

# HR PROFESSIONALS' PREFERRED SKILLS FOR BUSINESS GRADUATES IN SERVICE SECTOR

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## Abstract

*The current study attempts to explore the skills that are valued by service sector HR professionals (public listed) and to identify the top four needed skills by service sector HR professionals. Based on the literature review two objectives were formulated that seventeen skills are the anticipated attributes for employability and the most preferred skills preferred by HR professionals are adaptability, leadership, team work and work ethics. To assess employability, "Employer Perspective of the Business School Graduate" scale was adapted from Jackson (2013) study. The sample of the study consisted of 126 HR professionals from public listed companies in service sector. Rotated Component Matrix was used to calculate the top four preferred skills. The findings of the study suggest that four skills were preferred by HR professionals i.e. 1) adaptability, 2) leadership, 3) teamwork, and 4) work ethics. The implication of the findings is discussed in the study.*

**Keywords:** Employability, Skills, Service Sector, Business Graduates

**JEL Classification:** M 120

## Introduction

In most of the countries, graduate employability has become a significant issue involving diverse, economic, social, national and cultural facets (Asonitou, 2015). To adequately reach nationally accepted level of employability, local governments implement nationally recognized educational strategies which are directed towards national needs or market needs or it can be a combination of both the types. Consequently, this conflict produces a conflicting viewpoint in other facets of education policy such as educational providers, admission policy, curricula issues and employability skills of university graduates<sup>1</sup>.

The significant question that arises is whether universities should acclimatize themselves to produce personnel that retort the market needs, skills and experience (Afonso et al., 2012; Andrews & Russell, 2012) or else the business sector should acclimatize its structure to absorb the contemporary skills that universities create (Tran, 2015; Bryson, 2015). Every sides view point may contradict the views of other side. Diverse studies have reported the challenges and difficulties higher education systems are facing in reference to preparing employable business university graduates (Natalia et al., 2015; Tarvid, 2015).

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In discovering the relationship amid skills developed in undergraduate curriculum and those consequently required in employment, mostly in managerial careers. Wilton (2008) surveyed 1,999 graduates and raised the concern regarding the adequate preparation of university graduates for employment. Acclimatizing universities’ programs to match the labour market needs is critical in escalating the chances of graduate employability. This necessitates additional responsiveness to the type of skills individuals in the business sector would like university graduates to possess (Azevedo et al., 2012; Poon, 2012). In many countries, employability is the core issue and increased attention is paid to the role of higher education in the development of employability (Huang, Turner & Chen, 2014). In spite of the increasing attention and concern, the term ‘employability’ has varied meanings that vary around the world (Huang et al., 2014). Analysts defining employability are swift to emphasize that ‘employability’ cannot be decreased to employment, and instead include the growth of a “set of achievements” of knowledge, skills or a ‘combination’ of personal attributes and understanding; that collectively make a graduate more employable (Crosier et al., 2011; Williams & Cranmer, 2009).

This vast conception of employability instead of based upon intellectual rigor, engagement and values reproduce the word change from ‘employ’ to the broader issue of ‘ability’ (Tran, 2015). According to Mason (2009) who states that employability is conceptualized as ‘work readiness’, consequently employability skills is not only the possession of knowledge but a commercial understanding that facilitate graduates in making productive involvement to the workplace. Employability can be understood as an attribute facilitating success in employment and also more widely with life, therefore employability skills are being referred to as ‘skills for life’ (Cole & Tibby, 2013). Within this broader definition, employability has its societal contribution and a range of stakeholders beyond students has benefited such as economy, community and workforce (Yorke, 2006; Cole & Tibby, 2013). This idea of employability can be illustrated in theoretical framework in Figure 1.

