

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Employability Skills in IT Sector: What Matters Most for Graduate Success?

Ashish Kumar Awadhiya^{1,*}

¹Centre for Online Education, Indira Gandhi National Open University, India

Abstract: Graduate employability skills are very important for getting entry-level jobs and succeeding in the career. Employers need employees to possess 21st-century skills and personal traits that are transferrable and required in all job profiles. The IT sector of India is expanding exponentially and requires a high number of job-ready graduates. However, literature indicates a lack of awareness among graduates on importance of employability skills. Students are searching for the job with a different mindset from what employers are expecting. This descriptive research studied the perceptions of IT graduates on the importance of employability skills to get entry-level jobs using the online survey method. The research reveals that with an average mean value of 4.6, learners were aware of the importance of employability skills for attaining entry-level jobs. However, the learners were unclear about the terminologies used for employability skills. The results confirm the latest trends in employability skills among Indian graduates. The study suggests that there is a need to revisit these skills at regular intervals in consultation with the industry to get the contemporary trends. Industry, academia, and policymakers should work collaboratively towards creating a clear picture of relevant employability skills among the learners to bring the learners at par with the industry requirements.

Keywords: employability skills, IT graduate, 21st-century skills, employers, IT jobs

1. Introduction

Employability is a commonly and critically used term in the field of higher education and in the industry. Graduate employability is a key parameter for the credibility and ranking of any higher education institute including distance education institutes.

Employability skills have been defined as set of personal attributes that are required for the fresh graduates to get employed and sustain the job. These skills are required across the sector and industry [1]. These skills are also termed as soft skills, transferable skills, generic skills, essential skills, employability skills, and they include set of skills such as communication skills, problem-solving skills, time management, teamwork, work planning and prioritization, leadership skills, etc. Various studies [2, 3] have studied employability skills and have explained employability term as essential and transferable core proficiencies needed by the applicant to enter into the job and successfully sustain in an organization. Employability skills include personal proficiencies, transferable basic skills, technical knowledge, and formal educational credentials.

However, not all these skills are required for all the disciplines and all the industry sectors. There is very much probability that the type of skills and their level of importance may vary for different disciplines, country, locality, nature of job positions with the employers, and type of employer. For example, communication skills and teamwork may be highly required for graduates being hired for marketing jobs and customer service professionals;

however, the same may not be required for the graduates being hired for graduates being recruited for accounting. Similarly, decision-making skills, creative thinking, and team skills may not be very much relevant for the sale-related profile; however, the same skills may be more prevalent for database administrator and IT security. Therefore, it is important that program-specific employability skills need to be identified [4].

Many employers and industry are of view that basic employability skills are more important for them since they have their own mechanisms to train their recruits in the technical skills. Employers are demanding that their employees to have 21st-century skills and personal traits which are transferrable and needed in all kind of job profiles. Interestingly, the millennials have also acknowledged this requirement of the recruiters and planning their CV accordingly [5].

With reference to industrial growth, most of the countries in the world have gone through an evolution phase starting from agricultural economy followed by industrial economy and then landing towards service-based economy. However, India has somewhat different story and it has somewhat bypassed the industrial economy, and it has directly moved from agricultural economy to service economy. The major contributor to this shift is the IT industry. IT industry has grown in the country since 80s, and IT professionals in India were in high demand across the industrial countries. Many Indian small start-up companies in the early phase IT industry have grown into very big organizations with global presence.

