

ANALYZING EXPECTATIONS OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATORS ON KEY SKILLS REQUIRED FOR ENTRY-LEVEL JOBS IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the expected entry-level skills required in various business sectors from the business administrators' perspectives in the Thai context. Survey questionnaires were distributed to business administrators who had managerial experience at different levels in either domestic firms or international companies located in Thailand to explore their views and expectations towards graduates' employability skills taught and refined by higher educational institutions. Total of 432 questionnaires were collected and analyzed. Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted for in-depth discussions based on the findings from the questionnaire analysis. Two salient findings emerged from this study. First, business administrators' expectations on entry-level job skills were not quite affected by their sector, gender, age, and years of employment. Second, entrepreneurial skills were considered as the most important skill category required for entry-level jobs, especially employees' attitudes. This sheds light on how the higher education can narrow the gap between the perceived differences on employability skills that are deemed crucial.

Key words: administrators' perspectives, employability skills, entrepreneurial skills, entry-level jobs, Thai context

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Introduction

The rapidly changing world demands higher stipulation from recent university graduates placing particular significance to higher education programs. The role of universities in preparing qualified graduates for the workforce is a longstanding and controversial issue (Barnett, 2000) and the relationship between higher education institutions and the labor market has always been complexly related. The human capital theory (Paadi, 2014; Schultz, 1961) reasons that higher education has an ethical imperative to increase individuals' productivity, thus consequently enhancing workers' job performance. This conception focuses on explaining educational knowledge that may directly and/or indirectly contribute to individuals' success at workplace.

Though the human capital theory has added value in various fields, it has gradually been replaced by the consensus theory and the conflict theory. These two theories tend to blame the academe or university environment for not instilling sufficient generic skills to ensure graduates' employability through curriculum design and implementation by applying appropriate pedagogical methods (Selvadurai, Choy, & Maros, 2012). Furthermore, shifts in education and labor market have brought increasing challenges and pressure to universities to produce employable graduates and therefore has resulted in greater involvement of business employers in higher education to improve graduates' employability skills at workplace.

As higher educational institutions are acutely aware of the importance of graduates' employability skills, they try to improve their curriculum to meet up to the expectations of employers. The body of current literature consists of significant number of studies researching graduates'

employability or expected job skills from employers' perspectives across countries (Bennett, 2002; Field, 2002; Barac, 2009; Lowden et al, 2011; Robles, 2012; Fair, 2013; Clokie & Fourie, 2016). The results of these studies suggest that there has been tension and a mismatch between universities' curricula and employers' expectations on graduates (Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010).

This particular study, therefore, aimed to contribute to the current literature by providing a more detailed description of business administrators' perceptions of the skills vital to entry-level jobs and their thoughts on how to improve those skills before graduates seek for jobs within Thailand where high context cultural behaviors are prevalent. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the perceptions of business administrators concerning the key skills required by entry-level jobs in Thailand?
2. What are the different expectations perceived by business administrators in relation to their employment sector, gender, age and years of working in the Thai context?

Literature Review

While variations in the classification of employability are witnessed, there exists a shared conception of what kind of qualities, characteristics, skill sets and knowledge constitute employability in the job market. Though abundant literature exists on skills required to meet the needs of employers, the terms used to explain these skills have not been consistent. For instance, technical skills, specific skills, and hard skills are used as similar terms referring to subject-specific skills. Transferable skills, generic skills, and soft skills are used interchangeably to explain various skill set that a well-rounded employee these days is expected to hold.

This study adopted the terms technical skills and transferable skills to describe the essential skills expected and/or required for entry-level job positions.

Technical Skills

Technical skills in this study refer to technology or discipline-based knowledge, which includes knowledge and application capabilities in usage of computer, programming languages, database management, optimization and the major areas of managerial accounting, finance and operations management.

Since current literature magnifies on the significance of soft skills or transferable skills, it seems the importance of technical skills are deviated leading the readers to pay less attention to these skills set. Researchers have reported that recruiters may prioritize a job candidate with various transferable skills over someone with technical skills (Russell, Russell, & Tastle, 2005; Robles, 2012) since it is perceived that technical skills can always be trained accordingly. Young's (1996) study even concluded that no single technical skill was rated above any of the transferable skills by new graduates when it came to ranking important employability skills. Research in management also suggests a low correlation between technical skills and employees' managerial performance (Dunning, 1993; Badawy, 1995).

