Multiple skills for versatility

VERSATILIST

The new age professionalism demands that one be an expert in their chosen field, as well as have some cursory knowledge of allied fields, observes **V Pradeep Kumar**

Recently, while teaching applied statistics in Marketing Research, I could see tension building up on a few faces, with stony expressions. The comfort and familiarity with marketing concepts had disappeared, bringing an alien subject to the fore, prompting me to ask the question.

"Have you had an exposure to mathematics?" I asked an innocuous question to the management students. "Yes, Sir" a student answered confidently, prompting me to ask, "When was it?". His answer, "In the school, Sir" left me speechless.

The incident reminded me of students who take courses in arts and commerce, primarily for the freedom from mathematics. Their fear of mathematics or 'math phobia' is in fact a widely researched subject probing performance anxiety, pedagogy, gender and regional disparities, which has even led to developing a performance scaling known as Mathematics Anxiety Rating Scale [MARS].

Perils of micro-specialization

Post globalization, the dynamics of change is evident in all spheres of society and managing change - a key requirement. I have come across students getting stuck at campus recruitments and professionals stuck in careers, due to lack of knowledge or skills beyond their course or functional area. A few months ago, John (an Engineer), with an MS degree from US, walked into my office. His problem: despite academic excellence and a well-groomed personality, he was stuck in his career. The micro-specialization in engineering that he had done, had promised great scope, but with technological changes, the specialization lost its glitter affecting his career as well as personal life.

Every profession requires a dominant knowledge and skills or specialization to perform; but you can perform better only if you have related skills. Further, organizational undercurrents can suddenly develop into a storm, taking everyone by surprise. Years ago, the entire branch office of a sales organization I knew, resigned en masse. The crisis exposed the ineffectiveness of the marketing head with poor people management skills that was more crucial in that crisis. Similarly, in HR or finance positions, knowledge and familiarity of the fundamentals of marketing is necessary. Today, an organization needs 'versatilists' ie. people with holistic personality that enables perfect understanding and coordination, producing synergistic results.

The word 'Versatilist' was coined first in 2003 in a study titled, 'Unlocking the business value of people: building versatility' by Diane Morella, a Research Analyst with Gartner. The study opines, "Versatilists are able to apply a depth of skill to a progressively widening scope of situations and experiences, equally at ease with technical issues as with business strategy".

Academic perspective

The importance of interdisciplinary skills and organizational needs, led to universities combining two or more disciplines and offer new programs. Such diverse courses include Biotech, Biomedical engineering, Biostatistics, Neural Engineering, Hospital Management, Wine Management, Social Impact Management, and many more. In fact, there's even an MBA program in Football Management!

Stanford University has a course in Science, Technology, and Society (STS) that provides students with a liberal arts education for the twenty-first century. The program's affiliated faculty represent over a dozen departments, including Anthropology, Communication, Computer Science, Education, Electrical Engineering, History, Law, Management Science, and Engineering, Political Science, and Sociology. STS Majors, develop depth within two or three fields of study, while fostering a broad understanding of the technical and social dimensions of science and technology.

Long Island University Global, New York, offers another interesting four-year undergraduate program. The course has an innovatively designed curriculum involving subjects like Globalization, Development and Change, Environment and Sustainability, Cultural Anthropology and Ethnographic Research Methods, Media and Social Change, Economic History, Gender Issues, Languages, and Cuisine. In this context, Dr. Alina Feld, Interim Director of India Center, explains, "Our curriculum is based on the philosophy that understanding of oneself, local culture, and the culture across the world, necessarily involves both theoretical and practical or experiential learning. Our students can thus acquire an understanding of the interdependence of social, cultural, environmental, and political systems apart from personal and social responsibilities, intellectual and practical skills". Students of this program spend a semester or two in different countries including India and get a comprehensive knowledge and exposure to the complex phenomenon of globalization.

Management Programs were probably the first to combine several disciplines and offer them as an integral part of the course, leading to the development of modern managers. It takes you through the basics of Statistics, Quantitative Techniques, Economics, Human Behaviour, Marketing, Finance and the likes. Such multi-disciplinary skills are crucial to understanding different perspectives of organizational issues and decision-making challenges. This is the most important reason for the efficiency of management graduates, and hence the popularity of the course.

Several universities across the world have introduced innovative interdisciplinary programs that are worth considering when you evaluate options in higher education.

Industry viewpoint

A survey by leading IT magazine CIO, indicated that IT jobs require geeks who are business minded, with soft skills such as project management, communication, leadership and organizational skills. The survey revealed that most students come up with tech skills but don't have soft skills and program management required in a dynamic environment. A report by NASSCOM also opines that key skills required in an engineering graduate are communication, problem solving, and technical skills, and only about 25% of engineering graduates are readily employable.

Thomas Friedman, who wrote the revolutionary book, 'The world is flat' says, 'the flat world is a place where economic stability is not going to be a feature' and argues for rugged, adaptable entrepreneurs. Nandan Nilekani, Former CEO and MD of Infosys Technologies elaborates further, "Successful managers of the future need to be of third kind - the Versatilists." Explaining the concept, Nilekani says, "A versatilist has the ability to apply skills more intensively to situations. One should be equally at ease with technical issues as with business and strategic. You have to synthesize knowledge, and wholesomely experience the context to create value."

Facilitating efficiency

Many studies have shown that teaching interdisciplinarily increases the motivation levels of students, engaging them in active listening. Students become interested and open-minded, moving away from bias and preconceived notions, developing the attitude and competence to see different perspectives on a given subject. As a student, you aren't cocooned in isolation and can easily see the 'bigger picture', through critical and creative thinking. Such comprehensive learning equips you with life-skills increasing your ability and confidence, to deal with professional and personal challenges. These are the skills and personality traits, organizations look for in campus recruitments.

Therefore, identify key knowledge and skill sets, beyond your core specialization, that could facilitate your professional efficiency. For example, to become a successful Marketing Manager, you need to know the basics of people management, HR, and finance. Similarly, if you want to become an IT Project Manager, focus on communication, leadership, time-management and the likes, apart from technical skills. A successful career follows when you pursue your specialization and also acquire related knowledge and skills, developing a holistic personality. Years ago, the famous Biologist and an advocate of the theory of evolution - Thomas Huxley said, "Try to learn something about everything and everything about something", which emphasizes the gist of the concept.