

Employability Skills - A Perception of Agricultural Students, Graduates and Employers

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural universities are at the helm in giving sound technical knowledge to the students of agriculture, but many a time the students fail in expressing the real aptitude for the requirement of the agriculture industry. The study was conducted to bring an insight into the skill requirement of the industry and how the students have perceived their own capabilities in various aspects. It was found that there is variation between what the students perceived as important skills and what the industry requires. The students felt that they were competent in listening, self motivation and interpersonal relations while the employers expressed that problem solving and analytics, visioning and creativity are the core employability skills needed for the industry.

Keywords: Employability; Agricultural graduates; Skills; Tamil Nadu Agricultural University

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural Universities have included a variety of courses in the syllabi in order to inculcate the latest trends in technical agriculture courses. However, according to Agnihotri et al (2014), growing unemployment, shifting employment opportunities from public to private sector are some of the issues that need to be tackled to make agriculture education more vibrant and attractive. A mismatch or gap between the skills of the unemployed and the skills needed in today's economy could be one of the reasons presumed for the high unemployment rate amongst the agricultural graduates in an ever changing

agricultural industry (Alibaygi et al, 2013). The assessment of technical competency is done rigorously by universities. However in the job market, the students/graduates are evaluated on a number of other aspects like Problem Solving and Analytic, Decision-Making, Organization and Time Management, Risk Taking, Oral Communication, Written Communication, Listening, Interpersonal Relations, Managing Conflict, Leadership and Influence, Coordinating, Creativity, Innovation, and Change, Visioning, Ability to Conceptualize, Lifelong Learning and Motivation-Personal Strengths (Robinson,

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2006) and the like. According to Armoogum (2016) employers specify that graduates are not updated or equipped with modern technologies in the agricultural sector around the world.

There is a need for institutions to design the curricula according to the growing needs of the agricultural industry. (Rao et al . 2011).The understanding of employability skill requirement helps us to assess the agricultural education system and it also helps us to know if the current agricultural curriculum is on par to meet the demands of the industry . This would help us to make necessary modifications in the curriculum. This study was conducted to bring an insight into the skill requirement of the industry and how the students have perceived or understood their own capabilities in the various skill requirements of the private agriculture industry.

METHODOLOGY

The student perception of importance of employability skill was studied by taking a sample of 660 final year students of Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU), Coimbatore which is one of the premier institutes for agriculture in India. The sample was selected from various degree programmes from the colleges of TNAU. The skill requirement as perceived by graduate employees was assessed from 50 alumni/graduate employees. The skill requirement as perceived by employers was assessed from 24 employers.

A 67-item questionnaire adapted from Robinson (2006) with responses ranging from 0 = no importance (or competence) to 3 = major

importance (or competence) was administered to students, alumni and employers. The 67 items were grouped into 16 skill categories for better understanding. Mean and Standard deviation were used to rank the important skills.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' perception on importance and competence of employability skills

Data from the identified sample of 660 students were collected to describe students' perceptions of the importance and competence of the employability skills needed for the workforce.

The employability skills were ranked in order of importance based on their mean importance (Table1). Students ranked "Listening" as the first and foremost important skill needed in the workforce followed by 'Lifelong learning' and the third important skill needed was Motivation – personal strengths. Whereas, 'Decision making' was ranked as the last skill needed by them.

Means and standard deviations are reported to describe students self-perceived level of competence at performing the employability skill constructs. Accordingly, the students perceived that they were competent in listening, Motivation – personnel strengths and Inter personal relations in the order of their ranking. The students perceived that they were least competent in organization and time management, written communication and Decision making, The findings are in line with that of Alibaygi et al. (2013).

