

Industry and academia: a collaborative effort

The education system is often criticized for not catering to the industry needs.

Renuka Vembu finds out how IT companies are now partnering with the academia to develop industry-relevant skill sets



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Battling multi-cultural barriers, fighting the dripping attrition rate, catering to the growing need for cross-functional skill sets amongst others, the IT/ ITeS industry is facing numerous challenges to stay on its feet. A talent pool consisting of skilled workforce comes as one of the top priority areas that needs to be promptly addressed. The college graduates who are recruited hardly possess the hands-on knowledge and are barely adept at adapting to the industry way of working, coupled with work pressure and high quality standards, which make it more challenging. The exploding crunch of IT professionals is pegged by Nasscom, to

touch a whopping 500,000 employees by 2010. Out of the three million graduates and post-graduates who pass out every year, a mere 25% of the technical graduates and 10%-15% of others are seen as being of the employable stature. This conspicuous gap neither reflects well on part of the academia, nor does it reflect any industry involvement to help itself rise from the plummeting crisis.

Reasons for lagging behind

The apparent reason for this talent crunch, at the first glance, pins down the blame on the education system. Lack of focus on behavioral aspects and soft skills, less of

practical training, time constraints leading to limited focus on projects and practicals, lack of correlation and connection with the industry requirements, and the teaching methodologies still comparatively conservative than being experiential—can be attributed as the drawbacks of the educational system, which needs to evolve, be more pragmatic and keep pace with changing times.

Lokesh Mehra, Regional Manager, Corporate Responsibility, Cisco South Asia, said, "The growing skills gap reflects the slim availability of high-quality college education in India and the galloping pace of the country's service-driven economy. The biggest challenge is that the academia concentrates on theoretical v/s problem solving skills and analytical skills v/s actual strategy implementation or soft skills encompassing communication, creativity, leadership, innovation, etc." The industry-academia collaboration is an effective means to bridge the gap at the grass-root level itself before it boomerangs into churning graduates with no relevant industry skills. Strategies could vary from face to face interactions of industry professionals with academia, ICT-Web based training, creation of universally accepted benchmarks like certifications and policy level curriculum changes which could shorten the gap.

Deependra L. Chumble, Chief People Officer, Hexaware Technologies, accepted that talent crunch was indeed a stark reality and added, "Though engineering colleges are mushrooming and are burning the proverbial oil in coming up with sound infrastructure, until recently, academia has not realized the importance of grooming students to make them employable directly from campuses. The process of ▶

►metamorphosis has begun, but it takes place at college instead of school which is an unsuccessful solution to the problem. The objective of taking steps at school level is to ensure whatever knowledge is imbibed at school is encashed at college and then from college to work."

Talent crunch is caused by several factors: (Source: TeamLease Services)

- Ageing population
- Inadequate educational programs
- Inadequate vocational training facilities
- Lack of individuals with the skills and competencies required for available jobs
- Immobility or off-location opportunities
- No detailed understanding of skill requirements in the market
- Lack of industry participation

A collaborative effort

A company partners with an educational institute depending upon their needs and resources at disposal, business forecasts, market demands, etc. With the objective of strengthening the relationship with academic bodies, universities and educational institutions in India and abroad, and to fortify the R&D base with academic inputs from institutions and vice versa, Hexaware was involved in Train the Trainers program (TTT), a Faculty Development Program (FDP) designed to enable academicians from various engineering and science colleges selected for campus relations initiative. They also have a Faculty Refresher Course, with a hands-on workshop. By means of classroom lectures, virtual classroom, e-learning and video-based trainings followed by assessments, they have also started 'Campus Hexpert', an Early Intervention Program (EIP) for the fresh recruits of Hexaware even when they are in campuses. This helps non-IT students to acquire sufficient fundamental knowledge in computers before they join the company.

Kishor Bhalerao, VP, HR Persistent Systems, said, "With the industry prescribing the skills required for an employee to be employable, the academia can impart and train these prospective employees adding to the skilled workers segment. Employees get a variety of learning methods to choose from—classroom training, self-study, distance education, higher education or computer-based training (CBT)." They have tied up with IIT Mumbai, for Distance Education Program (DEP) for Post-graduate Courses in IT, and Management for graduate engineers and working professionals through a simulated classroom environment. The company offers sponsorships



Lokesh Mehra
Regional Manager, Corporate Responsibility,
Cisco South Asia

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for MTech (CS) from IIT/IISc, and with BITS, Pilani for an MS program. BITS would operate an off-campus centre and conduct educational programs to meet our needs by offering specific degrees through its 'Off-Campus, Work-Integrated, Learning Programs'."

