

# **Requisiteskills to enhance employability in our VUCA world: an Indian Context**

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## **Abstract**

The International Labour Organization (ILO) statistic of 2011 indicated that, globally, there were about three (3) billion working individuals. This number has risen and the companies' Personnel Specification, for their specific roles are getting onerous by the day. Though the search for the ideal candidate can be equated to a maze, it is one that can be solved with the right perspective and basic understanding of the profile and industry in question. However, there are some 'sine quibus non' for working in our globalized world. Finding the right candidate plays an important part for an organization. The question of employability is one facet that every university across the globe is trying to come to terms with to improve their placement ratio. From understanding the basic principles of communication to the table etiquettes, everything plays an essential role in enhancing the business environment for an individual. From the '11 laws of likability' to 'Pre-suasion', world views are emerging that outline and epitomize influential personalities. This paper mainly deals with the different benchmarks that best employers have placed in relation to soft skills and suggested etiquettes by industry experts. Further, it delves into what are the different checklists in the industry while identifying the ideal candidate.

**Key Words:** Soft Skills, Employability, Technology,

## **Introduction**

The quest for the ideal employee, who enhances himself and his employer's firm through efficacious interpersonal and intrapersonal dexterity is modish. The Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment around us has made it necessary for individuals to continuously be on the look out to stay updated. Industry experts are continuously bellowing on the importance of bridging the gap between the industry requirements and university output. Though domain expertise is paramount in their outcry, soft skills play a pivotal role in it. In this exploratory paper we are in search of the essential soft skills, which are shaped by the tides of time, we shall look more closely as to which of them play an important role determining that one has a steeper career growth today.

Let us begin with the meaning of word - soft skills. The Oxford dictionary defines it as - personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). The definition stresses on the need to be interactive with a certain level of effectiveness. Firstly, is there a need to interact at all? Is it not sufficient to be efficient at what one does? Why should anyone learn interpersonal skills, when one is good at what he or she does? The key lies in the term 'synergy' – be it the Mongols who ruled the largest land, even though for a short time, or the most technologically advanced firms, the platitude holds true. It was clearly given its due credit in Stephen Covey's - The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People as the penultimate habit. Be it moving as a phalanx or working together to improve the efficiency of software, synergy has become an important element of today's global culture. As globalization gathers pace, about 9 in 10 employers believe that graduates with soft skills will make the difference, as per Talent Q (Talent Q, 2015).

This is what one of the most renowned economists of all time tells about soft skills, "we can never survey our own sentiments and motives; we can never form any judgment concerning them; unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavour to view them as at a certain distance from us. But we can do this in no other way than by endeavouring to view them with the eyes of other people, or as other people are likely to view them" (Smith, 1759). In the above statement Adam Smith talks about the need to see from the perspective of the other in order to understand more clearly and this indirectly points in the direction of interpersonal skills. The famous McKinsey's 7s Framework can be divided into two - hard elements and soft elements. The soft elements though less tangible are influenced by the culture and are equally important. One of the soft elements – shared value (evidenced in the corporate work culture) is in fact placed at the center of the framework (Mind Tools Content Team, 2017). This is indicative of how corporate interaction is central to the success of an organization and clearly vindicates the actions of firms such as Google who invest a lot into their work culture (Yang, 2017).

**Importance**

A research conducted by Stanford Research Institute and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation, in 2008, among Fortune 500 CEOs indicated that 75% of the job depended on people skills and only 25% on technical skills (Stanford Research Institute, 2008). Another research conducted between 1980 and 2012, by a graduate of Harvard indicates that nearly all job growths have been influenced because of social-skills in that time period (Deming, 2015).

Research studies on the importance of soft skills is not limited to the last few decades; one research which dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century indicates that soft skills play an important role in one's job success. Charles Riborg Mann, a civilian adviser in the US War Department, who was also a physicist and an engineer, had dedicated some of his energy on studying soft skills and hard skills. His study published in the year 1918 talks about the importance of expression and appreciation in communication and emphasizes on the need for personality development (Mann, 1918).