Though companies and employers stress the importance of transferable skills and the demand for graduates with these skills is soaring, technical skills could be crucially valuable for the lower level managerial performance (Hysong, 2008). To prepare graduates to be more effective and efficient at workforce, higher education institutions should listen to what the employers have to say about the skills that they expect

graduates to hold which needs to be based upon essential technical skills.

Transferable Skills

Employers do not only expect new employees to possess the basic technical skills needed to get the job done but also require them to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes, known as transferable skills. Transferable skills refer to the capabilities that are not subject-specific; these set of skills are wide range of abilities that once acquired, can be applied in various contexts (Gash & Reardon, 1988) without considering their different characteristics of the origin and the destination industries (Sgobbi & Suleman, 2015). Transferable skills are seen as significant factor affecting graduates' employability since these skills are evidences of how flexible a candidate is (Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009; Lowden et al., 2011; Careers New Zealand, 2015). Consequently, these are referred to as the most wanted skills that employers focus on when hiring potential candidates for entry-level jobs these days (Robles, 2012). Hyper-globalization has attributed to the continuously changing structure of the contemporary workplace. The culturally and environmentally different working styles and contexts such as diverse background of team members, cross-functional and/or cross-cultural groups, and even virtual teams in businesses, have massive influence on employees' productivity. Employees are expected to immediately adapt to various situations and work flexibly. Hence, new graduates need to develop greater interpersonal awareness and effective communication skills (in forms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing) to handle the relationship with team members with different departments, cultures, and even time zones to survive in this fiercely

competitive environment (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005; Cheruvellil et al., 2014; Kick, Contacos-Sawyer & Thomas, 2015). Therefore, it is perceived that effective communication skills are transferable to different industries or different fields. To be a multi-player and succeed in one's field, it is vital to possess this crucial skill set that adds to one's value.

In addition to communication skills, most employers look for graduates who possess entrepreneurial skills. However, entrepreneurship research lacks consensus regarding the issue of what main skills an entrepreneur has or needs (Morales & Marquina, 2013) in order to be effective in business settings. Formal descriptions and definitions characterize entrepreneurial skills as retaining self-belief, boldness, tenacity, passion, empathy, readiness to take expert advice, desire for immediate result, and ability to recognize opportunity

(Salgado-banda, 2005) or ability to come up with proactive, critical, and innovative mindsets (Foss & Klein, 2012; Harvey, Locke, & Morey, 2002; Lees, 2002). Lowden et al. (2011) discussed that potential employee's attitude such as being responsible and enthusiastic is counted as one of the most important employable skills. Mason, Williams, & Cranmer (2009) highlight the ability to learn and adapt as a crucial factor affecting graduates' employment. Johnson, et al. (2009) also adopted very similar definitions by frequently referring to those with employability skills as people who demonstrate innovative, creative, cooperative mindsets.

Based on the literature discussed, this study summarized and implemented the following categories for employability skills of entry-level positions (see Table 1).

Table 1 Summaries of Entry-Level Job Skills

Skill categories	Specific skills	
Technical skills	Subject skills relevant to the job position	
Transferable skills	Traditionally defined communication skills	Speaking in English Listening in English Writing in English Reading in English
	Entrepreneurial skills	Problem solving Creative and innovative thinking Learning skills Decision making Responsibility/Dependability

Positive attitude towards work
Working as a team member
Punctuality
Self confidence
Adaptability/Flexibility

Research Methodology

Study Population and Samples

Recruitment heavily relies on the expectations held by administrators on job skills they want their new employees to have; their perceptions greatly influence the hiring and training processes; therefore, it is crucial to grasp these people's attitude analytically and their perceptions qualitatively.

The study population was therefore defined as business administrators who were currently working in business sectors within the Thai context by fulfilling the following two criteria:

1. Having managerial experience at any level (low, mid-level, high-level management)
2. Working in either domestic firms or international companies located within Thailand

Considering the large number of study population, a convenience sampling was employed to access the potential participants who were easy to contact or to reach (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2016). To better generalize the entire study population, this study intended to enlarge the number of study participants. In total, 500 participants were approached via survey questionnaires. The effective 432 questionnaires were collected for further analysis.