The educational programs conducted under this collaborative arrangement offers employees an opportunity to:

- Enhance their academic qualification
- Synergize theory and practice on a sustained basis
- Be multi-skilled with exposure to upcoming technological areas
- Appreciate key management concepts
- Participate better in organizational initiatives, improve their perspective, and provide meaningful insights

SkillBridge, an employability enhancement e-learning initiative by 24x7 Learning, is a juncture where corporates and educational institutes can partner and empower students with skill sets that convert them from near-hires to hires. Karthik KS, CEO of 24x7 Learning, stated, "SkillBridge initiative is primarily been launched in B and C category cities without compromising on the quality of manpower, an untapped territory for the corporate and which possibly can hold the key to reduced cost of manpower. Corporate recruiters partnering with us can expect reduced induction cycle and faster turnaround time of inducted fresh candidates." TeamLease has tied up with various MBA, ITI, polytechnics and agriculture colleges, for training and placing candidates. They are currently exploring workforce development program, which has English, customer service, selling skills and basic computer skills. They use self profiling, e-learning, instructor-led



Deependra L. Chumble
Chief People Officer, Hexaware Technologies

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training and certification to ensure employability of the trained candidates.

With pipeline development and workforce re-skilling as the main agendas, Cisco Networking Academy (NetAcad), in addition to imparting IT knowledge and networking skills, also aims to bridge the 'digital divide' as it takes technical education to rural India, including technologically backward states. Cisco has also tied up exclusively with all women institutes to encourage girls to learn about networking which has been always considered as a male bastion. With over 170 Cisco Academies across the country, there are over 69,000 Cisco Certified professionals.

Key partnership indicators

When enormous time, efforts, energy and resources are deployed to recruit candidates and then to train the new joiners into understanding and acclimatizing to the required skill sets in the job function, when retention is still a issue and attrition a cause for worry, when there is a blatant mismatch between the demand and supply of the skilled workforce, the company needs to stand up and take notice of the situation.

Mehra said, "When an industry starts feeling the pinch of not having adequate staff to man projects, networks or even operations, it's a wakeup call for the concerned stakeholders. Today's knowledge economy is hinged on the fact that skills have become the next global currency and competitiveness thrives on the human competencies that exist within the organization. The trade off is greater efficiency and better insight leading to inspired decision-making by the organization."

Hexaware has started the initiative of training teachers, who in turn train students and help in polishing ►

While the partnership will at one level address the 'dearth in skill sets' issue for companies, it will give educational institutions an opportunity to stay connected with the corporate world

- ▶ additional skills and give insights into the latest technologies as required by the industry. This increases the communication between academics and industry people and reduces the gap between the educational curriculum and actual job requirements.

Fighting the odds

Challenges have to be countered and the mission has to be achieved. Rajesh A R, Vice-president, Team-Lease Services, gives a list of reminders that will help in the making of a successful partnership venture between the industry and the academia:

- All programs need to result in a job commiserating with ones educational qualifications
- Skill set requirements need to be updated vis-à-vis industry requirements. The curriculum needs to be updated periodically
- Financing options should be provided for candidates who would need them
- Proper allocation of budgets by the institute for infrastructure and training aids
- Quality trainers to be hired to implement these courses
- Need for on-the-job training
- Designing a metrics to measure the success of such initiatives

The dichotomy, as Mehra pointed out, exists where companies



Kishor Bhalerao

VP, HR PERSISTENT SYSTEMS

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are interested to a large extent, in a workforce catering to a specialized need that may be in vogue for a smaller duration while universities prepare their students on generic skills for the long-term.

The idea of creating finishing skills kicked off from this but with a country like India it's a drop in the ocean.

Any approach has to be framed and executed so that it stands benefited to one and all involved. While the industry-academia partnership will at one level address



Karthik KS

CEO OF 24x7 LEARNING

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the 'dearth in skill sets' issue for the companies at large, it will give educational institutions an opportunity to stay connected with the corporate world and be more effective in their approach. The student and prospective candidate stands to be at an advantage for they will now become a ready resource to be grabbed by the corporate giants, abreast will all the latest trends and polished skill sets, for a spiraling career path. ■

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