

The Significance of Inculcating Soft Skills in Students in the Process of Teaching Hard Skills



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Abstract:

This paper is the result of an investigation of the impact that the Soft skills have on the life of a student in his student life as well as the impact they have on his life thereafter when he becomes a professional. This paper explores why Soft Skills are essential and compulsory and complement hard skills, which are called technical requirements of a professional for which a student undergoes rigorous training in college. This paper urges teachers, faculties and trainers to take individual responsibility in the aspect of training students in Soft Skills, Faculties, who teach / train them have a great influence over them because they spend most of their time with them. Especially in engineering colleges, the professors who train students in hard skills are in a much better position to blend Soft Skills along with hard skills efficiently, thus bringing out a power packed module that shapes the students personality. Students, on the other hand, are also responsible for this situation because they focus more on acquiring technical knowledge, putting Soft Skills in the backseat. They realize this only when placement time is near. If both are blended together, the output is a better professional and a superior human being. All it requires is a little bit of extra effort from the faculty's side, a little care from the parents' side and a little more effort from the student. We all know that prevention is better than cure. So Soft Skills must be embedded during early childhood and during teen years otherwise instead of being an asset, she/he becomes a liability to the parents as well as the nation. If care is not taken immediately, we might have a nation of cultureless, manner less, educated zombies looking for work.

Key words: Soft skills training, hard skills, technical skills, communication skills, teachers, education

Introduction

It has been a long standing complaint of employers as well as the managers, that the newcomers i.e. students fresh out of college / universities lack Soft Skills and are unemployable. Schools, on one hand, dump the responsibility on the parents to teach them Soft Skills and then send them from school and parents put the ball back in the school blaming them for charging exorbitant fees and for the lack of training their wards are given in Soft Skills. This escalates into a situation where the colleges blame the parents and parents, on the other hand, feel that they have paid a heavy amount of fees to the college so it is their duty to teach the students Soft Skills. The result of this entire melee is each one tries to pass the buck to the other and as an end result; the students are the sufferers. They are really far behind in Etiquette & Soft Skills. Predominantly missing amongst Soft Skill is the ability to communicate properly in the English language and express their views correctly and clearly.

Today, graduates are academically competent and excellent with relation to hard skills but seriously lack in skills like ‘team-work’, ‘leadership’, quantitative aptitude and verbal reasoning’. More than 40 years ago, the German Engineering Association (VDI) recommended that at least 20% of the Engineering curricula should be dedicated to Soft Skills. Students coming out from Universities should have Soft Skills as well as the knowledge of a few cultures and foreign languages. The situation has now further deteriorated all over the world. Comparing the Soft Skills of students coming from two different Engineering streams can be evaluated and considered similar to that of an aboriginal man. However, on the other hand, students of history, arts or commerce are termed better in Soft Skills. The English Scientist C. P. Snow established this fact in his much famous speech titled “The Two Cultures” in which he defined that because of the nature of the courses, students inculcate the Soft Skills. He emphasized that non-technical courses and programs generally put more emphasis on Soft Skills or the courses are themselves are very Soft Skill related by nature.

What does Soft Skill really mean?

This is a million dollar question and has to be clarified before even discussing the importance of Soft Skills. The reason why this question is difficult to answer is because the perception of ‘what is Soft Skill?’ changes in every scenario. Sometimes there is a thin line drawn between Soft and Hard skill. At times, a subject or topic may be considered as a Soft Skill in one area but may come under the hard skill area in a different subject. And to top that, the insight differs as to what should be recognized as Soft Skill varies widely. Adding to this melee, Soft Skill differs from culture to culture, place to place and hierarchy to hierarchy. In countries like India, where a variety of cultures exist, a mechanical engineer need not have the knowledge of cultural awareness whereas for a human resource manager or a public relations manager, it is a ‘must-know’.