Instruments

This study adopted survey questionnaire method to investigate research participants' expectations towards employability skills required by entry-level jobs. In order to validate and justify the reliability of the method, the questionnaire was piloted with 30 business administrators who were, at the time of the study, working in business sectors. Alpha reliability from both pilot study and main study is reported in Table 2.

Table 2 Reliability Report for Major Variables

Alpha Reliability Report		Pilot study	Current study
Technical skills		.67	.74
Transferable skills	Communication skills	.71	.80
	Entrepreneurial skills	.73	.84
Overall		.70	.79

After the initial analysis of the collected questionnaires, a semi-structured interview was also employed to investigate the administrators' in-depth perceptions and opinions. Based upon the participants' consent, twenty administrators agreed to accept the interview initially and twelve interviews were conducted successfully. Content analysis method was used to assist the study effectively by adding useful, detailed opinions of the participants; it also provided insights on grouping and dividing labels based on the meanings provided by the interviewees (Neale & Nichols, 2001).

Findings

The findings are presented according to the survey questionnaires and the interviews conducted.

Findings from survey questionnaires

The 432 completed survey questionnaires were analyzed with two objectives. Objective 1 Perceptions of entry-level skills The scale of the questionnaire was rated as; 1-Not Applicable, 2-Not Important, 3-Moderately Important, 4-Important, 5-Very Important. As indicated in Figure 1, all the categorized entry-level skills were perceived as important; however, with different degrees, entrepreneurial skills were clearly the most important category compared with others, with a mean value of 4.32, followed

Trustworthiness of the qualitative data and analysis method is often questioned by positivists (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), however, the researchers claim that all steps included in this study were strictly followed by transparently sharing and involving participants to examine the data and collaborate in interpreting the meanings. By doing so, the researchers believe that stability and consistency were maintained throughout the whole of the study.

by subject-related knowledge (4.03). The basic four communication skills were perceived not as significant as the other two categories and the mean number stood at 3.70.

Among the entrepreneurial skill set category, having positive attitude was the most important entry-level job skill expected with an average mean of 4.67 which was closely followed by being responsible (4.54) and having effective team skills (4.50). Although communication category did not stand out as the most important skill set, the participants had high expectations towards new graduates' speaking skills (4.09) compared to the other three skills- writing, reading, and listening.

