

Skill Building: Quo: Vadis

Healthy economy and incessant growth are paramount for any country to serve larger interest of socio-economic development of its people. We are no exception to this, adage. In fact, for a nation like ours its all the more critical to grow our economy at a rate that is high enough to fulfil not only basic needs of our people but also for taking care of their increasing aspirations.

Today's world is characterized by liberalisation of individual economies and boundary less markets. It operates in a highly competitive environment where in growth and development of any country is driven by knowledge, skills and competencies of its people. This holds true for us also as evident in impact of IT revolution on our national economy. However, IT sector alone is not enough for our growing needs and we need to have similar contributions from other sectors of economy as well i.e., manufacturing, mining, services etc. Unfortunately, scenario in other sectors with regards to availability of required knowledge, skills and competencies, has been far from satisfactory on account of rampant skill shortages. In fact, no one was surprised when Skill Shortage was identified as a major challenge for the MAKE IN INDIA PROGRAMME by our current Prime Minister. Seriousness of his concerns can be judged from decision of setting up a separate ministry of skill development. This has certainly infused a new vigour into numerous ongoing skills building activities across the country.

Recognition of skill shortage as a major challenge for our economic growth is not new. For more than a decade industry leader have been expressing their concerns and limitations in improving competitiveness of Indian industry due to acute skill shortages (Just 2% skilled man power as compared to more than 70% skilled manpower in most of developed countries). Number of Economic Surveys, conducted by various national and international agencies including World Bank, ADB and FICCI etc, have also indicated it as a major impediment for further economic growth of the country. In fact, since 2005 we have seen number of Skill Building Schemes/Initiatives launched by various Central Government Agencies like NSDC, NSDA, NSDCB, NCVD etc. along with personal involvement of PMO's Prime Minister's National Council on Skill Development. Most of these activities were conducted in coordination with various state govt agencies and private sector entities spending millions of tax payer's money. For the purposes of records and targeted numbers, thousands of people were trained though we are yet to see any perceptible impact on skill shortages. In fact if this state of affairs continues, in spite of alarming increase in numbers of unemployed people (423 million by 2030), we are likely to face shortages of more than 300 million skilled people by 2022.

So why is it that our country which is soon going to be the most populated nation of the world with the highest numbers of employable people (960 million by 2030), equipped with best of educational infrastructure (thousands of ITIs, Polytechnic and Engineering Colleges, Universities, Medical and Paramedical Colleges, tens of IITs, IIMs

and Central Universities etc) and whose people are recognised as best of talent abroad is suffering from this problem?

While number of reasons like institution-industry gaps in terms of curriculum, teaching methodologies, inadequate focus on practical training, upgrading of courses designs, quality of teachers etc have already been identified and being acted upon, we are yet to see serious attention to some of the basic but critically vital issues bearing very strong impact on effectiveness of skill building initiatives. These issues are:

1. Failure to Distinguish Basic Skill Building from Skill Enhancement.

We need to distinguish skill building of unskilled/semi-skilled people from skill enhancement/up gradation and address both issues differently. Unfortunately, we have been focusing more on skill building of unskilled/semi-skilled people and very little attention is paid to skill enhancement. There is no doubt about existence of skill shortages for elementary jobs in different sectors of economy and Government has to address burning issue of mounting unemployment, but it is to be noted that during last decade country has developed reasonably adequate educational and technical / training infrastructure, good enough for taking care of basic skill development activities. What is needed here is qualitative improvement of delivery from these institutions by way of drastically improved institution-industry collaboration and updating of curriculum to bridge in existing skill gaps for elementary jobs. Once effectiveness and relevance of offerings from these institutions is improved, we may not be required to invest additional efforts for this objective.

Skill enhancement of people is a bigger pain with high degree of complexities and demands substantial amount of investment and efforts in terms of identification of skill gaps and training of people accordingly. So far industry has been doing so by way of heavy investment in terms of trial-and-error learning /retraining with very limited success. However, what is needed here is concerted and collaborative efforts by Government and private sector for precise identification of sector/industry specific skill shortages, incorporation of these skills in the curriculum of ITIs, Polytechnics, Engineering colleges etc, adequate practical exposure of latest technology during studies/on the job training and effective refresher programmes for those who are already employed.

2. Inadequate Attention to Technology Context of Targeted Skills.

Frequently our skill development initiatives fail to generate desired results because of very weak alignment of targeted skills with technology environment and expected on job performance.

Skill development is not end in itself rather it is a means for generating improved performance in different careers/jobs and requires to be seen in the context of

technical environment of respective careers/professions. Skills do not operate in isolation and unless backed by relevant knowledge and competencies specific to technical environment in which they are to be used, will not generate desired level of performance. This calls for clarity with respect to expected performance and what is needed in terms of specific knowledge, skills and competencies for generating same in given technology environment.

3. Social Stigmas Attached to Different Careers/Professions.

There is distinct categorisation of all careers/jobs into white Collar jobs and blue-Collar jobs. All operational jobs including highly complex technical jobs are recognized as blue collar jobs while office jobs and supervisory jobs are considered as white-collar jobs. Social respectability of white-collar jobs in our country is perceived to be very high even if employment prospects are better and compensation is higher in many blue-collar jobs. As a result of this, blue collar career options are explored only when people are compelled by absence of employment opportunities in any of white-collar profession/career. Resulting limited supply of right talent for critical and complex blue-collar jobs is also an important contributing factor in skill shortages besides low motivation of people who are opting for blue collar jobs out of compulsions.

Reclassification and redesignation of critical and complex operational jobs in organisational hierarchies will certainly help in attracting talent for blue collar jobs thereby improving skill availability for these jobs.

4. Failure to Recognise Role Of Individual Differences.

This is perhaps most important missing link in our current skill building initiatives. Quite often people are subjected to skill development without understanding their personal inclination/interest for a particular career/ job based on mistaken belief that anyone can be trained for any job. Here, one must understand that self-interest/motivation not only plays an important role in deciding intensity and magnitude of skills acquisition for superior performance but also triggers no of self-driven efforts for skill enhancement. One could see an intense fire within these people for excellence by way of continuous improvements. Bill Gate, Steve Job, MS Dhoni, Sachin Tendulkar are some of well-known names of modern era from list of many who could do exceptionally well because of strong passion and happiness with their chosen career.

To understand which careers a person is likely to enjoy, one needs to look at relationship of his psychological profiles (combination of personality type, dominant intelligence, interests, values etc) with different careers. Every career demands specific job behaviours/actions from the role holder. Similarly, every individual has his own unique psychological profile and people with specific psychological profiles are likely to be comfortable and happy with the jobs/careers whose behavioural demands are

aligned to characteristics of their psychological profile. Any mismatching of psychological profile with chosen job/career makes people vulnerable to disengagement, low motivation, limited growth and development and at times change of job/career and no amount of skill enhancement investment will work on them.

In view of above, unless we match psychological profiles of individuals with demands of jobs/careers for which skill development is intended, we are not likely to get desired outcome from our skill development initiatives.

Once all of above issues are reasonably addressed, we are bound to see much more productive results from our skill building initiatives than what we have been getting so far.