SHAPING STUDENTS FOR A SOUND CORPORATE FUTURE ON THE BASIS OF SKILLS OR POTENTIAL

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Abstract— **As companies worldwide struggle to move beyond the great recession of 2009, many business leaders are adjusting their talent strategies to meet the shifting demands characterized as the "new normal." While the inclination may be strong to revert to strategies that served them well prior to the economic crisis, many executives seem to recognize that the forces shaping future talent needs, such as globalization and an aging workforce, continued to accelerate during the downturn and now require new talent strategies to position their companies for success. This aims at exploring talent strategies, concerns of global companies, and unfolding employee trends as companies confront a fresh set of challenges that we expect will influence the next decade and beyond. The constraints of talent & quality of manpower at the entry level, yet, by and large, the industry has been able to get the required numbers albeit with some compromises with what they were looking for. Surprisingly most of this so called "unemployable" lot of students have risen to the demand upon selection, demonstrated the capability levels expected of them & ultimately settled down into successful careers and delivered substantially the results expected out of them. Many of the students at the bottom of the ladder, from amongst those who really needed the jobs, had to start off on petty stipends, and through structured learning or due to "hands on" learning & growth at the work place, a few years down the line, many of them have entered into reputed multinational companies.**
Key words: seek to improve the skill set of graduates; emphasize Soft Skills, Potential based selection, refocus the assessments, interact more with employers to understand the particular demand for skills in that region and sector-Domain skills, Work Place Competencies, skills do employers consider important when hiring new engineering graduates.

Index Terms—**About four key words or phrases in alphabetical order, separated by commas.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Historically,   when   the   economy   is   growing,   the unemployment rate is relatively low and the job vacancy rate is relatively high, indicating more job openings than there are

workers to fill those positions. Likewise, when the economy is shrinking, the unemployment rate is relatively high and the vacancy rate is relatively low, because there are more workers looking for work than there are jobs(2).

The key word in both of these categories is "potential." These shortage/surplus measurements are, in fact, only half of the equation. A "skill shortage" only exists if workers have failed to acquire the requisite skills to perform the required tasks at a rate equal to demand. Likewise, a "skill surplus" exists only if workers have failed to retrain and find employment elsewhere after losing their jobs. Both of these measurements are difficult to pin down (1-2).

II. THE CONFEDERATION OF INDIAN INDUSTRY (CII) IS HAPPY TO PARTNER WHEEBOX & PEOPLE STRONG IN THE INDIA SKILLS REPORT REVIEW STAGE

With manpower of 1.2437 billion, it is ironic that we suffer from dearth of talent? As per recent studies the severity of the situation can be estimated that only 10% of MBA graduates of the country are employable and same is true for the engineering graduates where this number is as low as 17%. This scarcity of skilled talent makes it impossible for the Talent Supply Chain to operate effectively and is an issue which if not taken care of immediately will become uncontrollable. One can imagine the enormity of the challenge we will face when in year 2026, 64.8% of India's population would be in the working age of 15-64 years. Solving this problem requires true-blue participation from all actors of the supply chain: the Academia, Industry and the Government. The first step towards any such partnership is a better understanding amongst partners: the needs, expectations and the challenges of each other. Only then can any plan bridge the gaps (20).

India Skill Report 2014, a joint initiative by CII with PeopleStrong and Wheebox, is a determined step in this direction. Reaching about 100000 students across 28 states and 7 union territories from the supply side and corporate players from 10 diverse industry sectors, this first of its kind report aims to provide an insight into the hiring trends of the market while understanding the needs of the job seeker and organizations. "I congratulate the India Skills Report Team for their success in bringing Government, Industry, Sector Skill Council, Associations and Academia on one platform and bringing in a thinking tool that can be used by different stakeholders to come with a solution for the skills issues of the country."(20)
Mr. Chandrajit Banerjee, Director General, Confederation of Indian Industry.