Table 1.
Students' Perceptions on the Importance & Competence of Employability Skills

(n=660)

| Sl. No. | Employability Skill | Mean | | SD | |
|------------|------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| | | Importance | Competence | Importance | Competence |
| 1. | Problem Solving and Analytic | 2.48 | 2.21 | 0.68 | 0.86 |
| 2. | Decision-Making | 2.20 | 2.00 | 0.82 | 0.93 |
| 3. | Organization and Time Management | 2.32 | 2.10 | 0.78 | 0.92 |
| 4. | Risk Taking | 2.32 | 2.13 | 0.77 | 1.02 |
| 5. | Oral Communication | 2.25 | 2.08 | 0.82 | 0.91 |
| 6. | Written Communication | 2.31 | 2.07 | 0.77 | 0.87 |
| 7. | Listening | 2.56 | 2.37 | 0.69 | 0.81 |
| 8. | Interpersonal Relations | 2.44 | 2.31 | 0.75 | 0.94 |
| 9. | Managing Conflict | 2.31 | 2.20 | 0.81 | 0.86 |
| 10. | Leadership and Influence | 2.29 | 2.12 | 1.0 | 1.02 |
| 11. | Coordinating | 2.43 | 2.13 | 0.74 | 0.84 |
| 12. | Creativity, Innovation, and Change | 2.46 | 2.29 | 0.73 | 0.96 |
| 13. | Visioning | 2.47 | 2.12 | 0.73 | 0.83 |
| 14. | Ability to Conceptualize | 2.25 | 2.18 | 0.78 | 0.82 |
| 15. | Lifelong Learning | 2.53 | 2.25 | 0.72 | 0.83 |
| 16. | Motivation-Personal Strengths | 2.49 | 2.32 | 0.81 | 0.83 |

It was found that the students were having a varying level of confidence on their competencies. This finding is in line with that of Alibaygi et al (2013).

Students' competencies may vary depending on their education background like medium of instruction, the board of education in which they have studied. Certain schools give more emphasis on self development,

creativity and application aspects in education. These will alter the students' perception of their own competencies.

Perception of Alumni on the Importance of Employability Skills

The perception of TNAU alumni on importance of employability skills was studied by taking a sample of 50 passed out students of TNAU. The employability skills were ranked

in order of importance based on their mean importance (Table 2). Alumni ranked Listening as the first and foremost important skill needed in the workforce followed by Visioning and the third important skill needed as Motivation – personal strengths and Lifelong learning. Whereas, Risk taking was ranked as the last skilled needed by them.

In most private organisations the entry level and middle level employees are required

only to receive instructions, understand them and follow them meticulously. This is the reason that listening and visioning is given priority. Another aspect which favours private organisations employers is self driving forces to achieve targets. However, the risks involved are bore by the organisations and it supports its employees in the process of target achievement.

Table 2.
Alumni Perception of the Importance of Employability Skills

(n=50)

| Sl.No. | Employability Skill | Mean | SD |
|--------|-----------------------------------|------|------|
| 1. | Problem Solving and Analytic | 2.28 | 0.82 |
| 2. | Decision-Making | 2.09 | 0.86 |
| 3. | Organization and Time Management | 2.19 | 0.81 |
| 4. | Risk Taking | 2.06 | 0.87 |
| 5. | Oral Communication | 2.31 | 0.85 |
| 6. | Written Communication | 2.32 | 0.83 |
| 7. | Listening | 2.52 | 0.84 |
| 8. | Interpersonal Relations | 2.4 | 0.87 |
| 9. | Managing Conflict | 2.25 | 0.91 |
| 10. | Leadership and Influence | 2.2 | 0.89 |
| 11. | Coordinating | 2.37 | 0.80 |
| 12. | Creativity, Innovation and Change | 2.43 | 0.86 |
| 13. | Visioning | 2.5 | 0.81 |
| 14. | Ability to Conceptualize | 2.32 | 0.82 |
| 15. | Lifelong Learning | 2.44 | 0.75 |
| 16. | Motivation-Personal Strengths | 2.44 | 0.83 |