Information Technology (IT) industry in India has been performing tremendously with around 7.7 percent contribution to its GDP during the financial year 2019 (expected to increase up to

*Corresponding author: Ashish Kumar Awadhiya, Centre for Online Education, Indira Gandhi National Open University, India. Email: akawadhiya@ignou.ac.in

10% by 2025) while providing employment to 4.1 million youth. IT industry has shown steady progress in India with around 191 billion US dollar during the financial year 2020, and it is estimated to grow at the rate of 7.7 percent thereby increasing the industry value to US\$ 350 billion by 2025. India is aiming to become the global manufacturing hub and largest supplier of the skilled manpower. India has also established remarkable global image in the field of service industry, Business Process Outsourcing, Business Process Management, and Knowledge Process Outsourcing. Specifically, IT industry in India has been performing tremendously with around 7.7 percent contribution to its GDP during financial year 2019 (expected to increase up to 10% by 2025) while providing employment to 4.1 million youth [6–8].

Considering the expected growth of IT industry in India, there will be huge demand for IT professionals in India starting from fresh IT graduates to experienced ones. COVID-19 scenario has also emerged as a game changer in IT industry because every business and every aspect of life is now compelled to integrate IT services into their business processes. Remote working, shift working, cloud computing, out-sourcing, online meetings, online trainings, e-commerce, etc., have become new norms in the today's world. All these new digital interventions are going to transform the Indian socio-economic scenario and significantly increase employment opportunities for IT graduates and the trend to be continued in future. Although the number of jobs is going to be higher, getting these jobs is going to be very tough because these jobs would require a higher level of skills and competencies. Employers prefer to hire the graduates, who are interested, passionate, and have a clear sense of purpose, according to recent trends. As a result, it is critical for applicants to stand out from the throng by incorporating distinctive skill sets into their resumes. Learners need to be more mindful towards their skills to gain the employment and sustain in their jobs. Companies are going to recruit and retain graduates with a diverse set of abilities in today's ever-changing business climate. While specialization in specific domains is going to be an added advantage, graduates seeking employment will need to enhance their soft skills, such as analytical skills, creativity, persuasion, and emotional intelligence, in order to remain relevant in job. Therefore, employability skills are much needed in IT industry [9, 10].

Around half of the Indian workforce is constituted by millennials (youth between 18 and 35 years). This millennial regiment has immense potential to lead the Indian economy to its full potential. With 600 million youth under 25 years of age, this millennial cohort is projected to be part of India's workforce until the next decade, and they need to be trained adequately to explore their full potential. This rethinking on skilling, reskilling, and upskilling becomes more pertinent when India is envisaging to become 5 trillion economy by 2025. A major part of these millennials is going to contribute towards IT-related jobs since almost all the industry sectors and organizations are adopting IT in various domains. Empowering IT graduates with relevant employability skills will directly boost the productivity of the IT sector which will result in the growth of the Indian economy.

Various research are available which have investigated the employability skills of the newly graduates from employers mostly using surveys. These studies have sought information from employers for specific skill sets required while hiring for

entry-level positions. Most of these studies concluded that employers are not satisfied with the skills of learners coming out from Higher Education Institutions, and they face difficulties in finding graduates with employability skills [3, 11, 12]. This trend is global and has been observed across all the sectors including IT sector in India [13–15]. It is pertinent to mention that the problems of graduate employability skill mismatch are similar in other parts of the world [16, 17] including developed countries from Europe, Australia [18] and developing countries like India [1] and Bangladesh [19]. The employability gap, in Indian context, is a major challenge for almost all the sectors and is more pronounced in the fast-paced IT sector, despite its impressive growth [20].

Various research studies are available which have studied the employability skills of learners and concluded that there is a mismatch in the employability skills among the learners and industry requirements. Learners have demonstrated difference of opinion with reference to importance of employability skills from that of employers. There is a significant difference among the opinion of employer and learner regarding the importance of employability skills [7, 21–23]. Educational institutions are now actively incorporating the component of employability skills in their curriculum and program delivery methods in direct and indirect forms. Education institutions are also inculcating the awareness of importance of employability skills among their students.

