ACQUIRING SOFT SKILLS AT UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

In general the universities focus on teaching professional information rather than soft skills like creativity, problem solving, personal communication, writing and speaking skills. The students learn how to become an engineer, an accountant or a dentist, but they don't learn soft skills. Without soft skills, every university graduate faces too much trouble in their professional live. With university education, the graduates can practice their profession; they can design a machine, they can cure an illness, they can develop economic growth models but cannot communicate effectively, do teamwork or solve problems. Hence, thousands of dollars are spent for soft skills training in corporate life. Besides, these trainings are short and insufficient; and there occurs the cost of time and money because of lacking soft skills. University students should acquire soft skills before they graduate. In this study, the methods for students to acquire soft skills during their higher education will be evaluated.

Key Words: Acquiring soft skills, hard skills, skills training, contextual learning theory.

INTRODUCTION

There are two kinds of skills: Hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills are the skills that people use to do a job. Hard skills are tangible skills that we learn in the school and utilize at work. Soft skills are intangible skills that we learn by personal development trainings and utilize at both work and life (Klaus, 2008). According to Malcolm Gladwell (2011), people who have better soft skills are taking the jobs, solving their problems at life in comparison to the people who have less soft skills.

The professionals, who are unemployed and want to get and keep a job, need a repertoire of technical skills. Dentists need to know how to do implants. Secretaries need to know how to use computer programs. Accountants need to know how to prepare a balance sheet. There after people prefer the dentists who empathize. The secretaries whose attitude is always positive work more years in comparison to the secretaries with less positive attitude. The CEOs prefer to work with accountants who have good relationships with other departments. Professionals are employed for hard skills, but retained and promoted for soft skills (MINDTOOLS, 2013).

"Hard skills" is a new term, emerged recently in order to distinguish them from soft skills. Engineering, accounting, teaching, fire fighting, cooking, sewing are a few examples of the hard skills. The hard skills are mainly learned in school system or on the job training. Traditional ways of acquiring hard skills are vocational schools and universities. Most of the teaching and evaluation focuses on hard skills at the vocational schools and universities. The undergraduate, master's and PhD studies teach mainly hard skills. A computer-engineering student learn how to program a computer at the university, he becomes a master during the graduate study and goes deeper at the phase of PhD. In other words, whole university education is dedicated to teach and master at hard skills.

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The soft skills are skills people use to communicate, solve problems, lead, empathize, and think creatively (Wentz, 2012). As being a new term, there is no agreed definition in the literature. Most of the definitions are based on the functionality of soft skills, not the description of it. The uncertainty about of the description in the literature causes a small chaos. Especially in the area of trainings there are some skills training like "presentation skills" which is definitely and skill; and there are some trainings like "ethics" that cannot be categorized as a skills training. In this paper, soft skills will be defined as the skills that can be learned through training and make a better employee and person in terms of communication, adaptability and problem solving.

THE PROBLEM AND THE NEED

The graduates when they start to work professionally, they receive soft skills trainings like communication skills, adaptability, teamwork, listening skills, problem solving and creative thinking skills. Most of these trainings are one day or two days long seminars or workshops. However, there is an unrealistic expectation about the results of these trainings. If one person can learn effective personal communication or creative thinking in two days the national education ministries should put these kinds of trainings into the national curriculum in every country. By the way a whole country can learn how to communicate effectively(!). A huge amount of finance and time spent on soft skills trainings to make employees acquire them and to become team players, effective presenters or problem solvers in the corporate world, but the results are poor as it is mentioned in Barbara Kellerman's book, from Harvard University (2012).

The organizations try to evaluate ROI (the return on investment) of these trainings. A test can easily measure what the participant learns however it is very difficult to diagnose the behavioral change, which might happen in time. Behaviors and attitudes occur in a long period of time and it is very difficult to alter them with new ones by a two days long seminar. Communication style and attitude is like a habit and it is difficult as acquiring a new habit and quitting one as in the case of smoking. Therefore the behavior change of personnel is limited through short-term training. Because change is a process; it is not a process that cannot be gone trough in a couple of days.

