TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SKILLS FOR EMPLOYABILITY: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION

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Abstract

Today's workforce needs skills such as critical thinking, communication, adaptability, and digital literacy. Employability in the 21st century goes beyond academic and technical skills; it also encompasses leadership and teamwork spirit, as well as emotional intelligence and problem-solving skills, which are essential for success in a rapidly changing world of industry. As new roles arise from technological and societal shifts, education systems must prepare learners to meet these needs. This paper explores certain employability skills and key competencies for the modern workplace. This paper highlights key employability skills—problem-solving, emotional intelligence, leadership, and teamwork—as essential for paving the way to success in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Critical Thinking**,** Emotional Intelligence, Employability**,** Leadership, Problem-Solving**,** Teamwork

Introduction

Skills necessary for finding employment in the 21st century extend beyond technical and academic skills; they encompass cognitive, interpersonal, and digital abilities crucial for success in a rapidly evolving world. As new roles emerge due to technological and societal shifts, education systems must equip learners to meet these demands. This paper examines employability skills for the modern workplace and explores the role of education in fostering these skills. Employability skills are a versatile blend of knowledge, digital abilities, and personal qualities such as emotional intelligence, leadership, team spirit, problem-solving, and critical thinking that enable individuals to acquire, retain, and succeed in employment. The World Economic Forum (2020), therefore, emphasises that the workforce in the 21st century requires more than just technical expertise—employers now value skills such as critical thinking, communication, adaptability, and digital literacy.

Problem Solving

Problems are inevitable. The journey of life is all about tackling different kinds of problems in various circumstances, finding the right solutions, and moving forward. Even a small child, when given a spoon for the first time, encounters a problem because they do not know what to do with it. As they are instructed on its use, the child finds a solution. And this solution stays with them throughout their lives. So, in most cases, once we face a problem, the solution becomes a lifelong learning experience. Since problems and addressing them have been fundamental traits of human life, why do we need to study the concept of problem-solving academically? Hasn't life already taught us how to deal with problems effectively? If so, why is there a need for a theoretical understanding of problem-solving? This question itself is a problem, and before we explore the chapter in detail, we need to find an appropriate answer—or answers—to it. From early in our lives, we are presented with puzzles and many others, helping us get used to problem-solving. Often, there are multiple solutions to a problem, but one may be the best and least time-consuming. This demonstrates that problem-solving is a skill—a craft that, if learned early in life, makes it easier to navigate life. Issues cease to be problems if we know how to manage them, accept them as they are, and understand how to resolve them. A problem may seem overwhelming when there is no immediate solution or resolution.

A problem is an interruption in a process where, for some reason (often unknown), reaching the desired goal becomes difficult. In other words, when it is observed that the goal is gradually becoming more out of reach from the current or initial state due to obstacles, it can be identified as a problem. According to K. Duncker, a problem arises when someone does not know how to progress from the initial state to the desired goal (1). Problems can be of many kinds –

- Well-defined Problems – A problem is well-defined when we know the desired goal and the means to achieve it. What varies is the method to reach that specific goal. Suppose the battery of your mobile phone has become weaker, and you are facing an issue with your mobile device. You know what the problem is—a weak battery. So, the solution is more straightforward: either replace the battery or buy a new phone.
- Ill-defined Problems—These are problems in which the intended goal and the reasons behind the issue are unknown, making it unclear how the situation will unfold once a solution is found. For example, if your mobile phone is behaving oddly and you don't know why, it can be considered an ill-defined problem.
- Abstractly defined problems are those where the future is uncertain. If the problem is solved, then it will also be in abstraction.
- Domain-specific problems are issues that require specialised knowledge to solve and can be referred to as domain-specific knowledge. For example, when a gadget stops working, we call an engineer to repair it, as engineers possess domain-specific knowledge.

