

Soft skills in college for success in career



need of the hour

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As Tara Kennedy, director, Research Base, pointed out in her column on September 19, a survey by NASSCOM shows that of the general pool of graduates only 25% have employability skills. For technology graduates, this number is approximately 35% to 40%. Out of more than five lakh students pursuing an MBA in India, only one fifth are considered employable. Just what are these mythical employability skills? Can anything be done about these seemingly alarming stats?

PROBLEMS: When a student moves from the protected college environment to industry, there are some dramatic changes that he or she has to adapt to, which need skills that are not given importance in an academic set-up.

1. Individual vs team:

Most of the appraisals conducted in colleges focus on individual brilliance. While this is essential, it sometimes develops a win-lose mindset, where winning becomes a zero sum game. But, in a job, nothing gets done in one-man armies. The success of an endeavour is the sum total of the contributions from all team members and the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. Team chemistry and leveraging from each other's strengths is

essential. The individual's fortunes are inherently tied to the team's fortunes.

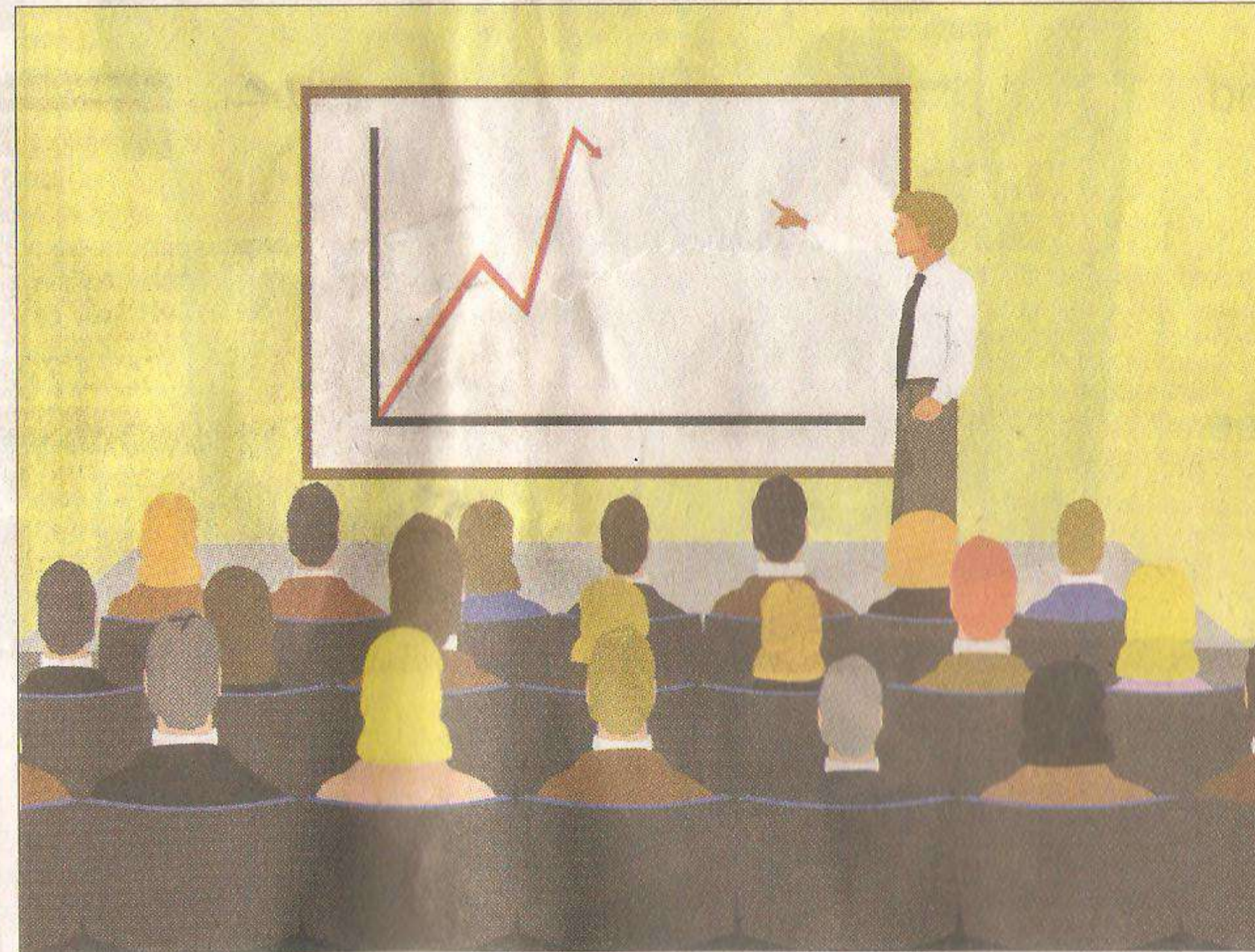
2. Communication conundrum: A corollary to teamwork is the need for good communication skills. As a professional, one is expected to communicate with peers, managers, customers and suppliers. Written communication in the form of reports, proposals, etc, as well as spoken communication in the form of

meeting etiquette, presentations, etc, assumes critical importance. With the proliferation of communication vehicles, ability to harness technology like text messaging, video conferencing, tweeting, blogging, and so on become critical success factors.

3. Missing professionalism: With the emphasis on marks and grades, students don't see the importance of certain aspects of profession-

alism like time management, goal setting, following a process, etc. But, in a job, they are expected to follow organisational processes and adhere to timelines (including age-old values like punctuality). These require an urgent change in approach.

4. Moving away from cookie-cutter solutions: Most students are very good at providing solutions to problems that are reasonably well defined and fall under



THINKSTOCK

Students need to be taught effective written communication, for reports, proposals and presentations.

In this column, we invite experts to describe what they think is the most pressing issue in higher education in India

definite patterns. Unfortunately, real world problems are often ill defined and do not fit into any standard moulds. Consequently, a real challenge faced by students is problem definition rather than solution identification. They need exposure to real world projects to get this skill.

SOLUTIONS:

1. Team-based evaluations:

At least a part of the evaluations for most courses, especially in the engineering and management streams, should shift to team-based work. Projects that synergise the concepts learnt in a course and across courses can help consolidate learning. They will also help in bringing up the levels of all the team members and thus increase the overall quality of students

2. Opportunities for developing soft skills:

This is, by far, one of the most pressing needs of the hour in grooming students to be industry ready. Soft skills sometimes are narrowly defined as 'speaking and writing good English'. In reality, soft skills encompass everything from a good attitude, covering aspects like pride in work and resilience, to good communication skills harnessing body language and voice modulation and from getting one's point across unequivocally to etiquette that is appropriate to the work environment like email etiquette, phone etiquette, etc.

MEET THE EXPERT

Professor Gopalaswamy Ramesh is a member of the Academic Advisory Group of Project Management Institute, India. He is also an independent consultant and author of five books on project management, software testing and maintenance and soft skills, including the national award winning book, *Managing Global Software Projects*, which also got translated in Mandarin. He is a guest/adjunct faculty in several leading institutions in India including IIT-Bangalore, IIT-Madras and Amrita School of Business, Coimbatore.

3. Exposure to disciplined project management practices:

Every professional has to do some form of project management. The need for effective project management has been amply borne out by a very appropriate quote by the quality guru, Edward Deming: "Imagine the chaos that would exist if everyone did their best—not knowing what to do!" Project management provides the essential glue to holding technical competence and soft skills together and transforming students with raw talent to effective and successful professionals. A well-rounded project management training could inculcate a great deal of discipline and go a long way in making students competitive in today's globalised business environment.