

BRIDGING THE GAP: STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING THE EMPLOYABILITY OF FRESH GRADUATES IN MID-LEVEL POSITIONS

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ABSTRACT:

There has always been the problem of absorption of fresh graduates into mid-level positions by industrial leaders due to the question of dependability and efficiency at such advanced levels. Employers' normal preference for more experienced persons in mid-level positions leads to filling these positions through entry-level recruitment instead of promoting fresh graduates. This is due to the overriding belief in most instances that fresh graduates are not prepared for such challenging responsibilities. Besides, on-the-job training for fresh recruits, although successful, is very risky due to potentially high turnover rates, and such people look elsewhere for better opportunities after gaining experience. This paper addresses the multifaceted problem of the integration of fresh graduates into mid-level positions, considering some strategies and solutions devised to reduce risks associated with such recruitment and improve job satisfaction both for employers and employees. It begins with the analysis of inherent challenges arising from this recruitment model, such as employer apprehensions about graduate readiness and increased turnover. It then discusses the gap with a look at some of the innovative approaches that could be adopted to bridge this gap. These innovations include tailored training programs to focus on those very needs for middle-level jobs, mentorship initiatives that provide support and guidance on an ongoing basis, and well-structured career development paths offering progression opportunities clearly within the organization. Additionally, this paper points out the importance of creating an enabling work environment that values and invests in the growth of new hires. The approaches suggested aim at balancing the immediate needs of the organization with long-term career aspirations of new graduates in the best interests of a harmonious, effective integration of the workforce. This study develops practical recommendations for industrial leaders on how best to optimize their recruitment strategies for fresh graduates.

KEYWORDS: Fresh graduates, Mid-level positions, Employability, On-the-job training, Talent retention.

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition from academic to professional life has always been a very crucial phase in the life of a fresher, and the recent trend seems to indicate a widening gap between what fresh graduates have and what potential employers expect. Something very relevant has happened in the contemporary job market: recent graduates, though with relevant degrees and certifications, find themselves competing more for entry-level jobs rather than moving into the mid-level jobs they are ostensibly qualified for. Such mismatching in the system has raised concerns across employers and educators alike on the practical preparedness and suitability of new work entrants. One of the primary concerns that employers express is the belief that fresh graduates are unreliable and inefficient to employ for mid-level positions, which demand a mix of technical skills, managerial capability, and experiential knowledge in complex ways, perceived as indispensable to the success of an organization and hence call for greater competencies. This, in turn, implies that many employers would be unwilling to invest in training and developing these graduates into positions since they lack the relevant commitment and skills to justify their investment. This cautious approach generally calls for the hiring of fresh graduates at lower levels than they deserve, just for cost control and minimizing risks.

This is usually the case in the contemporary trend where many employers recruit graduates into entry-level positions and provide in-service training that often gears them towards middle-tier positions. A good number of graduates, after receiving initial training, utilize those newly acquired skills to find employment elsewhere, hence weakening the return on investment for such training provided. This has not only intensified the problem of filling mid-level positions with suitably skilled people but also created a vicious circle of job turnover and inefficiency for the organizations. The fact that these fresh graduates immediately after training go in search of more lucrative

prospects evidences the problem has something to do with a deeper issue-the employability and career preparedness of the new entrants into the labor market. This phenomenon raises questions about the relevance and efficacy of current educational and training paradigms to narrow the gap between academic preparation and professional expectations.

