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## *Employers' Perceptions on Communication Skills at Workplace*

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### **Abstract**

*Communication skills are perceived as vitally important in satisfying the requirements of the workplace. Employers of today are looking for the employees who are equally proficient in technical skills and non-technical skills like communication skills and other interpersonal skills. Such skills are required to meet the demands of the workforce that relate to teamwork, clients and operation within a business environment. The present paper focuses on the perception of the employers on the significance of communication skills like technical writing, business writing, public speaking and presentation preparation on the part of engineers to keep in pace with the current technological advancements. In this context, a survey was administered to twenty employers of large and Medium, Small and Micro Enterprises (MSMEs) in and around Trichy. The analysis of the survey highlights the setbacks in the career of the engineers due to the lack of communication skills inspite of their possession of hard core skill set. It further proposes certain recommendations from the employers to enhance the communication skills of the engineers which, in turn, improve the prospects of their employability.*

**Keywords:** Communication skills, Employers' perceptions, MSMEs, Engineering employees

## **Introduction**

The dynamic world in which engineers present them with new demands provides new challenges in the diverse changes which confront mankind heading towards the twenty first century. Such changes occur not only in the natural environment but also in technology with respect to the society's expectations. To keep in pace with this technological advancements, an engineer has to be proficient both in technical skills and other nontechnical attributes and skills such as Communication skills, Problem solving and Management skills. To be successful in an era of rapid changes and fierce competition, engineers must be of the highest quality to meet the market's requirement.

## **Background of the study**

The graduates who are technically proficient and usually possess a strong work ethic has the problem with communication skills which are perceived as vitally important in satisfying the requirements of the workplace that relate to team-work, clients and operation within a business environment. Employers of today have expressed concerns about the lack of adequately trained graduates with communication skills to meet workplace challenges. Several graduates with low level of ELP have been turned away by employers when they seem to be lacking the appropriate communication skills to perform the task. NAASCOM (National Association of Software companies in India) has stated that there will be skill shortage among engineers of India by 2020. The International Labour Conference has claimed that the shortage of high skilled workers may make it hard to sustain high economic growth rates by 2020 in countries like India and China (ILO, 2000).

## **Significance of Communication skills at the workplace**

An engineer feels that his job is just to develop the best technical solutions where he does not need communication skills. Hence the fact is that many engineering students and practicing engineers prioritize technical skills over communication skills. In due course of time in their jobs, they find out that Communication skills are as essential as technical skills for them to be fully effective and successful in their careers. In a recent survey conducted by ASME (American Society of Mechanical Engineers) of both society members and non-members in engineering related positions, respondents opined that Communication skills such as technical writing, business writing, public speaking and presentation preparation are crucial for success as engineers work in and among more varied groups. A presentation might involve doing an oral or written report on the status of a project or design. This also may sometimes demand the convincing of the audience to the presenter's view point. Such an effective presentation involves two important communication skills such as public speaking and the

ability to visually present the information. But 75% of the engineers seem to possess speech anxiety when it comes to public speaking. Engineers who are adept at communication skills have a considerable advantage over those who are not. Hence, a skill shortage or skill gap is a shortage in performance.

### **Employers' perceptions**

Employers of today demand a range of competencies and qualities of the graduates and expect them to be work-ready (Yorke and Harvey, 2002). According to them, Good Communication skills help an employee to really listen to and understand client needs. Employers feel comfortable to expose the employees to the clients only when they are contented with their level of communication skills as they match the company's benchmark. Good communication enhances client rapport and trust. They have indicated that students are often not prepared for the workplace and called on universities to produce more employable graduates (Barrie, 2006) by providing transferrable skills that can be taken into the workplace (Smith, Clegg, Lawrence and Todd, 2007). Though the subject matter knowledge of the students is usually satisfactory (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick and Crognolini, 2004; Hind, Moss and McKellan, 2007), their interpersonal skills, teamwork, communication and problem solving skills can be improved and developed to make them employable (Hind et al., 2007; Maher and Graves, 2007)

### **The Survey**

A survey was conducted to twenty employers at large and medium, small and micro enterprises (MSMEs) dealing with engineering projects in and around Trichy, Tamilnadu to assess their perceptions on the significance of communication skills required for the diploma holders in engineering, at their workplace. Out of 33 questions asked in the questionnaire, 15 questions involve the socio linguistic factors and the remaining 18 questions focus on the significance of communication skills needed for an employee to meet the requirements of the organization.