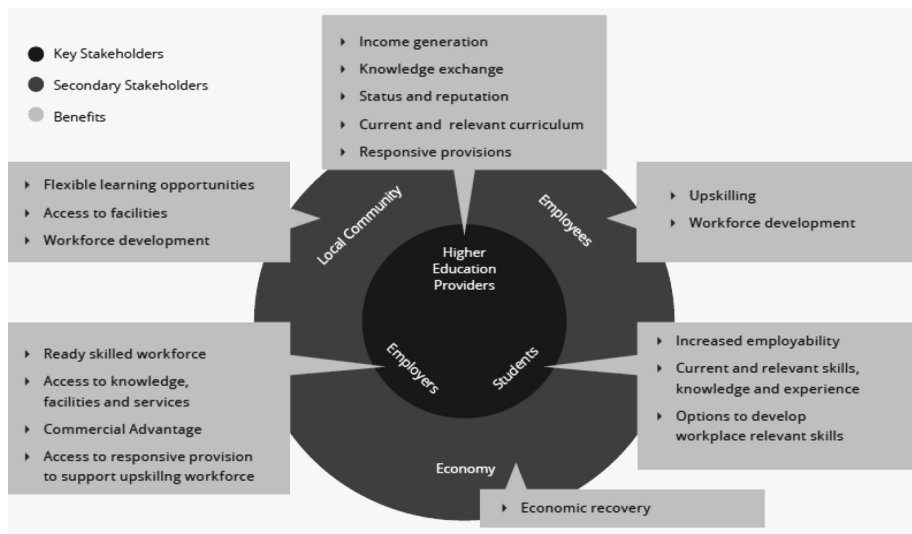


Figure 1. Stakeholders in employability (QAA, 2014)

While analysing the literature review it has been explored that there is a dearth of research,

on investigating employability in global context. After the analysis of internationally centered papers, a number of persistent factors that include recession, economic downturn and unemployment of graduates have been identified. This perspective has been accompanied paradoxically with 'skills shortage' (Mourshed, Farrell & Barton, 2012). According to Diamond et al. (2008) there is a continuous need for clear and open communication amid industry and the institution. Mourshed, Farrell and Barton (2012) proposed that the best approach to describe curriculum is significant in achieving educational outcomes and employer necessities is for provider and employer to work collectively to outline exactly what the curriculum should cover. In order to be successful there are two key success factors: firstly intensive collaboration and secondly to define the need of both the sides at a very nitty-gritty level.

Hogarth et al. (2007) emphasized that employers are concerned to employ the set of skills correlate with graduates and higher education processes are intended to produce skills in graduates that provide them for employment. He also asserted that "graduate skills cannot be disconnected from the personal attributes and qualities of graduates". Multitude results are produced when an individual has experience with many institutions. It has been acknowledged by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in their recent paper that "arrays of generic and basic skills are increasingly becoming valuable as a consequence of changes in the demand of the labor market and the associated uncertainty about the individual career trajectories (OECD, 2011). The OCED has representation of 34 countries, hence is a significant vigour in the valuation of employer demand. Consequently, it can be observed that soft or generic skills and an individuals' aptitude remains an important part of the employers' assessment of potential graduate employability.

According to the CBI (2012) report the acquisition of employability skills is an important factor than the degree subject. Conversely, degree subject is still considered important by the 70% of the employer. Employability skills are additionally seen as transmitting to global attributes and perspective. Educational institution should provide the right opportunities and environment for young individuals to enhance not only sound employability skills but also globally attuned mindset and global competencies (Diamond et al., 2008). Similarly, another researcher emphasized that across the globe "there is consistently increase in the nature of skills demand, with organizations and businesses looking for individuals with a core set of transferable qualities in different countries" (Playfoot & Hall, 2009).

According to the recent results of Erasmus Impact Study (European Union, 2014), it was well founded that many graduates benefited their career prospects as compared to those graduates who were not engaged in an international experience. Results from the survey supported the fact that 64% employers considered international experience as an important factor for recruitment. Erasmus students' demonstrated knowledge of the host country's culture and society, intercultural competencies ,learning and developing foreign skills like decision making, problem solving and analytical skills. As another researcher stated, that the benefits of international experience is far deeper for an individual enabling them to develop as "global citizen" and describes 'global citizenship' as an 'empowerment of individuals' by having a broader knowledge and perspective of the wider world. The wider world contributes to their critical thinking and problem solving, intellectual abilities and most important a strong wisdom of social responsibility from an unbiased global viewpoint (Ouyang

& McAlpine, 2013).

The era of globalization has brought a meaningful change in the skills desired and the ways to recruitment graduates. As Abbas et al. (2013) stated that, "those graduates will be in demand that are not only well qualified and highly skilled, but are flexible, adaptable in the transferring and application of their skills and knowledge in different contexts". In this network of global change and interaction, higher education needs to adapt to the rapid change of the environment and create the skills and technological innovations which are important for successful economic and social contribution in the global world (Abbas et al., 2013).

