



## **The Value of Soft Skills:**

### **Preparing the Next Generation of Workforce**

**Manisha Sagar**

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi

#### **Abstract**

Graduates and post-graduates are expected to have hard and soft skills to join the workforce. Employers place a high value on soft skills such as communication, creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking, as these abilities reflect a person's adaptability and maturity in social and professional environments. Evidence indicates a growing demand for soft skills, making it challenging for companies to find recent graduates with these essential abilities. Businesses express concern that graduates often need more competencies to thrive in the workplace. This study emphasises the critical role of soft skills in today's educational and professional landscapes and highlights the necessity of ongoing education for both present and future workforces. Universities must incorporate soft skill training to address the soft skills gap.

#### **Keywords**

Communication, Employability, Employers, Graduates, Job Market, Soft Skills, Syllabi.

Changes in the job market environment have made many employers approach traditional education programs sceptically. Employers highly value soft skills—such as effective communication, critical thinking, and sound decision-making—because these abilities are essential for boosting productivity, employee engagement, and retention. Despite their significance, the number of graduates equipped with soft skills is dwindling in today's competitive job environment. Many job seekers often lack the skills needed for employment. Therefore, higher education institutions must implement a framework for soft skills development to address the learning requirements of current and future workforces and keep pace with economic changes. This study critically explores the importance of soft skills in academic and professional settings.

Soft skills necessitate no definition in the present climate, but their importance has been widely discussed in public discourse. However, at least in our educational institutions, proper engagement and training still need to be adequately implemented. Soft skills encompass a range of cognitive, emotional, and social capabilities, heavily relying on interpersonal communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and social skills. Companies value these attributes highly, as they can be strong indicators of job success.

Herman (1999) posited that technology, information, and knowledge are foundational elements of the modern economy. As automation proliferates across sectors, the need for soft skills rises. Higher education must adapt during this economic transition as employers search for candidates with specific skill sets. Today's graduates are more employable because they are evaluated on criteria beyond their academic knowledge. Employers increasingly prioritise soft skills—including personal traits, interpersonal skills, work ethic, self-direction, and communication abilities—since these qualities speak to an individual's capacity to function effectively in both personal and work environments.



Bellanca and Brandt (2010) define soft skills as the social and emotional attributes that shape our actions and attitudes. With AI altering the landscape of routine workplace tasks, these soft skills are now seen as indispensable. Such qualities are unique to humans and cannot be replicated by computers. Consequently, employers are pressured to ensure that new graduates are adequately prepared to face workforce challenges and seize the opportunities from technological advancements.

Matteson, Anderson, and Boyden (2016) indicate that soft skills, such as communication, innovation, and problem-solving, are essential competencies that help individuals secure and retain jobs. Soft skills enable effective communication among colleagues and the establishment of shared expectations. Cimatti (2016) describes soft skills as personality traits and character strengths that influence how others perceive an individual. Successful modern businesses rely heavily on relationships among coworkers. When employees feel a sense of belonging, engagement levels can increase by 60% (Cimatti, 2016).

Building and sustaining relationships is supported by our interpersonal and life skills. Both verbal and nonverbal communication are essential in expressing intentions and establishing relationships, providing a profound understanding of human behaviour. Employee service remains crucial for business success, with strong interpersonal skills as a foundation. In addition, critical thinking, information processing, and the ability to apply objective data to resolve issues are identified as soft skills, according to Shultz (2008). Individuals with solid comprehension skills can swiftly recognise problems and capitalise on opportunities as they occur, making critical thinking a valuable asset in the workplace.

## **SOFT SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Today, soft skills hold significant value for employers. They seek a variety of competencies, such as effective communication, critical thinking, and teamwork. By developing these soft skills, organisations can significantly improve their performance. Employing individuals possessing these skills can substantially enhance morale and productivity. Communication and collaboration are critical in today's work environment, accounting for 55% of employees' daily responsibilities (SHRM, 2019). Studies indicate that soft skills training—like communication and problem-solving—can elevate workplace productivity and engagement by 12% and yield a 250% return on investment (Adhvaryu, Nyshadham, & Kala, 2018). As employee performance is tracked, the benefits of soft skills, including more excellent promotion opportunities, are expected to become increasingly evident. High turnover rates adversely impact employers and employees, leading to ongoing challenges in the human resources field, particularly with the ageing baby boomer workforce. The average turnover rate across all sectors hovers around 13%, and within the service industry, it often exceeds 30% (SHRM, 2019). Employers recognise that soft skills are vital in minimising turnover and boosting employee engagement, bringing retention challenges into sharper focus. However, companies frequently hesitate to invest in those who lack these skills due to more pressing immediate needs (Spang, 2014)



## **SOFT SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION SYLLABI**

The main goal of higher education is to provide students with the essential knowledge and skills for success in the workplace. With intense job competition, educational institutions increasingly focus on improving graduates' employability. Graduates' ability to find jobs significantly indicates their work ethic. Educational systems must prioritise the development of skilled individuals who can thrive in today's and tomorrow's job markets. Learning should align with workforce needs, emphasising acquiring specific job skills and broader concepts.

