Bridging the Gap Between Employers’ Expectations and Graduates’ Actual Performances through Communication Strategies

Assoc Prof Dr. Nora Zakaria¹, Zaharah Abd Jalal² and Siti Nur Sakinah Yunos¹
¹Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia
²Mdea Consultants (M) Sdn Bhd.

Abstract. In today’s competitive world, it is critical that fresh graduates enter the workplace with the appropriate skills to not only survive, but also grow their career. There is always a gap between the employers expectations and graduates’ actual performance. In order to address this gap, the Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia decided to prepare the students through an intervention programme prior to their internship. The purpose of this study is to showcase that this intervention programme can bridge the gap. The modules of the intervention programme were designed based on the employability skills. The programme which focuses on communication strategies that fall under these skills such as Interpersonal Communication, Business Professional Communication, Public Communication, and Executive Skills Development was held for 22 days and conducted just before they pursue their internship. Consequently, the respondents (employers) were asked to complete five-point Likert scale questionnaire surveys to rate their expectations and the graduates’ actual performance. Interview sessions with the graduates were also conducted. From the analysis, it shows that there is positive bridging of gaps between employers’ expectations and their actual performance. The employability skills that graduates appeared to have learnt applied positively at the workplace. Although only 26 students are involved in this study and their participation in the intervention programme is on a voluntary basis, there are practical implications that can be derived from the study - a creative intervention program that is needed in the learning of transferable skills. This paper hence introduces a new way to nurture students learning of transferable skills.

Keywords: Employability skills, Communication Strategies, Graduate Employability, Gap Analysis

1. Introduction

Concerns have been raised regarding the gap between employers’ expectations and their actual performance (Andrews and Higson, 2008). Wye and Lim (2009) noted that employers prefer to employ graduates who have good employability skills such as leadership skills, knowledge-acquiring skills, interpersonal skills, cognitive skills, and practical skills. Thus graduate employability is one of the main challenges faces by the universities as employers generally expect graduates ready to embark the world of work that is beyond their related subject discipline.

In response to embed “employability skills” into their activity, a proposed model for graduate employability is developed in preparing the students prior to their internship as shown in Figure 1. This intervention program which focuses on effective communication strategies integrated within the skills such as Interpersonal Communication, Business Professional Communication, Public Communication, and Executive Skills Development was held for 22 days. Apart from sessions such as visioning, personal development, intrapersonal communication, personal finance, personal grooming, etiquette and protocol, there are many other modules that have been implemented throughout the program which are business acumen, entrepreneurship skills to empower self or create start up, design thinking and Business Model Canvas for new economy and Internet of Things (IoT) skills such as coding and e-commerce to prepare for the new world of work. The modules are shown in Figure 2.

![Figure 1. An intervention program before internship - A proposed model for graduate employability](image-url)
In Executive Development Program (EDP) Bootcamp 1 module, the sessions are interpersonal communication, small group communication and public communication. While the sessions in EDP Bootcamp 2 module consist of business writing, report writing, resume and vresume (video), business presentations, critical thinking skills and decision making. These sessions require more commitment, thinking process and ability to analyse and express in writing. Apart from producing resume and vresume (video), participants need to understand that business writing requires clarity, conciseness and competency. The sessions under EDP Bootcamp 3 module are entrepreneurship bootcamp, social media, mobile application building and networking and mentoring. In the entrepreneurship bootcamp, Design Thinking Skills and Lean and Business Model Canvas were used extensively to assist participants to prepare and pitch their business idea. The strategic thinking project is based on Stanford Model for Global Entrepreneurial Leaders and it requires participants to use the format of persuasive presentation in marketing themselves as a whole product. In mentoring session, participants will keep in touch with the mentor during internship and after the internship via social media. Some of the sessions in this program were handled by CEO of the company.

This paper is to showcase that this intervention program can bridge the gap between employers’ expectations and their actual performance.
2 Literature Review

2.1 Employability Skill

In getting a job, the most necessary skills for graduates to possess are employability skills and technical skills. The scholars have defined the term employability skills and there are numerous explanation about it. Hillage and Pollard (1998, p.2) suggest that:

In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment.