The professional career of any graduate will benefit from undertesting, developing, practicing, and implementing soft skills in their personal and professional endeavors. Most of the studies indicate that learners, especially the new learners (millennials), are aware of the importance of employability skills in their career besides core domain knowledge, and this awareness is most among during the final year of graduation. Learners are proactively practicing to develop and foster employability among themselves through various methods. However, learners should be informed about which skills have to be developed and up to what extent, so as to attain the entry-level jobs in their chosen career. The information about right skills to be developed will help the learners to be career-ready and will help them to meet employers' expectations pertaining to employability skills [19, 24–26].

The major confusion in job search is that the students are searching for the job in different mindset from what the employers are expecting [27]. There is a difference of opinion between employers and the learners in terms of importance of the employability skills.

Facts like the high demand for IT graduates in India and the importance of employability skills among these graduates instigate exploring the level of awareness among these graduates. Global literature suggesting the existence of employability mismatch [1, 12, 17] also necessitates understanding this trend in Indian context in general and among IT graduates in particular [13].

Generic/ transferable employability skills such as communication skills, teamwork, planning and managing skills, and problem-solving skills are very much required across all industries. However, the IT sector also demands specific technical competencies, such as coding proficiency, knowledge of software development tools, IT security, and project management, and these transferable skills add value to perform these technical skills more efficiently. There is a need to identify the importance of

these key employability skills tailored specifically to the needs of the IT industry among IT graduates.

Considering this the research was conducted to study the perceptions of the IT graduates on the importance of various employability skills to get entry-level jobs.

2. Research Methodology

This article is an extract of an exploratory research study which was conducted in two phases. This descriptive research adopted a mixed-method approach. The phase one adopted qualitative approach and identified the prevalent job profiles, IT-specific indicators for employability skills, and desired skills for fresh IT graduates. This was done through document analysis and job site analysis. During phase one, eight key employability skills (Communication Skills, Problem-Solving Skills, Decision-Making Skills, Critical Thinking and Innovative Skills, Teamwork, Professionalism and Ethical Behavior, Self-Management, and Planning and Managing Skills) and the relevant constructs to demonstrate these skills for Indian IT graduates were identified [4].

This article pertains to Phase II where these eight employability skills were then presented to the IT graduates for providing their perceived level of importance. This phase included collection of the data from the learners using an online survey instrument. The survey instrument has undergone content validity (through expert review), item analysis (using pilot testing), and reliability testing (through Cronbach’s Alpha).

The mismatch of skills between industry and learners is deeper in the IT sector [1, 16, 28]. The Bachelor of Computer Application (BCA) of IGNOU is an employment and skill-oriented program, and such kinds of programs are more popular in metro cities like Delhi-NCR.

Accordingly, BCA students of IGNOU, enrolled in the final year (total 1811 students), were considered constituted as the population of this study. The survey instrument was sent to all the 1811 learners using census sampling. Sending the questionnaire to all the learners provides equal opportunity to every individual to participate in the survey. The questionnaire was sent via email using Google Forms. A total of 398 learners responded to the online survey. The questionnaire aimed to collect the learners’ perception (on a five-point scale) related to the level of importance of listed eight employability skills (Communication Skills, Problem-Solving Skills, Decision-Making Skills, Critical Thinking and Innovative Skills, Teamwork, Professionalism and Ethical Behavior, Self-Management, Planning and Managing Skills) in the job market for attaining the entry-level employment. The questionnaire also contained an open-ended question to provide any other skill deemed necessary to get a job in the IT sector. Accordingly, the questionnaire consisted of total 46 items for the respondents. Quantitative data received were analyzed through descriptive statistics, and qualitative data were analyzed through qualitative tabulation and word cloud.

3. Results and Discussion

In this questionnaire, the learners were asked to provide their perception of “Importance Level” of the eight employability skills for getting entry-level jobs in IT field using Likert scale. The Likert scale criterion was under five categories: 1 = “Not at All Important”, 2 = “Less Important”, 3 = “Not Sure”, 4 = “Important”, and 5 = “Very Important”.

