Employers' Emphasis on Technical Skills and Soft Skills in Job Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the emphasis placed on technical and soft skills in job advertisements for various industries. A total of 105 job advertisements in newspapers and jobstreet.com were analysed. The results show that almost all the job advertisements mention relevant degrees for the job and a portion of them require some working experience, indicating that employers expect job applicants to have the necessary technical skills for the position. Among the soft skills, communication skill and teamwork are the two most sought after skills but the type of soft skills required varies with the position and the industry. However, contrary to the focus on teamwork and leadership skills in college and university soft skill training, the analysis indicates that the employers value ability to work independently and to produce quality work under pressure and tight deadlines more. The results of this study provide data-driven evidence for lecturers teaching business communication and English for professional communication on the important aspects to focus on when teaching students to write job application letters and resumes.

KEYWORDS: job advertisements, technical skills, soft skills

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Introduction

Employability skills include "qualities of resourcefulness, adaptability and flexibility… [that are] needed for success in work and life as a whole" (Curtis & McKenzie, 2002, p. vii-viii). Employability skills are categorised into technical skills which are specific to a job, and transferable or soft skills which are generic skills. These generic skills are referred to as soft skills in Malaysia but in the UK, they are referred to as transferable skills. In Australia, soft skills are referred to as employability skills, and they are viewed as a subset of the generic attributes that university students are expected to develop (Bowman, 2010; Precision Consultancy, 2007). Soft skills are also defined as the "interpersonal, human, people or behavioural skills needed to apply technical skills and knowledge in the workplace" (Weber, Finely, Crawford, & Rivera, 2009, p. 356 cited in Mohd Adnan, Daud, Alias, & Razali, 2012). They comprise the following skills: Communication skills; teamwork skills; planning and organising skills; technology skills; lifelong learning skills; and initiative and enterprise skills.

Soft skills have come to the fore because knowledge economy jobs require "independent, self-motivated workers" (Menand, 2014, p. 4), and Malaysia is taking the knowledge economy route to bring the economy out of the middle income trap (Fleming & Søborg, 2012). In Malaysia, there is great emphasis on soft skills to the extent that courses such as entrepreneurship and information technology are compulsory generic courses in universities. Language courses, whether English or Malay, have been compulsory for a long time. Recently, a My3S programme was launched and students have to undertake a specific number of hours attending the *Modul Pembangunan Kemahiran Insaniah* ([Human Skills Development Module), Jabatan Pengajian Tinggi, n.d.) to increase the employability of graduates. For example, final year students in degree programmes who are Malaysians in Universiti of Teknologi MARA (UiTM) are required to fill in the Malaysian Soft Skills Scale Survey to assess their mastery of soft skills. In Universiti Tunku Hussein Onn Malaysia, Mustafa, Mohd Nor, Mohd Salleh, Madar, Ibrahim, Sulaiman and Razzaq (2008) found that the students' awareness of the importance of soft skills increased after the implementation of *Modul Pembangunan Kemahiran Insaniah*, particularly the importance of having a positive personality and good communication skills. Such is the response of the university to equip students with the necessary soft skills to secure jobs upon graduation.

In fact, there is a debate over how much certain soft skills represent personality features and dispositions rather than skills that can be learned. Robles' (2012) definition of soft skills places it clearly as "character traits, attitudes, and behaviors" which are "the intangible, nontechnical, personality-specific skills that determine one's strengths as a leader, facilitator, mediator, and negotiator" (p. 457). Starting from the premise that soft skills encompass a range of interpersonal skills, Waggoner (2006) set out to study whether soft skills can be taught. Think-Pair-Share and role play activities were used for a semester, and Waggoner found that the students' listening, teamwork and responsibility skills improved. Based on the results, Waggoner suggested explicit teaching of soft skills.

If soft skills are to be taught, they should at least be those that are considered important by employers. The current emphasis on soft skills in universities make it seem as if soft skills may be more crucial in securing jobs but it is not known whether Malaysian employers are looking for soft skills or technical skills. Thus far, job advertisements have not been analysed to identify the employer expectations of skill sets. The study would provide data-driven evidence for lecturers teaching business and professional communication to help them know what to focus on when teaching students to write job application letters and resumes.

Purpose of study

This study examined the emphasis placed on technical and soft skills in job advertisements for various industries. The specific aspects examined were: (1) frequency in which qualifications and work experience are specified as requirements in advertisements for different types of jobs; (2) the types of soft skills emphasised in job advertisements according to the type of job; and (3) other selection criteria in job advertisements according to type of job.

