Employers' Perception of Employability Skills of Students of Commerce and Management Discipline: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

Enhancing employability skills of students in Commerce and Management discipline is considered as an important task within the Sri Lankan higher education community. This research was conducted with the objective of identifying required skills and strategies to develop skills in order to expose students of Commerce and Management discipline to the job market. And also this was conducted based on sample constituting by five solid ventures representing all industries in Sri Lanka. Some literature reviews are also included in this paper which have extracted from educational reports and theoretical research papers. This Research identified that current job market level of Commerce and Management students is at a good level, apparently private sector employers are looking for more skills, and also research findings reveled that introduction to employability skills, employer needs, matching employer need and skills and attributes that are valued by employers. This research concludes that universities and other higher educational institutions should conduct special programs to develop the skills of students to meet the requirement private sector employers in the industry.

Key Words: Applied Knowledge, Workplace Skills, Personal Knowledge, People Skills

Paper type: Model Testing.

Introduction

Employability refers to a person's capability for gaining and maintaining employment for individuals. This will depend on the knowledge, skills and abilities that they possess, in addition to the way they present those assets to employers. Whatever the discipline a student may pursue in his/her academic career, when it comes to the phase of seeking jobs after graduation different types of skills are needed. In general, those are categorized as soft skills, analytical skills, leadership skills, written and communication skills, teamwork skills, time management skills, computing skills, personnel impact and confidence, decision-

making, creativity, flexibility and etc. It is agreed that none of a student may possess those mentioned skills set when they seeking for jobs and as a result employee and employer skills mismatch occurs. Provided that, the general understanding is that, the private sector seeks different set of skills from graduates provided the fact that, the majority of commerce and management students are absorbed to the private sector.

Having mentioned that approach, the fundamental purpose of this research is to identify required skills and strategies to develop skills in order to expose students of Commerce and Management discipline to the job market. Even though at present students prefer employment in both public and private sector, majority of student prefers to employ in private sector. If the job market for the Commerce and Management students is at a better level apparently private sector look for more skills and development in order to ensure the achievement of corporate objectives. So the main intention of this research is to finding out ways to develop those skills to empower the student as private sector required.

Employer Need

From employer's perspective, they define employability skills as skills required not only to gain employment but also to achieve pre determine targets and contribute successfully to organization's strategic direction (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia, 2002). The literature in this research indicates that employers want graduates who can adapt to the workplace culture, use their abilities and skills to develop the organization and participate in team work.

Literature Review

According to Cooper and Lybrand in 1998, they have defined those employability skills in terms of four key areas; first one is traditional intellectual skills, it means critical evaluation and logical arguments skills. Secondly key skills, like communication, IT etc. Third one is personal attributes – motivation, self-reliance and finally knowledge of organization and how they work.

University of Sydney believes that graduates should be more employable and also more able to cope with change. According to their believe graduates of any university or any other higher educational institute should have knowledge skills, thinking skills, personal skills, personal attributes and practical skills .Knowledge skills means they should be able to apply theories to practice which they have studied, in familiar and un familiar environment. Under the thinking skills undergraduates should have ability to exercise critical judgments. When concentrating personal skills they should have ability to planed and achieve their own goals in both personal and professional lives.

Personal attributes are also very important factor and according to the Sydney University their ethical behavior towards others. Finally practical skills, it indicates the practical knowledge of undergraduates in related to in information technology.

Other than that according to Employers' Needs Survey conducted by University of Guelph, Canada, they are mentioning some important skills which are expects from undergraduates. Time management, Self-understanding, Team work skills, Leadership skills, Problem solving skills are the some important skills which they have identified during their survey.

According to Hillage and Pollard (1998) state, it is a term used in a variety of contexts with a range of meanings and can lack clarity and precision as an operational concept Employer needs training, knowledge to develop their career opportunities. According to them employers expect lot of qualities from undergraduate for job market. Some of them are manage information, communicate information, demonstrate positive attitude and behaviors, work with others, team work.

While Andrews & Higson (2008) discourse in the higher education sector and among employers has increasingly been characterized by a focus on the "gap" between the skills and capabilities.

Graduates possess and the requirements of employers in a more globalised society. Various concerns have been expressed about this disconnect. Harvey et al. (1997) claim that while employers are looking for people, who fit, they also want them to be "intelligent, rounded people who have a depth of understanding, can apply them, take responsibility and develop their role in the organization – to be educated rather than trained". Bowers-Brown and Harvey (2004) note that many authors are seeing a shift in the requirements of business as a result of changes in the organization of work, with employees being required to display generic problem-solving ability and adaptability as the workplace changes.