III. MATH JUST IN TIME FRESH TALENT

Business wants any resource Just-In-Time to make sure that the return on investment is perfectly timed. Any Business

organization would be thrilled to see If they get a readymade resources for them. Currently governments are building lot of talent pool to make sure that the employment generation happens quickly. All the efforts are made to build employable people as soon as they complete their education.

Skill shortage remains one of the major constraints to continued growth of the Indian economy.However, very little research has been conducted to identify which specific skills are in high demand and which skills are in short supply.

The results confirm a widespread dissatisfaction with the current graduates - 64% of employers hiringfresh engineering graduates are only somewhat satisfied with the quality of the new hires or worse.

After classifying all skills by factor analysis, we find that employers perceive Soft Skills (Core Employability Skills and Communication Skills) more important than Professional Skills.

Skill gaps are particularly severe in higher order thinking skills ranked according to Bloom's taxonomy of thinking skill. In contrast, communication in English has the smallest skill gap, but remains one of the most demanded skills by the employers(10).

While employers across India asks for the same set of soft skills, their skill demands differ for Professional Skills across economic sectors, company sizes, and regions. These findings suggest that engineering education institutions should:

1. seek to improve the skill set of graduates;
2. emphasize Soft Skills
3. refocus the assessments,
4. interact more with employers to understand the particular demand for skills in that region and sector

Teaching-learning process, and curricula away from lower-order thinking skills, such as

remembering and understanding towards higher order skills such as analysis and creativity; and Succeeding at the Job is central to the well being of every professional .We know recruiters expect "High Performance on the Job"- High Performance means results delivered. Those who possess the correct mix of competencies suited for the job are more effective in that job role- (i.e. matching of competencies). However there exists a gap between applicant preparation and recruiter expectations.

There is an all round clamor that hardly 20% of the students coming out of higher courses of professional education are employable. Specially the now famous "Mackinsey report" had expressed serious concerns and most of the employers & members of HR fraternity have been expressing grave doubts as to how such a vast mass of unemployable youngsters will be able to sustain and fulfill the requirements of a rapidly growing Indian economy amidst tough global competition.

The constraints of talent & quality of manpower at the entry level, yet, by and large, the industry has been able to get the required numbers albeit with some compromises with what they were looking for. Surprisingly most of this so called "unemployable" lot of students have risen to the demand upon selection, demonstrated the capability levels expected of them & ultimately settled down into successful careers and delivered substantially the results expected out of them. Many of the students at the bottom of the ladder, from amongst those who really needed the jobs, had to start off on petty stipends, and through structured learning or due to "hands on" learning & growth at the work place, a few years down the line, many

of them have entered into reputed multinational companies. This I can say after a decade of experience of watching them and after tracking the careers of some 15,000 passout students now walking the corporate corridors (19).

IV. A TYPICAL FRESH ENGINEERING GRADUATE LACKING PROBLEM SOLVING SKILL SPECIFICALLY, THE SURVEY SEEKS ANSWERS THE FOLLOWING THREE QUESTIONS

1. Which skills do employers consider important when hiring new engineering graduates?
2. How satisfied are employers with the skills of engineering graduates?
3. In which important skills are the engineers falling short?

To illustrate the typical skill gap we see in fresh engineers, let us take the case of Bhanu Prakash, who after completing his Bachelor's degree in Information & Technology Engineering with a good academic track record has just joined an IT Services organization. Specifically, this group works on product engineering for a semiconductor vendor who is developing highly integrated silicon and supporting software for mobile devices. Bhanu has undergone about 2 months of refresher training by the organization on software engineering before being assigned to the project.

