Teaching Soft Skills at Undergraduate Level: Some Observations

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ABSTRACT

Soft skills have become a high demand commodity among hiring managers in the corporate world. This problem presents a challenge for both the employer and employee in the workplace. Soft skills refer to social skills and emotional intelligence abilities that help employees work well together in an organization. These skills include; teamwork, conflict resolution, creativity, adaptability, time management, and critical thinking. Soft skills are vital in acquiring employment, job security, and career success.

Furthermore, these skills are beneficial in life altogether. A few decades ago, hard skills were the only prerequisite to getting a job. However, as the information era emerged and the world grew more technology-based, the focus shifted from hard skills to soft skills. Undoubtedly, hard skills are still vital in performing in various fields, but soft skills have become equally important. Due to the increasing demand for soft skills, Universities are under pressure to integrate soft skills into degree programs. This paper explores how universities incorporate soft skills into their education programs and the importance of teaching these skills to students. Subsequently, this study will observe the effectiveness of the training and provide solutions for any limitations.

Keywords

Soft skills, increasing demand, teamwork, conflict resolution, creativity, adaptability, time management, and critical thinking

Introduction

In the employment sector today, there is a noticeable skill gap among job seekers and employees. Soft skills are a set of desirable characteristics that enable workers to thrive in the workplace. They are a composite of emotional intellect, social intelligence, people skills, and communication skills. At first glance, these skills seem like common sense and might be deemed unnecessary to teach in college. However, many employers have stated that soft skills are equally important to hard skills. Levasseur (2013:2) reports that graduates will often possess hard skills more than soft skills. As a result, the employer is forced to shoulder the burden of training the new employees. Unlike today, hard skills were the major qualification in the employment sector a few decades ago.

Hard skills are technical abilities that are acquired through education and experience. They are measured by a candidate's academic merits or the ability to perform a task. Hard skills are still vital in gauging a person's suitability to work in a particular field. However, their ability to work well with others determines their success in their career. The discovery prompted this shift of focus towards soft skills that good work personnel gave companies a competitive advantage. Unfortunately, in most workplaces, the older employees will often clash with younger workers despite their brilliant hard skills for the job. This issue confirms a significant lack of soft skills on the part of the younger employees. Therefore, there is a distinctly negative impact on the working atmosphere when dealing with new employees with little or no soft skills.

Nowadays, most hiring managers will pick candidates who possess soft skills when deciding between two equally qualified candidates. One significant benefit to possessing soft skills is their diversity. They are not only essential in the employment sector but also life altogether. In other words, most people who know how to treat other people well have better interactions and go further in life than their counterparts. Given the high demand for soft skills in the employment sector, it is safe to say that there is a need to teach soft skills in universities and colleges. The skill gap in the younger generation will inevitably derail their success in the workplace. This paper will explore the importance of teaching soft skills in college, teaching these skills among undergraduates, observing the effectiveness and limitations of teaching soft skills, and the solutions to the challenges observed.

Objectives

i.   To learn the importance of teaching soft skills to undergraduates

ii.   To explore how to teach these soft skills in colleges and universities

Literature Review

Soft skills refer to social and emotional intelligence that enables people to interact well with each other. At first glance, the term soft skills might imply that these qualities are easy to achieve or might not be as important as hard skills. To understand why these traits were coined as "soft skills", it is essential to explore its history. This expression is traced back to 1968 when the US army noticed that the makings of a successful troop of soldiers were their ability

to handle the machine and the leadership of the group. They argued that the missing skill was not physically hard and felt more soft than working with machines. Therefore, they formed a criterion based on the physical difficulty level of a task to judge if it was a soft or hard skill. During the war era, it made sense to term the skill as soft. However, in today's technology and information era, the term may seem too pejorative for such vital qualities.

Paramus and Monnot (2019:226) conducted a study to prove the need to retire the term "soft skills" and adopt the expression "CORE skills." The research reports that employers list team skills as the most important attribute for employees and new graduates from surveys. Similarly, job recruiters listed social skills as the most desirable trait among graduates. This study argues that the term "soft" holds a negative connotation such as weak or wimpy, which is not accurate for such vital skills. Cinque (2016: 167) conducted a similar study where several terms were used to refer to soft skills. The article displays the different names that have been proposed by various institutions for the term "soft skills." For instance, WHO termed these traits as "life skills" while the European Union called them "key competencies for lifelong learning." Therefore, soft skills are debatable, but the importance of these traits in the workplace is vital.

Importance of Soft Skills

Over the past few decades, the demand for interpersonal and intrapersonal skills has risen in the employment sector. In fact, these skills have been given equal importance as hard skills. Vasanthakumari (2019: 72) conducted a study to compare the importance of hard skills and soft skills. The research used a descriptive research design, which involves scanning articles and reports on the subject matter. The paper concludes that the two skills are interrelated, and while hard skills help with acquiring employment, soft skills guarantee employability. Furthermore, the paper argues that these soft skills should be taught to students from an early age to ensure success in academics and the workplace.

