



Is it too late to learn soft skills?

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Imagine this: you walk into an interview for the multinational company you have been dreaming of working at. Your confidence is through the roof since your resume boasts your advanced skillset. Your interviewers take one look at your CV, put it aside, and begin to grill you about your interpersonal skills. They throw around words like critical thinking, conflict management, and negotiation, and suddenly you realise your polished resume may not be as impressive as you once thought. Your only chance of landing your dream job is to quickly slip away.

Bangladesh is now increasingly investing in vocational and technical education, but a glaring gap in this is the lack of focus on soft skills. Soft skills are personal skills which usually directly complement "hard" or technical skills. One of the main reasons why Bangladeshi fresh graduates have difficulty in getting jobs is the lack of soft skills they possess. Workshops and training for young professionals are usually last-

minute efforts in shaping individuals into becoming employable. What there needs to exist is a change in the way we view soft skills development.

Soft skills usually need years to develop, so the best thing to do would be to start young. Parents, caregivers, and teachers need to be aware of the importance of soft skill-building and integrate special exercises into the day-to-day lives of children in order for them to hone these skills.

A child's behaviour and social attributes are largely shaped by the influence of family and friends. Learning even the most basic social cues is of utmost importance since, at a young age, the foundation for their social skills is already built. At home, children need to be taught how to listen intently, and be respectful, humble and enthusiastic. These might sound like basic human characteristics, but it is surprising how many adults joining the workforce lack a lot of these qualities.

Apart from academic teaching, children also learn some of the most valuable real-world lessons while at school. They find themselves in

situations, where they must navigate through peers of various backgrounds, and learn how to coexist in harmony. Major soft skills such as adaptability, communication, teamwork, and persuasion are developed in schools. This is their first step into building their own interpersonal relationships and managing them. At this time of their lives, guidance is crucial. Teachers play a big role in equipping young, impressionable students with the right soft skills to persevere when they are older.

Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC) is an organisation which aims to teach leadership and other relevant skills to the youth. Their Building Bridges through Leadership Training (BBLT) Junior programme is designed for students from class six to ten. Farah Chowdhury, Manager, Office of Professional Development, BYLC, shares, "The BBLT Junior programme tries to change the thought processes of children from a young age. If the concepts are instilled in them earlier on, it would be easier for them to grasp these skills in the long run. We follow the concept of experiential learning; it is more activity-based and focuses on peer learning. Case studies are created on the basis of situations within the classroom, which students analyse in group discussions. Our country's schools focus so heavily on rote learning that students are unable to learn certain important skills. This is the gap that BYLC tries to bridge."

Children today are at an advantage, since accessing information is now easier than ever before. This, however, can have a negative impact on their desire to learn from a school setting. They might think that everything that is taught inside a classroom can just be searched on the internet. However, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and other soft skills, cannot be learned online. This is why it is crucial for teachers to clarify the importance of learning these traits. Soft skills training must be introduced in every class. Before any subject is taught, students should be made aware of the real-world applications of the subject.

For example, students may not understand the importance of learning English Literature, where they have to read stories and poems and try to interpret them. In that case, they must be told how these activities will help with their cognition and emotional

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intelligence, which will become vital for them in the future.

Young Founders School is a global organisation working in Bangladesh to teach 21st century skills to children of ages between 11 to 18, mainly through entrepreneurship training. When asked about how their two-day boot camp helps children learn soft skills, Sanjida Tanny, Bangladesh Lead, Young Founders School, shares, "Participants work with people they have never met before and garner skills such as teamwork, collaboration, communication, no discrimination, social skills, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. Mostly, they work on social issues and try to find solutions, which help them with empathy, critical thinking, and problem solving. They also deliver final presentations using proper pitch decks, which exposes them to technological tools and allows them to gain hands-on technology literacy."

The ongoing Fourth Industrial Revolution has brought with it the introduction of automation,

artificial intelligence (AI), internet of things (IoT), and virtual reality (VR) into workplaces. This has huge implications about the future of workers, but don't worry, the robots aren't completely taking over (yet). The best asset that human beings have in this regard is their ability to analyse situations using emotional intelligence, something which technology lacks.

As students in Bangladesh, many of us have been conditioned to aim to become the best student only in terms of grades. Even if some students possess a passion for learning, they rarely get the chance to sit back and try to gain knowledge in a university setting, since the pressure to maintain a high GPA is unimaginable. Many teachers do not award marks unless the students answer word by word according to what the teachers' materials dictate. This leads to students having no choice but to memorise. Memorisation does not teach students any valuable skills that they will need in the future, especially with more advanced technology taking over.

Since soft skills are now exactly what employers are looking for, universities need to invest in more soft skills training. When asked about how universities could integrate soft skills learning into the curricula of universities, Professor Milan Pagon, Vice Chancellor (Acting), Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), states, "There are many popular methods already in use. One in particular is the 'flipped classroom' approach which challenges traditional classroom settings. In this approach, the conventional way of teachers giving lectures to students, who then go home and do their homework, is abolished. In a flipped classroom, the lecture materials are handed to students ahead of class. Students learn the material by themselves and do the 'homework' in class. The instructors are there to provide guidance and answer questions. There is group work and group projects, communication with peers and teachers, and all of these aspects help develop soft skills."



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