Soft Skills: Developing Teaching Materials to Connect Campus with Corporate

(Creating Materials for Transforming a Student into a Professional)

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Abstract: The education system as well as the market scenario is changing very fast. A decade ago, those individuals who had a brilliant academic record with added work experience were well sought after by most of the corporate institutions. But today, due to globalization and drastic innovations in technology, hard skills and experience are not sufficient enough for the ingress and escalation in the corporate world. Employers prefer to hire and promote the candidates who are resourceful, ethical, and self-directed with good soft skills. Dearth of soft skills in the candidates has resulted in low hiring by corporate.Soft skills are essential in the professional arena as well as the daily life of a person. These skills can be established and developed. Soft skills are also important to lead a happy and peaceful life without mental stress. This paper throws light on the essential soft skills and practically train the students to inculcate those skills through various learning activities such asConversation practice, Mock/mirror practice, Group discussions, Effective resume writing, Job interview techniques, E-learning, Esprit de corps.This paper classifies soft skills into several personality traits. Conversation skills are explained with guidelines for speaking effectively. An effective resume is also an important aspect for selection. It provides insight into what the requirements of most employers are and how to use words and phrases convincingly. The practice of group discussion emphasizes on the ability to work as a team, leadership, reasoning, innovation, lateral thinking and flexibility. This paper will hopefully benefit to students in acquiring employability assets which they can present to their employer. This would pave the way for professional success and subsequently a society of content citizens.

Keywords: Soft Skills, Personality Traits, Body Language, Employability, Troubleshooting, E-learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

For decades, the main focus of the industry was on what is called hard skills. With today's global economy, the industry ambience is undergoing a rapid transformation. This has brought to the foreground a wide cluster of skills to cater to the changing demand. Personality traits and soft skills are increasingly playing a central role in a person's career in this changing scenario.

The Importance of Soft Skills:

Soft skills fulfil an important role in shaping an individual's personality. It is of high importance for every student to acquire adequate skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. For decades employers as well as educators frequently complain about a lack in soft skills among graduates from tertiary education institutions. This problem is in no way restricted to developing nations like India; it is also well known to industrial countries around the world. A recent outcry in this regard came from the British Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), which recently reported that "Employers say many graduates lack 'soft skills', such as team working" and "They go on to explain that candidates are normally academically proficient but lacking in soft skills such as communication as well as verbal and numerical reasoning." (AGR, 2007)

While searching teaching- learning materials, I found that our students don't have proper exposure to develop soft skills which are highly in demand by companies. To achieve this goal, I have organized my paper into six main sections. In the first section, I provide an account of personality traits. Its sub-section throws light on various tips of body language and appearance. In the second section, I discuss how to develop problem-solving and trouble-shooting attitude among

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305

the students. I include teaming, interpersonal and communication skill in the third section that is followed by the fourth section of techniques to be adopted in group discussion. The fifth section is a focus on job interview tips whereas the sixth section highlights how to prepare effective resume. I now turn towards the first section.

II. PERSONALITY TRAITS

Personality is a continuum. Personality is our identity, as perceived by others. A particular personality can be groomed. Every individual possesses a mix of contrasting personalities. However, it is important to reflect upon one's career aspiration, and build the personality profile over time that is suited to the need. Personality, unlike what many people believe, is not in-born and static. It can be consciously developed and changed. With conscious effort, one can project the desired personality. One's personality is a signal that others read at all times. This includes every gesture and every articulation of the person. This signal is read by the interviewer or by superiors in a professional world. In turn, opinion gets formed and selection choices are made based on such impressions.

Eg: Self -assessment Test: On a sheet of paper note down adjectives that best describe you. For each adjective, provide an example from your life. After that make a list of traits you would like to have and why. Try to determine ways in which you can achieve these.

In a corporate setting, **appearance and body language** matter. While body language often speaks louder than words. Often gestures, facial expressions, and postures leave room for interpretation. This is particularly true when one tries to read the body language of those who are not very expressive. However, the key is to realize that body language is learnable. By use of a simple video camcorder one can watch one's body language and make self-improvements over time. The best way to improve one's body language is to be conscious of the fact that we are sending out signals at all the times to the people around us, and these are being watched and interpreted by many.

Eg: Form groups and record your partner (in a camcorder) doing the following:
- Giving a speech
- Taking an interview
- Interacting with the supervisor
- In a performance appraisal session
- In a team discussion

Show him the recording and ask the person to assess his desirable and undesirable body language.