The Harvard University, the Carnegie Foundation and Stanford Research Center has built a study on Mann's research and concluded that 85% of the job success comes from well-developed soft skills (Ruegger, 2016). This is very important for any economy considering that only a well trained workforce can thrust towards developing a country's GDP. A research carried out by McDonald's predicts that by 2020, the annual contribution of soft skills to the UK economy will have in real terms grown to about £109 billion and to just over £127 billion by the year 2025 (Pagano, 2015). This phenomenon is surely not limited to a country but indeed a global phenomenon. There is a quantum leap in the importance of soft skills among the must-needs for an employee, which in turn ensue an increased threshold for soft skills. A research conducted in 2016 by Murphy Donohue indicates that US employers have reported to experience lack of preparedness in candidates when it comes to soft skills, which accounts for 1/3 of the skills required in US (Donohue, 2016). According to Deloitte's 2016 Global Human Capital Trends report, in order to foster employee retention, improve leadership, and build a meaningful culture, executives stress on the importance of soft skills. In fact, most of the respondents (92%) rated that soft skills are of prime importance (Bruce, 2017).

**Reality Check**

Industrialists have time and again given us hints as to the lack of harmony between the industry requirements and the available talent force. A PwC research indicates that 1,300 CEOs rank shortage of skills as their biggest threat for business (PwC, 2015). An article by Harvard Business Review (HBR) with a marvy title "Employers Aren't Just Whining – the "Skills Gap" Is Real" gives a detailed analysis on the efforts the employers will have to take to develop new skills. It also talks about the opportunity created because of the difficulty in learning a competitive skill (Bessen, 2014). The importance of hiring candidates with the right outlook, and training them can indeed give the firm the leverage it needs to have a competitive advantage.

Mr. James Caan, a leading UK based industrialist, and one of the investors on who had been on BBC's Dragons' Den, has stated that though all employers believe in the importance of soft skills – about half rate them higher than academic qualifications - three-quarters acknowledge the skill gap in the UK industry (McDonald's UK, 2015). According to an Association for Talent Development (ATD) study, in 2015, on why the skill gap exists – 56% of professionals said that the current skill force did not match the company strategy, 48% choose that employees lacked the requisite skills for internal promotions, 45% opted that there was too few candidates to choose from and 35% of them wanted more training programs for employees (Fyfe-Mills, 2015). However, the idea of training your workforce has been dramatically changing.

Companies are investing more on training to keep their employees abreast with the changing technologies and requirements in their specific industry. It is estimated that globally about \$359.3 billion was spent on training in 2016 (Size of Training Industry, 2017). Such ghastly spend would not be sanctioned unless justified by the proportionate outcome. A study from Boston College, Harvard University, and the University of Michigan found that soft skills training like communication and problem-solving, increases the productivity and retention of employees by 12 % and delivers a 250% return on investment (Bruce, 2017). The employers have used every opportunity to provide training; and technology has definitely come to their aid. Online training has been used to improve interpersonal skills too; about 70% of interpersonal training uses some form of online training, according to the 2016 Training Industry Report (Training, 2016).

However, advanced our technologies have gotten us, soft skills trainings have proven to be most effective in classroom training. A research conducted by American Management Association reveals that Classroom Corporate (52.6%), Classroom Open Enrollment (27.9%), Virtual: On Demand (10.2%) and Virtual Live (9.4%) was the order of preference for training in relation to soft skills (AMA Staff, 2015).

**The Essential Soft Skills**

The India Skills Report – 2017, published by Wheebox, CII, AICTE and People Strong had surveyed more than 5,60,000 students and more than 125 employers across India to explore the essential skills necessitated by industries for anyone to be employed. One promising stat is that the percentage of employability has risen from 34% in 2015 to 40% in 2017. The research states that the following skills are required by employers - Domain Expertise, Integrity and Value, Communication, learning agility, Cultural Fitment, Numerical & logical ability, Result Orientation, Adaptability and Interpersonal, in their order of preference (Wheebox, 2017).

Building resilience in a workplace is just as important as it allows employees to adapt to the changes without catastrophizing (Bruce, 2017). Catastrophizing is the state of viewing a situation worse than it actually is – viewing the problem as a short term and fluid can definitely help. Some skills that enable individuals to develop resilience are problem solving, emotion control & purpose. In order to be better at leadership and become trustworthy working on listening, nonverbal communication, change management and being thankful will be helpful. It also added that soft skills are what drive friendship, success and happiness at work. Adaptability is one skill that has proved to be effective, be it in Darwin’s theories - which stresses on the need to adapt for survival or in our corporate culture. In order to become a long term employee one needs to possess the skill of adaptability/learnability (Manpower Group, 2016). This helps the companies to move their talent in order to increase exposure and inculcate diversity, which in turn helps in creativity. Employers consider individuals with entrepreneurship skills such as persuasiveness, leadership, personal accountability, goal orientation and interpersonal skills very valuable to their organization (Bonnstetter, 2012).