The following table (Table 1) provides perceived level of importance of each employability skill by the respondents in terms of mean value (M).

Table 1
Importance level of employability skills for getting entry-level jobs in IT field

Sr. No.	Employability skills		Very IMP	IMP	Not sure	Less IMP	Not at all IMP	Total	Mean	SD
1.	Communication Skills	N	258	131	3	6	0	398	4.6	0.6
		%	64.8	32.9	0.8	1.5	0	100		
2.	Problem-solving Skills	N	293	102	2	1	0	293	4.7	0.5
		%	73.6	25.6	0.5	0.3	0	100		
3.	Decision-making Skills	N	241	147	7	3	0	241	4.6	0.6
		%	60.6	36.9	1.8	0.8	0	100		
4.	Critical Thinking and Innovative Skills	N	234	145	15	4	0	398	4.5	0.6
		%	58.8	36.4	3.8	1.0	0	100		
5.	Teamwork	N	246	137	12	3	0	398	4.6	0.6
		%	61.8	34.4	3.0	0.8	0	100		
6.	Professionalism and Ethical Behavior	N	202	172	17	7	0	398	4.4	0.7
		%	50.8	43.2	4.3	1.8	0	100		
7.	Self-Management	N	197	180	14	7	0	398	4.4	0.6
		%	49.5	45.2	3.5	1.8	0	100		
8.	Planning and Managing Skills	N	251	138	5	4	0	398	4.6	0.6
		%	63.1	34.7	1.3	1.0	0	100		
9.	Overall Importance	N	240.3	144.0	9.4	4.4	0	398	4.6	0.6
		%	60.4	36.2	2.4	1.1	0	100		

Data from the above table (Table 1) are described below:

3.1. Communication skills

A total of 64.8% of respondents have rated the importance level of the communication skills as “Very Important”. A total of 32.9% of respondents have indicated communication skills as “Important”. However, a total of 1.5% of respondents rated it as “Less Important” and 0.8% of respondents have selected the category “Not Sure”. No respondent has selected the category “Not at All Important” for communication skills.

Accordingly, it is observed that a total of 97.7% of learners have considered the communication skills as very important or important thereby generating the M as 4.6.

3.2. Problem-solving skills

The importance level of the problem-solving skills has been rated “Very Important” by 73.6% of respondents. A total of 25.6% of respondents have indicated problem-solving skills as “Important”. However, a total of 0.5% of respondents are “Not Sure” about the importance level of problem-solving skills followed by 03% of respondents for whom this skill is “Less Important”. No respondent has rated this skill as “Not at All Important”.

Accordingly, it is observed that a total of 99.2% of learners have considered the problem-solving skills as very important or important thereby generating the M as 4.7.

3.3. Decision-making skills

The importance level of the decision-making skills has been rated as “Very Important” by maximum of 60.6% of respondents. A total of 36.9% of respondents have indicated this skill as “Important”. A total of 1.8% of respondents are “Not Sure” about the importance level of decision-making skills. However, 0.8% of respondents rated it as “Less Important”. No respondent has selected the category “Not at All Important”.

Accordingly, it is observed that a total of 97.7% of learners have considered the decision-making skills as very important or important thereby generating the M as 4.6.

3.4. Critical thinking and innovative skills

The importance level of the critical thinking and innovative skills have been rated as “Very Important” by maximum of 58.8% of respondents. A total of 36.4% of respondents have indicated this skill as “Important”. A total of 3.8% of respondents are “Not Sure” about the importance level of critical thinking and innovative skills. However, 1% of respondents rated it as “Less Important”. No respondent has selected the category “Not at All Important” for this skill.

Accordingly, it is observed that a total of 95.2% of learners have considered the critical thinking and innovative skills as very important or important thereby generating the M as 4.4.

