

A DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH TO EMPLOYABILITY



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“What gets measured, gets managed” – Peter Drucker

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



It is common wisdom that white-collar employers are not satisfied with the employability of fresh college graduates in India. This whitepaper shows that this is a global phenomenon and that a key reason is there is no common framework for employability developed by employers. The lack of this framework limits the ability of training providers to educate their students towards commonly accepted standards. This whitepaper shows a possible way to solve this issue through a project implemented by SAGE Foundation using technology built by Ask.Careers, which achieved impressive results in skilling low-income youth for jobs in the BFSI sector. Suggestions for training providers on how they can improve their own students' employability are also given.

2 THE THREE PROBLEMS WITH EMPLOYABILITY



According to a recent survey only 45.9% of fresh Indian graduates were considered employable by employers (Wheebox, 2021). Conventional wisdom often blames the deficiencies in India's education system for this skills gap.

However, surveys of employers in other countries highlight similar levels of dissatisfaction with the employability of fresh graduates (QS, 2019). Considering that universities in developed countries do not face the same limitations as Indian ones do, the cause of the employability skills gap may be more systemic. These are:

2.1 NO DEFINITION OF EMPLOYABILITY



Research into this issue has determined that one of the key reasons for this gap is that there is no widely accepted definition of an employable job candidate (Shahani, 2019). Some recruiters prefer a self-sufficient employee requiring minimal supervision, others look for tenacity and ambition, while others search for multitaskers or polymaths. While these definitions indicate certain attributes of a candidate's personality, they fail to identify exactly what recruiters need. This lack of a common framework for defining employability creates a conundrum not only for students searching for these jobs, but also for educational institutions around the world that need to train their students to become employable.

2.2 FLAWED HIRING PROCESS



The second issue is the flawed system used in the hiring of candidates. Often, companies delegate the responsibilities of recruitment to junior-level employees, who need to interview many candidates to select the ones that are right for their firm. These interviews mostly comprise of a few standardized questions, with the candidate doling out pre-rehearsed answers. As many colleges prepare their students to clear such interviews, the true employability of a candidate may not be determined until after they are hired. It is no wonder that a substantial percentage of new entry-level hires do not work out as expected once they join the company (Ferrazzi, 2015). There needs to be a better way for recruiters to truly determine if a job candidate is suitable for their company.

2.3 PROTEAN CAREERS



The concept of the Protean Career has become more widespread, where employees usually change their job roles or industry every 2-5 years. This requires constant learning of new skills and capabilities to remain employable (Hall, 2004). Hence, there is a need for freshers to develop a core set of skills that will make them employable in whatever industry they work in, while also enabling them to learn new ones quickly.

3 POSSIBLE SOLUTION



Peter Drucker’s seminal quote, “What gets measured, gets managed”, gives us a possible solution to the employability issues mentioned above. If employers and educational institutions can agree on the few trainable and measurable skills needed by entry-level job candidates to work successfully in jobs across industries, there may be a pathway to ensure a much larger percentage of college graduates are employable.

3.1 CORE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

Analyzing the many employer surveys of the core employability skills needed by entry level job candidates (Guàrdia et al, 2021) determines that the most commonly one cited are:



Communication Skills – to understand others and convey a point of view well



Professionalism – to deliver work on time and of high quality



Teamworking Ability – to collaborate with peers to achieve company goals



Computer Skills – to work effectively with corporate IT systems



Critical Thinking - to solve problems and face new challenges successfully



Industry Knowledge – an understanding of basic norms to work in a specific sector



Proactiveness – to work without needing constant supervision



Interestingly, most employers do not want a creative, highly intelligent entry-level candidate. Instead, they look for employees who can understand the needs of their managers and work with minimal training and supervision to deliver what is required. As these skills have been cited by employers across industry sectors, any knowledge worker who possesses them should be able to develop their careers successfully as they change jobs and industries as they grow.