Based on the Literature survey, seventeen dimensions of basic employability skills are identified. It is of utmost importance to fully define what comprises basic employability skills. 1) Basic Skills can be defined as the ability to write, read, speak and perform basic math. Writing skill consist of the ability to communicate opinions in reports and letters. Reading skill consist of the ability to understand the written information and basic math includes the solving of practical problems through mathematical technique defined in the SCANS report (1991). 2) Thinking skills according to SCANS (1991) are defined as the ability to think, solve problems and make decisions. 3) Intercultural Skills are defined as the ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds, understanding different cultures and multicultural competence (Bird & Mendenhall, 2010). 4) Personal qualities are defined as the ability to take responsibility for actions, goal oriented, being friendly, open and honest. 5) Integrity is defined as the ability to be honest, having sound moral character and values (Steneck, 2006). 6) Resource management skills are defined according to Schermerhorn (2008) include designing activities of planning, organizing, influencing and controlling to achieve organizational objectives. 7) Interpersonal Skills has been defined as the ability to assist others to acquire, negotiate arrangements, resolve differences, work in multiethnic organization and provide customer service (SCANS, 1991). 8) Systems management skills has been defined as the ability to operate and understand organizational, technological and social systems. 9) Technology use skills is the ability to work with computers and other technology, choosing right tools, equipment, hardware, software for a job and application of knowledge of tasks (Sweeney, 2006). 10) Adaptability skill is defined as the ability to adapt to the changing work environment (Von Krogh, 2012). 11) Work Ethics has been defined as a set of attitudes and beliefs, reflecting the fundamental values (Meriac, Woehr & Banister, 2010). 12) Information Skills according to SCANS (1991) has been defined as the ability to evaluate and acquire data and to select procedures, tools and equipment. 13) Professionalism has been defined as being responsible, mature and self-confident (Elias & Purcell, 2004). 14) Team work has been defined as the capacity to work with diverse traits/personalities individuals and working with cross functional group (Andrew & Higson, 2008). 15) Leadership skills have been defined by Schermerhorn (2008) as the ability to achieve organizational goals through motivation. The characteristics of effective leaders are empathy, responsibility, honesty, integrity and self-esteem. 16) Research skills has been defined as the ability to analyze and synthesize the current market and business environment (Bailey et al., 1996). 17) Decision making skills are defined as the ability to take timely decisions and able to analyze problems (SCANS, 1991).

On the basis of above literature, the specific aims of this paper are: 1) to explore the skills that are valued by service sector HR managers (public listed). 2) to identify the top four needed skills

by service sector HR managers.

## Method

### *Sample*

The population for this research study was 149 public listed companies of service sector in Karachi. It is difficult to collect data from all the listed companies, therefore Graph Pad software, online random number generator was used to generate random numbers. Fifty companies were identified through Graph Pad. The total number of the sample is 126, which is the total population of all the HR managers of public limited manufacture 126, responded with a response rate of 95%. In terms of gender 74.6% were male and 25.4% were females; the age of the respondents ranged from 26 years to 40 yrs. and above. In terms of tenure 19% managers tenure was of 2 yrs, 33.4% managers' tenure was of 4 yrs. and 47.6% managers' tenure was more than 5 years. In terms of job position 72% were Assistant HR managers, 20% were HR managers and 34% were Senior/Head HR managers. In terms of education 92.9% managers had Master's Degree, 6.3% had MS/MPhil degree and 0.7% had PhD degree.

### *Measure*

Demographic Information Form includes information about qualification, age, gender, job position, and length of service.

Employability Scale. The tool used for this research study was adapted from a research study piloted by Jackson, (2013), to identify the employability skills required by the HR managers. The questionnaire was based on 17 skills. The skills were interpersonal skills, basic skills, thinking skills, intercultural skills, personal qualities, integrity, resource management, systems management, technology use skills, adaptability skill, work ethics, information skills, professionalism, team work, leadership, research skills and decision making skill. The responses were measured on 7 point Likert scale. The reliability of the tool was established by the earlier literature and the researchers but it was re-established in the light of the existing research and demographics which is 0.78%.