3.5. Teamwork

The importance level of the teamwork skill has been rated “Very Important” by 61.8% of respondents. A total of 34.4% of respondents have indicated teamwork skills as “Important”. A total of 3% of respondents are “Not Sure” about the importance level of teamwork skill. However, 0.8% of respondents rated it as “Less Important”. No respondent has selected the category “Not at All Important” for this skill.

Accordingly, it is observed that a total of 96.2% of learners have considered the teamwork skills as very important or important thereby generating the M as 4.6.

3.6. Professionalism and ethical behavior

The importance level of professionalism and ethical behavior skill has been rated “Very Important” by 50.8% of respondents. A total of 43.2% of respondents have indicated this skill as “Important”. A total of 4.3% of respondents have selected the importance level of this skill as “Not Sure” followed by 1.8% of respondents, who mentioned this skill as “Less Important”. No respondent has selected the category “Not at All Important” for this skill.

Accordingly, it is observed that a total of 84% of learners have considered the professionalism and ethical behavior skills as very important or important thereby generating the M as 4.4.

3.7. Self-management

The importance level of the self-management skills has been rated as “Very Important” by maximum of 49.5% of respondents. A total of 45.2% of respondents have indicated this skill as “Important”. A total of 3.5% of respondents are “Not Sure” about the importance level of self-management skills. However, 1.8% of respondents rated it as “Less Important”. No respondent has selected the category “Not at All Important”.

Accordingly, it is observed that a total of 94.7% of learners have considered the self-management skills as very important or important thereby generating the M as 4.4.

3.8. Planning and managing skills

The importance level of the planning and managing skills has been rated as “Very Important” by maximum of 63.1% of respondents. A total of 34.7% of respondents have indicated this skill as “Important”. A total of 1.3% of respondents are “Not Sure” about the importance level of planning and managing skills. However, 1% of respondents rated it as “Less Important”. No respondent has selected the category “Not at All Important”.

Accordingly, it is observed that a total of 97.8% of learners have considered the planning and managing skills as very important or important thereby generating the M as 4.6.

The overall importance level for all the skills has been calculated by averaging the values of each skill. Accordingly, the table describes that an average of 60.4% of respondents have rated all eight skills as “Very Important”. Average 36.2% of respondents have rated all eight skills as “Important”. An average of 2.4% of respondents are “Not Sure” about the importance level for all eight skills. However, 1.1% of respondents rated all eight skills as “Less Important”. No respondent has selected the category “Not at All Important”.

Accordingly, it is observed that average of 96.6% of learners have considered these eight skills as very important or important thereby generating the average M as 4.6. Accordingly, it is evident from this discussion that learners have given considerable importance to all the employability skills presented to them.

The reason behind this increased awareness may be due to various sensitization program conducted by academia and policymakers. The government of India has come up with various policies and guidelines related to skill development, and these results indicate the outcome of such activities. The National Education Policy 2020 elaborated on disseminating the basic

employability skills to learners for their overall development and career growth. Based on this University, Grant Commission [29] of India has also introduced a document titled as “Curriculum and Guidelines for Life Skills (Jeevan Kaushal) 2.0” which aims to sensitize the learners about importance of employability skills which have been studied in this research. Apart from this, the documents also narrate about Universal Human Values like Love and Compassion (Prem and Karuna), Truth (Satya), Non-Violence (Ahimsa), Righteousness (Dharma), Peace (Shanti), Service (Seva), Renunciation (Sacrifice) Tyaga and Constitutional Values, Justice, and Human Rights originating from Indian Value System.

3.9. Ranking of employability skills by learners

Based on the M of the importance level of employability skills perceived by the learners, the ranking of employability skills has been generated. The following table (Table 2) depicts the ranking of the employability by learners as per their Mean Score (M).