Thomas J D'Zurilla defined problem-solving as a "cognitive affective behavioural process through which an individual (or group) attempts to identify, discover, or invent effective means of coping with problems encountered in everyday living." As mentioned earlier, we face problems daily in all areas of our lives—some we resolve efficiently and therefore do not seem to be problems. In contrast, others are too complex to solve easily, and when we encounter them, we are usually puzzled and sometimes even disturbed. What is needed is to adopt the right approach to identify the problem's causes and address them so we can eliminate them and reach the desired outcome. Problems should be regarded as chances for learning. Each obstacle we face in life teaches us something new – it prepares us to face life with greater courage. Instead of feeling tense about problems, we must confront them bravely and strive to resolve them whenever possible. The seven steps for an effective problem-solving process are

- **Identify the problem.** When doing so, it is essential to distinguish between primary and secondary issues, as only then potential solutions can be explored. Often, writing down problems clearly helps understand them.
- **List the Possible Solutions.** Once the problem and its root cause are identified, all potential solutions should be explored. It is also recommended to write down these solutions. If a group is engaged in problem-solving, it must brainstorm collectively to arrive at a possible conclusion.
- **Understand everyone's interests.** A problem and its solution may create more problems for others. Therefore, it is vital to consider everyone's interests when seeking solutions. The best solution is one that satisfies all parties. It is the effective solution which meets everyone's needs.
- **Evaluate the options.** Among the written options for solutions, assess their merits and demerits individually to identify the one that best suits everyone.
- **Select an option.** As the evaluation progresses, it is time to decide whether to take the risk and select the option that best addresses the problem.

- **Implement the option.** It is time to implement the problem-solving option now. While doing so, it is essential to monitor carefully to ensure the solution is not causing any additional problems. If it does, implementation should be stopped immediately; if it does not, it can be continued.
- **Evaluation.** After implementation, one should re-assess whether the chosen option (solution) is appropriate. If it is suitable, that is positive; if not, one must re-evaluate and repeat the entire process to find the correct solution.

When solving a problem, always consider the resources available to you. Often, the solution is right in front of us, but we do not know how to use the resources effectively. Abundant resources are always at our disposal, waiting to be utilised properly. However, due to our lack of knowledge and experience, it can be challenging to determine which resource to use in a specific situation to achieve the desired outcome. Resources are frequently all around us for solving problems, but because we are unaware of how to utilise them, we struggle to do so effectively. What is necessary is that we learn how to use resources. When a problem arises, many people rely on the trial-and-error method to find a solution. Sometimes, it works similarly to "*Jugaad,*" but it is not a guaranteed approach, as no one can predict which method will effectively resolve the issue. Patience is essential, as one must continually try different options and observe whether the chosen method leads to the desired result. However, this approach is not reliable or suitable in most cases. When the problem is complex, trial-and-error often fails, especially when many factors are involved or the environment is too vast, making the method ineffective.

In many situations, "*Jugaad*"—the trial-and-error method—fails. When that occurs, advanced critical thinking is required to resolve the problem. Critical thinking is the capacity to reflect intelligently on and evaluate ideas and experiences. It involves developing mental discipline that enables a person to rationally interpret, analyse, and explain rather than merely finding solutions to problems. As a deliberate method of inquiry, critical thinking allows individuals to assess their learning through active engagement with multiple perspectives. It results in a self-regulating and systematic understanding of the world. It is a thinking process that can be cultivated into a habit of the mind through consistent practice. It is a strategy that helps individuals become aware of their knowledge limits and recognise the potential to understand the world more intelligently.

Critical thinking is defined as "that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem – in which the thinker … takes charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposes intellectual standards upon them" (Davis-Seaver 22). Thus, critical thinking is "carefully cultivated curiosity" (Davis-Seaver 24) that evaluates the possibilities that ideas about how we understand the world are constantly being formed, unformed, refined, and redefined. It prevents ideas from ossifying and enables the active, informed dissemination of knowledge that can be fruitfully employed to better human lives. What is needed is for one to cultivate critical thinking and use it effectively in problem-solving.