Method of study

A total of 105 job advertisements submitted by university students with their job application letters and curriculum vitae for a coursework assignment in a professional communication course in a Malaysian university were analysed. These advertisements, taken from newspapers and online sources in September and October 2013, covered a range of jobs because the students were from various degree programmes. They were told to select job advertisements befitting of their qualifications and work experience at the point of graduation so that the mock exercise in job application was useful. See Appendix 1 for a sample of job advertisement.

For the analysis, the job requirements in the advertisements were analysed to identify technical skills, soft skills and other specifications required by the employer. To formulate the analysis framework for technical and soft skills in job advertisements, explanations given by the Department of Higher Education, Malaysia (*Modul Pembangunan Kemahiran Insaniah untuk IPT Malaysia* [Human Development Skills Module for Malaysian Institutions of Higher Learning], n.d.) were used as a starting point (Table 1). However, the examples are from the job advertisements analysed in this study.

Table 1
Breakdown of soft skills by Ministry of Education, Malaysia

Soft skill	Explanation	Examples in job advertisements
1. Communication	• Ability to express ideas clearly, effectively and confidently in spoken and written communication • Ability to listen actively and give feedback • Ability to make oral presentations clearly, confidently and appropriately to the audience • Ability to use technology in presentations • Ability to negotiate and reach agreement • Ability to communicate with interactants from different cultures • Ability to develop communicative skills individually • Ability to handle written communication	Communication skills, language skills, interpersonal skills (willing to listen to people without judging them, share ideas and pitch in when co-workers need help.)
2. Teamwork	• Ability to build good relationships, interact and work effectively with others to achieve the same objective • Ability to understand and take the roles of both the team leader and team member • Ability to know and respect the attitudes, behaviours and beliefs of others • Ability to contribute to planning and streamlining of group outcomes • Responsible for group decisions	Teamwork, leadership, motivate others, work independently

3.	Leadership	• Knowledge of basic leadership theories • Ability to lead projects • Ability to understand and take the roles of both the team leader and team member • Ability to supervise team members	
4.	Problem solving	• Ability to identify and analyse problems in complex and unclear situations, and make justified assessments • Ability to develop and improve thinking skills such as explain, analyse and evaluate discussions • Ability to look for ideas and find alternative solutions • Ability to think out of the box • Ability to make decisions based on evidence • Ability to persevere and pay full attention to given responsibilities • Ability to understand and adapt to the culture of the new community and workplace	Creative thinking, attention to details
5.	Lifelong learning and information management	• Ability to look for and manage relevant information from different sources • Ability to accept new ideas and have the capability for autonomous learning • Ability to develop curiosity and thirst for knowledge	Fast learner
6.	Ethics and professional morals	• Ability to understand the effects of the economy, environment and socio-culture in professional practice • Ability to analyse and make decisions in solving problems related to ethics • Ability to put ethical attitudes into practice, besides having a sense of responsibility towards the community	
7.	Entrepreneurship	• Ability to identify business opportunities • Ability to conceptualise business planning • Ability to build, explore and grab business opportunities and work • Ability to be self-employed	

In the preliminary analysis, skills listed in job advertisements which did not appear in the examples were added to the analysis framework. The framework stabilised after both researchers analysed 10 job advertisements to ensure applicability of the framework and consistency in the analysis. Some adjustments were made to the analysis framework.

First, communication skills were sub-divided into language, communicative ability and interpersonal skills. Although language and interpersonal skills may be needed for communicative ability, they are different skill sets. In Marzuki, Ting, Jerome, Chuah, and Misieng's (2013) study, university students were interviewed on the characteristics of a good communicator, and the findings showed that they did not equate language proficiency and communicative ability.

Second, teamwork is another soft skill which warranted sub-categorisation because to achieve teamwork, the employees should be able to lead and to be led. Besides that, they should be able to work independently to do their part so that the team can achieve the common outcome.

Third, lifelong learning and information management is another soft skill which required translation to the skills of lifelong learning in the context of job advertisements because the employers do not use the words "lifelong learning" or even "information management" in their job advertisements. Lifelong learning is defined as the ability to look for and manage relevant information from various sources, to receive new ideas and to learn autonomously, and to develop a sense of curiosity and thirst for knowledge (see Table 1). The personal qualities which came under self-management such as self-motivation, responsibility and ability to handle pressure were categorised as lifelong learning and information management in this study.

