ENHANCING THE CAPACITY OF ORGANIZATIONS AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEIS) IN INCREASING GRADUATES EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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Abstract: This paper analyzed the perceptions of Graduates, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Employers on Graduates Employability in Bangladesh. By using Quantitative Methodology, the study found that there is a significant perception gap between Employers and Graduates as Graduates strongly believe that scoring higher CGPA increases the chance of securing a job in the competitive labor market, on the other hand Employers give top most priority on 'Integrity' and 'Communication Skills' and advised that CGPA is used mostly for job applications screening purpose. Therefore HEIs should include 'Employability Skills' in the curriculum and assessment. Though few HEIs have introduced Outcome Based Evaluation (OBE), however these are yet to contribute in Employability Skills Development. The Existing Curriculum is not Employability Skills focused, so Employers and HEIs should establish a collaborative strategy for developing Employability Skills that will eventually develop efficient Human Resources.

Keywords: Employability Skills , CGPA, Employers, HEIs, Graduates

Introduction

Many students find themselves at the road of life with little direction upon graduation. Unfortunately 70% of high school graduates lack professionalism and work ethic skills found by Bronson (2007), Gewertz (2007) and Dutton and Omar et al. (2012) . It is also identified by Sutton (2002), Perreault, (2004),   Wilhelm (2004), Glenn (2008), Parsons (2008), Mitchell et al, (2010) and Shafie & Nayan (2010) that most of the community college students in USA ,Malaysia and Latin America lacked relevant employability skills. According to employers, a good academic qualification is no longer sufficient to secure employment(Yorke,2006) , degree classification is for screening the job applications and for short listing purposes (Graduate Prospects, 2009).In many cases, employers use criteria like series of skills activities, psychometric tests and personality profile other than degree to assess applications(Graduate Prospects, 2009).It is believed that graduates with good employability skills may otherwise be missed because they have not achieved good academic qualifications (Denholm, 2004; Morley et al., 2006; Morley and Aynsley, 2007). Moreover, degree classification or grading system may not be reliable (Yorke, 2007) and grade inflation has been a concern for long (Baty,2007).

Furthermore, different regulations and practices related to degree outcomes in different universities could undermine the fairness and comparability of the grading system across different institutions (Lowe, 2007; Yorke et al., 2007). As students are expected to contribute at workplace immediately after getting hired (Confederation of British Industry, 2008) Employers suggested that Higher Educations Institutions (HEIs), should be teaching their students how to cooperate with others in the workplace (Evenson, 1999) by developing skills that will make them employable.

However no research has attempted to know the reasons why graduates are incapable of meeting employer's requirement and the role of HEIs in developing students' knowledge and   skills that make them employable. Therefore this study has four objectives   : i. To explore Perceptions of Employers, Graduates and HEIs' about graduates Skills, Knowledge and Characteristics which help new graduates to be employable ii. To address the perception Gap if there is any iii. To evaluate the HEI's curriculum whether these are students employability

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focused and iv.To explore the opportunity to collaborate HEIs and Employers to increase Graduates Employability. This research has taken 'Bangladesh' for data collection.

Literature Review

> Employability is a set of achievements-Skills, Understanding a
> Personal attributes- that make graduates more likely to gain employment
> and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves
> the workforce, the community and the economy."
> (Yorke,2006).

Keller, Parker, and Chan (2011) defined employability skills as an assorted array of knowledge, skills, and attributes that are relevant for the workplace. The term Employability skills used interchangeably with nontechnical skills, is defined as the "interpersonal, human, people or behavioural skills needed to apply technical skills and knowledge in the workplace" (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera as cited by De Villiers, 2010, p. 2). Employability skills are categorized as being related to human issues, such as communication, teamwork, leadership, conflict management, negotiation, professionalism, and ethics (Azim et al., 2010).Employers always prefer graduates to be social enough to adapt with the workplace culture, use their knowledge, skills and abilities to achieve the common goals of organisations. Critical thinking ability (reflection) is also highly required for innovation and anticipating and leading change (Harvey et al,1997; Little 2001 in Lees 2002). In the research report 'How much does higher education enhance the employability of graduates?' Mason et al (2003) discussed that the concept of employability is mostly centred on the development of communication, numeracy, information technology, and learning how to learn. However, more recently, authors have moved towards a more complex understanding of graduate employability and proposed a number of inter-related attributes, skills and competencies that help individuals to both secure and perform well in employment. Rothwell and & Arnold (2007) proposed an approach for understanding employability that was based on interrelated components which included wider contextual factors such as: student's (a) academic performance and engagement in his/her studies (b) confidence in his/ her skills and abilities (c) ambition (d)perception of the strength of the university's brand (e) The reputation the student's university has within his/her field of study (f) The status and credibility of the student's field of study (g) The student's awareness of opportunities in the external labour market (h) the student's perception of the state of the external labour market (i) The external labour market's demand for people in the student's subject field.(Lowden at el.2011)

