

# ASSESSING EMPLOYABILITY OF MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

Recruiters find it quite challenging to find management students who fit the requirements of the job positions on offer. They are looking for the students with soft skills to complement their technical expertise. Once they are hired, they will be trained on the technical skills required for their roles however if they don't have the requisite soft skills it would be difficult for them to learn new skills and meet professional standards. During the campus placements, the soft skills of the students are assessed by means of group discussion. Many management students are not able to demonstrate the skills and attributes expected by recruiters and this reduces their chances of getting a campus placement. The study assessed the soft skills of the second year management students. The skills such as listening, personal presentation (being professionally dressed), building on ideas assessed were It found that the language proficiency, domain skills below the expected level. Students realized they had to improve their listening skills, allow others to speak, provide facts, figures and examples to substantiate their points and build on others' ideas to succeed in getting through the group discussion round.

***Keywords:*** *Employability, Management Students, Soft Skills, Group Discussion*

## **Introduction**

Employability is an important issue for management students. Recruiters have to select the right candidates to fit the role. Out of the tens of thousands of students who are about to graduate, recruiters have the arduous task of finding the right people for the job? Many students have secured high marks in their examinations and have good conceptual knowledge in their areas of specialization. Management students are enthusiastic about starting work, their new job position, work environment and the package they are going to receive etc. However, the initial enthusiasm wanes after they are faced with the workload. They struggle to complete work requirements and some of them leave for greener pastures. Many of the graduates change jobs within the first one or 2 years. Hence it is very important for recruiters to identify students who have the personality that fits the job, the ability to do what it takes to get the job done and also add value to the team and organization in order to succeed in the workplace. The soft skills gap is something that the industry and academia are trying hard to bridge. Soft skills help in the acquisition of technical skills. In order to acquire technical skills to a proficient level, students need to be able to learn, be patient to practice and be determined not to give up.

## **Communication and Collaboration**

Managers need to be able to communicate well. Their ability to communicate decides whether the candidate gets through the process or not. The tool recruiters use to evaluate the communication skills of the management graduates is the group discussion. This has proved to be a very effective means of screening applicants for various positions. If they are not able to communicate, then their other skills are not even evaluated.

Apart from communication, students are assessed on whether they are able to lead and play in a team. Management students (especially ones who don't have work experience) are usually recruited as management trainees. They are put into a team to work on a project. Even though a lot of their work is done individually, they have to collaborate with the team to produce results and deliver a product or service to the customer. If they are unable to do that, it will severely impact the team's and their own productivity irrespective of their technical expertise.

### **Group Discussion**

Communication and collaboration of the students can be easily observed in a group discussion. Presently, many recruiters (especially those who recruit on campus) shortlist students by conducting a group discussion. During a group discussion, candidates are given a topic and a few minutes to prepare. They are also given a time limit to discuss the topic. Topics based on current affairs, important issues in the country/around the world, general interest, etc. are given. Students who are going to enter the workplace need to be knowledgeable in these areas. Management students need to demonstrate their communication skills, people skills, analytical skills and problem solving skills during the group discussion. Students are evaluated on several factors such as conceptual clarity, their ability to interact with others, communicate ideas, be open to others' ideas, lead the discussion, move the discussion forward, express one's views clearly, substantiate them with relevant examples, summarize and conclude the discussion.

### **Need for the study**

Several national reports show that less than 25 per cent of management graduates are employable. Students pursue the management programme to improve their job prospects but at the end they are not satisfied with the job offers they get. Hence assessing their skills prior to the campus placements will enable to prepare themselves for the jobs they want. They would be aware of what recruiters expect and practice accordingly.

### **Objective**

To assess the employability skills of the management students at the end of the MBA programme.

### **Universe and Sample**

One institution approved by the AICTE and offering the full time management programme in Tiruchirappalli was taken for the study. There were 59 students in the second year of the course and all of them participated in the study.

