

Relevance of Soft Skills at Today's Workplace

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Abstract– Soft skills are in great demand at workplace of today. In today's scenario of cut-throat competition, hard skills alone are not sufficient. Communication skills, self-motivation, working in a team, problem-solving skills, decision making, leadership and last but not the least emotional intelligence make up the soft skills. One can learn and develop soft skills just like hard skills. However, the reality is that the employees these days can hardly be called proficient in soft skills. Their superficial knowledge of these skills actually does more harm than any good. The reason for this maybe inadequate emphasis on these skills in schools and colleges as well as in on-the-job training. Soft skills have to be taught extensively over the years so that they become an inseparable part of the personality of the learner. Training, however, alone cannot do the trick. Learners had to make conscious efforts to learn these skills so that they seamlessly form a part of their personality.

Keywords– hard skills, soft skills, interpersonal skills, communication skills, emotional intelligence

The work scenario of today is a lot different from the work scenario of yesteryears. We today live in a global economy characterized by rapid change, accelerating technological breakthroughs and an unprecedented level of competitiveness. These developments create demands of much higher levels of education and training than ever before. The workplace of today demands a workforce which is more than well-equipped. One needs to possess core professional and technical skills. Apart from that, the modern times ask for a greater capacity for innovation, self-management, personal responsibility and self-direction on the part of an employee. In other words, in order to excel at work today, one needs to have both sets of skills i.e. hard skills as well as soft skills. Hard skills are the job-specific skills. They are mostly quantifiable and often learned in educational institutions. These are the technical skills that you need a repertoire of to be productive at your workplace. Soft skills, by contrast, are the interpersonal relationship-building skills. The acquisition of these skills makes an employee an asset for his organization and enables him to build constructive working relationships. The one having soft skills can recognize and manage his own and others' emotions. Whereas hard skills are the tangible and technical skills, soft skills are the comparatively intangible and non-technical skills. They are much more personal than the hard skills.

The soft skills are also called 'people skills', 'interpersonal skills', 'social skills' or 'transferable skills'. These skills have been defined as "collection of positive attributes and competencies that can improve work performance and productivity, enhance relationships, and make an individual more marketable in the workplace."¹ They are closely linked to emotional intelligence– i.e. the ability to understand, use and manage one's emotions, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict. The term 'soft skills' covers "a wide range of skills as diverse as teamwork, time management, empathy and delegation." They are as important as, if not more important than the hard skills i.e. the technical know-how. A company manager, for example, who has the soft skills of understanding, active listening, approachability and empathy for the people working under him will be undoubtedly more successful than a manager having a degree from a top management school. Similarly, a salesperson having an exhaustive knowledge of the market may not top the sales if he does not have skills like communication skills, self-motivation and negotiation. Soft skills are not just only required while dealing with customers and clients. They are equally important when it comes to interacting with colleagues. Employers naturally value those employees who can best fit with a team, work easily with others, motivate colleagues, resolve conflict as and when required, respond calmly to crisis and can also be a leader of the team.

The importance of soft skills at workplace is being increasingly recognized these days. The World Economic Forum in its report 'The Future Of Jobs' published on 18.01.2016 predicted that by 2020, complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management and emotional intelligence would be among the most important skills required in the workplace.³ Consumers these days have a big list of sellers to select from. Intense competition has brought about greater convenience and competitive prices for the customers. In such a

scenario, "Customer service is often what influences the choice to use a particular business."⁴ Significantly, consumer service is a service that is hard to automate. A robot is unlikely to ever take the place of human beings in the realm of dealing with and satisfying the consumers. Therefore, soft skills are in high demand these days. Gone are the days when a good GPA and a relevant degree from a good university was all a new graduate needed to land a job. Today, abstract skills are just as important to employers as practical trade skills and educational qualifications. In fact, a job-aspirant having good soft skills stands out in a crowd of job-seekers where everyone has comparable hard qualifications. Furthermore, one may land a job on the basis of hard skills but it is the cultivation of soft skills also to a large extent that opens the doors to future success.

Among the key soft skills, **communication skills** are on the top. Never before have these been more important. In order to present, clarify, negotiate and persuade, you need a mix of skills in speaking, writing, listening and appropriate body language. One must have the ability to articulate thoughts and express ideas with precision. This applies to both written and verbal communication. One has to be an active listener as well to be a good communicator. **Self- motivation** is another soft skill. The companies expect their employees to be responsible and sometimes even go the extra mile to perform well. The ability to work well without constant close supervision is a very important soft skill for any employee. **Team-working skills** also form a part of soft skills. Regardless of the position a person holds in an organization, one must have the ability to work well in a team. One must know how to join forces and work in partnership with others. **Creativity and problem-solving skills** are also among the highly valued skills. One must have the ability to see problems as part of the job and take them as opportunities to learn something hitherto new. The capability to identify problems and devise the most appropriate solutions is a very important soft skill. **Making timely decisions** is another soft skill. However, one should know how to be decisive without being reckless. **Time management and the ability to work under pressure** are also among sought after skills in the modern work scenario of severely demanding deadlines. Knowing how to prioritize is critical to be effective at time management. **Negotiation** is another important soft skill. To be a good negotiator, one must know how to be persuasive, while sensitively seeking a solution which will benefit all parties. Last but not the least is **leadership**, a soft skill one can show even if one is not directly leading others. Modern business cannot be run by a few people who think and many people who do what they are told. In fact, if a team has to work well, its every member must be able to take orders as well as give them, as per the demand of the situation.