### *Procedure*

The questionnaire of the study was distributed individually to the respondents and was completed manually. An overview about the questionnaire was provided. The respondents were requested to fill the demographic form which consisted of age, gender, qualification, tenure and designation. Participation in the study was voluntary and the responses were anonymous. The purpose of the research was explained to the respondents. They were told that the privacy of the information will be maintained.

## Results

Table 1

### *Participant Demographics (N=126)*

Measure	<i>N</i>	%
<b>Education</b>		
MBA	117	92.9%
MS/MPhil	8	6.3%
<b>Age</b>		
26 to 30 years	52	41%
30 to 40 years	38	35%
40 years and above	20	15%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	32	25.4%
Male	94	74.6%
<b>Job Position</b>		
Assistant HR Mangers	33	57%
HR Mangers	41	16%
Senior /Head HR Managers	52	27%
<b>Length of Service</b>		
1 to 2 years	24	19%
3 to 4 years	42	33.4%
5 years and more	60	47.6%

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants. A majority of the participants were male (74.6%), between 26 and 30 years old (41%), had MBA degrees (92.9%), had five and more years of working experience (47.6%), and were HR Managers (57%).

Table 2

*Total Variance Explained*

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	7.864	46.256	46.256	7.864	46.256	46.256	3.496	20.564	20.564
2	1.620	9.530	55.786	1.620	9.530	55.786	3.107	18.274	38.838
3	1.252	7.366	63.151	1.252	7.366	63.151	2.812	16.541	55.379
4	1.133	6.664	69.816	1.133	6.664	69.816	2.454	14.437	69.816
5	.761	4.475	74.291						
6	.692	4.071	78.361						
7	.619	3.638	82.000						
8	.515	3.028	85.028						
9	.456	2.682	87.710						
10	.377	2.215	89.925						
11	.357	2.102	92.027						
12	.325	1.911	93.938						
13	.274	1.613	95.551						
14	.250	1.473	97.025						
15	.229	1.345	98.370						
16	.166	.979	99.348						
17	.111	.652	100.000						

Table 2 shows the total variance explained in seventeen stages. At the initial stage, it shows the factors and their associated eigenvalues, percentage of variance explained and the cumulative percentage. In reference to the eigenvalues, four factors were extracted because they had eigenvalues greater than 1 with 67.4% of the variance explained.

Table 3

*Rotated Component Matrix*

	1	2	3	4
1. Basic Skills	.650	-.422	-.275	.331
2. Thinking Skills	.706	-.154	-.359	.390
3. Intercultural Skills	.770	-.164	-.334	-.056
4. Personal Qualities	.699	-.442	.009	.021
5. Integrity	.524	-.303	.505	.189
6. Resource Management	.694	-.300	-.254	-.350
7. Interpersonal Skills	.661	-.267	.421	.196
8. Systems Management	.721	-.008	-.164	-.345
9. Technology Use	.729	-.036	.283	-.390
10. Adaptability	<b>.786</b>	-.034	.005	-.012
11. Work Ethics	.650	.205	.005	<b>.404</b>
12. Information Skills	.775	.086	.107	-.335
13. Professionalism	.595	.448	.030	.235
14. Team Work	.629	.239	<b>.515</b>	.080
15. Leadership	.521	<b>.559</b>	-.114	.075
16. Research Skills	.715	.240	-.013	-.235
17. Decision Making	.666	.512	-.203	.046

Table 3 shows that the Factor one appeared to measure adaptability skills, with a total variance explained of 46.25%. Factor two appeared to measure leadership, with a total variance explained of 9.53%. Factor three appeared to measure teamwork; with total variance explained were 7.36%. Factor four work ethics, appeared to have a total variance of 6.66%.

### Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the skills that are valued by service sector HR managers and to identify the top four needed skills by them. It is obvious that employability is an enormously vague and complex idea that is quite challenging to define and articulate. Conversely, by synthesizing the existing literature, it is likely to identify significant 'transferable' skills and competencies vital to graduate employability (Andrew & Higson, 2008). Exploiting and integrating the above skills and competencies of business graduates is considered to be paramount importance. HR professionals of service sector expect business graduates to obtain high levels of discipline explicit skills synthesizing with additional generic skills. They expect the business graduate who is about to commence employment should be prepared with the essential skills and competencies and be able to work with least supervision.

