proposing the embedding of soft skills in course curricula (Jewels, 2003).

Recently in a survey of IT employers in USA, employers considered technical skills to be important, but cautioned that without employability skills, technical skills were merely commodities. (BATEC, 2007). Employers across the globe seem to realize the vital importance.
of soft skills in turning intellectual commodities into intellectual capital so much so that many organizations include soft skills training in their training programs (Arora, 2003).

Paranto and Kelker (1999) analyzed employers’ satisfaction with job skills of management graduates in a regional university in US. They examined which skills employers perceived indispensable when hiring business graduates. Through factor analysis, skills were categorized into four main factors, namely specific skills, core skills, personal characteristics, and communication skills. Where specific skills set consists of word processing, database management, spreadsheet knowledge, ability to adapt to changing technology, technical abilities; core skills set contains self-confidence, critical thinking, creative thinking, interpersonal skills, and leadership skills; personal characteristics set having business ethics and professionalism and communication skills set includes listening, speaking, writing, and non-verbal communication.

Two national studies one by the American Society for Training and Development ASTD (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer 1990) and other by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS 1991) are considered introductory works in identifying employability skills, often used as yardsticks or beginning points for other international, national, state, regional, and local studies. ASTD emphasized 16 skill groups across all job families as reading, writing, computation, speaking, listening, problem solving, thinking creatively, goal-setting, career planning, interpersonal, teamwork, negotiation, understanding organizational culture and leadership. SCAN findings highlighted 36 skills, including the ability to use five competencies efficiently (resources, interpersonal skills, information, systems, and technology) based on a three-part foundation of basic skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities.

Employability skills are accorded high importance and priority equally by employers as well as the management schools. Employability skills refer to such cognitive abilities as learning to learn, analytic and problem solving, innovative, and communication skill (Bikson, 1994; Bikson & Law, 1995). Above all, employers are less demanding of technical skills, considering them trainable, if candidates exhibit employability and soft skills, and positive attributes (Winterbotham et al., 2001). For some employers, the degree subject studied is not as important as the graduates' ability to handle complex information and communicate it effectively (Knight & Yorke, 2002). Employers want to hire students that are ready for the workplace. Skills gap serves as a call to universities to consider incorporating leadership into programs to close the gap. Many feel that there is a skills gap between the manner in which students are prepared for the real world in a university setting and what they will need to be successful in the workplace and for life in general (Shivpuri and Kim2004).

The discussion of employability skills reveals that for getting employment individual must have or must possess employability skills and these skills requirement can be vary from organization to organization because of region, sector and occupation. Various researcher identified, categories these employability skills in different groups and studies the importance and competency of the same and they found that Employers cannot place an importance on developing the skills they need 'in-house' and are fewer demanding of technological skills, considering them trainable. Skills gap do exist, between the actual level of skills in graduates as produced by Indian universities and institutions verses the minimum level of skills in fresh hires.
as desired by employers. (Higher Education Forum supported by 1SOS & Westat, 2010).

National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) in USA acts as a bridge between the academia and employers. NACE’s Job Outlook Survey-2013 on skills and qualities employers seek in fresh graduates revealed skills like ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization, ability to work in team structures that; ability to make decisions and solve problems, ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work, ability to obtain and process information, ability to analyze quantitative data, technical knowledge related with the job/function, proficiency with computer software programs, ability to create and /or edit written reports, ability to sell or influence others, in descending order of rank as expressed by employers. (Annexure-I)

For this study the researcher has adopted the top-ten skills as per employers’ survey from the NACE’s Job Outlook 2013 to study the management students’ self-perception about importance and competence in Indian context. In addition, this study analyzed the differences in self-perception of respondents; pre-training and post-training. For the purpose, a questionnaire was administered on the respondents just before the commencement of soft skills training. The respondents were instructed to mark their perceptions about the importance and competence before the start of soft skills training of two month. The same questionnaire was re-administered after the completion of training wherein; the perceptions of the students were recorded about importance and competence again.

METHODOLOGY

The population for this study was MBA students at the Al-Barkaat Institute of Management Studies, affiliated with Mahamaya Technical University, Uttar Pradesh. The students selected for this study were current students in MBA-II and IV semester (2011-13 & 2012-14 batches) (population size N = 135). It was determined that a sample size of 100 management students was needed to appropriately generalize findings to the population (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). A convenience sampling method is used to collect data. Questionnaire was administered on 100 MBA students. However, the actual submission of filled-in questionnaires after completion of training was 88; wherein 5 questionnaires contained only pre-training responses; thus providing 83 questionnaires readily available for study.