There is another set of problems about short-term trainings. They are not applicable individually. General structure of these trainings requires a group setting. A new beginner should wait until training is organized that he/she can join. So he/she will experience communication problems until he/she can attend the training. Moreover, as it is mentioned above there is no guarantee that these trainings will change the employee's mindset and his behavior.

THE SOLUTION

The solution might be contextual learning. Contextualized learning is a concept that the learner learns through the context (Johnson, 2001). It is like learning swimming in the pool or sea; or learning a language in one foreign country. Children are learning to use or program computers by playing with them.

According to contextual learning theory, learning occurs only when students process new information or knowledge in such a way that it makes sense to them in their own frames of reference (their own inner worlds of memory, experience, and response). The mind naturally seeks meaning in context by searching for relationships that make sense and appear useful. (CORD, 2013)

In contextual environments the learner or in other words "experiencer" discover meaningful relationships between abstract ideas and practical applications in the context of the real world; concepts are internalized through the process of discovering, reinforcing, and relating. The class setting for learning interpersonal communication, teamwork, or problem solving is insufficient. Indeed people may best learn these skills in the real context.

The business life itself provides a context to learn soft skills. Despite that business people will not like to see an organizational environment as a trial and error space. Communication problems, resistance to change, adaptability, and lack of self-confidence are not the problems to be experienced in one business. Businesses

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have already very big problems like responding to the competition, innovating, attracting new customers and not losing the existing ones. By the way the businesses prefer employees with the soft skills already acquired.

So the right place and time looks like a place before the real business life starts, which is university.

The Activities to Acquire Soft Skills At University

Soft skills are not skills that come with the genes (Coyle, 2009). We can acquire them in the context. The activities that might help to acquire soft skills at the time of being a university student are as follows:

- Long term apprenticeship
- Sports
- Voluntary works and projects
- Art and design projects
- Long term workshops and classes
- International and domestic travels
- Learning to play an instrument (violin, guitar, etc.)

There are several ways for a student to acquire a soft skill at the university. Some examples are analyzed below:

Long Term Apprenticeship

Long-term apprenticeship might be a good opportunity to acquire a soft skill. During the apprenticeship a student has a chance to observe the communication, meeting and dress code in the business world. At the same time, the student can learn when to speak and when to stop speaking. The cost of making an error is small for both apprentice and the employer. The apprentice takes small responsibilities; if he or she cannot fulfill the responsibility it will not be a big problem for the company. In contrast the student has the chance to learn from his own small mistakes. The student learns to conform to the working hours in the morning and in the evening.

Sports

Most of the sports help one to acquire soft skills. One university student, who is a member of basketball team at the university, learns to work with targets. He has to attend daily exercises as part of his team responsibility. He improves his time management skills by arranging his time for team activities and his academic work. He has to learn to persuade his professor if one match overlaps with one final examination. He has to develop his adaptability for the new team members. He has to learn to be modest to accept some one as a captain. He has to learn to transfer a strategy on board to the court. This is just one of examples of sports that might help to acquire soft skills. The other sports like football, mountaineering, rowing, and athleticism and so on work well to acquire soft skills.

Voluntary Works and Projects

In general projects are very efficient tools for learning (Laur, 2013). Voluntary works and projects at the university years also contribute to acquire soft skills. Trying to collect donation for a society or organizing a congress or a fair for one foundation helps too much to improve communication and problem solving skills. An effective donation collection needs persuasion skills to convince people or organization to donate. Again every nonprofit society works with too many volunteers and every volunteer need to work with others in harmony. Nonprofit organizations are more complex organizations because people do not work for money. Therefore pushing people to complete one task is harder than the corporations. Leading is more necessary than management in nonprofit organization to get the job done by volunteers. Nonprofit organizations are excellent structures for acquiring soft skills.

Art and Design Projects

Art and design projects can also help university students to acquire soft skills. Every art and design project occurs a vision or a dream to create. From the point of a dream in the mind, the university student tries to realize this dream trough his creativity. The human mind dream without boundaries and this creates an

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imbalance between available resources and resources required to realize the dream. So the university student should solve the problem of scarce resources for realizing his dream. Most of the art and design projects have deadlines like an exhibition opening date or a commemoration day. Therefore students learn to manage their time effectively. Art and design projects of groups also help to improve teamwork spirit and teach team members harmony.