It is a pathetic situation that people are still in the dark regarding the boundary of Soft skills. The online encyclopedia “Wikipedia” gives a very broad definition of Soft skills, which leaves much room for discussion: “*Soft skills refer to the cluster of personality traits, social graces, and facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark people to varying degrees. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job.*” (Wikipedia, 2007)

1. Common Sense	2. Good attitude	3. Communication skills
4. Group Discussion	5. Etiquette & Manners.	6. Body Language
7. Cooperation & Team skills	8. Adaptability.	9. Flexibility.
10. Follow rules / Instructions.	11. Initiative	12. Responsibility
13. Reliability.	14. Honesty.	15. Integrity
16. Dependability.	17. Work ethics.	18. Punctuality
19. Grooming	20. Accountability	21. Interpersonal Skills
22. Intrapersonal skills	23. Motivational skills	24. Creative thinking skills
25. Problem Solving Ability	26. Public Relations	27. Willingness to learn
28. Time Management	29. Prioritizing Tasks.	30. Performance Excellence
31. Commitment	32. Ability to meet deadlines	33. Listening Skills
34. Judgment	35. Leadership skills	36. Decision Making
37. Self-directed / Motivated.	38. Presentation Skills	39. Change Management
40. Project Management	41. Eye contact.	42. Self-Supervising
43. Personal energy	44. Personal hygiene	45. Intellectual Ability
46. Sociability	47. Empathy	48. Business management
49. Negotiating skills	50. Cultural awareness	

Table 1: Examples of Soft skills

Table 1 above lists some of the Soft Skills that are considered worldwide. However, this is by far incomplete. More could be added and the list could go even longer.

If we analyze the examples given in table 1, we can clearly see that we have narrowed down on three categories of skills – namely:

- Qualities that can be acquired like skills & knowledge.
- Skills that relate between one individual to many.
- Skills or qualities present within the individual

Many people include certifications and scholarly achievements under Soft Skills. Such achievements cannot be included because those come under educational or technical qualification. A person can receive a certificate by doing a course in Soft Skills but no institution or individual can certify if a person really has Soft Skills because it has to be practiced and is intrinsic by nature. People can only feel the effect of Soft Skills which is put in practice by a person.

Describing how an individual can put Soft Skills in practice would make this article too long and is practically impossible because there are too many topics that need to be unfolded in a manner that everyone understands. Therefore, we will restrict the scope of this article to only two categories

- Skills that relate between one individual to many.
- Skills or qualities within the individual

What are the Soft Skills that hold more significance?

We would repeat it here that each individual has his own perception of Soft Skills and depends on it. Needless to say, whenever we talk about Soft Skills, the first thing that springs immediately to mind is – Communication Skills because that is the skill that is mostly lacking amongst students of all ages and all categories. It ranges from colleges to universities and even to small scale basic educational institutions. Many cannot even define communications skills properly or are biased with the definition. In a staff meeting, the basic question that was asked to the Communication & Soft Skills department by the Chancellor of a university. “What is Communication Skill?” The most common answer was – “The English language.” The correct answer came from a person from another department which was not accepted by the Communication & Soft Skill people. His clear cut definition was – “*Communication skill is a skill where the message is transmitted in such a way that the receiver receives it in a way the sender intended it to be.*” This is the depth of the ignorance of the Soft Skills people working in the Communication and Soft Skill departments in most colleges. No wonder, the students seriously lack both Communication as well as Soft Skills. We need to find a way to improve the qualities / skills within the individual. This is mandatory because the students study these skills. Their application is nearly impossible to monitor because the faculty / trainer is not always with the student.

We would venture so far to suggest that the parents should be given regular training in Soft Skill and should be asked to monitor, and not police, their children and report back to the faculty. We all will agree that it would be a herculean task but at the same time it is going to give us the desired results within a short period of time. Moreover, Soft Skill training should begin at the primary school level and should continue till post graduation or at least till graduation. Almost all educational institutions force the students to pay more attention to technical subjects and leave the training of Soft Skills to the parents. Most parents and faculties, in turn, are ignorant of the fact that Soft Skills exist at all. My interaction with one parent regarding his wards’ lack of Soft Skills had me shocked. His reply was – “If my son is well mannered and displays proper Soft Skills, he will be termed as a wimp by his peers and my relatives. I want him to be brash and look like a macho man. That is what will enable him to command respect in the society.” No

wonder, students Soft Skills are deteriorating day by day. The parents need to be trained in Soft Skills first.