The Project manager that he reports to is in charge of delivering the layer of platform software, which comprises of the Real Time Operating System and the Device Drivers for all the peripherals the mobile device will support, to the customer. The project manager assigns to Bhanu the task of taking over the development of a device driver for one of the simpler peripherals on the device and points him to all the relevant information sources. The project manager expects Bhanu to work quite independently on the same and complete it with minimal assistance given the fact that he has the necessary knowledge from his academic background, and the device driver is for the simplest peripheral on the chip. On the job, however Bhanu begins to flounder. He is first of all quite stymied by the amount of information he has to digest in a short span of time. He did not have the skill to filter out and read what was really required for the job. The second challenge was his unfamiliarity with handling a large volume of code.(1-2)

His academic projects had been quite small, a few hundred lines at most. He did not have the skill to abstract out the entire system, and only focus on the interfaces for the device driver he had to develop. The next challenge was on the design of the module. He had to pick a design which was not only efficient in the time but also efficient in use of system resources as the designs for a mobile device with typically limited memory. Last but not the least, the design had to be robust. When it was time to integrate and test the driver, he had to really grasp the complexities of debugging an embedded system. Though his own module was quite simple, he had to have the big picture of the system. He had to understand how to use the debugging tools and the features it provided, to probe the system at the appropriate level. He was once again felt wanting on the required problem solving skills to move ahead on the problems encountered (17-18).

If we reflect on this case, it is clear that the academic curriculum had the following lacunae:

➤ Had not trained Bhanu sufficiently on key design skills, especially handling conflicting criteria to be met, and problem solving skills, and creative exploration for the same, and

➤ Had not trained him on handling complexity, and key abstraction skills required to handle it. These problems can be traced to:

➤ Lack of imagination in the construction of laboratory experiments in the academic setting and also probably in the evaluation patterns followed,

➤ Few problem sets (examinations) for students to test design oriented problems which would have given students the chance to explore the design space and appreciate the challenges, and

➤ Little exposure to joint projects with industries to experience complexities in the actual work place and prepare students better for a career in the relevant industries.(7-8)

What does it actually mean…. it means that many employers while hiring entry level talent are looking for developed students with "Work Place Competencies"-(Knowledge, Skills, Winning Attitudes & correct enablers e.g. balanced & whole some personality, emotional maturity, confidence, passion for achievements etc.- Skills here mean both the Technical Skills as well as other soft skills that go with the job. Soft Skills in turn have two components, Communication Skills &, Human Relations Skills/ Interpersonal Skills). Obviously a young qualified student coming out of a professional college does not possess these workplace competencies quite as adequately, as the prospective employer would wish to have & so the employer feels the student is not employable. However either through structured training programmes or the process of getting experimentally exposed to the working on the job the students acquire & develop the competencies & skills and succeed. Thus this competency & skills development is the consequence of rigorous experiential exposure. What this, however, shows that skills & work place competencies develop in the experiential learning mode & process, & the majority of professionally qualified "freshers" are able to successfully acquire it. It is also obvious that not all educational institutions are able to 'simulate' similar conditions for the students during the process of acquisition of the degree or diploma. This does not, however, mean that all the students are not having the potential to be gainfully employed, as the word "unemployable" has been projected to mean. All it means is that the correct exposure has not been provided, or that the student has not been aware as to how important is such preparation for employability & success on the job and has not cared to undergo the process of development. The students should (and many of them do) possess the correct mix of resources that can be converted into correct work place competency profile after the due process of training, learning & development just as many of the students have become successful down the line, given such thorough hands on learning & working at the place of work(6-7-8).

Thus it is the "potential" that has to be "spotted" by recruiters while hiring at the entry level (read freshers) and recruiters have to be prepared to invest in them through learning & development interventions, rather than being vocally concerned that adequate talent is not available. In my opinion, the 20%, so called employable category of students (as per

Mackinsey studies) are those ones whose "resource development" has already happened to a better or larger extent, because of either their own extra resourcefulness, keenness, self drive or aptitude or the strong mentoring provided by the institution when they are studying. There is a band of about 60% students in the mid segment which are the ones who can be so developed & made "employable" through strong & extensive learning & development exposure and will adequately meet the expectations of mid segment employers, which are all successful & established companies; its only some bottom 20%, who are the non motivated & lacking in both aptitude & self drive or the resource capability within them it too less, who should be classified as "unemployable" & who should settle down for lesser jobs demanding lower competency or skill levels.(17-19)

