

Are Employability Skills Coachable?

Enough has been written on “employability skills” or their lack thereof amongst most Indian students. Essential for any job aspirant, these are skills to meet the hiring needs of current business world. As per a report by NASSCOM, a mere 10% of fresh graduates are actually employable! Similar surveys on Engineers and MBAs put employable professionals no more than 25% - net, a vast majority of even professionally qualified people are not industry ready.

What are Employability Skills: Our own past research – with 40 companies - had identified 9 Missing Elements which limits the candidate’s employability:

1. **Attitude (Sincerity, Can-Do, Ownership/Motivation)**
2. **Business Ethics/Honesty**
3. **Grooming/Confidence**
4. **Communication Skills**
5. **General Awareness**
6. **Basic Managerial Skills (Leadership, Teamwork, Time Management etc.)**
7. **Basic Sales and Customer Service (most entry level jobs require one of these)**
8. **Domain Knowledge**
9. **Work Experience**

While the obvious solution to unlock India’s much talked of demographic dividend is to empower our students with these requisite skills, the BIG question is: *Can these employability skills be coached?*

Our experience over a period of **1 year after administering a 240 hour “employability” intervention to 3000 students across 6 Tier II cities** (focusing on Tier II/III MBA colleges) has thrown mixed results.

Attitude and Ethics were the most difficult to correct. Clinical psychologists told us that attitude can be improved through a long 6-9 month process involving motivation, extended practice and constant feedback. Being pedantic (like the professor going to the class and dabbling on the virtues of a Positive Attitude) almost never works in improving someone’s attitude. Still most college professors and principals continue to hope that by repeating their unsolicited advice multiple times, their students may listen - we all communicate what we want to say versus what our audience wants to hear!

But even the use of innovative techniques like story telling (like asking how many want Aamir Khan's six pack abs and then showing videos of him working out heavily for one full year, and then doing a debrief that desired results will require very hard labour too) has had mixed results. In reality the effect of few hours of class was often drowned by their 22 years of grounding. While some borderline cases did change, for the most part the already good ones became better.

Grooming and Confidence, on the other hand, were the easiest to correct. Steady practice in small batches of 15-25 students, with people of similar ability carefully chosen and put together, and then giving every individual a chance to speak for 5-7 minutes every single day for 4-5

months, helped tremendously. Workshops with specially trained grooming instructors, emphasizing on 'Dress to Impress' created impact. The process requires strict discipline so that everyone gets time to speak, else the ones already good take all the 'air-time'. Similarly basic grooming checks like color combinations of attire, hair, and shoe polish, etc. every day for few months changed people's habits. In most of the cases, we found that grooming itself generated self confidence.

Current Awareness was also a relatively easy job. An everyday quiz on current awareness for six months developed reading habits in the students. To build their interest we charged those who couldn't answer a fine of five rupees and rewarded those who answered correctly. Punishing wrong behavior and rewarding right behavior, if done over a period of time, changes habits.

Communication skills development takes time and a very scientific method of intervention. First part is to hone basic communicational skill in any language, where we hone our listening skills, try understanding the audience, and practice being crisp and logical in our responses. The second concern for most Tier II colleges is the inability of students to speak in English. Unfortunately just putting any good English spokesperson does not work. A scientific module which covers specific grammar and spoken English /pronunciation, especially tailored for adults is required. Students are also less inclined to focus on English at such a late stage of their careers. So, session needs to be lively and interactive. Our experiments with the module followed in BPOs for 80-140 hours has been very successful since these BPOs have mastered the art of training English communicational skills to adult learners. But it requires a rigorous curriculum of 1-1.5 hours session every single day as lack of continuity drastically reduces the effectiveness.

Managerial Skills - like Leadership, Team Work, Stress and Time Management - can be learnt but again require innovative methods. A good corporate style game followed by an intense and deep debrief - and repeated twice or thrice - can at least sensitize people and make them cautious towards exhibiting the "right" behavior. While it would be ambitious to think that a two hour team work session will make everyone a great team player, still we have seen a significant improvement in the level of maturity and intent after this sensitization.

Sales/Customer Service and Practical Domain Knowledge are coachable but require faculty from industry. The challenge that most tier II colleges face is that the major chunk of students are freshers without any previous experience in any domain. Adding to this, average faculty of these colleges also has very limited quality industry experience. So their ability to train students on practical industry-oriented knowledge is very limited.

The best practice may be to get a significant portion of training, say 25%, to be delivered by actual industry experts. In our research, we used IIM Alumni who could deliver live corporate experiences, share inside secrets and tips of the business world, explain what is not covered in theory and how to apply theory in real life etc. The feedback from these sessions was always very positive. Add to it some live games (demo selling, demo trading etc.).

Experience was the tricky one. Most companies wanted experience before a degree like MBA but 80-95% of Tier II/III MBA students were fresh BA/BCom/BSc. We tried to use a via media - offering live industry projects during the course, but industry acceptance of these was varied.

Most HR managers were not convinced that a 2 month part time project can replace a relevant work experience of 1-2 years. The only long terms solution may be for the colleges to recruit only experienced students, especially for a post graduate course like MBA.

So, net, Are Employability Skills Coachable? The answer, as above, is not in one word. Some are very coachable, some less, and some very minimally coachable. In Grooming, Confidence, Sales/Customer service and Basic Managerial skills, we may be able to reach significant levels of improvement. On attitude and ethics, however, impact of limited hours of classroom training is questionable. Communicational Skills, on the other hand, can improve drastically but demands extended practicing and efforts.

Thus the final employment was also varied: while in most colleges there was a 30-50% increase in placements versus previous years, 100% placements of all trained students was still not possible (most colleges hit 60-70%), despite the entire 240 hour intervention.