Robinson (2000) affirms that for a person to get and do well in a job it is important to have necessary abilities and skills, and it is significant in all types of industries. Due to current economic demand that changes very fast, the employers have no option but to hire graduates who have the necessary employability skills related to the job’s applied. Non-technical ability and occupational skills are also important elements in employability skills, not just the technical skills only (S. Rasul et al., 2009). However Zaliza and SAFarin (2014) noted that graduates are lacking employability skills, such as communication skills where graduates are not able to speak and converse fluent English, not well-discipline and do not possess the leadership skills.

2.2 Industry Perspective on Graduate Employability

Many initiatives had been done by the government, universities and colleges to find solutions of the graduate unemployment issues such as providing Graduate Employability funding (MOHE GE FUND). Furthermore the industry has selected undergraduates to undertake internship programs or industrial training in its organizations. Internship programs must be completed within a specified period set by universities or colleges with the aim of providing relevant hands-on or practical experiences for undergraduates (Salina et al., 2011). Harvey et al., (1997) find that different employers may express different expectations of graduates and indeed, there is a gap between employers’ expectations.

3 Method and analysis

The study employed a quantitative and qualitative research design. Only 26 students involved in this study and their participation in the intervention programme is on a voluntary basis. At the end of their internship, the questionnaires were given to their respective companies employers to rate their expectation and actual performance. Some of the reputable companies were AIA, Tune Protect Malaysia, Petronas, AmBank Group Malaysia, Bank Muamalat Malaysia Bhd, CIMB, TM Bhd and BIMB Securities Sdn Bhd. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire was chosen for this study as most of the previous research studies have used this approach to find “employers expectation and graduates performance” (Fadella & Abdullah, 2011; Salina et al., 2011; Ting & Ying, 2012). The five-point Likert scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaires incorporate the seven generic skills which are communication skills, problem solving, practical skills, ethics and values, social skills and responsibility, technological skills, entrepreneurial skills and information management. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the data collected from the questionnaire.

4 Results and Discussion

Reliability test was conducted by computing Cronbach Alpha coefficient for each variables for employers’ expectations and their actual performances. This is shown in Table 1. All the Cronbach values are above 0.7 which indicates a good internal consistency of the scale (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010; Nunnally 1978). and therefore, these items proved to be reliable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>No. of Item</th>
<th>Cronbach α (Expectation)</th>
<th>Cronbach α (Actual)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.898</td>
<td>0.874</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 shows the mean value of expectation of employers and actual performances of interns rated by their employers at the end of their internship period. Among these seven attributes, ethics and values demonstrated the highest overall mean for expectation (4.27) and actual performance (4.65), followed by social skills and responsibility for expectation (3.94) and for actual (4.32), technological skills for expectation (3.90) while for actual performance (4.32). Overall mean for actual performances is greater than mean of expectation of employers.

A comparison of expectation of employers and their actual performances for each attributes and the summary of statistics is shown in Table 3. The gap analysis was conducted to identify the gaps between desired levels (expected) and actual levels (perceived) of work skills. The formula for expectation gap (GAP) is given by \[ GAP = AP - E, \] where AP and E is actual performance and expectation respectively. This study used the gap analysis developed by (Jayasundra, 2008).

Among the seven attributes, communication skills and problem solving scored the highest gap (0.39), follows by ethics and values (0.38), social skills and responsibility (0.38), practical skills (0.37). Finally technological skills and information management scored the least gap (0.35). Thus the overall findings reveal that there is a positive gap between employers’ expectations and their actual performance. It gives a meaning that the actual performance of interns is above the expectation of employers. The gap analysis findings of this study shown that generally, employers were very satisfied with the quality of interns’ employability skills since all the gaps exhibited positive values. In other words, employers perceived that the employability skills of the interns were above their expectations.
To explore further on the gap analysis, t-tests were conducted between the ratings of each skill to examine whether there is a significant difference between the employers’ expectation and their actual performance (Table 3). The significance level was set at $P < 0.05$. The results revealed that there is a significant gap between the actual performance of interns and the expectation of their employers. All the p-values are significant which confirms that graduates are able to fulfil the expectations of employers which mean the performances of graduates were higher than the expectations of employers.