Beside these factors some organizations comment that graduates academic Performance is not so important that make them employable rather for some employers , 'the degree subject studied is not as important as the graduates' ability to handle complex information and communicate it effectively' and that 'Graduate recruiters want a variety of other skills, personal and intellectual attributes, rather than specialist subject knowledge'.(Knight and Yorke 2000).But unfortunately, 'One of the major problems facing the employability agenda is the discrepancy between HEIs and Organizations.Some, such as Lees (2002), suggest that there are fundamental differences in the understanding of employability between employers and HEIs which has impeded progress in promoting graduate employability measures. In her literature review, Lees highlights a number of studies (e.g. Dunne et al, 2000; Harvey, 2000) which suggest that there is little common understanding between employers and HEIs over the concept of relevant skills, and that increasingly, 'graduate attributes' are seen by employers as more important than the degree subject studied.

The literature suggests that academics can be skeptical of incorporating employability skills into their teaching and can see it as an attack on academic freedom in terms of content. Gunn et al (2010), states that while those responsible for Higher Education provision agree that universities should take into account students' employment needs 'including the generic skills and abilities needed in the workplace' and reflect this in the curriculum and course design, tensions remain because of academics' concerns that engaging with the employability agenda will lead to a diminution of academic standards and objectives(Gunn et al2010). However,

this can be addressed by framing the issue in terms exploring how academics can teach their subject to promote employability skills and attributes rather than diminishing the academic content (Coopers & Lybrand, 1998; Harvey, 2000a). Knight and Yorke (2001) argue that curricula designed to enhance employability can also be of benefit in academic terms. For example, in addition to subject knowledge, course content can address specific and generic skills, self-efficacy and critical, reflective thinking (Knight & Yorke, 2001). As Lees (2002) states: These dimensions will be developed through the program of study, the methods of learning, teaching and assessment that the student experiences, through any paid work that is undertaken whilst at university and through their social life and involvement with Guild activities.

Furthermore, it is argued that resources would be better utilized to increase employment-based training and experience, and/or employer involvement in courses, which were found to positively affect immediate graduate prospects in the labor market and, therefore, support graduates in the transitional stage into employment Cranmer (2006).It will also minimize the concern as in many cases the employability skills acquired at university may mismatch the skills that they need in employment (Mason et al2006).

Employability is to be tackled comprehensively. Universities have to reflect it in their mission statements, learning and teaching strategies, course frameworks, strategic documents and practical guidance. Yet some concern has been raised with regard to how the development of such skills can be embedded into universities' practice, considering other priorities that influence their policies. In 2008, the House of Commons Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee carried out an inquiry into skills and training policy. Their report, "Re-skilling for recovery" (House of Commons, 2009) identified successful examples of HEIs collaborating with employers, but reported that employers were reluctant to fund collaboration with HEIs. This was because they preferred to train employees when they started work rather than provide universities with money to do this beforehand.

Therefore this study aims to find out whether or not Bangladesh's HEIs and Employers are creating employability skills by analyzing the perceptions of Graduates, HEIs and Employers.

Methods

An Employability Skills Inventory Profile was adapted from Cleary, Flynn, and Thomasson (2006), Venetia Saunders and Katherine Zuzel (2010) and Ann-Marie Claudia Williams'(2015) research on Graduates Employability. Beside Skills Inventory, a list of activities has been formulated by collecting data from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) Curriculums and Students' Assessment Criterions. Assessment Criteria of Twenty five out of forty six Business School of Bangladesh were taken into consideration .After the analysis six common assessment criteria had been identified that directly contribute in Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) .Some extra curriculum activities have been identified that are promising for developing employability skills but those activities were not mandatory for all students to participate and the outcome of performance of these activities are not included in the Grades in most of the Business Schools.