Table 2
Ranking of employability skills by learners as per the mean value

Ranking	Employability skills	Mean	SD
1.	Problem-solving Skills	4.7	0.5
2.	Communication Skills	4.6	0.6
3.	Planning and Managing Skills	4.6	0.6
4.	Decision-Making Skills	4.6	0.6
5.	Teamwork	4.6	0.6
6.	Critical Thinking and Innovative Skills	4.5	0.6
7.	Professionalism and Ethical Behavior	4.4	0.7
8.	Self-Management	4.4	0.6

As per the table (Table 2) above, the Mean values of all the employability skills range from a minimum 4.4 to a maximum 4.7 as perceived by the learners. This indicates that learners consider these skills very important for them to get entry-level jobs in IT field.

The table denotes that the learners have rated problem-solving skills as most important skill (M = 4.7) for them to have to attain entry-level jobs in IT field. Learners have given equal importance to Communication Skills, Planning and Managing Skills, Decision-Making Skills, and Teamwork skills with equal M (M = 4.6) to get entry-level jobs in the IT field. However, learners have given comparatively less importance to Critical Thinking and Innovative Skills (M = 4.5), Professionalism and Ethical Behavior (M = 4.4), and Self-Management skills (M = 4.4) to get entry-level jobs in IT field.

The results on the importance level of various employability skills from the BCA learners of IGNOU indicate that learners are aware of the importance of these employability skills to attain entry-level jobs.

3.10. Other skills suggested by learners

Learners were provided additional space to provide their feedback on importance of employability skills as well as any other important employability they feel deemed necessary.

Accordingly, learners have suggested the many employability skills and personality traits, which they feel are important to attain entry-level jobs for IT professionals. Based on the analysis of the employability skills and personality traits mentioned by the respondents, it was found that most of these traits fall under the eight skills identified in this research.

The categorization of the employability skills and personality traits mentioned by the respondents is demonstrated in the table (Table 3) below:

Table 3
Categorization of employability skills and personality traits mentioned by the respondents

Sr. No.	Employability skills	Important employability skills and personality traits mentioned by the learners
1.	Communication Skills	Presentation skill, convincing skill, the way to talk, human behavior, pleasant behavior, listening skills, quick response, public speaking, expressing his views, communicating on social media, awareness of your facial expressions and body language
2.	Problem-solving Skills	Confidence, ability to work under pressure, optimistic, proactive skill,
3.	Decision-making Skills	Accountability, analytical thinking, logical,
4.	Critical Thinking and Innovative Skills	Creative thinker, creativity, innovated by mind, patience, out-of-the box thinking, recognize adversity and turn it into opportunity, open mind, and a willingness to embrace new ideas, open mindset, open to new ideas and experiences
5.	Teamwork	Teamwork, cooperate with your team members, always cheer up the team, volunteering to help coworkers, sharing and caring, working well with other people, reliable, keep my colleague motivated, friendly and loyal, key player of the team
6.	Professionalism and Ethical Behavior	Giving your best to the company, hard work, honesty, business engagement skills, give our best, dedication toward work, committed towards his company, pleasing the boss, loyal
7.	Self-Management	Quick learner, good learner, attitude building, learn quickly, determination to learn, passion, self-improvement, mindset to always learn and grow with every step, positive behavior, mental and physical health, adaptability, motivation, consistency, self-confidence, willpower, always looking to improve my skills and knowledge
8.	Planning and Managing Skills	Time management, complete work before deadline, strictly follow your commitments, multi-tasking if required, finding shortcuts for time-saving job, working speed, smart working, punctuality, routine management skills, punctual, being practical, leadership skills, meeting or exceeding your expected levels of work performance, creating schedules for your daily tasks, timesaver

employability skills among the learners to bring the learners at par with the industry requirements.

5. Scope and Limitations of the Study

Employability is a complex issue and is very closely associated with higher education. It should be studied in a localized and specialized context. Accordingly, this study was limited to final-year BCA Learners of IGNOU from Delhi-NCR.

Ethical Statement

This study does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by the author.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest to this work.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Author Contribution Statement

Ashish Kumar Awadhiya: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Visualization.

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