If Soft Skills are to be inculcated in an individual, we need to look onto the important factors shaping his character as well as his skills of communication. First, we will look onto the factors how one can communicate properly because, communication is the first thing that a newborn does when it comes out from the mother’s womb. Body language is the second thing by means of which it lets others know what it wants or its feelings about a particular feeling or object.

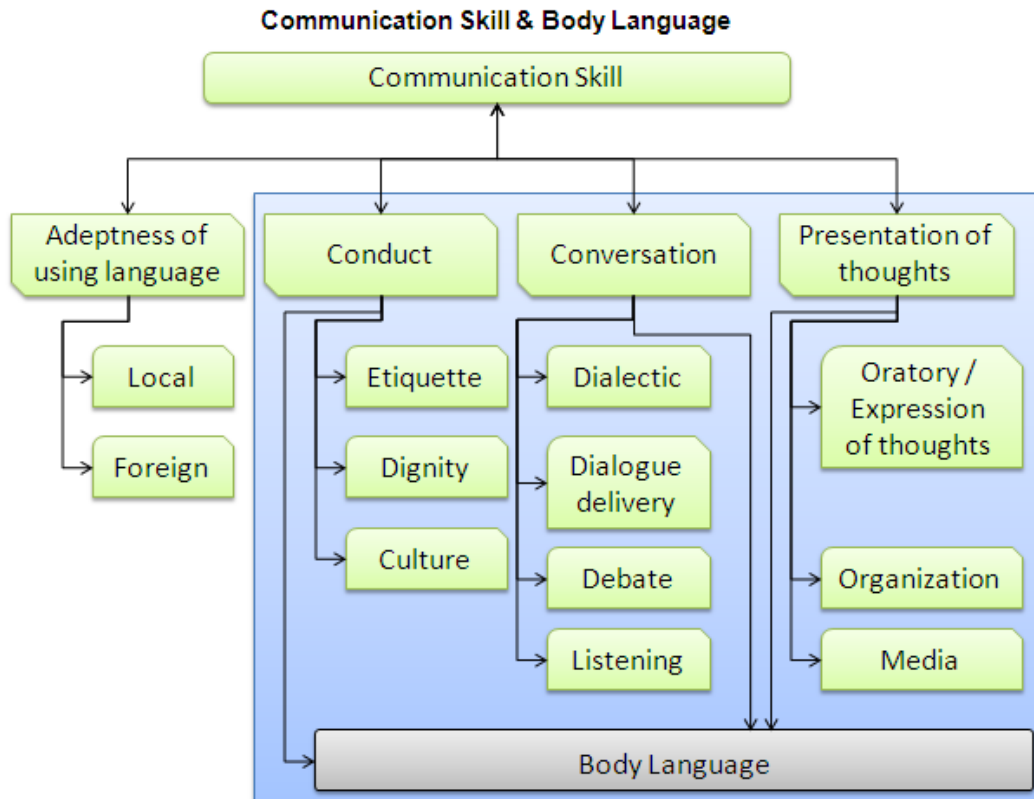


Figure 1: An overview of essential factors shaping a person’s communication skills.

Figure 1 displays a collection of aspects that spans from basic skills of using a particular language, which in multilingual societies like India where every state has its own language and may not be taken for granted on advanced topics like Dialectic or Oratory skills. Minimum requirements for a graduate of a college or university should be that the student should be proficient in spoken and written language, a certain amount of dignity that should reflect in conversation as well as in his body language, adequate discussion skills so that he can contribute on a topic of discussion. One major thing of importance here would be good presentation skills so that he is able to market his skills & services successfully. He should have creative skills so

that he is able to communicate his ideas properly. However, communication skills are not only necessary for his career and professional growth, but are even more contributing to his social standing or competence. Good social skills are reflected at his place of work and hence recursively further his career. All of these are interlinked and are interwoven in the very fabric of our lives providing we practice these skills because as the age old saying goes “practice makes perfect.”