Long-term Workshops And Classes
Long-term workshops are equally important for university students to acquire a soft skill. Every workshop or a class has a moderator or a teacher, and it helps to learn to work with an authority. In both environments student has classmates and he has to learn to interact effectively with them. There is a skill or a content to be learned constantly so the university student has to manage his time and concentrate on the subject. Every workshop and class has beginning and ending times like working hours, by the way it helps to develop a sense of responsibility.

International And Domestic Travels
Every travel to an unknown territory, city or country can help one university student to acquire soft skills. A university student's one month long train travel in Europe, in South America, or in Far East improves his skills to deal with uncertainty. Because travellers need to find a right place to shelter, to eat and to travel in unfamiliar places. So they have to answer this question right. In order to answer these questions right they need to prepare the answer before the travel and this is called planning. If the university student did not prepare the answer of question on time he has to communicate with people around him and find his answers. Every travel is also possible by a budget; the university student should learn to manage his budget to protect himself from difficult times.

Learning To Play And Instrument
Mastering an instrument like violin requires years of practice. To learn to play an instrument may help to acquire many different soft skills. The discipline is one of the most important success factors and discipline can be learned on the way to master one instrument. Beginning from the day one that one student touches an instrument the discipline helps to improve his performance. Constant periodic efforts to play one instrument better teach discipline. Besides learning to play an instrument needs to be interested in music, notes, other artists and compositions. So the university student will be interested in efficient content that will help him to improve his performance. Again in most of the example there are direct or indirect guides in learning to play an instrument. This helps university student to work with a guide or a supervisor.

The Required Conditions At Activities For Acquiring Soft Skills
Every activity during the university education may not help to acquire soft skills. There are some specific conditions that can make an activity to contribute to acquire soft skills. These are listed below:
- Requiring commitment
- Relationship
- Personal responsibility
- Rules, Dress code and professional material
- Time Restrictions
- Long (min. 3 and half months)
- Contextual learning

The activity should require a commitment. A tournament, an apprenticeship, a post, a project should require commitment from the student. Otherwise without a need to commitment student may not give enough importance to the activity.

Personal responsibility is another necessity. There are too many activities that can contribute to one's soft skill development. Even though if the person has no personal responsibility he might become a bystander doing and learning nothing. Soft skills are earned majorly by experiments.

Most of the activities require relationship and they provide opportunity to improve communication skills. On the other hand, learning language through books may not improve the relationship, because they don't have any people in process to interact. Another aspect of relationship is the help to the best activities concern relationship opportunities.

The activities with certain communication rules and dress code help one student to understand general rules of business life.

If the activity has some certain time restrictions, it may help students to manage his time effectively.

As has been mentioned earlier people change so slow, by the way it can be assumed that any activity that might change one student should be longer than days. Most of the skills courses for amateurs in the area of painting or drawing require 3 months of study before a student's exhibition. Based on this example it can be thought that activities that help to acquire must be longer than 3 months.

The activities should provide a context to acquire a skill. Travelling provides a context to improve communication skills. Without any class training a student should learn to express himself, convince customs officers that he is not criminal, bargain to get discounts, etc. The activities like travelling should provide opportunities for contextual learning.

CONCLUSION

Business needs employees who have already acquired hard skills and soft skills. University educations are mostly concentrated on teaching hard skills to the students. Students need to learn soft skills as well. The contextual learning is a good way of acquiring soft skills. Soft skills can better be learned at activities during the university years, like long term apprenticeship, sports, voluntary works and projects, art and design projects, long-term workshops and classes, international and domestic travel and learning to play an instrument during their university education. Acquiring soft skills may require changing attitudes, which can be learned through long time training. Therefore universities are suitable places to acquire soft skills both in time manner and activities available. From the examples on this paper it is clear that activities during the university years contribute acquiring soft skills. As a conclusion learning soft skills at the university is an effective approach that can alter poor soft skills trainings in business.

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