During Summer Semester 2017 the Skills Profile and the HEIs activities list were sent to eighty employers through four hundred Internship students of a business school of one private university of Bangladesh. These students were selected as they got three months Internship placements in those organizations , as a partial fulfillment of their BBA and MBA degree. The office of Placement and Alumni (OPA) of American International University Bangladesh (AIUB) distributed the questionnaire through these students and made it mandatory to return while submitting the internship report. Other than the Skills listed on the inventory that employers were requested to priorities, they were also requested to include any new skills they wanted new employees to possess when hired for a position within their organization. Respondents from employers group were consisted of Human Resource Managers, Training Managers, line Managers and other managers who usually are responsible for employees career management and performance management and recruitment and selection. Eighty organizations received the questionnaire and more than 50 skills were listed though there were

repetitions. The common skills were identified and renamed on the basis of organizational and theoretical terms. Finally 12 employability skills were placed in a questionnaire that was sent for survey during Fall 2017 through another batch of four hundred thirty internship students. These students also participated in the survey to give their opinion about employability. 'CGPA' was also included as students of Summer included academic performance as a means of winning a job. A 5-point Likert-type scale was created to measure the strength of importance of each attribute. The questionnaire asked the employers and graduating students to rate the level of importance of each of the 12 skills attributes. The range of extremely important (5), very important (4), somewhat important (3), not very important (2), and not important (1) was used. At the end of the questionnaire, there was space for free response, comment on any matters relating to students employability. The same scoring regimes were applied for both employers and Graduating students, so that direct comparisons could be made. The list of activities from HEIS also distributed through AIUB Institutional Quality Assurance Cell (AIQAC) to twenty five universities in Bangladesh to comment on their existing curriculums role in students employability.

Data Analysis

Collected data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical software package (Version 20).Graduating students and the employers were divided into two different groups. The overall mean values and standard deviation (SD) of the scores for each skill were determined for each of these two groups. Skills were ranked in descending order (standard competition order) by the mean value and SD.

To determine the correlation between the prioritization of skills data for the two groups the overall mean values of the employer's scores and of the graduates score for each skill were expressed as a scatter plot Pearson's correlation coefficient derived.

Another analysis on perception of HEIs and Employers on curriculum has been made to reflect the importance of assessment criteria for employability. Some of the criteria, which are part of curriculum, deemed necessary for students to attend and some are voluntarily offered.

Findings and Discussion

A scatter plot of employer mean scores and graduating mean scores for the importance of the various skills represents a strong positive linear correlation. The correlation coefficient was +0.992 indicating that there was good agreement among these two mean scores (Figure 1), and this was strongly statistically significant (p<0.001).
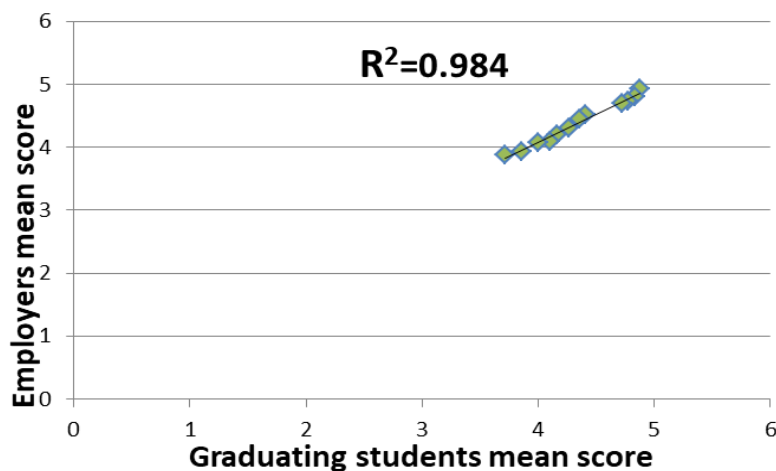

Figure 1: Scatter plot showing correlation between skills priorities of employers and graduating students

Employers overwhelmingly responded that integrity and communication was the top of two most important skills needed by employers in todays' market. All 80 employers (100%) indicated that integrity and communication skills were extremely and very important. More than 70% employers indicated that work ethics, interpersonal skills and adaptability are also extremely important for employment.