According to Tomlinson (2007), the dialogue on employability persistently overlooks the perceptions that undergraduate have about their future work and employment, and the attitudes, identities and orientations they develop in relation to this. He argues that there has instead been a tendency by some authors to view students in universalistic terms, as rational investors in education who approach the labor market in uniform and stereotypical ways. Such assumptions ignore the different work-related identities and orientations learners develop in relation to their future labor market activities. The way in which individuals experience work is subjective, and this is likely to influence their labor market outcomes and shape their employment prospects.

Matching Employer Needs

Current business environment is dynamic. Students of Commerce and Management discipline should compete with professional qualification holders when they are entering into the job market. From the employers point of view they prefer to recruit professional qualification holders which can be taken evidence from job advertisements. Therefore there is need to match the skills of students of Commerce and Management discipline with the needs of the industry if they want to be successful in the job market. Hence, it is necessary to identify what the skills which are employers are expecting from students of Commerce and Management discipline.
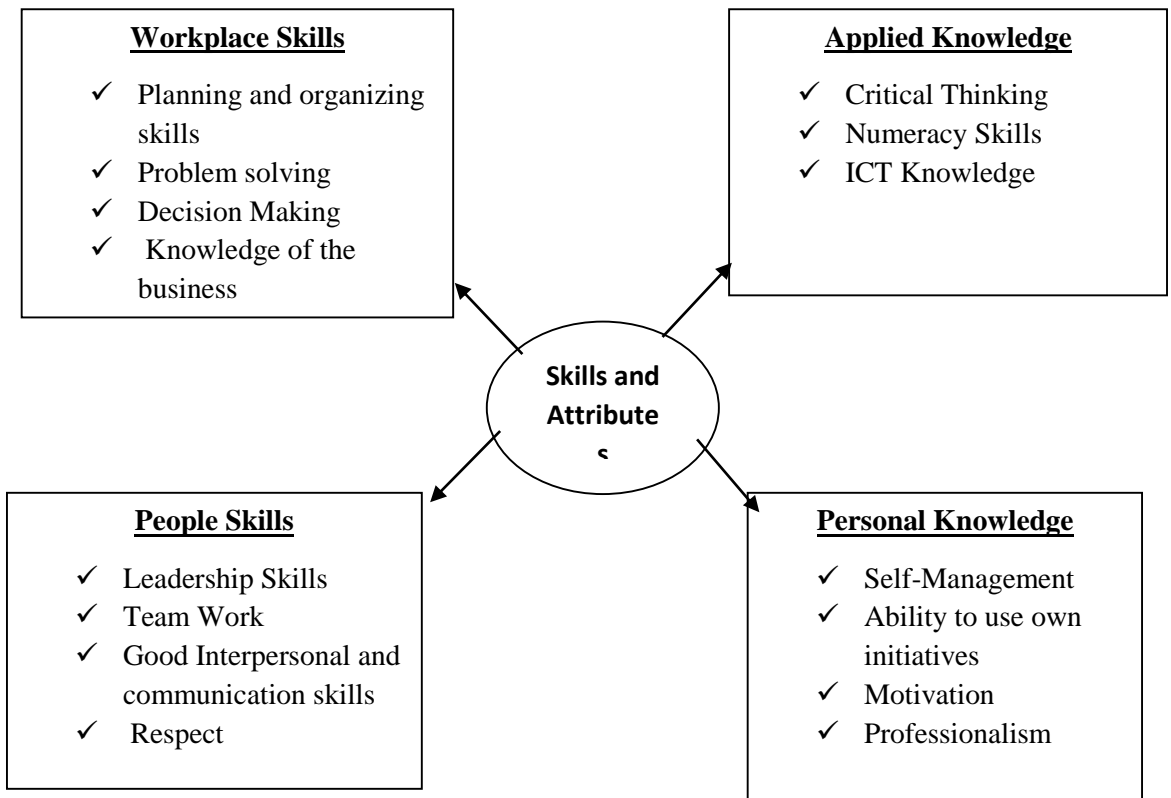
Methodology

The research entails a large scale cross sectional survey utilizing the sample constituting by five solid ventures representing all industries in Sri Lanka. These ventures are Hemas, Uniliver Sri Lanka,D Samson and Sons, Norlanka Manufacturing Colombo Limited and H-Connect Pvt Ltd.