Table 4. Overall Gap from Employers' Survey

Table 4 shows the overall gap for each attributes and it shows that communication skills (x₁) and problem solving (x₃) scored the highest gap (0.39). Investigating further (Table 5), among the ‘communication skills’ construct, item that had the highest positive gap was “tactful when communicating with clients/customers” (gap value = 0.48). On the other hand, construct item that had the lowest gap was “communicates and expresses ideas effectively and speaking clearly and effectively” (gap value = 0.34).

Table 5. Gap Analysis for Each Construct items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>AP</th>
<th>GAP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication Skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand and follow instructions correctly</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicates and expresses ideas effectively</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking clearly and effectively</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicates ideas in writing effectively</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactful when communicating with clients/customers</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem Solving</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies problem solving technique effectively</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies creative thinking producing ideas</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applies critical thinking in decision making</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to provide an explanation of the problem very clearly and accurately</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to create new ideas</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practical Skills</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to work in a team</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates good analytical skills</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to learn in accommodating change</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to lead a work in a team</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entrepreneurial skills</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethics and Values</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Punctuality
Dress appropriately to work place
Take full responsibility on the task given
Able to distinguish between personal and workplace matters

Social Skills and Responsibility
Carry out a task from start to finish based on quality standards
Ability to finish a task in a given time
Ability to cope with work pressure
Ability to work without supervision

Technological Skills
Use computing and information technology effectively
Willing to learn new IT skills
Have adequate IT skills to apply in a given task

Information Management
Able to retrieve information from maximum references
Highly engages in independent learning
Excellent use of references

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>For the problem solving technique effectively</th>
<th>able to create new ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Punctuality</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress appropriately to work place</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take full responsibility on the task given</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to distinguish between personal and workplace matters</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social Skills and Responsibility

Carry out a task from start to finish based on quality standards
4  4.26  0.26

Ability to finish a task in a given time
4  4.43  0.43

Ability to cope with work pressure
3.91  4.39  0.48

Ability to work without supervision
3.83  4.17  0.34

Technological Skills

Use computing and information technology effectively
3.91  4.39  0.48

Willing to learn new IT skills
3.96  4.3  0.34

Have adequate IT skills to apply in a given task
3.83  4.04  0.21

Information Management

Able to retrieve information from maximum references
3.78  4.17  0.39

Highly engages in independent learning
3.7  4.09  0.39

Excellent use of references
3.57  3.83  0.26

For the problem solving construct, item “applies problem solving technique effectively” had the highest positive gap (gap value =0.70) and item “able to create new ideas” had the lowest gap (gap value = -0.04). The details of the gap analysis are shown in Table 5.

4.1 Interview results

After the internship ends, participants share their feedback about the impact of the intervention program. Some of the positive responses were “Communication skills, self-esteem, and personal finance improved”; “Able to manage emotion when handling people”; “Have been exposed in the corporate life” and “I know the steps how about to become an entrepreneur”. These impactful feedbacks about the effectiveness of the program proved that the program in a way opened many avenues to propel them to make better career options of their choices.

5 Conclusions

Even though the study was conducted on a relatively small sample size but the intervention program which was held for 22 days really gave some positive impacts to these interns. The findings suggest that the actual performance of these UiTM interns is much higher than expectations of their employers. The result from the gap analysis show that the interns have high ‘communication skills’ (gap = 0.39) and ‘problem solving’ (gap = 0.39). Comparatively, ‘technological skills’ and ‘information management’ have lower gaps (0.35). However the employers perceived that the interns ‘able to create new ideas’ (gap = -0.04) and ‘entrepreneurial skills’ (gap = -0.08) are still below their expectations.

Thus universities with collaboration with industry are encouraged to embed a creative intervention program to nurture students learning of transferable skills. The focus would be an “Entrepreneur Development” program since entrepreneurial skill is below the expectation of employers. However, during the graduates’ convocation which was in April 2018, 76% of them were offered jobs with starting salaries between RM1600-RM3600, 12% started enterprises and 12% further their study. In terms of employability definition by Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), all of them were fully employed.

Acknowledgement

The intervention program in this study was financially funded by Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) under the Graduate Employability Grant.

References