The frequency of each response and the percentages that indicated the level of importance of each skill attribute as perceived by employers are represented in figure 2.
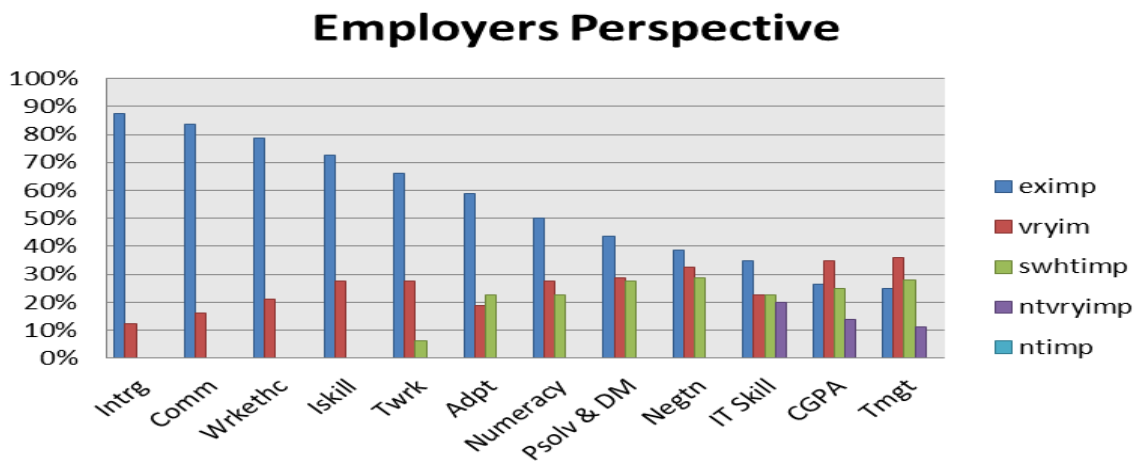

Figure 2: Employers perspective of employability skills

Same survey questionnaire was sent to graduating students in order to find out their perspective about the skills required for employability. Response received was very surprising indeed as the factor that employers tend to value less for employability has been identified as a top ranked priority by graduating students. CGPA, the skill set/employability factor that was ranked 11th on the list from employers' perspective placed on top of the list of graduates. Because they strongly believe that scoring high CGPA increases the chance of securing a place in the competitive job market, a good CGPA is good enough to change the course of their career. This led to believe them that scoring higher CGPA is very significant at times of employment issue. On the other hand, common thoughts shared as well by both the groups during the survey. Communication, as an employability skill has been identified with equal importance. More than 90% responses agree that both CGPA and communication are extremely important for upcoming graduates. Following diagram represents the ranking of employability factors from graduates perspective.
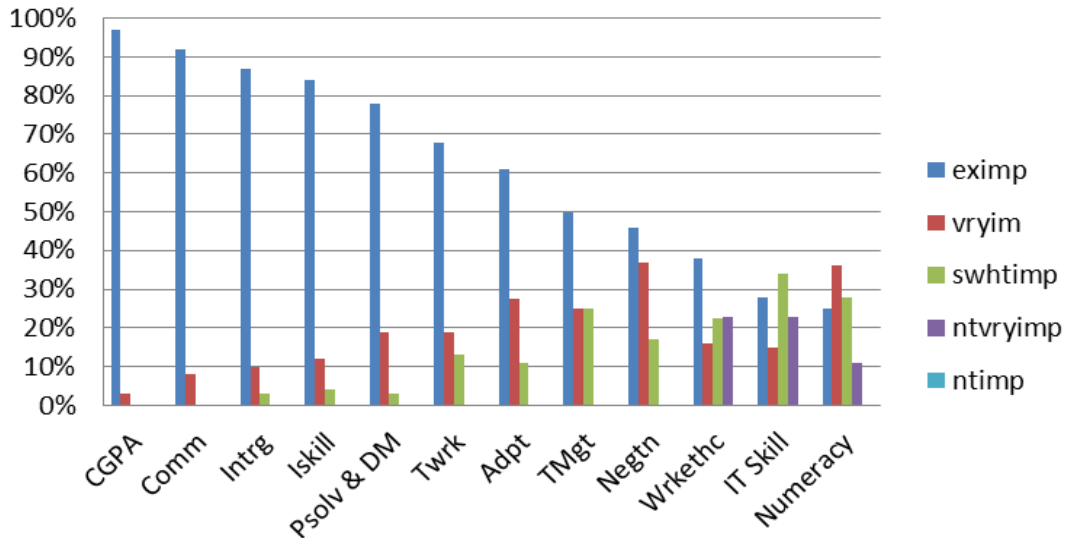
Graduates perspective