Before the analysis, the advertisements were sorted according to the type of job such as event management, accounting and engineering because the categorisation of technical and soft skills depends on the job. An advertisement posted by Image Magic Digital Printing Services for the job of Graphic Designer lists the following as requirements:

- Possess a Certificate/Diploma in Graphic Design or related field
- With knowledge in Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator and related field. Additional expertise in other graphic tools is an advantage
- Creativity to come up with outstanding design
- Able to work independently with minimum supervision
- Capable of producing quality work and meet tight deadlines
- Required language(s): English & Chinese
- Full time position only
- Malaysian citizens only

The following are justifications for categorisation of job requirements as technical and soft skills:

- Knowledge in Adobe Photoshop was categorised as technical skills for a graphic designer.
- Creativity to come up with outstanding design was categorised under problem solving skills because effective problem solving requires the person to go beyond the routine mode of thinking or doing things.
- Ability to work independently came under the category of teamwork because team members also need to work independently on their own to complete a team project.
- Capability to produce quality work and meet tight deadlines was categorised as planning and organising skills.
- The language requirement was categorised as communication, under the sub-category of language.
- Malaysian citizenship was put under Others, which are neither technical or transferable skills.

The analysis also took note of whether degree qualifications and work experience were listed among the job requirements.

Results and discussion

Qualifications and work experience in job advertisements
The 105 job advertisements analysed encompassed 14 different types of jobs. Table 2 shows that most of the job advertisements analysed were for human resource graduates (34 out of 105), with a fair number of advertisements for science, computer, accounting and engineering degree graduates. The jobs advertised for graduates in the creative arts field were more varied, encompassing designer, photographer, event manager, art gallery curator, and film production manager. In this paper, the jobs open to social science and education graduates are grouped together under "social science", and include social worker, counsellor, psychologist, nursery conductor and editor.

Table 2
Breakdown of job advertisements analysed by type of job, and inclusion of qualifications and work experience

Type of job		No. of job advertise-ments (N=105)	No. of job advertise-ments which include qualifica-tions	No. of job advertise-ments which include work experience	Fresh Graduates encouraged to apply
Human resource		34	32	22	10
Science related		18	18	14	8
Computer related		14	14	4	7
Accounts		11	11	5	3
Engineering		9	7	8	5
Creative arts	Designer	5	5	4	2
	Photographer	3	2	0	0
	Event manager	2	1	1	0
	Art gallery manager/assistant curator	2	2	0	1
	Film production manager	1	1	1	0
	Sub-total for creative arts	*13*	*11*	*6*	*3*
Social science	Social work	2	1	1	0
	Counsellor/psychologist	2	2	2	0
	Nursery conductor	1	1	1	0
	Editor	1	1	0	0
	Sub-total for social science	*6*	*5*	*4*	*0*
Total		**105**	**97**	**63**	**36**

The analysis revealed that more advertisements included qualifications than work experience. Out of 105 job advertisements analysed, 97 (92.4%) included qualifications and 63 (60%) included work experience. Only eight job advertisements did not mention qualifications. The emphasis on qualifications in the job advertisements shows that technical skills are important. By specifying the qualifications, the employers assume that the candidates they interview would come with the necessary technical skills for the job. For example, the job description of accounting graduates includes the following:

- Assist in preparing full sets of accounts and reporting
- To carry out bank reconciliation, data processing, updating records, journals, accounting schedules and maintaining of accounting records
- Assist in preparation of management reports, financial budget, forecast, cash flow management, and costing
- To assist the senior in accounting activities of the company to meet the required deadlines
- Perform any other duties and responsibilities which the company may assign from time to time (Jobstreet.com.my, n.d.)

They learn the technical skills in their three to four years of degree studies although their competence may vary from individual to individual but they are assumed to have the foundational knowledge to start their jobs by virtue of their obtaining a degree. Further on-the-job training would serve to refine those skills. The two types of jobs where qualifications, and by implication technical skills are very important are computer and accounting related jobs.

Work experience is mentioned in one-third of the job advertisements for computer and half of the accounting related jobs respectively. A similar pattern is observed for the groups of job advertisements grouped under the "creative arts" category but the advertisements in the "social science" seemed to value qualifications and work experience equally (Table 2). Work experience is not the emphasis in the job advertisements, possibly because the students were asked to look for job advertisements which they could realistically respond to upon graduation in a year or two from the time the data for this study were collected. Furthermore, they were told that they could only apply for jobs which specified about two years of work experience to be realistic. In fact 36 (34.3%) of the job advertisements analysed stated that fresh graduates were encouraged by apply for the job. As explained earlier, the fresh graduates are assumed to have the necessary technical skills for the position advertised based on what they have learnt in their degree. Employers in Scotland also use the degree qualification as a proxy to ensure that new employees have the minimum level of competence (Glass, Landsburg, Quashie, & McGregor, 2008).