A 10 item structured questionnaire was developed with responses ranging on a 4-point Likert Scale from 0=no importance/competence to 3= major importance/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 identify the respondent’s self-perceived ratings. The respondents were asked to mark their ratings on self-perceived importance and competence in relation with 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 survey, 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. identifying the pre-training students’ self-perceived importance and competence for each skill. Mean and Standard Deviations are separately calculated for each pre-training importance, pre-training competence and post-training
importance and post-training competence. With respect to each skill, Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) are calculated; Pre-training and Post-training on importance and competence. The higher the mean (M), the higher the importance or 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. identifying the post-training students’ self-perceived importance and competence for each skill. The same procedure has been adopted as given above for achieving objective no. 1 but with post-training scores.

To achieve the objective no. 3 i.e. measurement of impact of training in terms of changes brought in the students’ perceptions towards importance and their level of competence 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 using SPSS. T-statistics shows significant impact of training upon self-perceived importance as well as competence.

To accomplish the last objective i.e. No. 4. To identify 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 and competence constructs are assessed simultaneously; pre and post training. Paired T-tests using SPSS are conducted to assess the impact of training programme upon the students’ perceived importance and competence level on 10 employability skills. 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 WDS by 83 (n=83).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Demographic and General Inferences

The sample composition in this study had 36% female and 64% male respondents. 53% were from MBA II semester while 47% from MBA IV semester. 23% of the respondents were in the age group of (19-21), 57% in (22-24) while 20% in (25-above). 33% had I div at 10th, 49% at 12th, 50% had I div. at graduation level. 14% had I div. 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. Aligarh. Marketing was the most preferred area of interest (43%), followed by Finance (29%), and HR (23%), majority of the female preferred HR. A substantial majority (74%) preferred paid employment (service) as their most preferred career path after MBA, 18% were not interested in paid employment they preferred either their own business or stay at home. (Annexed as Figure 1-14).

Pre-training Analysis
The students’ perceived ability to create or edit written reports ($M=2.8554$, $SD=0.2635$), ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside organization ($M=2.8434$, $SD=0.2827$), ability to analyze quantitative data ($M=2.5904$, $SD=0.6550$), ability to make decisions and solve problems ($M=2.5309$, $SD=0.6342$), technical knowledge about job/functional area ($M=2.5301$, $SD=0.7546$), ability to work in team structures ($M=2.4096$, $SD=0.6536$), ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work ($M=2.4096$, $SD=0.7760$), proficiency with computer software programs ($M=2.3855$, $SD=0.6325$), ability to obtain and process information ($M=2.3012$, $SD=0.6948$), ability to sell or influence others ($M=2.2410$, $SD=0.7491$) as the most important skills in order of decreasing importance. Hence, students rated communication skills as the highest on their perceived importance. While they rated selling or influencing others, ability to obtain and process information and proficiency with computer software programs lowest on their perceived importance.

On pre-training competence to perform certain skills, the students perceived the following skills in descending order of competence level; ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work ($M=2.3614$, $SD=0.6731$), technical knowledge related to job/function ($M=2.1687$, $SD=0.5592$), ability to work in team structures ($M=2.1084$, $SD=0.4688$), ability to make decisions and solve problems ($M=2.0964$, $SD=0.8057$), proficiency with computer software programs ($M=2.0602$, $SD=0.5706$), ability to analyze quantitative data ($M=2.0482$, $SD=0.6421$), ability to obtain and process information ($M=1.9880$, $SD=0.8337$), ability to sell or influence others ($M=1.9759$, $SD=0.3484$), ability to create and/or edit written reports ($M=1.9518$, $SD=0.6988$), ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization ($M=1.8193$, $SD=0.5662$). Therefore, in their own perception students’ had high competence in performing group, cognitive and technical skills, while they rated themselves low in competence related to communication skills.

**Post-training Analysis**

Students’ perception about importance of skills is ranked in descending order as ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization ($M=2.9036$, $SD=0.2969$), ability to create and/or edit written reports ($M=2.8795$, $SD=0.3628$), ability to obtain and process information ($M=2.8434$, $SD=0.3976$), ability to sell or influence others ($M=2.6988$, $SD=0.4616$), ability to make decisions and solve problems ($M=2.6988$, $SD=0.5350$), ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work ($M=2.6265$, $SD=0.5568$), ability to work in team structures ($M=2.6024$, $SD=0.5618$), technical knowledge related to job/function ($M=2.5542$, $SD=0.5467$), ability to analyze quantitative data ($M=2.5542$, $SD=0.5896$), proficiency with computer software programs ($M=2.3614$, $SD=0.6731$). Thus, the students placed written and oral communication skills as the skills of highest importance. While, skills related to proficiency in computer software and quantitative data were placed as lowest on importance level.