One can learn and develop soft skills just as one can develop the hard skills. Though for some people they are harder to acquire, it is not impossible to learn and acquire them through practice. Unfortunately, the cultivation of soft skills is mostly overlooked in education and training. Though employers place a high premium on the soft skills, these skills are not typically taught in schools, colleges and universities. They form a small part of the curriculum of certain professional courses in some universities and are not sufficiently instilled in the graduates. It is the hard truth that their importance is often undervalued and there is far less training provided for them than hard skills. Employers assume that the graduates have learnt them in college and consequently do not provide any extensive training for them. At the most, short-term courses, sometimes lasting merely a week, are arranged to enable the employees to be adept at soft skills. Consequently, these skills are not internalized properly and they remain a superficial part of their personalities.

The proficiency in soft skills displayed by most of the employees can by no means be called adequate. The sorry state of affairs is mirrored in the serious inadequacies that the youngsters, who claim to have mastered all the probable soft skills, cannot help but display in the actual workplaces. A major chunk of their training, for example, is devoted to communication skills and ironically these remain the most under-developed. The emphasis during their education in soft skills has invariably been on making them proficient in English, the sole language in which almost all the business e-mails are written and in which the everyday business of the modern workplaces is increasingly being carried out. The short-term training courses which they may attend later also aim at honing the four skills of language learning i.e. reading, writing, listening, speaking in the shortest possible time but the result is the cultivation of half-baked skills which do more harm than good. Even the seemingly fluent speakers of English who are employed in private banks, big showrooms, travel agencies and malls make serious blunders while using the language. It is pathetic to see them struggling with a very limited vocabulary and even a smaller range of sentence structures. They sometimes have to resort to literal translation of a vernacular to save their skin. An employee of a travel agency, for instance, was recently overheard offering profuse apologies to a client. The poor girl was heard saying again and again, "I am very ashamed of you, Sir", making the poor client squirm and go redder and redder in the face, every time she said it. The youngsters fare hardly any better at writing skills. A short e-mail marred by countless mistakes, spelling as well as grammatical, naturally projects its writer in an extremely poor light.

Most of the users of the English language, in the business world seem to suffer from a limited knowledge of the language itself. A similar paucity of politeness, kindness, courtesy and goodwill seem to beset most of them. By no means do they have infinite stores of these virtues. A smile that seldom reaches the eyes and fades away the moment the client's back is turned is far worse than no smile at all. Kindness and courteousness are indeed rare commodities in the business world of today. Even a moderately discerning eye can discern the impatience bubbling away beneath a thin veneer of politeness. An employee should therefore be truly courteous rather than merely courteous. Similarly, the skill of persuasion does not imply bulldozing a customer into buying something that does not suit him and which will leave him feeling cheated at the end of transaction. The trick is to always stay considerate of the interests of others while pushing for what you want to achieve. Unfair manipulation of the client seldom pays in the long run. Why not increase the emphasis on honesty, integrity and a genuine concern for the client in the training itself, so that the young people do not have to learn this the hard way? Furthermore, since soft skills also encompass an employee's relations with his associates and colleagues, one has to be genuinely concerned about others and really considerate of their feelings. The spirit of collaboration and cooperation that vanishes at the first hint of competition is, therefore, much more repulsive than open rivalry among colleagues. Again, a leader, who falsely professes openness and equality, does a great harm to the organization.

The soft skills therefore should be an inseparable part of the personality. The problem arises when these skills are not properly absorbed and remain superficial to the personality of the learners. They have to be sufficiently instilled in the young people over the years. For that, they have to become an integral part of the curriculum along with the hard skills. Short term courses arranged later at the workplace are not that beneficial, it seems. Soft skills have to be taught extensively over the years so that they are internalized properly. Teaching soft skills should be termed as a "fundamental educational activity"⁵ and some experts even recommend starting the training in primary school itself, since their acquisition not only helps a youngster in landing a good job but also in leading a fuller and happier life. It is evident that "Schools must provide students with soft skills not only to find a job, but to flourish as human beings and citizens."⁶ As 'skills beget skills', the acquisition of soft skills at an early age will surely play an important role in efficiently raising other skills in the young people. The academicians should take them even more seriously at the college level and they should be integrated into the coursework. Apart from making them an important part of the curriculum, there is also a need to refresh and refurbish them from time to time during the job tenure of an employee. The training should however be in small chunks and employees should also be given time to internalize new lessons.

A very important thing to remember is that one cannot and should not depend on training courses alone for the cultivation of these skills. Soft skills are more of an attitude than mere skills. Probably that is why, for some people these so-called soft skills are often the hardest ones to develop. In reality, these skills pertain to how you organize yourself and how you approach life. That is why, learning them has to be a life-long process. And learning can take place only if one knows what has to be learnt. In other words, one has to identify one's own soft skill gaps and work on them diligently. Awareness, as they say, is all. No training, howsoever extensive it might be, can take the place of self-analysis and self-knowledge. Nobody can know you better than yourself. Self-awareness is the first step towards improvement of any kind. However, one should not try to achieve too much in one step. All the soft skills cannot be achieved all at once. One soft skill has to be identified to start with. Once one makes progress on one soft skill, it will give one confidence to improve more on others. Practice, practice and practice –alone can make one proficient at using them. Let soft skills become an integral part of your personality through constant practice and correction.

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