Data collection methods: In our research intends to collect primary data by means of a mail survey. Comprehensive quaternaries intend to develop that comprising of main four parts. First part include four questions related to **Work Place Skills**, Second part include four questions related to **People skills,** Third part include three questions related to **Applied Knowledge** and Final part includes four questions related to **Personnel Skills**. These skills significantly section by section analyzed by the following paragraph.

Skills and attributes that are valued by employers

According to our survey from the employers' perspective they are often looking for skills that go beyond qualifications and experience. For employers, getting the right person means identifying people with right skills and qualities to fulfill the role and contribute to the organization's success. Our survey has done based on four main skill areas. They are people skills, workplace skills, and applied knowledge. Based on our survey results, followings table shows what are the common and most important skills that business organizations expect from students of Commerce and Management discipline.

Workplace Skills	**Applied Knowledge**
✓ Planning and organizing skills ✓ Problem solving ✓ Decision Making ✓ Knowledge of the business	✓ Critical Thinking ✓ Numeracy Skills ✓ ICT Knowledge

Skills and Attributes

People Skills	**Personal Knowledge**
✓ Leadership Skills ✓ Team Work ✓ Good Interpersonal and communication skills ✓ Respect	✓ Self-Management ✓ Ability to use own initiatives ✓ Motivation ✓ Professionalism

Workplace Skills

Planning and Organizing Skills

In our survey we found that these organizations considerably consider about the ability of employees to plan activities & carry them through effectively. To do this, these organizations have focused employee's action plans **which have helped organizations to identify employee's ideas and to decide what steps employees need to take to achieve particular goals.**

Under the planning and organizing skill they mainly consider about the following skills,

1. The ability of identifying business objectives.
2. Setting objective and goals which are achievable.
3. Prioritizing business tasks effectively.
4. Being able to work under pressure.
5. Completing work to a deadline.

Decision Making Skills

Decision making abilities are more significant part of any business organization whereas success of the organization depend on the decision making ability of the workers. According to our survey we were able to find decision making steps in which these employees should have. These organizations are thoroughly considered about these abilities.

1. Ability to clarify the nature of the problem before deciding action.
2. Collect and summarized data systematically.
3. Use creativity in the generation of alternative solution to the problem.
4. Select short list of the best option.
5. Make the decisions.
6. Implement the decisions.
7. Evaluate the decisions.

Knowledge of the business

Employees should have knowledge about the business situation and according situation they should have abilities to get decisions to achieve organization's goals. To obtain these opportunities our considered organizations more concern about following employees qualities.

1. The experience of the employees.
2. Employee's ability to design and process of new goods and services to achieve goals.
3. Employees plans for future activities.
   According to our survey we found that organization have used employees knowledge of the business, skills and experience as an assets.

Problem solving

Effective problem solving skills enable employees to analyze problems, identify problem severity and assess the impact of alternative solutions. Workplace training designed to develop problem solving skills helps employees to work more efficiently with co-workers, customers, partners and vendors. Therefore our five organizations significantly consider about employees ability of problem solving when selecting them. Therefore employee should have following skills to do this task.

1. Identify the organization's problems cleverly.
2. Proposing the solution quickly.

3. Evaluating the options.
4. Implementing a solution.

<u>People Skills</u>

Leadership

Leadership is the ability to motivate and influence others towards the achievement of a goal. Leaders should have strong self-confident. And also leaders are team players, allowing them to work in a group to achieve the best results for their employer. Always leaders should respect thoughts, opinions and ideas of others. According to the employers' believes developing leadership skills of undergraduates not only help you to find a senior position, but may help to gain promotions when they are working in the industry.

Team Work

Another important skills coming under people skills. Teamwork demonstrates ability to work effectively with others. Now a day's most of the organizations establish team rather than establishing group, because establishing teams are most effective way to achieve pre determine objectives and goals of the organization. Under this employers expect from students, ability to develop constructive working relationship and maintain them over time. Apart from that it is necessary use appropriate strategies and solutions for dealing with conflicts and differences to maintain a smooth workflow.

Good interpersonal and communicational skills

Interpersonal and communicational skills are one of the most important considerations of employer when recruiting people to their organizations. Interpersonal personal skills are the skills we use to interact with other people. Interpersonal skills include both verbal and written communication. These skills help to participate effectively as a member of a team. As well as when making decisions, take responsibilities and negotiate with customers employees should maintain good interpersonal and communication skills.