These challenges create a need to understand, from a fundamental point of view, problems that fresh graduates face in trying to find mid-level positions. The authors look at areas that involve gaps in practical experience, mismatched skill sets, and employer expectations as areas to begin finding problems that might be latent. In the paper, the focus is also extended to strategic options that may promote the employability of fresh graduates in middle-level positions; strategic options include enhancements in the relevance between the in-school curriculum and industry needs, professional training targeting job openings, and creative changes in recruitment methods that appraise and fit graduate candidates with corporate requirements. In other words, the labor market perspective shows that fresh graduates are facing serious challenges to advance from entry-level jobs to mid-level employment. The following research tries to provide explanations and at least some real suggestions for better adjustment of graduate qualification supply with labor market demand, allowing further development and implementation of a more effective employment strategy and a possibility of better career prospects for those who just entered the labor market.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

These obstacles arise from the fact that fresh graduates take up mid-level positions, and the transition from academics to professional roles poses a challenge in today's competitive job market. Various research into these challenges and how best to solve them for improvement in the employability of graduates were proffered by several research studies. Works such as [1] and [3] deal with the problem of theoretical information that is learned at school not being in balance with the practical skills needed within the industry. This is a very common problem, especially for disciplines like engineering and IT, where fresh graduates have no practical experience whatsoever [1]. Other proposed solutions include innovative pedagogies that emphasize competence in practice as a means of equipping students for mid-level jobs upon graduation. Second, competency frameworks that align curriculum content and learning with enterprise needs are designed to enhance graduate employability. Even further, this approach puts more emphasis on practical exposure and hands-on learning for the students in courses pertinent to the real-world situations [2].

Also, studies such as [3] point to the importance of closing the gap in the perception of employability by higher education, business, and the graduates themselves. A common definition of employability by the stakeholders, together with integrating cross-disciplinary initiatives, are some of the strategies that go a long way in closing that gap [3]. Strategies need to be formulated aimed at creating shared understanding of employability among stakeholders, integrating initiatives across disciplines, and adapting to different institutional contexts. In such barriers from external factors, such as the pandemic, works like [4] focused on industries such as Malaysia's construction industry and provided ways to enhance the employability of the graduates in case of emergencies. This is research into methods of enhancing the employability of fresh graduates in the Malaysian construction industry during the pandemic outbreak. Also, other research studies like [5] review employability skills and highlight the role of individual capabilities and industry standards. Their results identify that it is expected the institutions to prepare their graduates with the skill sets that will be required from them [5]. Other research works, such as [6] and [7], investigate new techniques which may result in increasing the employability skills of graduates, such as real learning techniques. These methods have focused on better preparation for professional life by creating exercises that simulate real-life situations. This paper will be grounded on the identification of deficiencies in the student's employability competencies and offer suggestions to improve graduate employability in the case of a faculty of tourism. Other papers, such as those at [8] and [9], outlined the importance of collaborations with business and trade associations in enhancing recent graduates' employability. Such partnerships would expose students to real-life expectations and problems, which would enhance their generic skills. Students can improve on their generic skills best when they and their teachers are fully aware of the needs and expectations of their employers and clients. Besides, other works focusing on career guidance and counseling, like [10] and [11], underline the importance of psychological support combined with individual goal-setting techniques for young graduates who are obliged to cope with work demands. This paper also underlines career planning and personal goal-setting strategies for students, along with the psychological problems they face when confronted with employment demands.

The current research therefore draws to a close with a multi-model approach toward enhancing employability among fresh graduates for middle-level positions. Academic institutions will be better positioned to prepare graduates for successful careers in their chosen fields by addressing the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical competencies, mending perception gaps among stakeholders, bridging curriculum content to industry needs, and creative educational and partnership models.

3. UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES

A. Skepticism of Employers

Industrialists are bound to be skeptical about recruiting fresh graduates directly into mid-level positions. Their ability to handle responsibility, adapt to the corporate environment, and deliver results creates apprehension.

Employers, hounded by the overpowering need for operations and rival pressures, seek staff that will easily acclimatize with the pressures placed on midlevel positions. The fresh graduates have theoretical knowledge, but they usually lack the practical experience and soft skills needed for those positions. To the leaders, therefore, they present a high-risk investment; a leader would rather hire people with proven records or promote from within. On the other hand, fresh graduates want to be placed in jobs that correspond to their academic performance and expectations. However, with the scarcity of mid-level jobs making their condition worse, they are left to either take entry-level positions or undertake an intense job search. This is the coherence lacking between industry expectations and the graduates that further widens the gap between academia and industry.