### **Methods and Materials**

From literature, the skills and attributes preferred by recruiters were identified. The students were divided into 6 groups and there were 10 members in each group. Each

group was asked to pick a topic. The topic was read out and the students in the group were given 2 minutes to organize their thoughts and note down their points. They were given 15 minutes to discuss the topic. At the end of the discussion, they were given a questionnaire and asked to do a self assessment of their performance. The skills and attributes of an active participant in a group discussion were listed and students had to reflect on their performance and rate themselves on a scale of 1 – 5 (where 1 – Very Poor, 2 – Poor, 3 – Average, 4 – Good, 5 – Very Good). They were asked to do the assessment after participating in the discussion so that they would be objective in the assessment.

**Data analysis and interpretation**

**Table 1: Soft Skills of the students**

S.No.	Criteria	Level				
		V Poor	Poor	Average	Good	V Good
1.	Dressed professionally	0	0	0	30 45%	29 55%
2.	Body Language	0	0	21 36%	27 46%	11 19%
3.	Listening	0	0	25 42%	26 44%	8 14%
4.	Ideas	0	6 10%	12 20%	26 44%	15 25%
5.	Speaking loud and clear	0	0	14 24%	30 51%	15 25%
6.	Allowing others to speak	0	8 14%	26 44%	18 31%	7 12%
7.	Building on ideas	0	0	17 29%	29 49%	13 22%
8.	Providing facts and figures, examples	0	18 31%	26 44%	7 12%	8 14%
9.	Making my point	2 3%	6 10%	24 41%	21 36%	6 10%
10.	English language skills	0	6 10%	22 37%	23 39%	8 14%

From the table, it can be inferred that the all the students are confident of doing well in the group discussion. None of them have rated themselves poorly on any of the criteria except making their point in the discussion. Students are very confident that they are

dressed professionally and make a good impression with their way they present themselves. On third of the respondents rated they average at demonstrating the positive and confident behaviours such as maintaining eye contact with everyone, maintaining a proper posture and using gestures to complement the ideas they are expressing. Equal number of the students expressed that their listening skills were either average or good. This may be due to the fact that the students were worried on making their points within the allotted time rather than listening to the ideas the others were expressing. Only 25% rated very happy that they had relevant ideas to the topic discussed while 10% couldn't get relevant points. Half of the students were able to speak loud and clear and 25% rated themselves very good on this factor. Allowing others to speak were most of the students rated themselves average because they were conscious of the time and wanted to speak more instead of listening to the points others were making. 22% of the respondents were effectively build on the ideas of others and contribute to the discussion going smoothly. 31% found it difficult to provide fact, figures to substantiate their points. However students found it easy to give examples. Only 10% of the students were able to convincingly make their point in the discussion. Some students could not express all the points they had written because everyone was trying to speak as much as possible. 39% of the students felt that their English language skills were good and enabled them to communicate their ideas well.

### **Findings and Discussion**

English is the language of communication in most of the top organizations in the country. Most of the business communication is done in English so job seekers who aspire to work in the various positions in these organizations need to have a good proficiency in the language to be able to communicate with their peers, and others above and below them in the organizational hierarchy. It was found that many students lack confidence in speaking in the group discussion firstly because they are not fluent in English. Their limited vocabulary makes them conscious when sharing their ideas and they tend to focus on avoiding grammatical mistakes instead of communicating their ideas and putting them across in a confident manner. But fluency alone is not enough, furthermore, students need to communicate their ideas compellingly and be willingly to listen and build on others' ideas in order to be selected.

Secondly, many students are knowledgeable in some areas and found it hard to discuss a topic they did not know much about. Students usually prepare and practice on frequently discussed topics and avoid ones that are too technical. Without knowing about the topic and related issues, they were not be able to take a stand and express their views. This may be due to the lack of the reading habit among young people. Students read to prepare for assignments, exams, seminars but they don't read for pleasure or to develop expertise in a particular field. Reading regularly and widely enables individuals to develop an opinion. They can then use the information they have come across to support their argument. During the discussion, students can listen to what the other participants have said, think about it and then give their points.