This is what hiring for "potential" would mean; select the ones with the correct resource potential and through learning & development interventions develop the potential into capabilities/competencies. However this proactive approach is not happening in majority of cases; the current scene is that the majority of the employers expect the fresh recruit to be "billable", from day one. Industry & commercial compulsions may demand this to be the correct approach, however, the best suited talent can not be acquired in this manner, because most of the educational institutions are currently inadequately equipped to provide experiential learning exposure; all the hype of "Institute Industry Interaction" notwithstanding. There is no harm in expecting such 'billable' entry level talent but then industry has to be prepared to integrate backwards i.e. it has to select students based on potential early enough and provide them the experiential training during (say) their final year and evaluate again at the end as to how many of the students undergoing such training have successfully come up to expectations. This training, however, needs to be cost effective & good in quality. To be cost effective the training has to carried out either at the work place or better still, in the final Semester at the college itself, with the help of training staff provided by industry. So that when the time comes for the students in evaluation at the final interviews before joining, he/she has all the knowledge, skills and posseses work place competencies expected of him/her(20). Alternatively outsourced agencies paid by the recruiter may be engaged or selected few college faculty can be trained (train the trainer). It has been the experience of this author, who has been the Director Training, Development and Placement of a large group of Professional Educational Institutions, that without a "driving motive" in the student and without the "motivated trainer" the development effort does succeed quite as much, and the creation of "industry readiness" remains a wishful dream. The students in the mid segment who need this training the most, are not generally self driven & highly motivated (due to a laid back attitude), so if value adding training programmes are run for them without the minimum commitment of the student, very few of them actually participate seriously & even fewer develop the necessary level of skills & competencies. Further the trainers as available in the market through various training agencies have a profile which is not suited for the quality of training needed & the mentorship provided by them is highly insufficient in most cases. While there are highly effective training organizations available for good corporate training, these are too costly for average student (or Parents) to afford after having paid substantial amount annually as fees &

expenditure. Because it is the recruiter who benefits the most by getting cost effective entry level trained manpower on board the recruiters should come forward to subsidize the cost of such training heavily. Alternatively as suggested earlier they can either depute their own trainers or provide subsidized training through suitable out sourced agencies of their choice. The "train the trainer" programme is one of the most cost effective & low cost methods of efficient students training & compulsory training for development. Further, if such training is conducted post an early selection; & if the students are given a challenge through measurable target levels to be achieved, their interest level as well that of the trainers who are accountable is much higher & consequently the end results are vastly improved. Less than 5% students fail after such experiential training. All this cost is easily recovered (offset) against post induction training which gets reduced by 75% to 80%(9,11, 13)

Further the mid segment students so developed have more rational & realistic expectations & stay longer with employers & the attrition is substantially reduced. In comparison high performing "high fliers" picked up from elite institutions perform well but leave sooner for greener pastures. They should be selected where exceptional challenges & quality is expected & commensurate compensation & growth can be offered. However bulk of the entry level jobs are suitable for the mid segment student aspirants and out of our tweaked perceptions we are demanding much too high a talent level (in terms of competencies & skills) which the current system is not developing (21).

CONCLUSION

It is sad to see that very few organizations have come forward in this proactive manner as outlined earlier. I can say this out of extensive experience that both employers as well as the educational institutions are failing to mentor the students & young talent has to navigate of its own & develop through the challenges they have to overcome as part of starting a career & based purely on the survival instinct. The way they should be mentored is not in place & though there is no dearth of talent in any part of India, we are crying "wolf" because of dearth of mentoring & competency & skill development initiatives from industry & educational institutions alike. At least, in spite of my best efforts, I have not come across many such proactive initiatives to groom students to be employable yet we are seriously concerned that the way things are placed, the talent crunch will be our next major bottleneck.

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