In order to pursue a successful business career, particularly after completing an MBA course, it is necessary to learn and refine some important skills. These range from high level number crunching to handling sophisticated IT systems, liaising with departments and applying critical thinking to complex problems. The required skills can generally be split into two categories – hard and soft, and these categories relate to their function within the workplace.

Whilst hard skills are associated with theoretical and abstract knowledge, soft skills are more concerned with practical and social characteristics. On the one hand, you have proficiency in disciplines like maths and science and abilities relating to computing. On the other, you have interpersonal assets like good leadership qualities, confidence, reliability and independent thinking. The question is, which one of these two categories is more important for MBA students?

Filling the soft skills gap
The answer to such a question is not a constant one, because it is influenced by an almost endless range of social variables. In other words, it depends on what kind of values society chooses to elevate above the rest. For MBA graduates, the emphasis has traditionally been on hard skills, but this has changed over the last decade. The recommended skills for business students have moved from statistical and theoretical processes to increasingly social and communicative assets.

However, according to the 2015 Millennial Majority Workforce Study, 55% of business managers today claim to prioritise hard skills over soft skills, despite the popular belief that soft skills are most valuable – a total of only 21% claimed to focus on the personalities of prospective employees. Moreover, a proportion of 45% of these managers stated that they expect to become even more focused on hard skills in the years to come. This is in stark contrast to the 11% of managers who claim to expect an increased focus on soft skills.

Thus, in the present day climate, a hard skills deficit appears to be a fundamental problem for both prospective employees and corporate employers. Millennials, who are emerging onto a sluggish jobs market with a greater capacity for social skills rather than their technical capabilities, must be able to support and supplement their MBA qualifications. Clare Hudson, from MBA Career Management Services at the University of Manchester (UK), argues that it is more important than ever for the next generation of MBA graduates to be able to show off what they can do as professionals.

Based on current job market demands, there is a significant need for hard skills to come out of the closet. As Hudson observes, it is not that hard skills are absent from the skill-set of graduates, but many have focused on a personality presentation and nurturing their social and communicative abilities. This one-sided approach, then, makes employers more selective, looking for individuals who possess technical knowledge as an active agent.

Hard skills are a personal quality that should be put on equal footing with soft skills. Dorothy Dalton, international talent management strategist and coach, suggests that a perfect employee is a blend of interpersonal skills and technical knowledge. “Hard skills tend to be the foundation of a successful career, and the soft skills required provide the cement.” Therefore, particularly for MBA graduates, soft skills are a vital part of good business practice, but it is the hard skills that determine whether you get a job interview, and whether you are an asset to a company.

**The role of the education sector**
Thus, the overall trend is clear. As Amelia Tan, from Business Asiaone, recently noted, “workers with hard skills [...] will be in big demand next year, as the economy continues its restructuring towards a skill-based one.” Clearly, hard skills are not to be underestimated, currently standing as a prerequisite for employment.

So where does education fit in? MBA courses typically provide high quality training in both soft and hard skills. From finance and accounting, with a sharp focus on technical understanding of business administration, to a development of leadership personality, MBA
modules are created to cultivate professionals with abilities across the whole spectrum.

However, Emma Chilvers, coach to Cambridge MBA students, speculates that, perhaps, soft skills are more in line with the education environment, and present themselves as more needed. It is not until a graduate enters the current job market that the hard reality of hard skills becomes clear. Therefore, it is the education sector that must alleviate any deficits.

While the emphasis on hard skills is a new trend, universities are quick to adapt and to prepare their students for their careers. Current MBA programmes exemplify great emphasis on professional abilities and expert knowledge in areas such as business information analysis, project developments and management, business economics or electronic technologies, all directed towards a development of hard skills, encouraging students to bring together these practical subjects and areas such as organisational behaviour, ethics or creative decision making.

Read: Get to Know the MBA Faculty in Advance

Dealing with workplace conflict

It is easy to see that soft skills like team cohesion, and the ability to deal with workplace conflict, are valuable to the modern MBA graduate. Yet this doesn’t change the fact that most enterprises are motivated by results and a desire to maintain pace with the rampant speed of technological development. According to Steve Kaplan, of Bloomberg Business: “It is a much better idea for companies to hire employees who have demonstrable technical and theoretical skills, even if they score lower for attributes like sensitivity and modesty.”

In other words, tenacious MBA graduates are likely to be more successful than quieter employees who are used to seeking complete approval for every move made. In reality, no matter how well an individual may demonstrate their soft skills – listening, liaising, organising, tracking and managing – they can only be considered qualified for a corporate position if they have the necessary skills to crunch the numbers or review the spreadsheets, and use complex business models to help a company gain an edge over the market.

Nevertheless, let’s not forget that, once you are able to employ your hard skills, it is the applied interpersonal approach that makes you thrive. Hard skills can only go so far and, in order to lead by example, to establish a stable working environment, and to ensure a company’s success, soft skills are essential. Thus, while the role of hard skills as a foundation for professionals in modern businesses cannot be emphasised enough, relationship-based abilities are, indeed, the cement of a successful career, making you a leading expert in your field.

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