Soft skills in job advertisements according to type of job
Soft skills are mentioned in all the job advertisements analysed. Table 3 shows that soft skills are less important for accounting jobs (average of one soft skill per advertisement), supporting the earlier results on the greater importance of technical skills to accounting and computer related jobs. In comparison, science graduates are expected to have more soft sills (average of three soft skills per advertisement). The difference could be due to accounting being a professional degree whereby graduates are trained with the necessary skills to practice in a particular profession whereas science graduates can apply for a variety of jobs ranging from research assistant and science officer to sales personnel for scientific equipment companies. Since their science degree may not be directly applicable, other skills are called for and they need to apply what they have learnt in the university. The advertisements for other job types had about two soft skills each, showing that employers generally expect job applicants to demonstrate not only technical skills but also soft skills related to the job.

Among the soft skills, the most frequently mentioned soft skill in the 105 job advertisements analysed is communication skill (Table 3). It is common for employers to list two or more sub-skills within the communication category. The sub-skill most frequently mentioned is proficiency in certain languages (54 advertisements), particularly for creative arts, human resource, computer

related, science related and engineering jobs. Language proficiency is not that important for accounting jobs. Communicative ability, per se, is mentioned in only 22 job advertisements whereas interpersonal skill is mentioned in 17 advertisements. It is interesting that jobs requiring science and engineering degrees require communicative and interpersonal skills more than other jobs, as far as the specifications in the job advertisements go.

Table 3
Frequency of soft skills in job advertisements according to type of job

Soft skills		Human resource (n=34)	Account (n=18)	Computer (n=14)	Science (n=11)	Engineer (n=9)	Creative arts (n=13)	Social science (n=6)	Total
1. Communi-cation	Language	18	5	7	7	5	10	2	54
	Communi-cative ability	7	2	1	7	3	1	1	22
	Inter-personal	4	0	1	6	4	0	2	17
2. Teamwork	Indepen-dent	10	3	4	6	3	4	0	30
	Teamwork	7	2	5	6	1	3	2	26
3. Leadership		0	2	1	3	0	0	2	8
4. Critical thinking and problem solving		8	2	5	5	1	3	1	25
5. Lifelong learning and information management	Lifelong learning	5	0	1	2	1	0	0	9
	Informa-tion manage-ment	14	3	3	5	2	3	1	31
6. Entrepreneurship		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7. Ethics and professional morals		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total		73	19	28	47	20	24	11	222

Next, the teamwork skill is the second most frequently mentioned soft skill in job advertisements. The two sub-skills of teamwork skills, ability to work independently and as a group, are equally important to job advertisers. In our experience of conducting mock job interviews with students in colleges and universities, we found that students tended to overstress leadership and teamwork skills without realising that the ability to work independently is an asset. Good teamwork outcomes are only achievable if individual members can work independently; otherwise the other group members have to cover up for the lack of the non-performing members which would compromise group outcomes.

In comparison, critical thinking and problem solving skills are not as important because they appear in only 25 (23.8%) of 105 job advertisements analysed. Problem solving is defined as "the ability to identify a problem and then come up with possible solutions. Critical thinking skills allow you to evaluate each possible solution, using logic and reasoning, to determine which one is most likely to be successful" (McKay, 2014, para. 3). The results show that critical thinking and problem solving are skills needed by science and computer science graduates more than others.

Graduates are assumed to have lifelong learning and information management skills in this era when change happens quickly and they have to deal with an immense amount of information with the help of technology. In the process of analysing the data, no descriptors close to the

definition of lifelong learning and information management skills by Department of Higher Education, Malaysia (*Modul Pembangunan Kemahiran Insaniah untuk IPT Malaysia* [Human Development Skills Module for Malaysian Institutions of Higher Learning], n.d.) were found. Instead, we found "fast learner" and "on-going improvement" as descriptors of lifelong learning skills and "effective execution of tasks" and ability to use MSOffice as descriptors of information management skills. Table 3 shows that lifelong learning is absent from job advertisements targeted at accounting, creative arts and social science graduates but it is important for human resource graduates to demonstrate their ability to learn new skills and adapt to the changing nature and conditions of their jobs. It is uncertain whether this is due to the more stable nature of the skills required for the former group of jobs compared to human resource jobs. Table 3 shows that information management skills are mentioned in 31 out of 105 job advertisements advertised. Whether or not the skill is mentioned, and regardless of the type of job, the ability to use technology to manage information is required to function in the modern workplace.