Thirdly, communicating effectively is skill that comes with practice. Though knowledge and language skills greatly help one to speak in the group discussion, sharing one's ideas, making a point, being assertive instead of aggressive, being heard, getting along with the others and demonstrating qualities such as leadership, patience etc. comes by engaging in discussion several times, building a rapport with people and building trust. Throughout the management programme, group discussions are conducted in classroom sessions as part of the curriculum. In general most of the students said that they had not prepared for these discussions and they just participated and did their best. As a result, they have missed the opportunities to hone this skill. By regular preparation and practice students can cover many topics and be ready to perform in the group discussions conducted in the campus placements.

### **Preparing for Group Discussion**

It is recommended that students should be prepared to speak on a variety of topics. Students can collect common topics, organize them into themes, collect points on each one by reading websites online, newspapers, etc. They can read about advantages, disadvantages, past, present happenings and future projections.

Students should have good domain skills, be able to share information relevant to the topic, apply domain knowledge to provide possible solutions to issues discussed. Reading newspapers such as Business line or Economic Times would enable management students to enrich and update their domain knowledge, come up with examples, facts, and statistics learn from the best practices in the industry.

Students can organize themselves into groups and discuss as many topics as possible every week. They can also make use of the clubs in their department/college for practice. In this manner, students can be prepared to ace the group discussion and get through this round of selection.

### **New assessments of Soft Skills**

In the near future, students will have to be prepared to face the new soft skill assessments because they need to demonstrate the soft skills required by the organizations. Recruiters are trying to find ways to ensure that new recruits have the soft skills and are trying different ways of determining whether they have them or not. After the group discussion, shortlisted candidates attend a personal interview. This is used to assess whether they are suitable for the job. Some industry experts say that resumes may become obsolete with the multitude of assessment options offered by hiring and assessment companies who promise to find the most suitable candidates in an easier and quicker way. Retention rates and job performance have improved. It has the added benefit of increasing diversity and is able to tap a wider pool of candidates to select from. Employers have a lot to benefit from using assessments like these especially in the age of Automation, Artificial Intelligence and the Internet of Things. It is also becoming increasingly important for job seekers do get comfortable with these assessment tools by periodically doing a self-assessment as they tend to change jobs, and industries more than once during their careers.

It is likely that Artificial Intelligence driven assessments would be used to assess soft skills by observing body language – facial expressions, posture, gestures; tone of voice, inflection, choice of words etc. These would be analyzed and compared with ideal profile of top achievers in order to predict whether the prospective employee would be a success on the job. At present these are assessed by recruiters manually. But artificial intelligence might help to reduce the observational bias.

Some organizations use interactive games which are based on neuro science. These games usually take 30 minutes or less and gives the candidate a series of tasks to complete. Through this it assesses personal attributes of prospective employees such as attitude, flexibility, adaptability, presence of mind, creativity, resilience, resourcefulness

etc. These game based assessments are found to be reliable and can predict soft skills especially when important roles need to be filled.

Having some idea of the organizational culture, people, policies etc. will enable a candidate to understand and determine whether he will fit in the environment. This also helps to position himself/herself and creatively utilize one's potential. While facing interviews, students should be well prepared in this respect, to answer frequently asked questions, give examples of when they have used the soft skills mentioned in the job description. In addition, they have to practice delivering their answers confidently and so that they make a positive impact.

While the an understanding of the above factors will help students do well and clear the selection process, it is not advisable to try to tweak the test results or portray a false image because it in the long run it creates unnecessary stressful situations for the employee and the management. Everyone has their own strength so it is best to be authentic and focus on using one's strengths and unique talent to make a positive contribution. It is in finding the best fit that employees can thrive and thus organizations can flourish.

### **Conclusion**

The study identifies the skills and attributes assessed in the group discussion and recommends that students develop their domain skills, interpersonal skills and practice discussing formally and informally to improve their confidence to face the group discussion and showcase their skills of communication and collaboration. It also suggests new assessment tools students can familiarize themselves which might be useful if and when they switch jobs.

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