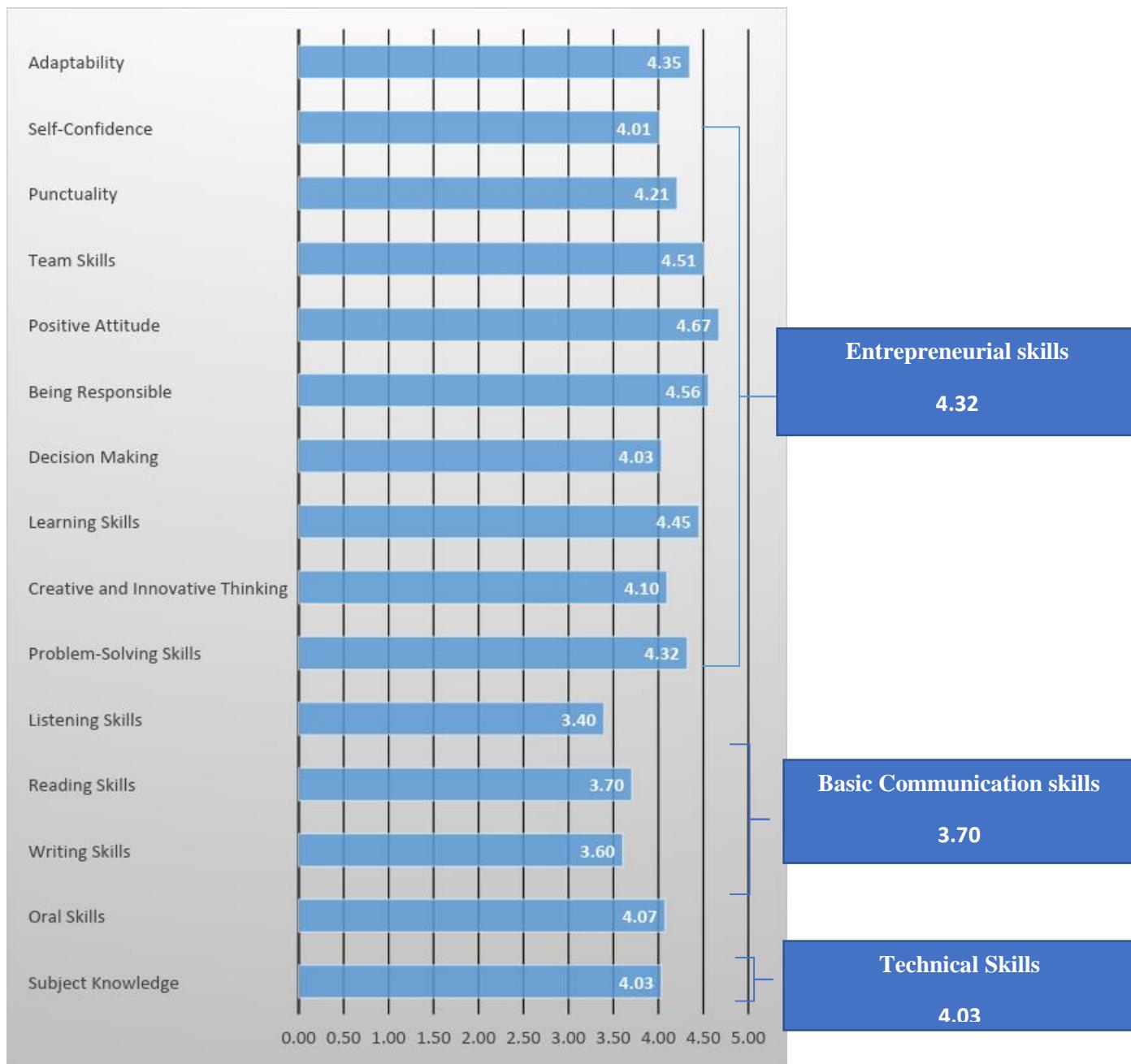


Figure 1: Expectations of Business Administrators on Entry-Level Skills

Objective 2 Different perceptions by gender, employment sector, age, and years of employment

Table 3 Entrepreneurial skills compared with Gender

	Gender	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Entrepreneurial skills	Male	269	4.323	.3743	.0312
	Female	163	4.410	.9780	.1048

Table 4 Entrepreneurial skills compared with Employment Sector

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.229	3	.410	.916	.434
Within Groups	101.479	227	.447		
Total	102.708	230			

Table 5 Entrepreneurial skills compared with Age

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.352	3	.117	.260	.854
Within Groups	102.357	227	.451		
Total	102.708	230			

Table 6 Entrepreneurial skills compared with Years of Employment

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.386	5	.277	.616	.688
Within Groups	101.322	225	.450		
Total	102.708	230			

Table 7 Communication skills compared with Gender

	Gender	n	Mean	t	Sig (two-tailed)	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Communication skills	Male	269	3.699	0.11	0.912	.6778	.0564
	Female	163	3.692			.6284	.0673

Table 8 Communication skills compared with Employment Sector

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.737	3	.912	2.136	.096
Within Groups	96.926	227	.427		
Total	99.663	230			

Table 9 Communication skills compared with Age

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.456	3	.152	.348	.791
Within Groups	99.207	227	.437		
Total	99.663	230			

Table 10 Communication skills compared with Years of Working

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.874	5	.375	.862	.507
Within Groups	97.789	225	.435		
Total	99.663	230			

As shown in Tables 3 to Table 10, there were no statistically significant differences

on the participants' perceptions according to their demographic information.