B. Reliance on On-the-Job Training

One of the most common practices that employers engage themselves in is on-the-job training where fresh graduates are trained on-site to attain the required level of skill and knowledge at mid-level positions. Though in principle this is quite effective, the investment made in training starts turning into a liability if graduates decide to continue their career elsewhere once the training is over. Employment has taken such a shape that on-the-job training is considered one of the major ways through which freshers are prepared for middle-order positions in the workplace. On-the-job training could be put in because of the fresher's need to acquire preliminary exposure to the industry or function. However, as they refine their career aspirations, they may discover divergent paths more aligned with their long-term goals, leading them to seek alternative opportunities. This approach is founded on the premise that hands-on experience fosters skill acquisition and enhances job readiness. However, the realization of on-the-job's potential is contingent upon graduates remaining within the organization following training. The phenomenon of post-training attrition puts employers in a dilemma, as investment in on-the-job training may fail to yield expected returns whenever graduates seek other career opportunities.

C. Talent Retention Concerns

Fresh graduates leaving for greener pastures after training heightens talent retention concerns for employers. Expenses accrued from training, coupled with the loss of resources already invested, create a disincentive to hire fresh graduates at the middle level of any organization. The retention of freshly trained graduates continues to be one of the major headaches for organizations that invest in professional development. Despite initial investment in their training, employers often have to bear the brunt of watching these people move on to greener pastures. The eventual erosion of talent does not only dent organizational stability but also further exacerbates the debate about the return on investment in training programs. The tendency of fresh graduates to leave for greener pastures immediately after training escalates the crisis of talent retention among employers, especially in mid-level positions. Added to these training costs is the loss of invested resources, which works as a major disincentive in the hiring of fresh graduates by organizations.

4. STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING EMPLOYABILITY

A. Mentorship Programs

The implementation of mentorship programs may further ease the way for fresh graduates to enter mid-level positions. Not only does a graduate get advice, guidance, and support when he or she is paired up with an experienced professional, but it also makes a graduate feel part of an organization. The mentorship programs retain their position as one of the best employability enhancement strategies. These are organized schemes in which experienced persons, usually mentors, come in handy to give guidance, support, and knowledge transfer to mentees, fresh graduates or new entrants into the job market. Mentorship programs enable the transfer of valuable tacit knowledge and expertise of experienced professionals to mentees. The mentor shares experiences gathered during years of practice, showing much-needed perspectives toward emerging industry trends, best practices, and the available opportunities that exist for professional development. The mentees can, therefore, acquire practical skills, problem-solving strategies, and critical thinking abilities that are essentially required for them to be successful at the mid-level. If mentorship is institutionalized appropriately, then the organizations can effectively equip fresh graduates with the ability to enhance their employability, accelerate their career growth, as well as become effective contributors toward the success of the organization.

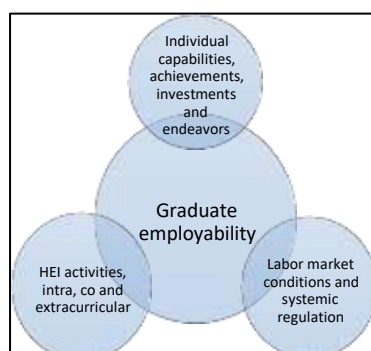


Figure 1 Factors of Graduate Employability

As shown in Figure 1, there are three key factors involved in graduate employability [6]:

- Students' individual capabilities, achievements, investments, and endeavors;
- HEI activities (intra-, co- and extra-curricular, career service, research);
- Labor market conditions.