3.2 TRAINING FOR EMPLOYABILITY



As most of the skills cited above fall under the category of “soft skills”, colleges & training providers would need to alter their pedagogy to focus more on developing these capabilities in their students while imparting the theoretical knowledge needed to gain their qualifications. Many educational innovations already exist to facilitate this. Some include



Problem Based Learning – Students solve assigned open-ended problems by researching basic concepts around a topic



Flipped Classrooms – Theoretical content is studied by students at home while classroom time is devoted to discussions, simulations and problem-solving around the studied topic



Work-study assignments – Students execute projects for real companies through their course



Gamification – Course material takes elements of games like progressive challenges, group participation, goals & awards etc.

This would require faculty to shift from being providers of theoretical lectures to become co-facilitators along with students in their learning along with being more conversant with learning technologies. Training institutions can also use a range of psychometric tests to assess student soft skill development and share the results with potential recruiters.

4 IMPLEMENTATION OF SOLUTION



Hiring in India's BFSI sector has grown by 27% with many companies focusing on remote work & online customer interactions after the COVID lockdown (Wheebox, 2021). Hence most entry level jobs are in the customer sales & support areas where employees are skilled at remote interactions. Entry level employees who have communication, sales and technical skills are well suited for these jobs. However, there is a huge shortage of talent to fill these roles.

On the other hand, there are many youths from low-income families who would aspire to work in these roles, but do not have the communication & soft skills needed to get hired for them.

SAGE Foundation saw an opportunity to bridge this skills gap by implementing the above-mentioned solution for employability to train 5000+ low-income students for jobs in the BFSI sector. The program targeted low-income freshers who have completed a BCom or BA from tier 2 or tier 3 colleges. Most of these students have primarily been educated in vernacular languages and do not know much English. On graduation, they typically get jobs that pay Rs. 96,000 to Rs. 1.20 Lakh per annum, usually in the retail or SME sector. By undergoing SAGE's tech-enabled Bootcamp for a 45-day period, we expected to help them gain BFSI sector jobs with salaries of Rs. 2.40 Lakh to Rs. 3 Lakh per annum. Through this model they would be able to gain white-collar jobs at more than double the salaries they would have gotten without this training & start their families on the pathway towards the lower middle class.

4.1 TRAINING OVERVIEW



Selected students were enrolled in an intense 45-day Bootcamp program where the first 15 days were devoted to improving their English communication skills & the remaining 30 days to develop their soft skills and impart BFSI industry knowledge.

Based on our collaboration with BFSI recruiters, we analyzed the capabilities needed to be developed by our low-income students to gain jobs in this sector. These were:



English Oral Communication Skills



English Listening Skills



Sales Orientation



Problem Solving



BFSI Sector Knowledge



Personal Grooming

Hence, our program focused on developing & assessing these capabilities in our students over the 45-day period.

Students needed to download three apps from Ask.Careers which were optimized to be used on low end smartphones. These were:

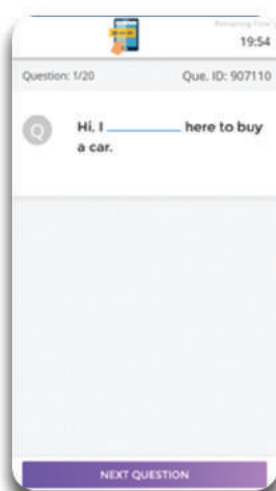


These apps were supplemented by online live classes on zoom.

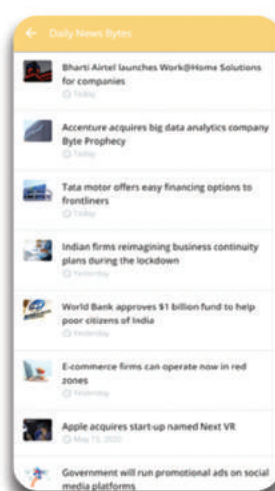
4.1.1 ask - Business English



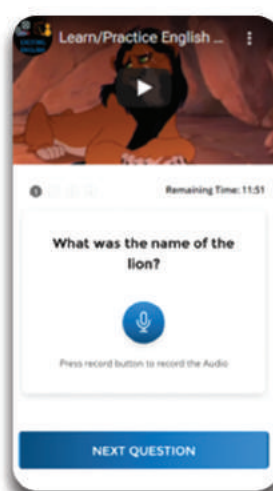
This app gave students practice in reading, listening & speaking in English using interactive exercises and movie clips. Each module had assessments & feedback.