### **Results and Discussions**

All the employers have asserted that Communication Skills is a value addition for an employee at the workplace. They attached 50% to 70% of importance to Communication skills as the requisite criteria for the incumbents. Admitting the level of their employees' ELP and the rate of their written communication as average, they ascertained the improvement required in Communication skills that

will help in their career advancement. While half of the employers have demonstrated that the extent of communication skills leading to productivity and quality service should be between 50% and 70%, five of them have initiated the maximum range from 70% to 90% for it. They preferred communication skills for clientele conversation and internal communication as these interactions are subjected to the organizations' reputation and productivity. Majority of the employers have admitted that their selection of the employees at the time of interview would be with equal priority to communication skills and technical skills. Except two, all the other 18 employers had agreed the existence of skills gap among the engineering graduates that affects the employability of them. To the query of the reasons for the skills gap prevailing in the global market, 48% of the employers have emphasized two from the four given options - the prevailing education system and lack of commitment from employees' side.

### **Strategies recommended**

#### **(i)Employees' Commitment**

Employers expect the graduates to develop the generic skills that largely depend on individual attitudes and motivation. This go hand in hand with the development of confidence in their application to new and different contexts, including the workplace. Travelling, participating in voluntary and community work, interacting with multi-cultured people impact upon their confidence and consequently increase their employability (Atkins, 1999). It was the graduates' attributes that determine their success in the workplace rather than their specific degree.

#### **(ii)Educational Training**

Educational institutions are expected to nurture the appropriate competencies and ensure that the skills are developed (Kember and Leung, 2005). Communication skills should be an important element in undergraduate programmes as they are necessary in any field of work (Bath, Smith, Stein and Swann, 2004). It is the responsibility of higher educationalists to incorporate a module on Communication skills as part of their teaching and learning process. Employability skills need to be embedded throughout the curriculum instead of confining to a single module (Hind et al., 2007). According to Rainsbury, Hodges, Burchell and Lay (2002), there is insufficient importance placed on the development of employability skills by many higher education institutions. Students must be involved in work integrated learning so that they can be exposed to realities and the competencies they require in the workplace. By enhancing their skills, competencies, personal attributes, enthusiasm, self-confidence and knowledge that are needed in the workplace, the graduates enable

themselves to be more employable and successful in their chosen careers thus benefitting the workforce, the community, and the economy. Hence, it is the responsibility of the higher education to provide its graduates with the skills to operate them professionally within the work environment (Vignali and Hodgson, 2007).

### **(iii) Vocational Training**

Training and developing employees effectively would align them for their career growth and personal motivation. Adequate training of transferable skills produces marked improvements in employee communication and proficiency of performances (Cheng and Ho, 2001). Any institution of higher learning or business with the goals to survive and prosper in the present day diverse and regressed economy has found it imperative to invest in training and development in improving the production and acquiring the greatest return in investment of human capital (Knoke and Kalleberg, 1994). At this context, both training and education are necessary components for a successful conflict management system (Constantino and Merchant, 1996). To enhance job performance, training skills and behaviours have to be transferred to the workplace (Holton and Baldwin, 2000). Employees with good communication skills gather more information concerning procedures and technologies related to job performances, assuming the subsequent responsibility and greater accountability, both of which effect improve proficiency (Adams, 1989; Gordon, 1977).

### **Conclusion**

The demands of employers are met with the task of developing a skilled workforce. A sub-baccalaureate degree in a high-demand industry would yield higher prospects for engineers than a conventional four year degree. The survey highlights the requirement of communication skills for an engineer at the workplace for career enhancement and organizational productivity. A targeted strategy to educate and train the engineers on non-technical skills including communication skills to be work-ready will enhance the educational attainment and economic competitiveness of an organization.

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