Figure 3: Graduates perspective of employability skills

The mean score and standard deviation of employability skills attributes related to its perceived level of importance is represented in Table 1 (see appendix). Each of the soft skill attributes from employers perspective had a mean score of ≥ 3.72 based on a 5.0 scale, where 5 = *extremely important*, 4 = *very important*, 3 = *somewhat important*, 2 = *not very important*, and 1 = *not important*. None of the skills attributes received a *not important* ranking. From graduates perspective each of the employability skill attributes (see appendix) had a mean score of ≥ 3.88 based on a 5.0 scale, where 5 = *extremely important*, 4 =*very important*, 3 = *somewhat important*, 2 = *not very important*, and 1 = *not important*. None of the soft skills attributes received a *not important* ranking.

Table 3: Employers and Graduates preference

Top Ranked skills employers prefer	Top ranked skills graduates prefer
Integrity	CGPA
Communications	Communications

While trying to investigate the perception of employers and HEIs on the role of existing curriculum in students' employability, following findings has been identified:

Table 4: Employers and HEI's perception about employability in curriculum (5=strong employability, 0= No employability)

Students Assessment Criteria	Employability (Employers view)	Employability (HEI's view)
Written Exam	1	1
Viva	2	3
Attendance	1	1
Written assignment	0	0
Individual and team presentation	4	4
Volunteering experience in event management (seminar, workshops)	5	5

From the above table, perception about students' assessment criteria from two different perspectives has been drawn. Assessment criteria those contribute towards better academic result and mandatory part of curriculum has been identified as least importance for employability by employers and HEIs whereas in reality, general thoughts among people are that "better academic result ensures strong chance of employment". Most importantly both employers and HEIs agree to the same note. Surprisingly, engagement in volunteer work has been identified as one of the most important assessment criteria for employability by both employers and HEI. This can be explained in a way that students have the scope of showing their skills when they involve themselves in volunteer works as it is a kind of platform to showcase their individual skills and qualities that ultimately portrays employability skills that employers look for. So, it is a very interesting finding that can be taken into account for study and how these particular criteria can be included in the curriculum could be a matter of further research.

Table 5: List of Activities that HEI doing for creating Employability (5 Strongly Agree, 0 Strongly Disagree)

Voluntary Activities	Employability by Employers
Club Activities	3
Internal and External Competition	3
Student Exchange Program	2
Event Management Skills	4
Participating Workshops Seminar	3
Guest Speakers from Organizations	2
Field Visit & Study Tour	3

Educational institutes have been trying to introduce certain voluntary activities in order to raise the skills of new graduates that will eventually help them while hunting for job. Initiatives like organizing event management

program where student can have the scope of presenting their strength in dealing with various activities their own using skills and knowledge in order to host a particular event successfully. And employers view this activity on a high ground as this ultimately shows how an individual will react to a situation and come up with a positive outcome. So, in collaboration with employers, HEI's have been implementing voluntary activities to raise the employability skills that deemed necessary and significant from employers perspective. All the activities listed on the table mentioned above, HEI's trying to incorporate in the curriculum so that every passing out graduates should have the required skills that is needed for employability.