Findings from Interviews

The interviews revealed that the majority of the interviewees (10 out of 12) strongly agreed that they needed employees who could handle stress and pressure in a flexible and professional manner due to the competitive nature of business environment nowadays. This is in line with the results presented by the questionnaires. According to the interviewees, those who were able to handle stress well were those who have positive attitudes towards work as well as themselves. Adaptable employees who could flexibly work in different situations and environment, according to the

interviewees, also were those displayed positive attitude. These skills were perceived as entrepreneurial skill set of which the importance is growing immensely. This is well summed up by one of the participants; "We do not ask our entry-level employees to have all the desirable skills. We look for those who are enthusiastic, yes, those who have positive outlook because those people are the ones who generally are willing to learn and help others. That is the kind of person we need." (Participant 5)

The interviewees mostly held the opinion that above-mentioned entrepreneurial skills are more important since these are assets that are truly difficult to train.

Communication skills, however, could be significantly improved with extensive training according to interviewees. For instance, the interviewees elaborated that they would rather hire entry-level employees with positive attitude than those who can write or speak well. As one interviewee argued; “communicating well is absolutely necessary. But without positive mindset, your communication won’t be so effective.” (Participant 11) Moreover, Participant 2’s opinion clearly represents this agreement: “I guess...the important work skills may depend on different sectors and different cultures. But in this era, it is all about people skill. One should know how to work with others, so being able to work well with a group of people with different background and flexibly handle issues with different opinion is seen as crucial factor when we hire new staff.”

Again, the skills and traits mentioned by the interviewees did not differ when it came to different business sectors; regardless of the field they worked in, all interview participants came up with analogous expectations and perceptions they held towards entry-level positions. Especially, they seemed not too much concerned about the technical skills as such skills are “already must-have background” to consider when they select job candidates, or they can be “easily trained” when new employees start working.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the business administrators’ perceptions of key skills required for entry-level jobs in Thailand. Two salient findings emerged from this study. First, business administrators’ expectations on entry-level job skills were not quite affected by their sector, gender, age, and years of

employment. Second, entrepreneurial skills were considered as the most important skill category required for entry-level jobs, especially employees’ attitudes. Though ample amount of literature stress that the most important skill set in work environment is communication skills (Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997; Trenholm & Jensen, 2008), the administrators of this particular study ranked entrepreneurial skills more significant. They largely agreed that communication skills can be trained and practiced while it takes much longer time and effort to cultivate and improve entrepreneurial skills. This, of course, does not mean communication skills are not so important for entry-level positions; communication skills still count as one of the essential elements any employee should have. This study asserts that employers expect for qualities and characteristics such as positive attitude and team skills alongside communication skills.

Recommendations

Theoretical implications

This study contributes to the mainstream literature from two aspects. First, it highlights the importance of entrepreneurial skills or spirits, especially employees’ attitudes in entry-level job requirements. Clokie & Fourie’s (2016) study also supports this finding, “Skills can be learned—attitude not so much” (p. 452). Second, this study demonstrates employers’ perspectives towards employable skills in a collective cultural context, Thailand.

Practical implications

This study has also brought practical contributions to the current literature in both higher education and business communication fields. The findings emerged from this study are hoped to assist teachers

who are largely responsible for guiding, motivating, and mentoring future workforce. The gap between the industries and higher education institutions should be bridged through more extensive collaborations.

In order to support students to hold positive attitude towards work, the industry and universities need to understand students' motivation. According to Clokie & Fourie (2016), employers rated motivation as the most important interpersonal skills an entry-level employee should hold. Entry-level workers are not expected to lead or make important decisions on their own, therefore, the most crucial skill set needed is enthusiasm and motivation to keep on learning to benefit themselves and the companies. In line with this assertion, Pool & Sewell (2007) state that amongst essential components of employability skills, having self-confidence which relates to positive attitude is the central factor for employees to grow. Moreover, Paadi (2014) states that lack of entrepreneurial skills are the main reason new graduates are unsuccessful in getting recruited. This study has added to these claims that indeed employers' expectations are in line with these assertions.

Though many institutes focus on improving students' communication skills, this study wishes to suggest that the higher education institutions should not ignore the importance of preparing students to possess professional spirits, such as positive attitude and being responsible.

Limitations and future research

Despite its contribution, the research is not without limitations. First, this study may only apply to employability skills required by entry-level positions. Second, this study focused on administrators working within the Thai context. The environmental and cultural settings have considerable impact

on the participants' perceptions and the results may be different in other socio-cultural settings. It is hoped that future studies interested in this line of topic take initiative to verify the results in different contexts with different scope and methods.

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