Cimmati (20126:125) conducted a similar study to examine soft skills and their relationship to organizations' quality. This article surveys seventy-eight Italian universities with an aim to determine the relationship between different workplace skills. The study reports a synergy between the two skills and that teaching of soft skills should begin from primary school. Additionally, the research points out that learning soft skills crucially depends on the individual because they must be aware of their poor skills and be willing to improve. In light of the increasing demand for soft skills in new graduates, the employment sector puts more pressure on learning institutions. Qizi (2020: 1925) carried out a study to evaluate how learning institutions have incorporated soft skills into the curriculum. The research surveys in universities find that the curriculum only included seven of all the twenty-one most important soft skills. The paper concludes that higher education institutions are still behind in integrating soft skills into the curriculum.

Soft Skills Measurement

Soft skills are difficult to assess and measure compared to hard skills. The latter, which showcases what a person can do, can easily be evaluated through academic merits and workplace performance. However, the former is about whom a person is on the inside, making it more challenging to measure. Nonetheless, experts have designed a few methods that assess a graduate's soft skill level. For instance, trainers can use individualized personality tests, surveys from a person's family and peers, and psychological tests to obtain substantial information to gauge the learner's proficiency. However, these assessments are only effective if the individual is truthful, and the friends and family are not biased.

The Teaching of Soft Skills:

The integration of soft skills into the University curriculum is an ongoing endeavor. There are multiple proposed ideas on how to teach these skills to undergraduates. The two major schools of thought are integrating soft skills into existing courses that the learner is taking or teaching the skills separately as a project or program. Cimmatti (2016:104) writes that most universities prefer combining soft skills in the various subjects of the degree because it is easy to accomplish than developing an entirely new program. Furthermore, some traits such as critical thinking cannot be taught separately from an existing course because the skill needs context to be applied effectively.

Regarding teaching the skills separately, there are several ways to execute it. For instance, teaching can be done through seminars. Students can attend organized workshops that focus on training these skills. Another teaching approach is by dedicating time within the semester to teaching soft skills, for example, the first two weeks or the last two weeks. Universities can also dedicate a whole semester in the degree to teach some specific soft skills. An additional way to incorporate soft skills into the curriculum is to create subjects on the various soft skills and assign them to particular teachers whose job is only to teach these skills. These subjects can then be integrated with the already existing subjects of a degree. Undoubtedly, teaching soft skills in Universities is a new and challenging concept, but fresh innovations will continue to emerge with time.

Some Observations:

As mentioned before, incorporating soft skills into the graduate programs is no mean fete. Teaching soft skills presents a few challenges. Firstly, soft skills are not easily measured. This issue makes the educator's job difficult since they cannot effectively assess the students' competence of the learned skill. As of now, soft skills are evaluated through

self-reporting essays and tests. The problem with this assessment method is that the learner can lie, which makes the feedback unreliable. A second limitation to teaching soft skills is the conversion of knowledge into skill. This issue relates to the classroom-type of learning. The students will acquire knowledge about the skill, but they might find it challenging to apply the knowledge practically in the workplace.

Thirdly, successfully teaching soft skills relies heavily on the learner's willingness to learn and change. For example, for social skills, the teacher cannot force the student to treat other people well if he/she doesn't want to do it. Despite the teaching method's effectiveness or the teacher's efforts, such a student will lack that specific skill. Fourthly, soft skills require repeated effort. Unlike soft skills, hard skills are taught in a short period, tested, and graded, after which the students move on to other subjects. However, soft skills require practice and constant refreshing of knowledge and skills. Therefore, a lot of money, time, and effort is put into the teaching and learning process. Despite all these limitations, Universities have put in commendable effort in doing what they can while seeking to improve teaching methods and techniques.

Solutions:

From the observations, there is a need to improve the teaching-learning process for both students and teachers. To overcome the issue of immeasurability of soft skills, teachers can use a case-based knowledge checklist. The teacher creates scenarios and role-plays and uses a checklist of correct behavior to assess the student's performance. Unlike self-reporting tests, this method enables the teacher to obtain reliable feedback on the learner's progress. The challenge of conversion of knowledge to skill can be solved by employing service-learning and simulations in teaching. This action involves creating programs where students handle projects in an actual organization. In this way, the learner applies gained knowledge on real-life issues that occur in a workplace.

Concerning the issue of potential unwillingness to learn by the students, teachers can refrain from forcing the learners into learning about soft skills. Instead, they should give them the freedom to choose and commit to the training. This technique will ensure the complete effectiveness of the training programs. When it comes to the repetitive nature of soft skills training, a good solution is to develop a long-term teaching program with opportunities and incentives to encourage continual practice and participation. Soft skill learning is remedial and requires continuous application of the knowledge to obtain a remarkable outcome.

Conclusion:

It is safe to say that soft skills are life skills. Their importance and benefits go beyond the workplace and into life. For this reason, these skills must be taught in Universities. Teaching can be executed by combining soft skills into the existing degree courses or creating new programs separate from the existing courses. The resulting

limitations include; the difficulty in measuring soft skills and converting knowledge into skills. However, soft skills among students can be improved through experiential learning, motivation from teachers, and an awareness of these skills, especially in seeking jobs and ensuring job security.

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