The remaining two soft skills, entrepreneurship skills, and ethics and professional morals, are not mentioned in the job advertisements analysed in this study. However, surprisingly the employers in the real estate industry considered ethics and professionalism to be the most important while information management and lifelong learning and entrepreneurship are the least important (Mohd Adnan et al., 2012). There were no real estate positions among the job advertisements analysed in this study. This comparison supports the observation that some soft skills are more job-specific than others like communication and teamwork. However, communication skill is the soft skill that foundation and diploma students have the least confidence in, according to a survey by Syed Ahmad (2013) in a Malaysian university.

Other selection criteria in job advertisements according to type of job
Apart from technical skills and soft skills, the job advertisements also specify other selection criteria which consist of personal attributes, demographic characteristics and possession of a driving licence and willingness to work in specific locations. The last two in this list, although unusual, appear rather often.

Table 4
Frequency of other selection criteria in job advertisements according to type of job

Selection criteria	Human resource (n=34)	Account (n=18)	Computer (n=14)	Science (n=11)	Engineer (n=9)	Creative arts (n=13)	Social science (n=6)	Total
1. Innovative and good attitude	13	4	13	8	3	6	1	48
2. Planning and organising skills	13	3	6	6	2	3	2	35
3. Self-motivation	7	2	1	3	2	4	1	20
4. Ability to handle pressure	5	0	3	1	1	3	0	13
5. Responsibility	3	1	0	1	1	3	0	9
6. Gender	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	3
7. Malaysian	3	2	1	0	0	1	0	7
8. Driving licence	4	3	2	3	1	5	1	19
9. Work in specific towns (position specific)	4	3	2	3	2	3	0	17

Table 4 shows that possession of a driving licence and willingness to travel appeared in 19 and 17 job advertisements respectively, mostly for jobs meant for science and creative arts graduates. Many of the jobs for science graduates are research assistants and research officers whereas the creative arts jobs requiring these are graphic designers and event managers. These jobs may

require the candidates to travel more than other desk-based jobs. A few job advertisements also specified the desired nationality and gender of the job applicant.

The personal attributes frequently mentioned in the job advertisements are innovativeness and good attitude, planning and organising skills, self-motivation, ability to handle pressure, and responsibility, in descending frequency. Planning and organising skills are expressed as management on schedule, time management, and ability to meet targets in the job advertisements. This encompasses long term and short term planning. These personal attributes profile an ideal employee as one who is innovative, well-organised, self-motivated, and work to deadlines with good outcomes.

Implications for English language education

The results of this study have pedagogical applications for the teaching of professional communication courses. Since communication skills carries the most weight among the soft skills, it is necessary to focus on upgrading students' language proficiency, communicative ability and interpersonal skills. Without good communication skills, students will not be able to convince their potential employers at interviews that they have an advantage in the required technical and soft skills for the advertised position. The communication skills referred to are often spoken skills. Therefore, in professional communication courses, it may be useful to have activities such as role plays which provide plenty of opportunities for students to learn to communicate in real-life work contexts. The communication skills targeted should not only be basic conversational skills but persuasive skills. Students should be trained to incorporate jargon from the field into their talk to show potential employers their familiarity with the field and the job. For example, accounting graduates should be able to talk about timely and accurate preparation of full sets of accounts and financial reporting procedures instead of using general and vague words. However, having role plays in class may not develop their interpersonal skills adequately. To push their communicative skills further, it may be worthwhile to arrange mock interviews and other communicative situations with industry partners to give students a feel of the authentic workplace communication.

Conclusion

The analysis of job advertisements placed in Malaysian newspapers found that it is a must to have the relevant technical skills to apply for targeted jobs, and this takes the form of a relevant qualification. The job applicants are sometimes expected to have work experience, and for this, the experience gained during industrial training and final year research projects can be used to the applicants' advantage. Most job advertisements specify one soft skill or the other, and the most frequently mentioned is communication skills which encompass language proficiency, communicative ability, and interpersonal skills. Another important soft skill is teamwork, and it is emphasised much more than leadership skill – contrary to what university students may think. Teamwork skills constitute the ability to work independently, an aspect which may have been sidelined as teamwork spells group work and makes individual effort oblivious. Lifelong learning and information management skills as well as critical thinking and problem solving skills carry less weight among the soft skills. This study has made use of job advertisements as a proxy to understand what employers conceive of as "soft skills" needed for graduate employment but further studies are needed to directly investigate employers' expectations of graduates in terms of soft skills in various industries.

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