According to the findings of the study, adaptability skill appeared to be of utmost importance with a total variance of 46.25% which is also consistent with the results of other studies. Von Krogh (2012) stated that emerging social software technologies require graduates who possess adaptability or flexibility skills to interact with different work groups. In service sector, employees' interaction with the client is intense and requires adaptable skills that makes it easy to answers questions from



diversified perspective (Paroutis & Al Saleh, 2009). Adaptability can be defined as the adjustment of behavior according to the interpersonal demands of the service encounter. Many service sector companies have gone down due to their failure in service delivery to its client. Employees are the boundary spanners, which require flexibility. Recruiters should hire highly skilled workers who possess the talent and judgment essential to determine what is vital to meet customers' specific need and channel their behavior accordingly.

The second finding of the study reveals leadership skills to be the second important skill needed by HR professionals with a total variance of 9.53%. According to the findings of Robins (2015) employers need employees to possess non-technical skills in addition to technical skills that includes leadership skills, team skills etc. Leadership ability is an imperative basis for managing successful performance and an individual's employability in modern working life. Today's organizations highly value those individuals who instigate and take initiative rather than the ones who only complete their work (Nilsson, 2010). Leadership ability is also associated with an individual's position in hierarchical structure. The respondents emphasized on the significance of various soft employability skills over hard formal and technical skills. This is also consistent with earlier researches.

According to the third finding of the study, team work has been identified as the third important skill needed by HR professionals. Factor three appeared to measure team work with total variance explained were 7.36%. According to the study conducted by Andrew and Higson (2008) team working skills were identified as playing a vital role in the employability of the graduate. Employers need graduates who are able to work together with in a team. Several research studies have revealed that employers described interpersonal skills including the ability to work in teams, assist others to learn and capacity to work in multicultural organization being more imperative than academic skills (Bracey, 2007; Rosenbaum, 2002). Team skills generate trust which results in organizational synergy and better performance of an employee. In this era of increased competition employers require team skills for the best prediction of job performance.

The last finding of the study reveals work ethics to be the fourth required skill by the HR professionals. The total variance of work ethics appeared to be 6.66%. Employers view work ethics to be of importance for job performance. In the twenty-first-century workplace the essential competencies that employers and job seekers look for career navigation along with work ethics (Rojewski & Hill, 2016). The world has become a global village more rapidly; employers are finding those employees who can perform their jobs with positive work ethics in spite of their religion or ethnic backgrounds. Many enterprises from different countries team up with one another to produce services, goods. Work ethics feature as dependability and communication skills are vital in the globalized workplace where collaboration and cooperation are given emphasis on (Park & Hill, 2016). In the rapid evolving digital world of cut throat competition employers place a positive value on the work ethics of employees for sustainable performance of the organization. The current norm in the work place is a secular work ethic construct based on characteristics leading to success and economic development.

The limitation of the study was that sample consisted of public listed service sector HR professionals. Only quantitative method was used in the collection of data. This research was

conducted in Karachi only, the simplification of findings to other contexts and regions could be limited. Consequently, contextual as well as regional differences must be taken into account when employing the findings of this study. Furthermore, this study only ascertains employer preference of skills that lead to employability, additional exploration may be warranted to further support the conclusion of this work and hence, add to the current theory.

HR professionals perceived adaptability, leadership, team work and work ethics as highly desired skills to be crucial element in business success. The study extends the idea that collaboration between employers and educators was considered necessary in order to build curricula that enhance employability of business graduates. Academicians should develop programmes in which business graduates are enthusiastically fortified to acquire and hone soft skills. They have the accountability to build intellectual capital, which further develops management and business practices that helps in the enhancement of the economy

### **Conclusion**

The skills identified in this study are not distinctive, unrelated individual traits but represent a synergetic assemblage of what may be termed as 'ideal' competencies and generic skills required of graduates in the workplace. These findings are definitely positive for students, academicians as well as employers. This evidence might allow both academicians and employers to further process their focus on needed skills in order to strengthen employability. It is perceived that business universities do not understand the requirement of employers with the consequence that many business graduates do not possess adequately suitable skills required to perform the work. On the other hand employers struggle to recruit suitable qualified employees and retrain them while on the other side a large number of business graduates are unable to find a job. On the global scale the number of business graduates is increasing. Pakistani business schools have the responsibility to support employability, mobility and work readiness of their graduates. In doing this, they will yield highly flexible, employable and qualified individuals who are ready to meet the ever changing demand of this volatile business world.

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