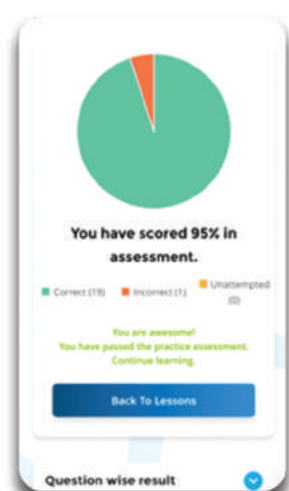
Interactive Exercises



Reading Practice

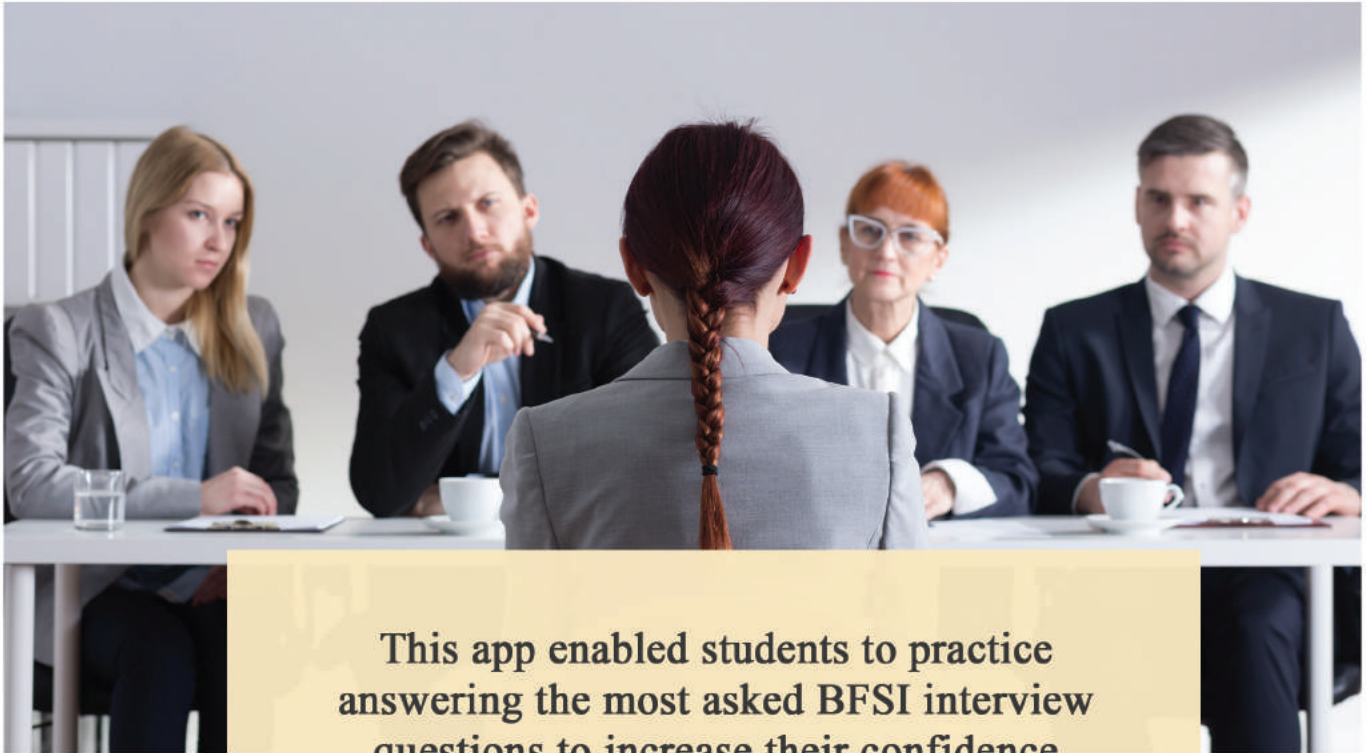


Listening Exercise



Assessment Progress

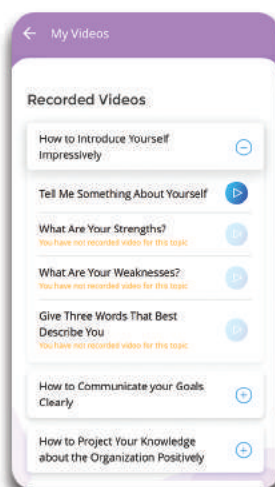
4.1.2 ask - Job Interview Prep



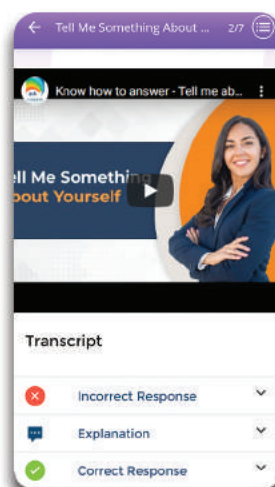
This app enabled students to practice answering the most asked BFSI interview questions to increase their confidence during the actual job interview process.



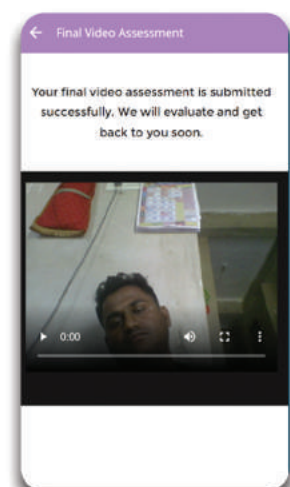
Questions
to Practice



Student records
their response
to questions



Feedback
Given on All
Responses



Final Mock
Interview

4.1.3 ask - Banking Course



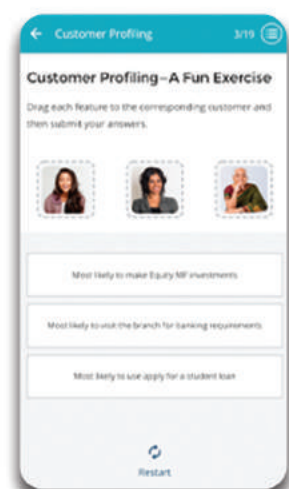
Home
Screen



BFSI
Curriculum



Lessons in
story form



Interactive
exercises

4.1.4 Live Online Classes



Using a flipped classroom model, students supplemented their app-based course content & quizzes with daily interactive classes on zoom. In a typical class, the student would need to prepare the lesson beforehand (e.g. Introduction Mutual Funds) and in the class she would have to take part in an interactive session around it (e.g. sell a mutual fund to your classmate). Each student would need to engage with this session and give feedback to each other on ways they can improve. The