Table 3.
Employer Perception of the Importance of Employability Skills
(n=24)

| Sl.No. | Employability Skill | Mean | SD |
|--------|------------------------------------|------|------|
| 1. | Problem Solving and Analytic | 2.49 | 0.48 |
| 2. | Decision-Making | 2.39 | 0.77 |
| 3. | Organization and Time Management | 2.38 | 0.72 |
| 4. | Risk Taking | 2.38 | 0.61 |
| 5. | Oral Communication | 2.38 | 0.73 |
| 6. | Written Communication | 2.38 | 0.79 |
| 7. | Listening | 2.38 | 0.75 |
| 8. | Interpersonal Relations | 2.38 | 0.59 |
| 9. | Managing Conflict | 2.38 | 0.72 |
| 10. | Leadership and Influence | 2.38 | 0.80 |
| 11. | Coordinating | 2.38 | 0.65 |
| 12. | Creativity, Innovation, and Change | 2.40 | 0.62 |
| 13. | Visioning | 2.41 | 0.59 |
| 14. | Ability to Conceptualize | 2.40 | 0.71 |
| 15. | Lifelong Learning | 2.40 | 0.59 |
| 16. | Motivation-Personal Strengths | 2.40 | 0.64 |

Perception of Employers on the Importance of Employability Skills

The employers' perception of importance of employability skills was studied by taking a sample of 24 prospective employers from various firms such as HDFC, Sathyam Bio Ltd., Bannari Amman Sugars Ltd., Yara Fertilizers Ltd., and Coromandel India Pvt Ltd., It was ensured by the employers that all the employability skills listed are highly required by students for sustenance and

effective performance in the workforce for the individual and beneficiaries. The employability skills were ranked in order of importance based on their mean importance (Table 3). Employers ranked Problem solving and analytic as the first and foremost important skill needed in the workforce followed by visioning and the third important skill needed is creativity, innovation and change. Whereas the least important skill needed ranges from organization and time management,

Table 4.
Ranking of Employability Skills

| Sl.No. | Employability Skill | Ranking | | |
|--------|------------------------------------|----------|--------|-----------|
| | | Students | Alumni | Employers |
| 1. | Problem Solving and Analytic | 4 | 11 | 1 |
| 2. | Decision-Making | 16 | 15 | 7 |
| 3. | Organization and Time Management | 9 | 14 | 8 |
| 4. | Risk Taking | 10 | 16 | 9 |
| 5. | Oral Communication | 14 | 10 | 10 |
| 6. | Written Communication | 11 | 8 | 11 |
| 7. | Listening | 1 | 1 | 12 |
| 8. | Interpersonal Relations | 7 | 6 | 13 |
| 9. | Managing Conflict | 12 | 12 | 14 |
| 10. | Leadership and Influence | 13 | 13 | 15 |
| 11. | Coordinating | 8 | 7 | 16 |
| 12. | Creativity, Innovation, and Change | 6 | 5 | 3 |
| 13. | Visioning | 5 | 2 | 2 |
| 14. | Ability to Conceptualize | 15 | 9 | 4 |
| 15. | Lifelong Learning | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| 16. | Motivation-Personal Strengths | 3 | 4 | 6 |

risk taking, oral communication, written communication, listening, interpersonal relations, managing conflict, leadership influence and coordination. The perception of alumni and employers on risk taking ability is the same and the employers feel that in the middle level and lower level management

the staff needs to just carry out routine sales promotion jobs in private organisations.

Ranking of Employability skills

Ranking of employability skills was done to study the similarities of skills among the students, alumni and employers. According to students and alumni the employability skill

item in greatest need of attention is 'listening'; whereas employers had prioritized problem solving and analytic as top rated skill (Table 4). The study has found that there are differences in the perception of students and employers which is in line with the study by Venetia (2010).

Active listening is the key to the success of any job. However, in the private organisations, the employers usually prefer to have candidates who are able to solve field level problems for the farmers.

CONCLUSION

Skill acquired in academics and required in job are significantly different. It is found from the study that the requirement by employers are Problem Solving and Analytics, Visioning and Creativity, Innovation and Change. The perception on employability skills varied among students, alumni and employers. Emphasis should be given to improve these skills in the curricula and provide them hands on training so that the graduates can meet the demands of the industries and improve their employability skills.

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