However, as we probe deeper down into Communication skills the issue becomes more and more complicated. In the English speaking world, Language proficiency is the ability to speak, read and write Standard English in a way business people communicate. One may have the ‘hard’ skill of knowing what usage is correct and what is incorrect, but lack the ‘soft’ skills of knowing when to use only standard forms and in what tone to use them. (Waggoner, 2002). In this definition our basic Soft Skill “Communication Skills” itself is divided into a “soft” and a “hard” part. We could venture even further to say that Communication skills are a prerequisite for a range of other Soft Skills like resolving or managing a conflict. Even in resolving a conflict, syllable stress, tone of voice and the quality of language that we use plays an important part.

The world, today, is a world driven by data and daily endless stream of data comes our way. Our brains should be trained to filter out garbage data which is basically of no use to us and retain only data that can be converted to information and make informed decisions with excellent output. This calls for critical or structured thinking which goes hand in hand with problem solving abilities. Analytical skills and ‘thinking out of the box’ also play a vital role in our professional and private life and are equal to Soft Skills. Creativity skills are also a part of Soft Skills but do not mean that it occupies the least importance in our lives. People think that only artists, musicians, and lyricists can be creative. Nothing can be farther from the truth. Discussion, arguments and debates and mind mapping are famously known applications of innovation in the corporate world.

Old habits die hard

As discussed earlier, a major part of Soft Skills are personal habits which are intrinsic in nature of a human being. This poses a very interesting question – Can personality or habits be changed? As the old adage goes – Old habits die hard. The saying is sad, but true. If you read the sentence carefully, old habits can be killed. It is difficult but possible. Soft Skills training is the answer, but, what can a few hours of training accomplish. Can it change a person who has lived with a particular trait all his life? The answer is brutal – Change yourself or change your job. When a professional wants career growth up the corporate ladder but is a person who has attended a few trainings in Soft Skills, he has no choice but to put the Soft Skills into practice.

An important aspect for a professional is to recognize his weaknesses, shortcomings and bad habits. If one recognizes his weaknesses, then there is scope for improvement. We can successfully say this because a person who does not want to improve will never accept his weakness or shortcomings. He will find excuses and work around it. The better way is, as soon as a deficiency is recognized; we need to start working towards its elimination.

For example, a person may have stage fear when he has to make a presentation in front of the Board of Directors. The fear may be due to a variety of factors: Lack of presentation skills, lack of confidence, and lack of software knowledge. When the problem area is narrowed down, he can start working on it. Let us assume that his fear is presentation skills. He can start by presenting before his relatives, close friends who will give him positive comments and help with improvement. After a few practice sessions, he would have conquered half his fear of presenting and can do a better job than what he would have done before the practice sessions. Once he presents before the Board, the next presentation will be even better because the fear is almost gone. A few presentations more and it becomes second nature to him. With similar exercises one can progress towards patching up his fears.

A negative habit or trait can be overcome only by a self-imposed training. A person must jump into the water to learn swimming and with constant practice; he can only do it better. Even Soft Skills training would be unsuccessful if the trainee is not convinced that it would improve him or prove beneficial for him.

Why are Soft Skills so crucial?

We have deliberated a lot on Soft Skills and the answer is still pending as to why they are of great significance to a person. There are a million reasons for us to now take a critical look at an individual's Soft Skills.

The one-shot reason is the current job-market. There are many job seekers and too few jobs. The Indian corporate say that the current generation is unemployable because they have few or no Soft Skills. Only the fittest survive, and to be the fittest, we require the training in the 'cutting-edge' technology and a 'competitive edge' that singles you out as the best candidate for the position over others with similar qualifications and comparable evaluation results. And where do the candidates find this competitive advantage? It is by enhancing your knowledge and adding up positive personal traits and habits that makes you stand apart from the rest of the crowd. Youths nowadays often think that they can easily secure a job because they are considered 'professionals' after completing their tertiary education. At the same time 30 years ago, school leavers and graduates did not have many problems in job hunting because employment normally came knocking on their doors.