faculty member would facilitate the discussion and a class coordinator would ensure all students are taking part online. This method helped to build students' communication skills, problem-solving abilities & sales orientation.

4.2 ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW

The assessment process rested on the principles of transparency & gamification. As mentioned earlier, students were assessed on a scale of 1 to 5 on their:

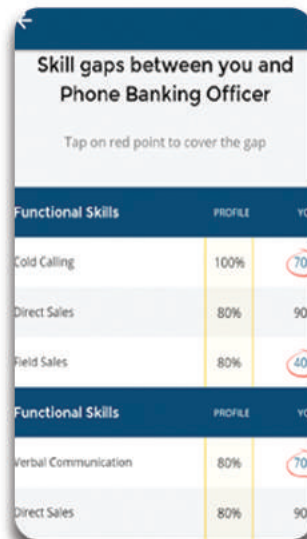


Students' scores were shared with potential recruiters, which provided two benefits. Students felt the need to score highly on these parameters as this would affect the sort of job they would be offered on graduation. Recruiters hiring risk was reduced as they had useful parameters on which to assess potential job candidates beyond a short job interview. This transparency helped to align the interests of the students and recruiters along commonly understood measures.

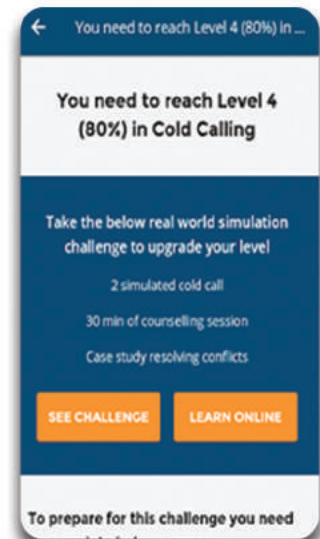
A gamified process within the smartphone app allowed students to see the level of skills required for actual jobs on offer and how their current level of skills measured up to those requirements. The app then recommends what the student needs to learn to bridge the skills gap.