B. Skills Development Initiatives

Employers can proactively invest in skills development initiatives that address the peculiar needs of mid-level positions. In addition, as employers put in place structured training programs and professional development opportunities, they enhance the marketability of fresh graduates while closing the skill gaps in the process. The above initiatives offer an avenue for the employer to invest actively in the growth and employability readiness of fresh graduates to hold mid-level positions. Such initiatives are targeted to address selected skill gaps and thereby equip the graduate with competencies for performing well on the job. An employer can also conceptualize and provide job training that meets the exact requirements the employer has for a mid-level position. Programs can include technical skills, industry knowledge, soft skills, and leadership skills necessary for any mid-level job. Employers ensure that fresh graduates receive relevant and effective skills acquisition by adapting both the content and method of training to suit their needs. Investment in competence development initiatives responding to the needs of mid-level positions proactively enables fresh graduates to enhance marketability, accelerate career growth, and contribute meaningfully towards ensuring organizational success.

C. Talent Pipeline Management

This strategic manner of managing the talent pipeline enables organizations to establish relationships with universities and other educational institutions. This may be through active participation in a student's educational route, in which organizations identify prospective students and groom them through internships to fill middle-management jobs later. The management should ensure that the talent pipeline management initiatives are in line with the strategic objectives of the organization and the talent needs. Design programs and partnerships to meet specific skill gaps, industry trends, and future workforce needs. Employers can tailor talent pipeline management to facilitate unique program development in talent creation based on the needs and goals of the organization. This could include internships, co-op opportunities, apprenticeships, and leadership development providing students with practical work experience, mentorship, and on-the-job challenges. Employers ensure that the students' talents are developed in concert with the goals and competencies of the organization, including those needed for the mid-level positions of the future. In return, the employer begins to develop a talent pipeline that creates a constant supply of candidates for mid-level positions, with a strong, resilient workforce that will be able to ensure the continued success of the organization over time.

5. PROPOSED MODEL

Our proposed model for enhancing the employability of fresh graduates in mid-level positions consists of five initiatives, which are Skill Development Program, Career Counselling and Guidance, Industry-Academia Collaboration, Soft Skills Development, and Continuous Learning and Development, as illustrated in Figure 2.

A. Skill Development Programs

- Integration of practical skills training into academic curricula
- Internship and co-op programs to provide hands-on experience

B. Career Counselling and Guidance

- Individual career guidance and counseling.
- Career development workshops in increasing self-efficacy and job search strategies.

C. Industry-Academia Collaboration

- Partnerships between university and business with the aim of knowledge sharing and creation, offering internship opportunities.
- Establishment of Industry Advisory Boards with the aim of being updated about general trends within the industry and the skill set requirements.

D. Soft Skills Development

- Integration of soft skills development initiatives within the academic programs.
- Experiential learning activities, such as role-playing exercises and case studies.

E. Continuous Learning and Professional Development

- Graduate's culture of continuous learning
- Mentorship programs and alumni networks for ongoing support and guidance.

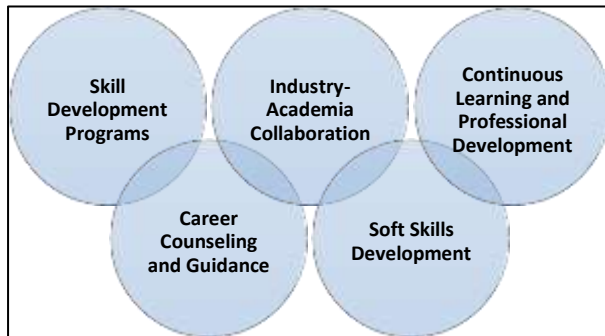


Figure 2 The proposed model for enhancing the employability

This model identifies the interlinked relationship that exists among various practices that can be undertaken to enhance the employability of fresh graduates for mid-level jobs: identification of the skills gap, career counseling, industry partnership, soft-skills training, and lifelong learning. With the help of these suggested measures, each stakeholder may prepare the graduates much better to enter their future work in mid-level categories successfully.