One's attire, demeanour and style reflect one's personality. Hence, it is important to consciously work on one's appearance so that it creates the desired impression during an interview or subsequently in one's career. Most interviewers would appreciate a smart attire like this: for men, black or dark blue suit, milk-white shirt, a tie that is not ornate or colourful, and black polished shoes with black socks. For women, a similar smart formal attire is appropriate. Even a sari, or a salwar and kameez of a pleasing colour would be fine. Some other points to remember regarding the attire are as follows:
- Shoes with conservative heels
- Clean, trimmed finger nails with no glaring nail polish
- Well-groomed hair style
- Minimum make-up
- No bulging handbag—just a small folder with important papers
- No ornaments

Communication or soft skills can be classified into two broad categories:

Personal Traits include time management, attitude, responsibility, ethics, integrity and values, self-confidence, courage, etc. Interpersonal traits include teamwork, communication, networking, empathy, listening skills, problem solving, troubleshooting and leadership.

Eg: I) While each company has its own personality tests, many of them are variations of the Myers-Briggs Type indicator (MBTI). The MBTI assessment is a psychometric questionnaire designed to measure psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions. The questionnaire, consisting of 72 questions has

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306

two options for each question – YES or NO. One should pick the option that they feel applies to them the most. Even if one is unsure, one should go with one's instinct. Responding to all the questions with fetch the most reliable result.

Eg.

1) You are almost never late for your appointments. – a) Yes b) No

2) You enjoy having a wide circle of acquaintances   - a) Yes b) No

Soft skills are intangible. Only a keen observation can bring out the multi-faceted personality of a person over time. These are, therefore, being looked upon as critical traits one need to have for career growth. This is because soft skills truly expose the inner person in you. Soft skill play acritical role in the career growth of individuals. The expectations begin with the basic foundation of ethics, integrity and values. Equally non- negotiable criteria are strong work ethic and professional and positive attitude.

III. PROBLEM SOLVING AND TROUBLESHOOTING

Problem solving and troubleshooting are systematic and scientific processes of searching for the source of a problem and resolving it. Doing this proactively is a smart soft skill to possess. Since any problem quickly gets senior management attention, a key role played here to diffuse the situation using this skill gets recognized by the organization.   Charles Kepner and Benjamin Tregoe (1981) explain the technique adopted by them in their book. Their technique is a gradual step-by-step process of arriving at the root cause of a problem by asking questions such as:

- The actual point where the problem is causing trouble
- The points where there is no problem
- Exactly when the problem started to occur
- Exactly when it definitely was no there

Incidentally, this relates to a few well-known lines from Rudyard Kipling:

> *I keep six honest serving-men*
> *Who taught me all I know*
> *Their names are – what and why and when*
> *And how and where and who*
> (Source: The Elephant's Child)

These types of questions greatly help in narrowing down a problem and make the diagnostic test easier, quicker and more accurate.

TEAMING AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS are also key imperatives from a company's perspective.

When studying the behavioural patterns of today's young generation, it becomes evident that this situation has affected them in a harmful manner. Work/Employment always expects teamwork. Almost all achievements in the workplace are results of teamwork. However electronic and digital technology has isolated the man in the society. Soft skills are the instruments that can be used to bridge the gap between the individual demanded by the workplace and the socially isolated person.

People who take ownership and responsibility for their actions are looked upon favourably do to there no -excuse mentality. To gain competitive advantage while solving customer problems, companies also assess skills such as problem solving, troubleshooting as well as listening skills, consistency and predictability.

Eg : Each person is given a difficult situation by the class and he has to enact it out in the best way possible. The class judges his communication quotient. Possible situations are as follows:

- Saying "no" and being loved for it
- Handling phone interruptions
- Telling your boss your salary increases this year was less than what you expected
- Dismissing an underperformer
- Managing a tearful colleague
- Selling a pen to an illiterate person

- Convincing an outstanding candidate, who has offers from many reputed companies, to join your company.

Time management is another skill that helps companies appreciates the self-discipline practised by employees.

While assessing individuals for career growth in a company, leadership is one of the most traits that is evaluated by management in much detail. Characteristics such as strategic vision, self-confidence and courage, and execution and drive for results also play a vital role in this evaluation.

IV. GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Group discussions are conducted to find out many important features relating to a candidate that cannot be ascertained from a written test. How a candidate reacts in a group and how he behaves in different situations, his leadership qualities and communication skills, teaming traits and ability to resolve conflicts are some of the important aspects that reveal themselves during group discussions. These help the leadership of a company ascertain a person's soft skills through situations that mimic real-life cases. Group discussion is thus a vital channel into the persona, and the first opportunity for an employer to gain an insight into these key attributes. It is used not only as a selection criterion at the entry level, but is also a useful tool for assessment at the higher rungs of the career ladder.

