

Indian IT firms don't need more robotic "yes men"—they need real humans to solve problems

By Ananya Bhattacharya

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As automation takes over low-skill, repetitive tasks in the software industry, jobs are becoming increasingly complex and demand quick execution. In this scenario, the catch-all phrase plaguing India's \$150 billion IT sector is the "skills gap," referring to a shortage of hard skills in sought-after areas such as big data and artificial intelligence.

However, there is another area that techies are falling short in: soft skills. Also known as "people skills," this refers to a collection of productive personality traits that allows people to interact with others effectively. Traits like strong communication, self-confidence, high emotional intelligence, and analytical thinking all fall under the domain of soft skills.

Over 36% of more than 42,000 Indian employers surveyed in the 2016 Talent Shortage Survey by the ManpowerGroup, a multinational human-resource software and consulting services firm, cited a lack of soft skills among candidates as reason for their inability to fill vacancies.

Earlier, IT and business process outsourcing (BPO) firms would have large teams with over 100 persons, where only managerial-level employees interacted with clients. Now, team sizes are shrinking, and every employee is expected to contribute in a meaningful way, rather than just carry out instructions for set tasks.

Companies in India are "in desperate need of engineers and software developers to service foreign clients but are increasingly frustrated by graduates who are not workplace ready," a January 2015 Economist Intelligence Unit report states. "Poor problem solving, lateral thinking, communication and decision making skills, and an inability to work in a team are listed amongst the most significant failings."

In a world where **"the machines are winning,"** the way for people to differentiate themselves is by focusing on things that make us **"most human,"** recruitment firm Boyden's managing partner in India, **Dinesh Mirchandani**, told Quartz. Empathy and imagination helps one **"recognise the real problems that need solving"** and **"creatively apply technology to solve them,"** Mirchandani said.

And this is exactly where India's engineering population gets beat.

Falling short of words

Language, particularly English, is one of the most important soft skills required in the industry.

The bulk of Indian engineers hail from small towns like Aurangabad in Maharashtra, Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh, and Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh, Kris Lakshmikanth, the founder of executive recruitment firm Head Hunters India, told Quartz. And most of them are educated in local languages, rarely in English, the major or even bridge language of the top software markets. "When clients are in the US or Europe, English is the only common language, and they (workers) find it difficult to communicate (with clients in writing and orally)," Lakshmikanth said.

Earlier, the instructions for what was required were written down, and techies would turn that into code in two or three weeks, said Ed Szofer, CEO of SenecaGlobal, a product development outsourcing company. "Today, the tech, the way it's being developed, is much more current and timely. Agile development is the way to work collaboratively with teams everyday...in a scrum session, on video or audio," Szofer said. His 300-employee firm, with operations in Hyderabad, works in small teams of between five and 15, so every person needs to contribute on a project.

Meanwhile, the definition of soft skills itself is broadening. It was largely about spoken skills and presentations earlier, according to Sangeeta Gupta, vice-president of India's National Association of Software and Services Companies (NASSCOM). "Now there's design thinking, social media skills, creativity, and problem-solving. In business, communication has always been important, but now people need collaborative and story-telling skills also," Gupta told Quartz.

However, a confident and communicative demeanour is only the first step towards landing a job and excelling in it.

No "yes men" please!

Indian techies have a lot more catching up to do in terms of cultural baggage, too. For instance, in Indian schools, questioning a teacher is rarely encouraged; classroom debating itself is rare. And that plays to youngsters' disadvantage. Indian tech workers, hence, are far more hierarchical and submissive than their global counterparts.

"We don't want the Indian 'Yes,' which is 'I hear ya but I don't get it and I'm not going to object to you because of the way I was brought up.' It catches up with you," Szofer said. "Our clients need innovation, they need to be challenged."

Hence, the change must come from there: Indian schools and universities, where the emphasis is still mostly on rote learning.

Technical institutes in India are textbook-centric and offer little industry exposure, networking opportunities, or communication training for the most part. "There's a strong focus on tech: learning how to program Java, becoming a hardcore engineer. That's great, but that's only part of the equation," Chicago-based Szofer said. "The other bit is communication, confidence, understanding social differences, and so on. If you don't have those (soft) skills, in 10 years, you're going to be left in the cold."

Nevertheless, change is slowly but surely seeping in.

Many tech firms now keep English language teachers on staff to host classroom sessions. Companies are also leveraging on digital platforms, creating videos and launching app-based training. Although, they would still much rather keep costs down and hire people with soft skills, instead of spending money on grooming others, Head Hunter's Lakshmikanth points out.

On its part, the government of India is making internships compulsory for college students to improve their exposure to the industry. Bigwigs like Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) and Infosys have forged partnerships with engineering colleges and opened in-house training centres to prime techies for the workforce.

Dinesh Mirchandani is a Managing Partner of Boyden India.

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