The Conover Company which is focused on developing training programs for the industry has suggested a way to develop soft skills. According to them emotional intelligence competencies such as self-esteem, interpersonal awareness, empathy, self-management, self-improvement, self-control are the base for building attitudes (Conover, 2016). Therefore, focusing the energy on these emotional intelligence competencies will consecutively reflect in the companies’ performance.

According to The India Skills Report – 2017, employability is highest in the age group 18-21, followed by 22-25; this is effectively the age that most people are out of colleges or early work life. Though less than 13% of the professionals chose campus hires as the preferred recruitment sourcing channel, at least 80% of the employers have plans of hiring from campuses. This is one of the reasons that many institutions have gone so far as to include industrial partnerships in their pedagogy. About 88% of the students desired to avail internships; this could be because such programs acted as a prelude to their work life (Wheebox, 2017).

**Conclusion**

As of 2020, millennials contribute about 47% of the country’s workforce and adequate attention must be laid on the changing working conditions and the attitudes that persist in the economy. The Indian Skills Report had indicated that employability increases with improved economic conditions (Wheebox, 2017). Further, with freelancing experts and part time professionals, our world is moving towards a Gig Economy, which in turn increases competition and thereby quality. Given below is a table indicating the employability percentage and various skillsets that have been deemed important in the India Skill Report over the time period 2014 – 2021.

Year	Employability Ratio (%) in India	Top Skills				
2014	33.95	Integrity and Value	Result Orientation	Core Domain Knowledge	Aptitude	Cultural Fitment
2015	37.22	Integrity and Value	Domain Expertise	Interpersonal skills	Learning Agility	Communication
2016	38.12	Domain Expertise	Integrity and Value	Result Orientation	Interpersonal skills	Cultural Fitment
2017	40.44	Domain Expertise	Integrity and Value	Communication	Learning Agility	Numerical & Logical Ability
2018	45.60	Domain Expertise	Positive Attitude	Adaptability	Communication	Numerical & Logical Ability

<b>2019</b>	47.38	Learning Agility	Adaptability	Communication	Emotional Intelligence	Conflict Resolution
<b>2020</b>	46.21	Positive Attitude	Adaptability	Learning Agility	Domain Expertise	Interpersonal skills
<b>2021</b>	45.90	Problem Solving	Communication	Active Learning, Resilience, Flexibility	Digital Dexterity	Analytical and Critical Thinking

The Indian Skills Report had indicated that employability increases with improved economic conditions (Wheebox, 2017). Further, with freelancing experts and part time professionals, our world is moving towards a Gig Economy, which in turn increases competition and thereby quality. The demand for education, expert knowledge in specific fields and soft skills has increased over time. Educational Institutions have also tried to play their part is ensuring that industry ready graduates or post graduates are being molded. Charles Riborg Mann in 1918 had stressed that, “personal qualities such as common sense, integrity, resourcefulness, initiative, tact, thoroughness, accuracy, efficiency and understanding of men are universally recognised as being no less necessary to a professional engineer than are technical knowledge and skills” (Mann,1918).

Skills such as communication and problem-solving are definitely helpful to retain one longer than other employees. Furthermore, skills such as Domain Expertise, Integrity and Value, Communication, learning agility, Cultural Fitment, Numerical & logical ability, Result Orientation, Adaptability and Interpersonal are preferred by employers in their order of preference. Skills such as listening, nonverbal communication, change management and being thankful can be helpful in becoming a trusted employee and in driving friendship. From an employee’s perspective persuasiveness, leadership, personal accountability, goal orientation and interpersonal skills are very valuable to the organization. In a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world, employees or candidates will have to learn to adapt to the environment (Ruegger,2016). Hence, Adaptability or Learnability should be counted among the most important of soft skills that a candidate or an employee needs to possess.

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