



Presenting credible evidence at the interview is crucial.

Confucius says, "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work." I am sure most of today's jobs didn't exist then. Neither was it so difficult to find one.

Despite the ever-rising cost of getting a degree, one fact stands out today like a student shouting in a quiet campus library: out of more than half a million Bangladeshi graduates each year, an alarmingly high number of them can't find a job. According to a 2014 report prepared by the Economist Intelligence Unit, nearly 5 out of every 10 Bangladeshi graduates are unemployed (against 3 out of 10 in India and Pakistan).

And those who finally manage to find a job—the positions are often part-time, low-wage or not related to their career interests—they are underemployed. "The problem has two sides—the demand side and the supply side," Dr Fahmida Akter Khatun, Research Director of CPD says. "Companies that still want to recruit are often not getting the talents they are looking for. On the other hand, some graduates are not finding enough companies that can hire them." The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) is an apex think tank that conducts research on issues of critical national and regional interests.

Underemployment is indeed an issue that concerns many graduates. "In a company like GP, both engineers and business graduates can realise their full potential," says Quazi Mohammad Shahed, Chief Human Resource Officer of Grameenphone which is the largest mobile phone operator in the country with more than 50 million subscribers. "But the entire country is not like that. I graduated

from BUET with a degree in mechanical engineering. There are few companies where we can use our knowledge and skills. Industrialisation has not flourished in our country."

Exacerbating the problem of unemployment and underemployment is the fact that in a changing global economy both job description and job specification keep changing. The question is do most universities adequately prepare today's graduates for the competitive and dynamic work environment?

"The style of imparting learning has to change," Mohammad Shahed says. "Students have to be pushed to learn through practical experience. They must go out and learn from companies. We have a strong internship programme where graduates can get invaluable industry knowledge. Field research is a must. And while conducting research, students must preserve integrity."

Lately Bangladeshi universities have been known less for their quality of education and more for other things—often not nice. Almost none of the public and private universities appear in global rankings. Instead, most of these universities are frequently in the news for student violence and poor governance. Dr Fahmida Akter says, "We have so many private universities. But unfortunately more than 90 percent of the graduates of these universities are unemployable."

A lot of leading employers share this view while educators may see university graduates' preparedness more favourably. "Education is not about going to a coaching centre, learning a few questions by heart and then reproducing them in the exam,"



Professor AAMS Arefin Siddique

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Quazi Mohammad Shahed

“Those with foreign degrees have to compete with the rest and give proof of their credentials.”

Arif Iqbal says. "Education is about developing creativity, inquisitiveness and analytical skills." Iqbal is the GM, HR of Transcom Distribution Co Ltd, an allied business company of TRANSCOM Group, responsible for distributing a variety of high quality, globally popular products across the country.

"Companies need to build partnership with educational institutions," he adds. "And tell them what specific skills they need, how many graduates they need each year and what kind of research is needed. Universities should be prepared to update and upgrade curriculum."

Mid Moniruzzaman graduated in Management Information Systems (MIS) from the University of Dhaka in 2012. Since then he has appeared in four interviews but hasn't landed a job. He had gone to a good university and done well as a student. He wonders where he has gone wrong. What he may be missing is the simple fact that he didn't think about his future in a structured way. Most universities in North America, Europe and Australia offer career planning services to students so they can start planning early. Students learn how to consider their skills and interests and how to thoroughly research the industries and jobs that utilise their talents.

Professor AAMS Arefin Siddique, Vice Chancellor of University of Dhaka says, "We have a Student Counselling and Guidance Directorate. Each department has a student advisor who advises students on career development and personal issues. We organise job fairs on campus. Students get to exchange ideas and opinions with companies and learn what companies are looking for in candidates."

An analysis of demand of graduates by sector also would create more opportunities. For instance, if we can figure out how many Chemistry graduates we need each year, universities will know exactly how many of them to produce every year. In that scenario, the chances of graduates in Chemistry becoming unemployed or underemployed will be a lot less. Dr Fahmida Akter of the CPD says, "Different sectors should do such studies on a micro level. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics is well equipped to do a survey like this on a macro level. They work with large volume of data."

Job seekers and employers should work together to close the skills gap. A number of US companies such as Target, Goldman Sachs and Macy's have

long-standing, innovative training programmes for recent university graduates. Graduates from a diverse set of subjects are chosen for their aptitude and are trained at the company's expense to address missing skills. These programmes are intense (typically over a month in length) and taught by former practitioners. Such programmes serve as a means of getting undergraduates with contrasting backgrounds—think engineers versus business majors—on the same page to add value to the organisation.

"We hire recent graduates with a background in pharmacy, chemistry, mechanical and electrical engineering, BBA, MBA, and marketing," says Anjan Kumar Paul, GM, Human Resources of Square Pharmaceuticals Ltd. "We also hire chartered accountants and cost accountants. "We have a three month internship programme and we offer in-plant training for pharmacists, chemists and engineers." Square Pharmaceuticals Limited, the flagship company of Square Group, is one of the market leaders known for its high quality products that exports medicine to forty countries across four continents.

There are many myths about the job market; most common among them is the notion that you can't find a job—no matter how qualified you are—if you do not have connections or "powerful uncles". It's not always true. Referrals do matter—but not the way you think it does. Mohammad Shahed of GP says, "Graduates have to prove their competence in an assessment test and interview. Referrals do not matter for them. But for mid-career or senior positions it plays a very important role. We want to know where they have worked before and what they have achieved."

You may think that if you have a foreign degree, you are going to breeze through the hiring process. Again, that does not hold if you are a recent graduate. Ranjan Paul says, "Those with foreign degrees have to compete with



Graduates need to learn their strengths and weaknesses.

the rest and give proof of their credentials."

Liz Ryan hired thousands of people during her career as a former Fortune 500 HR Senior Vice President. She is one of the world's most widely-read and well-respected workplace visionary and thought leader. In an article titled *The Truth About Who Gets Hired* published in *Forbes* last year, Liz writes, "It doesn't have to do with the job-seeker's resume, clothes, age, nationality, price tag, patter, track record or educational credentials. The people who got hired were people who came to the match-making process to learn more, not to please anyone. The people who got hired were people who were intellectually curious. They brought thoughtful questions to their job interviews."

So is there an 'X' factor when it comes to choosing from a group of candidates with good credentials? Who stands out among the many?

Mohammad Shahed, chief of HR at GP says, "For me there is no 'X' factor like you are saying. But if there is a factor, it is this: How much credible evidence can a candidate present? Without that nothing counts. If we find out that the candidate is overstating facts—he hasn't done what he says he has done—he will be dropped out."

Can't argue with what Confucius says. "Success depends upon previous preparation, and without such preparation there is sure to be failure." ■