Research indicates a persistent demand for soft skills; a 2019 SHRM report revealed that 30% of employers struggle to find graduates with appropriate interpersonal skills. While hard and soft skills are vital in today's work environments, those in customer service positions particularly require a strong foundation in hard skills. Many employers voice concerns that new graduates lack the skills and experience necessary for success in the workplace.

A job in the current market often demands more than a bachelor's degree. Soft skills demonstrate individual initiative and commitment to one's role and organisation; thus, lacking these skills can significantly impede business operations. Employees with soft skills training are more adaptable during job transitions and life changes than their untrained peers (Chan, 2010). Students should actively cultivate soft skills as they are regarded as the "language and currency" of the job market (Pretti & Fannon, 2018). Since workplaces involve continuous individual interaction, effective communication is crucial for resolving conflicts.

Bauer-Wolf (2018) points out a recognised disparity between the soft and technical skills of graduates from the perspective of employers. Educators face new challenges as students seek knowledge outside traditional classroom environments and modify their learning experiences. The academic community widely appreciates the importance of 'hard' skills in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) for future professions. Nevertheless, there appears to be a significant disconnect between our education system and the evolving demands of the job market. On the contrary, employers believe that possessing soft skills will be more enduring than keeping pace with technological changes, thereby better-preparing employees for future roles.

Higher education often underestimates the importance of soft skills, worrying that recognition may impede the dissemination of academic knowledge (Lombardi, 2007). Universities argue their responsibility extends beyond merely graduating students ready for the workforce. Success in the workplace cannot be solely defined by traditional education; instead, soft skills—which account for 45% of workplace success—are more critical than hard skills, which contribute only 20% (International Association of Administrative Professionals, 2018). Critics assert that traditional teaching methods lack speed and allure, stifling creativity in modern classrooms, where standardised testing and strict lesson plans can hinder students' critical thinking capabilities.

An educational approach that fosters personal initiative, empathy, and collaborative abilities is crucial for building successful professional lives. The fast-evolving labour market necessitates educational institutions to adapt to meet the growing demand for soft skills (Witziers et al., 2003). Higher education institutions

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must move away from rote memorisation and instead focus on developing transferable skills to better prepare students for the job market. Employers highly value communication, critical thinking, and social skills. When students effectively utilise these skills in real-world situations, it benefits them, businesses, and educational institutions. Conversely, failing to teach these competencies may result in higher unemployment rates and reduced earnings for graduates (Lombardi, 2007).

### **Soft Skills Curriculum**

Universities must prepare graduates with the intellectual and professional skills needed to succeed in today's labour market. To achieve this, they should develop graduates with a potent combination of hard and soft skills. Marketability depends not only on academic credentials but also on abilities that boost employability.

Today's students are tomorrow's leaders, and our education system must adjust to the needs of the modern workforce. Educators need to design relevant curricula that connect academic knowledge with hands-on application. Alistair and McGuire (2019) stress the significance of soft skills—such as problem-solving, communication, teamwork, and critical thinking—in educational environments. They advocate for developing these skills through active learning and real-world case studies.

The future workforce will rely on graduates' capacity to showcase practical skills and knowledge rather than just exam readiness (Lombardi, 2007). Although traditional lesson plans lay a foundation of knowledge, they often need to pay more attention to developing soft skills, which receive less attention than hard skills. Compared to conventional lectures, problem-based learning and experiential teaching methods can effectively improve soft skill growth.

Collaborative learning settings can significantly enhance students' academic and social development. Students are more engaged when facing challenges in smaller groups and participating in activities encouraging critical thinking. Moreover, teamwork fosters community and accomplishment as students finish projects together.

Recently, liberal arts degrees have regained recognition for their focus on soft skills employers value. A liberal arts education spans disciplines like humanities, social sciences, and arts without being restricted to a specific career path. Employers see this degree as essential for cultivating human-centric abilities, including critical thinking, adaptability, and teamwork. While technical knowledge in science, technology, and engineering is crucial for long-term success, Kruger and Peck (2017) highlight the growing disconnect between our education system and industry needs. There must be a greater focus on skills that machines cannot replicate. Although AI benefits many areas, numerous roles still require uniquely human qualities such as empathy, creativity, and interpersonal communication planning.

### **Learning Opportunities for Working Professionals**

The swift advancement of automation and technology has significantly impacted the contemporary labour market. A McKinsey Global Institute report (2019) states that by 2030, 30% of all jobs will involve artificial intelligence. Companies are searching for individuals who fulfil and surpass these criteria in today's competitive job landscape. There is a growing emphasis on developing talent strategies that enhance

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workers' mental and emotional well-being. Currently, talent development heavily relies on employees already having the requisite skills. Organisations perceive that their investment in employee talent development is limited by the fleeting nature of skills learned in university (SHRM, 2019).

Furthermore, the systems students and workers rely on to adapt and grow with the workforce are evolving. Colleges and universities are increasingly modernising their teaching approaches to support working adults better. To give these professionals real-world learning experiences, the educational system must embrace a more practical and applied methodology. An educational platform that makes enrollment easier for working adults and provides the flexibility to study at their convenience is crucial.