6. CREATING A CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT

A. Building a Growth Culture

Continuous learning and professional growth are immeasurably more attractive cultural components for recent graduates. Organizations can differentiate themselves as the employers of choice for top talent through innovative cultures that foster creativity and professional development. The culture of growth is all about developing resources, and opportunities, and creating an environment that inspires supports, and empowers people to learn, innovate, and grow. The culture of growth allows employees to be very creative and even think out of the box; they experiment with novel ideas and innovate. This means taking a lead through continuous learning, enabling innovation, and providing career opportunities that will make the employer a choice for the best and ensure a work team that can realize continued success in today's fast-moving world of business.

B. Recognizing and Rewarding Performance

Recognizing the contributions of fresh graduates and rewarding good performance is a potent means of talent retention. Performance-based incentives and recognition programs drive home the value proposition for staying with the organization. As a means of recognizing and thanking one's contributions to the organization, organizations will not only recognize but reward exemplary performance to create a culture that celebrates and values the efforts of their greatest assets-people. Recognizing fresh graduates' contributions and rewarding performance is one of the powerful motivators driving higher levels of commitment and engagement. Recognition and appreciation of employees' efforts would stimulate them to excel in their roles and be committed to the mission and goals of the organization.

7. IMPLEMENTATION OF TRIPLE MISSION

The Triple Mission of a university rests on three pillars: degree, skill, and career. Normally, it concerns providing a qualification with a good deal of theoretical knowledge, together with sufficient lab-based conceptual and practical skills in understanding the knowledge taught. Therefore, most universities cannot focus on career or hands-on industry skills, and usually cannot offer any mid-level job in the industry. Instead, qualification in the right curriculum under a degree explains what a degree is all about. That curriculum must be industry oriented. The curriculum must be revised and reengineered from time to time, to match industry needs. Second, it is skills. By skill here, I mean an industry curriculum-based; whatever is being provided should be implemented. It needs to be a real-life project-based, industry-oriented, on-the-job sort of training. To achieve that successfully, following an industry-oriented curriculum, teachers play a very important role. Teachers should possess relevant industry experience of at least four years. Highly encouraged are faculty recruitments for those candidates possessing the required qualifications through direct industry experience. Full-time industry experts may also be a part of the education sector as part-time faculty. The existing faculty members may be deficient in adequate and updated industry skills, expertise, or experiences that the industry expert, in his job here, could train them so that they can continue teaching at the university. In a nutshell, university teachers must be a scholar and industry practitioners. The third point of the triple mission is Career. Here, career does not mean that the graduates after completion will get an entry-level job only. The expectation is to start at least with a mid-level job, which entails a qualification involving at least a couple of years of a job-requisite qualification with some industry experience. Some students may choose entrepreneurship as a career. To this, we advise that our graduates work as employees for a few years so that they can gain some experience in the relevant industry.