Often, technology or technological devices help solve specific problems. Technology has greatly benefited humankind and is a blessing to human civilisation. With technology, our lives have become much easier, and as a result, we utilise technology in every aspect of our daily routines. We should also harness technology to address the challenges we face. For instance, if you are travelling to a specific place and encounter heavy traffic on a particular route, you do what you do nowadays: turn on Google Maps on your Smartphone and seek an alternative route to resolve the immediate issue. This exemplifies how we incorporate technology into our lives to solve problems. There are countless examples all around us.

Emotional Intelligence

"Emotional Intelligence is the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships. Emotional Intelligence describes abilities distinct from, but complementary to, academic intelligence or the purely cognitive capacities measured by IQ." (Goleman 1988)

Whenever emotions are discussed, they are often regarded as secondary and less significant than reason. Emotional Intelligence is a behavioural skill that improves our performance in both professional and personal areas of life. In essence, emotional intelligence can help us achieve our goals, provided we possess the other necessary skills. Professor Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer described emotional intelligence as a cognitive ability to operate within the laws that govern the intellect. In summary, emotional intelligence is a combination of intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies or management skills that help us navigate our relationships. It is generally believed that having the following qualities in one's professional life indicates emotional intelligence –

- **One can manage one's emotions under pressure.** Under pressure, all of us falter for various reasons. Whether it is work pressure, emotional strain, or something else, one often finds oneself in a state of discomfort. It is essential to manage pressure wisely. In such situations, behaving in an emotionally intelligent manner is also essential. One should neither become angry nor irritated when under pressure nor lose composure.

- **One listens in a way that makes others feel heard.** Listening to others makes people feel valued. We must ensure others feel valued so they can respond appropriately to the demands of the time. An emotionally intelligent person will act in ways that make others feel appreciated and that convey the message that their voices and opinions are as important as anyone else's.

- **One is quick to show empathy.** We must understand that we live multiple lives simultaneously – professional, personal, social, and more. In the professional realm, one must behave professionally, but often elements from our other lives unconsciously and unintentionally influence it. In such situations, being an empathetic listener to others' problems is essential. Anyone quick to show empathy fosters a relationship, and it matters most in the world.

- **One takes responsibility for one's own mistakes.** When one works, one is bound to make mistakes. But that does not mean we should stop working, nor that we should refuse to admit our mistakes. When one admits to one's mistakes, it shows that one is human, prone to errors, and brave enough to acknowledge them. Therefore, taking responsibility for mistakes is often regarded as an emotionally intelligent act.

- **One is open to feedback.** Feedback is an essential part of any communication. Without it, no communication is complete. However, some individuals, afflicted with a superiority complex, believe they are the ultimate authority and that their words are final, leaving nothing to come after they have spoken. These individuals suffer from a complexity that, in turn, instils fear in their subordinates, who feel unsafe voicing opposition. Consequently, by closing off channels of communication, these people often endanger the organisation. When one is emotionally intelligent, one keeps all avenues of feedback open, recognising that a better idea can come from anyone, and that listening to others' suggestions is always vital for growth and success.

- **One can work through conflicts.** When a few people gather to work or play, disagreements are inevitable for various reasons. However, such conflicts should not result in a deadlock. An emotionally intelligent person knows how to manage and navigate through conflicts to come

out successfully. It is a skill that one must develop along with one's problem-solving abilities.

- **One earns respect.** Whenever one follows the earlier-mentioned maxims in their personal and professional life, they find themselves respected by others. In a work environment, respect is not only a source of great joy but also a way to foster smooth working relationships. It relates to emotional intelligence: once one gains respect for the person they are, the work atmosphere becomes more congenial, and work flows more smoothly.