Suggestions

Integration of employability skills as assessment into HEIs curriculum will promote hiring of students in today's workforce (also supported by Glenn, 2008; James & James, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2010; Perreault, 2004; Wilhelm, 2004. Industry-Educators Partnership is Highly required. Employers also need to make both external and internal communication about required employability skills they are looking for in a particular job position. It is suggested that Skills list will be mentioned in the job advertisement & direct questions related to skills must be included during recruitment & Selection Process. It will survey to create awareness among students and Higher Education Institutions. It is advisable that HEIS and employers should come forward and start working in collaboration to develop graduates profile. In this regard they can have a joint fund through which graduating students will be receiving skills training. It is understandable that both of the parties or any of them may be resistant about having joint fund, however it should also be realized that beneficiaries of this initiative is not only the students, employers can save time and money to develop employees, long term training and many other development schemes. Organization will surely provide need based training but they will get more ready to perform employees which actually they want. And interestingly no one should forget that development is a long term process and employees cannot be developed within a limited time period of training or counseling. Students and Human Resources as a whole needs to go through systematic development framework since their student life. All the skills mentioned in this paper are also called as life skills, people management skills, behavior skills, human skills, soft skills, work skills (Weber, Finley, Crawford, & Rivera as cited by De Villiers, 2010, p. 2).Therefore, few hours training program for employees cannot ensure learning or developing these skills.

Limitation and Future Research

This study did not address the number of acceptance and rejection in hiring graduates because of employability. Moreover, since Skills Development is a long term process, it is important to figure out the right age, time and level of Education to start learning and developing Employability Skills. Future researchers are also suggested to investigate how environment too contributes in achieving these skills along with HEIs and Employers as environment (family, friends, community, and culture) also has a vital role in developing skills into Human Resources.

Conclusion

It's a matter of great concern that students still strongly believe that scoring higher CGPA will ensure their job in the competitive market. The core gap between the Employers and Graduates expectations is that employers are skills focused and graduates are CGPA focused. Therefore this is where HEIs can contribute the most. Higher Education Institutions can surely develop the employability skills among graduates by engaging employers in the course, stating 'employability' in the mission statement, Curriculum and Assessment. This is how both of the stakes can work in collaboration in graduate employability. Though some HEIs are now prioritizing Outcome Based Evaluation (OBE) but the number is very less .This study has not found any evidence of inclusion of employability skills in the Graduates Assessment and CGPA. Hence, a highest CGPA achiever in many cases fails to demonstrate employability skills that are a threat to the credibility of the excellence of a graduate or a potential employee. Therefore to continue with the credibility , Higher Education

Institutions (HEIs) should reform the existing curriculum and include 'employability skills' into it. It is a matter of hope that students also realize the importance of developing 'Communication Skills' to be employable, as according to employers this skills enhances other skills from the list i.e. interpersonal skills, negotiation, adaptability, team building. Hence, it's the high time for both HEIs and Employers to sit together to find the right process of developing 'Skilled' human resources who are ready to perform in the work and life.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

Table 2: Comparison between two groups of Mean and standard deviation of each employability skill attribute relative to perceived level of importance (N=80)

Employability skills	Employers		Graduating students	
	M	SD	M	SD
Intrg	4.88	0.26	4.92	0.16
Comm	4.84	0.30	4.8	0.24
CGPA	3.86	0.88	4.92	0.16
Wrkethc	4.78	0.39	4.07	0.79
Iskill	4.72	0.48	4.69	0.42
Twrk	4.41	0.64	4.44	0.66
Adpt	4.36	0.74	4.31	0.70
Numeracy	4.27	0.79	3.88	0.60
Psolv & DM	4.16	0.66	4.51	0.51
Negtn	4.1	0.82	4.21	0.73
IT Skill	4	0.84	3.94	0.81
Tmgt	3.72	0.79	4.2	0.62

3. List of Soft Skills/Employability Skills

1. Integrity-honest, ethical, high morals, has personal values, does what's right
2. Communication-oral, speaking capability, written, presenting, listening, Understanding
3. CGPA- Cumulative Grade Point Average
4. Work Ethics- hard working, willing to work, loyal, initiative, self-motivated, on time, good Attendance
5. Interpersonal Skills- nice, personable, sense of humor, friendly, nurturing, empathetic, has self-control, patient, sociability, warmth, social skills
6. Team Work-cooperative, gets along with others, agreeable, supportive, helpful, Collaborative
7. Adaptability- Flexibility, willing to change, lifelong learner, accepts new things, adjusts, teachable
8. Problem Solving & Decision Making-Critical Thinking, ability to lead, willingness and skills to solve problems
9. Negotiation-People management skills, highly require where multiple stakeholders are there in the organization
10. IT Skill-Technical , functional and hard skills that increases work efficiency
11. Team Work-cooperative, gets along with others, agreeable, supportive, helpful, collaborative
12. Numeracy-Basic functional Knowledge helps employees in the business world