Respect

Respect demonstrates sensitivity and respect for the opinions, perspectives, and customs and individuals differences of others. Under this employers belief that their employees should be flexible and open minded when dealing with a wide range of people.

Applied Knowledge

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking can define as the process of activity and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing and evaluating information to reach an answer or solution. During the process of critical thinking ideas should be responded and well thought judged. It's create new possibilities develop new knowledge. Critical thinking shows what are the important of the broadly thinking of problem solving. Critical thinking is inward-directed with the intent of maximizing the <u>rationality</u> of the thinker. One does not use critical thinking to solve problems one uses critical thinking to improve one's process of thinking.

Number skills

Numeracy/ Number skills are the ability to reason and apply simple numerical concepts. Numeracy has major impact on employment. In a work environment, numeracy can be a controlling factor affecting career achievements and failures. Many professions require individuals to have a well-developed sense of numeracy. Even outside these specialized areas, the lack of proper numeracy skills can reduce employment opportunities and promotions, resulting in unskilled manual careers, low-paying jobs, and even unemployment.

ICT Knowledge

<u>Information and communication technology</u> (ICT) has significantly increased the world's capacity for creation of raw data and the speed at which it is produced. Now a day's ICT knowledge is very important factor for employer. According to employers Commerce and Management should have basic IT skills and familiar with using a computer. They belief that it may open up a wide range of employment opportunities and increase marketability in the workplace. According to them students should have basic knowledge of information technology such as how to send and receive emails, use the internet effectively, and use word processor and spreadsheet software?

<u>Personal Skills</u>

Self-management

Self-management mainly involves for setting goals and managing time. In employer view employer think if employee has good self-management skills it is easy to lead him. Because of this employers seek self-management skills from graduate more than other employees. Other main Self-management skills are reflection, self-awareness, planning, time management, monitoring, and self-appraisal.

Motivation

Workers in any organization need something to keep them working. Most of the time, the salary of the employee is enough to keep him or her working for an organization. An employee must be motivated to work for a company or organization. Employers want to find out this skill from students in Commerce and Management stream. Employers think they should have self-motivation factors. And it leads to touch the ultimate goals of their business.

Professionalism

This is another main skill that employers seek from graduate in commerce and management stream. Professionalism emphasizes the self-control by maintaining composure and keeping emotions in check even in difficult situations. Other than that employer expect maintaining professional appearance by dressing appropriately for the job and maintaining personal hygiene. Also according to them when speaking with supervisors or co-workers it is necessary to use professional language.

Ability to use own initiatives

Employers always seek new initiative ideas. They think one good initiative idea can be the turning point of their business. Employers think Commerce and Management student have good initiative ideas. So that employers always seek good initiative ideas from them. Currently giving instructions by employers are common incident is happening in the business organizations. But employers always don't seek from Commerce and Management graduates to follow instructions giving by them.

Conclusion

This Paper discussed existing research findings on studies and practices of employability skills of students in Commerce and Management discipline on several aspects as, introduction to employability, employer need, what are the employability skills expect by employers from students in Commerce and Management stream with evidences from literature review, matching employer needs and Skills and attributes that are valued by employers. The current changing business environment emphasizes the importance of education for employability, focusing on the development of not only skills but also practical experience. Then, in order to enhance competitive advantage for graduate employment, students need to develop employability skills in addition to the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge and study programmers need to identifying the way of improving that requirement.

Main skills requirement mentioned in this study are people skills, work place skills, applied knowledge and personal skills. Furthermore this paper discussed what are the sub skills expect by employers from students in Commerce and Management stream under these main four skill areas. Many of the businesses suggested that educators should review and redevelop their delivery methodology to support the development of these skills and attributes in Students of Commerce and Management discipline. Therefore Sri Lankan Universities as wells other higher educational institutions has already taken actions for the purpose of developing employability skills of students. As a result of that job market special is at a better level for the Commerce and Management students, apparently private sector look for more skills and development in order to ensure the achievement of corporate objectives.

In recent years, there has been a strong emphasis on providing on work related training for undergraduates as a part of their degree program. During the training, undergraduates get their first experience of real working environment and, an understanding on working patterns within an organization. Most of the Universities and governments all around the world have given attention on identifying this skills requirement. As mention above private sector are looking for more skills and developments in students. Hence, Sri Lankan universities should conduct employers' skills requirement surveys to identify real needs, in order to strengthening their graduates' skills for fulfill the requirement in the industry.

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