In today's fast paced world, employers seek candidates who are productive from day one. If a fresher from a university has to be trained on the job to put more than two or three sentences together to make sense and express himself clearly, or put together a proper presentation or how to chat up a client or a customer in a pleasant manner, this graduate student would not even qualify as a quick starter. Also basic knowledge, other than the subject he has learned, like business management, project management and general economy will improve the chances of a job candidate considerably. The candidate must also learn on his own, the subjects that were not taught but related to his core field of learning.

Anyway, good communication skills are invaluable during the job interview itself. If the candidate is less qualified or does not have substance on the 'hard skill' side, good 'Soft skills' can be an excellent cover up for it. We have seen people who are super smooth talkers with performance not worth mentioning. Then there are advantages of displaying positive traits like courtesy, honesty, flexibility, common sense, flawless appearance, etc. during a job interview which are not even to be discussed. These are mandatory in every job irrespective of the level.

To top this, a candidate never improves because; the Human Resource executive seldom ever gives an honest feedback. No candidate who is rejected is told that he has Soft Skills that can be called pathetic. Some trashy reason is given like – "Your qualifications does not match with our requirements." Such kind of misleading or vague reasons are of no help to the candidate. Instead, if a proper and real reason is given like - "Your display of body language told us that you were unsure of the answer that you gave, and you had problems to express yourself clearly during the group discussion and present yourself in a convincing manner". This type of clear cut evaluation might sound harsh at first glance; but this kind of feedback would help the candidate to improve his / her style to perform better in the future with other companies.

Once the candidate succeeds in finding a job, he has to master the Soft Skills to enhance his career opportunities. After, finding a job, candidates think on how to EARN, they never think about adding an "L" before "EARN" i.e. on how to LEARN. A fact that can be verified in our daily life is that employers promote staffs who are better with their Soft Skills. People with good hard skills are no longer first on the list. Soft Skills complement Hard Skills and are given priority in the current business world.

We can venture to say – Soft Skills are shaping an individual's personality. Any educator's dream is that their students get a well rounded education and grow to become well balanced and matured personalities. However, this character is reflected in Soft Skills and not hard skills. People who socialize more and extrovert by nature are more appreciated than introverts who can speak less than ten sentences. Gone are the days when a person who is an expert in his field was rated as 'good' and with Soft Skills as 'nice to have'. Tables are turned and it is the other way round today. On the other hand, Soft Skills should not be treated as a camouflage for the necessary hard skills required for the job.

Can Soft Skills be acquired?

We've already identified two methods for improving our Soft Skills. The first way to get enrolled on a Soft Skills training course on rhetoric, languages, presentation skills, conflict or cultural management. This is a well-proven concept with the advantage of having some kind of certificate at the end of the course. Most people undergo this training only for the certificate because it will come in handy for career development or for jumping jobs. The slender sarcasm in the last sentence is deliberate, because it is not always guaranteed that a certain course actually successfully enhanced a person's Soft Skills until & unless it is vigorously practiced.

The second way of acquiring Soft Skills is by self-training via books and is the most useful because an individual trains himself because he wants to get ahead in life. He knows that if he does not practice, he will be the one to be blamed for the failure. With the advent of the Internet, Soft Skills material can be found easily on the net. Of course, it goes without saying that you would have to filter some unnecessary things out as there is also a lot of unwanted information on the internet.

A sure shot way to train oneself in Soft Skills is to begin by socializing with friends, colleagues, peers and other members of the society. Start by engaging in small talk to improve communication skills in an informal way on topics like; language proficiency, listening, discussing, self-esteem, overcoming stage fear, body language, etiquette and manners etc. The list could be endless.