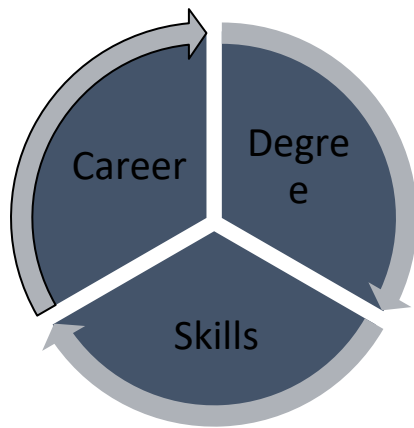


Figure 3 Tripple Mission concept

Most research has concluded that many great idea startups fail because of inexperienced leadership at a very early entrepreneur. Put it another way, the probability of being successful may improve if real-life business industry insights and leadership skills can be gained beforehand. Some of the fresh graduates choose to become researchers as their preferred career. For some fresh graduates, higher research may also be considered as a career option. Careers cannot be restricted to only local public or private services. The aim should always be towards the global market of graduate careers. A fresh graduate should mold him/herself as a global citizen with all required industry skills. He needs to be equipped with modern international industry-oriented skills so that he can work for any organization coming from any country and stay anywhere in the world. Hence, employability can thus be secured if, in the student's curriculum, soft skills are included under their general education subjects from their core subject knowledge. Graduates, to be able to work for global leaders, must be naturally experts in business English both oral and written. An effective language and cultural component in the curriculum would be necessary so that they can work with any person anywhere from the world. The university's curriculum should teach students the worth of human qualities, e.g. commitment, time management, ethics, patriotism, compassion, leadership, etc. If university graduates have the required industry skills with human quality, they may get jobs in any part of the world.

8. CONCLUSION

The transition of fresh graduates into mid-level positions is no doubt tumultuous, reflecting a bigger issue: the alignment between academic preparation and industry expectations. Turbulence being experienced by these new entrants is not related to individual capability but is deep-rooted in systemic problems linked to employer expectations, skill gaps, and retention strategies. There are always doubts among the employers about the dependability and long-term commitment of fresh graduates. Such doubts are one of the reasons for being circumspect while making hiring for middle-level positions. Added to this skepticism is the anxiety of retaining trained talent, which makes a strong case for reconsidering current employment practices and policies. In this direction, organizations need to put in place targeted and strategic interventions for employability and retention. Centric to this will be the creation of strong mentorship programs, wholesome skills development initiatives, and pipeline management. In this regard, structured mentorship frameworks should be availed for graduates to ease them into the challenging world of a middle-level practitioner. Mentorship helps not only in transferring much-needed industry knowledge and practical skills but also creates a sense of belonging and professional identity among new recruits.

Also, investment in focused skills development programs relevant to the particular demands of the mid-level job will bridge the gap between academics and job requirements. These should be competency programs that technical and soft skills that prepare graduates for higher responsibilities. Organizations, therefore, will enhance the employability of fresh graduates in middle-level positions and make them more effective in the organization by offering them only selected training facilities. Another relevant strategy is pipeline management in dealing with the transition of fresh graduates to mid-level positions, entailing an early and proactive identification of talents by making their potential grow. By establishing clear career advancement pathways and providing early career professionals with opportunities to demonstrate capability, organizations can do a better job of aligning hiring practices with long-term talent needs.

Besides this, the culture of growth and recognition within the organization would greatly help in retaining the talents. A place that exhibits an avid interest in continuous professional growth and recognizes the potential of a fresher would surely be more conducive and motivating to work in. Such culture brings job satisfaction and positions the organization as an employer of choice for attracting and retaining top talent. It is in implementing these strategies that well-designed internship and mentoring programs come into focus. The internship avails them with relevant work experience, while being a stepping stone that is very important for the fresh graduates; mentoring ensures ongoing support and development through their careers. Together, these can help new hires

more easily blend into mid-level positions and also be indicative that the organization is invested in the success of all hires over the longer term.

This, therefore, requires a multi-layered approach to this turbulence faced by fresh graduates while trying to make it into the middle strata, comprising strategic mentorship, targeted skills development, pipeline management, and organizational culture. Equipped with such focused strategies, organizations can reduce the risk from hiring and training fresh talent and tap their potential to contribute towards long-term growth and success. This proactive approach will not only help the organization but make the workforce dynamic and productive to ensure that they cope with ever-changing demands on the job market.

9. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Other areas of potential future research that might be explored include differential, longer-term impacts on talent retention and organizational performance between mentorship programs versus those focusing on building skills. These mentorship programs provide an individualized guiding relationship and can take quite varied forms in terms of design, delivery, and results. Other areas of future research could include the relationships between different models of mentorship-one-on-one mentoring, group mentoring, formal vs. informal mentorship relationships longer-term talent retention, and job satisfaction. This would help understand how these programs contribute to the employee's long-term engagement with the career and organizational loyalty.

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