Students’ perceived 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 in team structures ($M=2.3614$, $SD=0.4833$), ability to make decisions and solve problems ($M=2.3614$, $SD=0.5539$), proficiency with computer software programs ($M=2.1566$, $SD=0.3976$), ability to analyze quantitative data
(M=2.1687, SD=0.4078), ability to obtain and process information (M=2.2530, SD=0.5901),
ability to sell or influence others (M=2.1566, SD=0.3657), ability to create and/or edit written
reports (M=2.2530, SD=0.4644), ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and
outside the organization (M=2.1807, SD=0.5214).

Thus, the students perceived improvement in their ability to plan, organize, prioritize work,
technical knowledge related to job/function, working in team structures communication,
planning, organizing, prioritizing, decision-making, problem solving skills. A significant
improvement was noted in the competence related to verbal and written communication 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 about the importance and their level of competence on skills, paired t-statistics were
implied through SPSS. The results showed significant impact of training upon students’ self-
perceived importance of employability skills and their competence levels. (T-Test results as
appended in Annexure-III & IV).

Lastly, application of Borich’s MWDS application revealed that the top five skills for
curriculum enhancements were proficiency with computer software programs (MWDS=0.4834),
technical knowledge related to job/function (MWDS= - 0.5017), ability to plan, organize, and
prioritize work (MWDS= - 0.6146), ability to work in team structures (MWDS= - 0.6241),
ability to make decisions and solve problems (MWDS= - 0.9108), and ability to analyze
quantitative data (MWDS= - 0.9793). The pre-training and post-training competence scores
revealed that on almost all of these skills students’ perceived significant improvement after
training, yet corresponding with the importance attached to skills, the future curriculum needed
to assign still more priority in these skill sectors.

CONCLUSION

Pre-training results show that the management students placed highest importance on ability
to create or edit written reports, ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and
outside organization, ability to analyze quantitative data, ability to make decisions and solve
problems, technical knowledge about job/functional area and placed least importance to
ability to work in team structures, ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work, proficiency
with computer software programs, ability to obtain and process information, ability to sell or
influence others. The findings signify that the greatest importance was placed on
communication skills. Whereas, ability to work in team structures which was placed at rank
no. 2 by the employers was ranked at the low level of importance by the students. This might
be due to the vague impression amongst the freshers that winning in a selection process like
Group discussion or interview is a win-lose situation i.e. you win at the expense of the other.
The pre-training competence results showed that students’ perceived themselves most
competent in ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work and technical knowledge related to
the job/function. For curriculum enhancement, the highest priority areas as identified in this
research are: Proficiency with Computer Software Programs, Technical knowledge related to
the job/function, Ability to plan, organize, and prioritize work, Ability to work in team
structures, Ability to make decisions and solve problems, Ability to analyze quantitative data
Limitations of study

The population of study is highly selective i.e. one Muslim managed MBA institution in Aligarh affiliated with Mahamaya Technical University. The findings may not be generalized to other management schools like those under central or state universities, colleges. Also, as in many institutions there is no provision of specialized soft skills training programmes, the pre-training and post training findings and impact of training may be generalized. The study has adopted the top 10 most sought skills by the employers as per NACE’s Job Outlook Survey-2013; therefore, the spectrum of skills is limited upon that particular survey conducted in USA. Further, the study relies upon the self-perceptions of the students, and the perceptions may not be so objective and accurately mentioned. The most evident limitation of this study is that the population under this study is a homogeneous stratum i.e. the Muslim students (92%).

REFERENCES

16. Mullen, J. (1997), Graduates deficient in 'soft' skills, People Magazine, 3(22)
Annexure

Table 1: Students’ self-perceived importance on skills; Pre-Training & Post-Training

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SKILL</th>
<th>PRE-TRAINING IMPORTANCE</th>
<th>RANK</th>
<th>POST-TRAINING IMPORTANCE</th>
<th>RANK</th>
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<td>Ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization</td>
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<td>Ability to work in team structures</td>
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<td>2.8434 0.3976</td>
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<td>Ability to analyze quantitative data</td>
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Table 2: Students’ self-perceived competence on skills; Pre-Training & Post-Training

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<td>1.8193 0.5662</td>
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<td>2.1807 0.5214</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>SKILL</th>
<th>POST TRAINING</th>
<th>MWDS</th>
<th>PRIORITY FOR CURRICULUM IMPROVEMENT</th>
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<td>Ability to work in team structures</td>
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