### **Cross-Sector Partnerships**

Cross-sector partnerships facilitate knowledge creation by enhancing collaboration among previously isolated groups (Mehling, Kollec, 2019). Collaborative efforts between universities and industries, which include opportunities for work-based learning and curriculum development, better equip students and workers for the job market. Through these partnerships, university instructors gain valuable real-world insights while students refine their employability skills.

Multidisciplinary collaborations offer students the optimal environment to be job-ready. Central to this educational framework is career preparedness programs that impart transferable skills relevant to a dynamic labour market, adopting a "college to career" model that engages a diverse group of stakeholders. Research by Tumuli, Wanderi, and Thoruwa (2013) indicates a strong link between graduates' learning outcomes and job success when colleges collaborate with businesses. The study found that 60% of companies offered jobs to graduates involved in group projects. Additionally, the findings illustrated an easier transition for students into the workforce (Tumuti et al., 2013).

Such university-industry collaborations are highly advantageous for businesses, providing them access to skilled applicants. These partnerships foster career development opportunities, including training courses, seminars, and boot camps. By aligning with educational institutions, businesses can monitor labour market trends and create job readiness programs, thus contributing to economic growth and addressing skill gaps.

Today's employers expect graduates to possess technical expertise and essential soft skills, such as customer communication and teamwork (SHRM, 2019). Given the shifting job landscape, equipping graduates with marketable competencies is crucial. Dan (2013) notes potential collaboration challenges between educational institutions and businesses. Issues such as coordination and information flow arise when differing groups operate under varying formal rules, hindering adaptability and delaying research advancements. Furthermore, clinical research often necessitates additional funding from corporate partners for specialised equipment and on-site resources. University ownership and commercialisation policies can also restrict for-profit companies from benefiting from academic research. Lastly, concerns about intellectual property arise as institutions typically own any output from collaborative projects, making it difficult for businesses to access relevant documentation (Dan, 2013).

### **DISCUSSION**

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The demand for soft skills is at an all-time high due to technological shifts in our economy. Skills like communication, creativity, teamwork, and critical thinking are highly valued; a deficiency in these "soft skills" can adversely impact an organisation's productivity, growth, and innovation. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, businesses must help job candidates enhance their soft skills, including decision-making, problem-solving, effective written communication, and success in interpersonal relationships (SHRM, 2016). Additionally, 84% of survey respondents highlighted a need for soft skills such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and a strong work ethic. Technological advancements are also a driving force in industrial growth. To combat unemployment and enhance the workforce's skills, there needs to be an increased focus on creating educational opportunities for current and future workers. Education can bridge the skills gap, equipping students with the knowledge and competencies that employers demand. Many companies have expressed concerns that recent graduates often need more soft skills to be effective in the workplace. A recommended first step to address this issue is designing educational programs that integrate soft skills into their curricula. Educators can promote the acquisition of sought-after skills through experiential and project-based learning. These learning formats, crafted by industry experts, incorporate academic and career outcomes for students. In turn, businesses can affirm students' qualifications by accrediting their programs, ensuring graduates are workforce-ready. The traditional bureaucratic education system frequently challenges educators regarding the relevance of knowledge to future careers. Partnerships between industries and educational institutions enable instructors to stay informed about emerging industry requirements and the skills needed to navigate these challenges.

A one-size-fits-all educational approach is also impractical, as only some solutions fit every business issue. The resolutions to business challenges discussed in classrooms must be multifaceted and specific to the context. Both employers and job seekers can easily access graduate certificates. Students can complete assignments at their own pace, tailoring their education to meet business demands. Companies can reduce costs associated with training new employees by allowing their workforce to pursue certifications applicable to career advancement degrees.

## **CONCLUSION**

Establishing a lifelong learning system for postgraduates and professionals effectively bridges the soft skills gap. Personal development and continuous education hinge on a solid foundation in soft skills, which shape our behaviours, thoughts, and relationships. Increasingly, companies prioritise these "soft" skills over highly specialised ones, valuing effective communication, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. Employers prize these soft skills for adaptability, resilience during economic changes, and transferability across various roles. Despite the necessity for such skills, finding candidates who possess them remains challenging for many organisations.

The growing mismatch between graduates' competencies and workplace demands concerns businesses. Our education system must align sufficiently with industry requirements, as employers now expect higher education to impart vital soft skills. Universities should integrate soft skills training through project-based and job-oriented learning to address this issue and support lifelong learning. These teaching methods can enhance students' communication, decision-making, and problem-solving capabilities. With the evolution of technology altering business dynamics, companies must quickly retrain their workforce to

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meet market needs. Therefore, universities might consider offering graduate certificates and micro-credentials tailored for working professionals. Online graduate certificates provide a flexible and efficient way for students to gain essential training for today's challenges.

Lastly, fostering comprehensive collaboration between employers and universities is crucial for improving higher education's response to workforce needs. Inter-industry partnerships have proven successful in creating a steady pipeline of skilled talent. Academic and industry collaboration can enhance students' learning experiences by promoting dialogue and synergy between educational experts and business professionals.

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