Even as you read this, educational institutions are changing their methodology and shifting to student-centric learning as the result of such a methodology is excellent. Many universities are embedding Soft Skill learning into their syllabi because it has added advantages. Students are encouraged to participate in a way that learning is enjoyed and are learning hard skills through Soft Skills. This becomes an ideal way of lecturing and more knowledge is imparted in a short period of time. Moreover, it also helps a lecturer to improve his discourse as the years pass by and if the way the lecture is presented is excellent, then he / she could even video record the lecture or use video conference to take classes. Even a guest lectures can be arranged this way to save travelling time and more students can take advantage of a good faculty.

To set things right, imbibing Soft Skills begins at the cradle. A lot of effort should be put by the parents to make sure that their children's personality is pleasing and habits are excellent. As the world is fast shrinking to become a global village, both parents have to work to meet the high standard of life as well as to pay the ever rising cost of education. Parents rarely have time to interact with their children let alone inculcate Soft Skills. Since the cost of the education is high, they expect the school to teach them the Soft Skills and schools, in turn pass the buck to colleges or centers of higher learning to equip them with the Soft Skills required. The end-case scenario is

that everyone knows that they have to do it and nobody does it. The students are the sufferers in the process of the blame game.

What can the educators / lecturers / teachers do to enhance their student's Soft Skills?

The first step is for the educational institutions to recognize the needs of the students gauge their weaknesses and then take steps to patch them up with the required training. They also need to raise the awareness of the students about the importance of Soft Skills and doing a SWOT analysis of each and every student. Specialists can be hired for this. Students should be encouraged to read books that are focused on improving Soft Skills, attend training courses, take part in debates and socialize with their peers. Each student should be encouraged to present a topic of their choice during the seminar sessions.

An addition to this, a period with a defined syllabus should be incorporated as a subject. At school level, students may be required to do a research and present a paper or a small write-up and submit the results during a particular period. At institutes of higher learning, a Soft Skill class can be arranged with topics like leadership skill, listening or writing skills, cross cultural conflict, problem solving can be introduced. Such practices are well received by student and it basically turns out to be fun learning for them.

Care must be taken because most colleges and universities overload students with subject's related to hard skills. It is an astonishing fact that most universities believe that the more subjects they teach, the better their students become and more are the chances of placements. Placements have become the driving force behind the choice of college / university when choosing which college they should attend after school.

Universities and colleges that already have Soft Skill department have another issue. The faculties of the technical courses have an ego the size of an elephant. They believe that they do all the hard work in training the students to become achievers and the Communication and Soft Skills faculties takes away all the accolades after the student is placed. True interest regarding the future of the candidate is never displayed. This can be converted into a major scoring point with a little logical thinking in planning and application of courses. An elegant way of offering Soft Skills training is to embed in the teaching methodology of the technical faculty who teaches the subject i.e. hard skill course. This way, no changes need to be made to the program curriculum but the changes are reflected in the teaching methodology. An example would be a faculty who teaches, for example, Thermodynamics. He should plan a lecture by determining what Soft Skills s/he wishes to enhance on that day, and then he should consider how the required subject content can be arranged to support this goal. Correctly applied, such an approach to teaching will automatically increase the attractiveness and effectiveness of a course regarding both, hard skills and Soft Skills. Of course, it goes without saying that the faculty

needs to be trained first in Soft Skills and then letting them choose the methodology and then practice it with the help of a Soft Skills trainer. In due course, it becomes a methodology that they automatically follow thereby increasing the Soft Skills of the students manifold.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that Soft Skills occupy supreme importance and individuals who do not have them will soon be out of job. One has to take the trouble to acquire Soft Skills beyond academic or technical knowledge. Soft Skills are gaining importance in all areas of the work industry. Faculties have a major role to play here by imparting their respective courses by using Soft Skills and at the same time making sure that their students practice Soft Skills during their University time. It is high time for the trainers, lecturers and faculties to change their methodology in imparting education. This holds true for schools, colleges, Universities as well as parents. It is everybody's responsibility to make sure that proper grooming, etiquette and Soft Skills are practiced at all times. This world would be a better place to live in. If each individual contributes his / her bit, the society, at large, would improve dramatically, thereby contributing to the peace of the world in a big way.

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