Eg: Key steps to succeed in a group discussion are as follows:

- Be well-versed about recent news and events around the world.
- Attend workshops on communication skills if needed.
- Practice public speaking to gain confidence.
- Involve in group activities.
- Seek feedback from those who you trust on your performance in group events.
- Practice the art through as many mock sessions as possible.

Topics for GDs can be factual, controversial or abstract. The first speaker on the topic plays a very important role. He initiates the discussion and hence gets the full attention of the assessor and participants. He becomes the natural leader of the group.

V. INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

Job Interview has become a crucial component of the selection process in any industry. The right man for the right job is the call of the day. Nobody wants a square peg in a round hole. Hence the candidates should remember that he is standing at that gateway, and the keys to entry are with the interviewers. For the candidate, the purpose of the interview is simple. It is not to blindly promote himself; it is to convince the interview team of the value he will bring to their organization.

Ample preparation and strong performance are needed to achieve this intent. It is also highly desirable to research (from different sources) the production, sales, research and other activities of the organization or company where you have been called for an interview. This knowledge will be a positive advantage for you during the interview.

Tips to be followed:

- Appropriate dress code (professional)
- Speak clearly with proper articulation
- Be aware all the time of your body language- reveals your true self.
- Maintain proper eye contact with the interviewers
- Face the questions and answers politely
- Don't get unnerved by awkward questions

During the interview, show your respect to the interviewers and demonstrate your interest in the activities of the company. You can politely express some of your own views if the situation arises naturally.

Different answers to common questions: The candidate should write down his/her own answers to some very common questions asked during an interview. Some of these questions are as follows:

- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Why do you want to work here?

- What are your salary expectations?
- Who is your role model?
- Why should we hire you?
- What qualities of a leader do you possess?
- Can you work well within a team?

Modern interviews often go beyond the conventional questions. The logic behind of this practice is to see how well the candidate can come out of a tricky situation successfully. Creative and out-of-the-box thinking is much desirable.

Eg.

1) Without looking back, tell me the colour of the wall behind you.

2) How much money will the company make if we hire you?

It is to be noted that there is no right or wrong answer to these questions. It is all about how innovatively you think and reply. However, do not answer before engaging your brain. It is perfectly all right to take a moment to think and answer.

VI. RESUME WRITING

Then, it is important to thoroughly revise your curriculum vitae to ensure that it clearly brings out the value in the eyes of the employer. A well-written, crisp and sharp resume immediately draws the attention of the employer. The skills, that the candidate believes differentiate him from the others, must be mentioned in a way that draws the attention of the employer. The resume can be written in a chronological sequence (by timeline) or in a functional format (by skills) or through a combination of both. It should clearly highlight the hard domain skills the candidate possesses. It needs to also state clearly that critical soft skills and personality traits that are needed for the job and instances where these were exhibited in prior roles.

Eg: Key points in Resume writing: Personal details, educational details, Career Objective, Strengths,Projects undertaken in University, Domain skills, Achievements, Hobbies.

A resume thus offers a multidimensional portrait of all aspects of a candidate in front of the employer, enabling them to take the right decision.

VII. E-LEARNING

"The Direction in which education starts a man will determine his future". – Plato. One needs to attend the soft-skill one-day workshop organized by various organizations. This hands-on experience enhances one's confidence and ability to establish oneself in the corporate world. There are training manuals, instructor guide, power point slides, training video clips, pre-assignments, post assessments' sheets, test bank, personality tests, multimedia resources, flashcard glossary available at online resources.

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is the best option for the aspirants as it is an online course aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the Web. Career growth requires a blend of both soft and hard skills. Today, there is an increasing number of MOOCs focused on soft skills. It provides students access to video clips from employers, admission tutors and well-respected leaders. Most importantly, it helps the participants build their own portfolio of strengths and weaknesses (based on group feedback) that they can work upon to improve.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Our students graduate from good colleges with good grades. In spite of that why they are unemployable? The answer lies in the fact that they lack two essential attributes: personality and soft skills. The encouraging news is that many colleges today have recognized this need and have begun to focus on these essential aspects. This paper is an attempt to acquaint students with details of soft skills and importance of personality. Technocrats rarely have the time to go through various books available in the market on this topic. I have minimized all essential points in this paper to be remembered by them before facing interviews. It will assist them in acquiring employability assets which they can present to their employer. It will also serve the needs of those who aspire for a sharp growth in their professional career.

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309

These techniques will surely enable students to convert into professionals. Finally, to be successful, remember to always follow the first and foremost tenet: Ethics, values and integrity at work, at all times.

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