It is worth noting that people can experience a range of emotions. These include anger, fear, joy, sadness, anticipation, surprise, disgust, and trust. According to Robert Plutchik, these are the eight basic emotions. It is essential to be aware of these emotions and learn how to regulate them to achieve greater success in life. Those who can manage these eight emotions well understand that a fulfilling life lies ahead. The actions we need to take regarding these emotions are –

- **Being aware of emotions** – The first key aspect of developing emotional intelligence is recognising the fundamental emotions and the environments or stimuli that trigger them. Once you understand these two elements, managing your emotions becomes easier.
- **Regulate Emotions** – One must control emotions to reach greater heights in life. If someone becomes angry in a specific environment or for a particular reason, it is recommended that the individual avoid those circumstances to maintain emotional stability. Once this is accomplished, the person can channel their emotions in a positive direction to achieve more in life.
- **Controlling Negative Emotions and Encouraging Positive Emotions** – When someone encourages positive emotions in their life and avoids or manages negative emotions by being in the right environment and avoiding the wrong people, they can steer their life in a positive direction, allowing them to channel their energies effectively.
- **Controlling Emotions While Problem Solving** – When problems arise, it is common for us to lose our "cool," often leading us to make the wrong decisions. One must be especially cautious when dealing with problems.
- **Curtain Impulsive Behaviour** – people often act on their impulses. Such behaviour should be kept to a minimum to maintain emotional intelligence.
- **Handling Stress** – Modern life involves managing stress on various levels. The better someone manages their stress, the better their quality of life. We must develop mechanisms for handling stress through routines, systematic, practical, and pragmatic approaches to attain emotional intelligence.
- **Being Patient** – One must have patience with life and others. Things do not always progress as desired. We must be patient with ourselves and others to stabilise our emotions and maintain emotional intelligence.

Leadership

We all aspire to become leaders and want others to follow us. However, in reality, the opposite often occurs. Why is that? Why are we followers instead of leaders? What is lacking in us that prevents us from leading? These questions are essential to consider when reflecting on what truly makes a leader. A leader stands tall among the crowd – not necessarily in height, but metaphorically. They stand out so distinctly that they are recognised as different from the rest, and this difference commands respect and admiration. At the same time, a true leader remains connected to their people, sharing common ground with them while maintaining a unique presence. This is one key trait among others. A leader's role is to guide a group towards a desired goal. In this sense, anyone can be a leader, as long as they have the potential to steer a group to success.

- **A leader should have a vision** – they are the ones who turn dreams into reality, but first, the dream must be conceived. A leader envisions the future they want to see and strives towards it. A leader is someone who not only dreams of a future for themselves but also for their team, their group, and their people, and who inspires confidence that these dreams can be realised.
- To achieve his dream, the leader then seeks the correct method. Nothing can be accomplished if one is not prepared for the circumstances one faces. **A leader plans carefully and adapts plans to meet needs.**
- **A leader should be manipulative** —"manipulative" often carries negative connotations when applied to a leader, but Machiavelli, in *The Prince,* argues that a leader must be manipulative. A leader needs to know when to deploy resources and mobilise their people to achieve the desired outcome. Often, a leader cannot fight alone; they must take their people along in their fight for a righteous cause.
- **A leader needs to empathise with the people** – they must genuinely care for them. A true leader understands their people deeply and acts accordingly.
- **A leader should demonstrate integrity**—a leader always sets the standard by their own example. A leader is a leader because they have earned the right to lead. A leader does not impose themselves on people unnecessarily; instead, they earn others' respect to become a leader. It is through their actions that they garner respect.
- **A leader must be a motivator**—someone who can guide people towards a goal.
- **A leader should possess exceptional communicative competence** – a good leader must be an effective communicator, as they need to instruct, motivate, and inspire those involved to act in a way that will lead to the desired outcome.
- **A leader is willing to take risks** – A leader takes risks at the right moment and achieves the supposedly undoable.
    - **A leader is skilled at problem-solving** — whenever an issue arises, it is usually the leader who takes charge of resolving it by gathering and utilising the available resources, whether their own or those of the group. Often, people believe that a leader is born – that leadership qualities are innate. However, this is not true. No one is born a leader. Instead, one learns to become a leader by developing the right attributes at the right time. Life often presents us with opportunities to become leaders. Many of us fail to seize those opportunities. Those who do succeed become leaders, while others remain followers. It is essential to cultivate all the qualities necessary to become a leader, and life will undoubtedly give us the chance to do so.

Team Building

A team is generally a group of people who come together to achieve a specific goal. We must recognise that we are social beings and therefore cannot remain in solitude all the time; we need the company of others to live fully. Additionally, we cannot survive in this world alone. To ensure our survival, we must unite as a group or team to overcome the challenges that often arise. It is this necessity that has led people to think in terms of building teams. It is essential to understand that the concept of a team is nothing new; since ancient times, people have been forming teams to achieve specific goals, foster cooperation among individuals, motivate themselves, and encourage everyone in the team to reach objectives essential for a better life. To achieve specific goals, a team needs many attributes, such as –

- **A desired and shared goal—t**he first essential for any team to form — is a clear goal. Team members should feel motivated to achieve it. A team's goal is not an individual's goal, but a

shared one for all members. If the goal is not shared, members will not put in their best effort to reach it. Therefore, each member must believe the goal is achievable for both themselves and the team.

- **Cooperation -** To achieve the shared goal, team members should feel encouraged to cooperate for the best outcome. Members should believe that through cooperation, the goal can be reached.
- **Motivation -** Motivation plays a crucial role in any achievement. Without motivation, progress becomes a barrier rather than a facilitator. Within a team, it is not only the motivation of individual members that matters; the entire team must be motivated to succeed.
- **Team dynamics -** The dynamics within a team are fundamental – each team member should understand and empathise with the others to achieve a cohesive, results-driven outcome.
- **Leadership -** Each team needs a leader who can provide vision and motivation to achieve its mission. It depends on the leader how they guide the team forward. A leader's role is not only to lead, but also to bring everyone under them toward the desired goal – to motivate and bring out the best in everyone, ensuring the goal is reached through proper planning and execution.
- **Determination -** Any team that succeeds does so because it is determined to do so. Determination is a vital element of achievement. Here, determination not only means the team has confidence, but also that each member believes they can reach the goal.
- **Shared responsibility -** In a team, each individual has a specific role to fulfil – they should be aware of their responsibilities. They should know their area of competence within the team and how to utilise it effectively to achieve the desired outcome.
- **Mutual respect -** Every team member should show respect to others. Without respect, work stalls. Each person should believe that others are just as vital to the team's success as they are. A team also succeeds because each member perceives that others are performing their duties with purpose and commitment, and for that reason, they should be regarded with respect.
- **Trust -** Trust is essential in building any team. A group of individuals come together as a team because each member trusts the others. Therefore, any information and details necessary for the team's success can be shared with every member. Any breach of trust causes the team to fall apart. Many remarkable achievements around the world have been realised because team members felt they could fully trust one another.
- **Core Competence -** Each team member has their own core competence. Suppose someone is considering starting a website-making startup; a team is necessary, and each team member should have expertise in their area. The individual(s) who will design and build the website need to be proficient in that; others need to be skilled in marketing the product; some will be responsible for handling advertising, while others will manage administrative tasks. Therefore, core competencies must be present in every team member to ensure the team's success.
- **Coordination -** Coordination is essential for any team to succeed. As mentioned earlier, a team exists because it shares a common goal. To reach that goal, team members need to understand how to work together effectively.
- **Management -** Team management differs from leading a team. The success of a team relies not only on its leader but also on effective management.
- **Execution -** For any team to succeed, it must plan to achieve its desired goal. Once planning is complete, the team must ensure the plan is executed correctly. Things don't always need to go according to plan; unforeseen conditions and the environment can sometimes require changing the plan, falling back on the backup plan, or adopting it with necessary modifications.

The team should be prepared for such adaptations during execution. When a plan is made, things have just started moving for the team; the real test of a team's competence lies in executing the plan.

Conclusion

Diverse employability skills are crucial for the 21st-century workforce. Education systems play a key role in developing these skills, helping students adapt to shifting labour-market demands. By emphasising problem-solving, leadership, emotional intelligence, and teamwork, universities can prepare learners to navigate an increasingly complex global economy. Emotional intelligence is a behavioural skill that improves our performance in both professional and other areas of life. Similarly, critical thinking skills are essential for problem-solving and for developing leadership qualities, which are essential for teamwork. There is an urgent need to focus on these skills to make our learners employment-ready.

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