Open Job Description

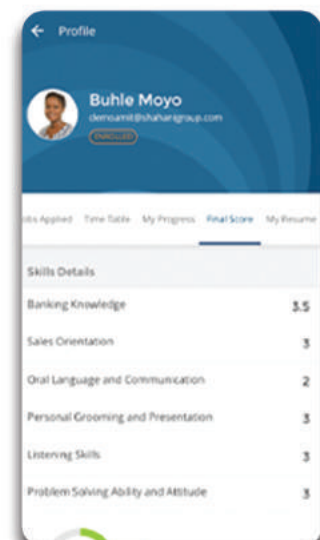
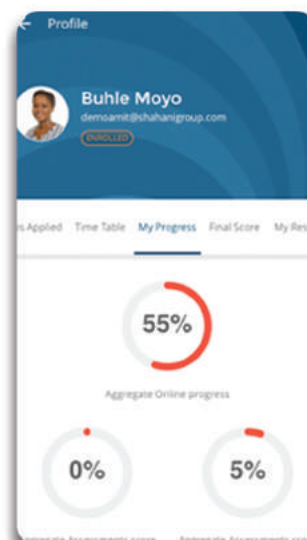


Skill Gap Between Student & Job Requirement



Recommendation to Student

Each student could view their assessment scores, quiz performance & class attendance on an ongoing basis on the personal profile section of their smartphone app.



4.3 PLACEMENT PROCESS

Only students who scored at least 3/5 on all soft skill parameters, 70% on the online quizzes and had at least 90% attendance in online classes were allowed into the job placement process. Students who did not achieve those levels were allowed to sit for as many classes as they wanted at no cost until they were able to reach these targets. Students who entered the placement process took mock interviews with external industry managers to ensure they were ready to face actual job interviews. Those who did not pass the mock interview round had to go in for extra training until our external experts were satisfied.

Employers appreciated this level of rigor as they could be assured that only qualified candidates were presented to them for interviews, which also helped us achieve our job placement rate of 90%.



Students' smartphone app listed available jobs on offer, and they were able to apply for up to 4 job interviews. We encouraged students to schedule their own interviews and manage their application process as this increased their levels of self-efficacy and would be useful for long term employability.

4.4 OUTCOMES

More than 5000 low-income youth have gone through our BFSI Job Skills program between 2019-2021. We have successfully placed 90% of these students in white-collar jobs at average salaries ranging from Rs. 2.40 Lakh to Rs. 3.00 Lakh per annum.

A survey of 2,900 of our earliest graduates determined that 100% of them still retained their jobs up to a year after being placed, despite major layoffs due to COVID.

We have analyzed the data of the jobs which were offered to our graduates and the average skills measures required of the ones who got those jobs over the last 2 years. The table below illustrates some of these

COMPANY NAME	JOB PROFILE	Banking Knowledge	Sales Orientation	Problem Solving	Oral Language	Listening Skills	Personal Grooming
A*** securities	Customer service	3	4	3	3	3	3
F*** Global	Customer service	3	3	3	4	3	4
H** securities	RM	5	4	4	5	5	4
H*** securities	Telebroking Executive	4	4	3	4	5	3
H*** securities	Account Opening	4	4	3	4	5	3
H*** securities	Telebroking EX	3	4	4	4	4	4
H*** securities	Customer Care	3	2	3	3	3	3
H*** securities	Relationship Manager	3	3	3	3	2	3
I*** securities	Relationship Manager	3	1	3	3	3	2
I*** securities	Sales Officer	3	3	3	4	2	3
K*** securities	KYC	4	4	4	4	4	4
K*** securities	KYC Profile	4	4	4	4	4	4
K*** securities	AM-Inbound Process	3	3	4	2	4	4
K*** securities	BDE	3	2	4	4	4	4
K*** securities	Inbound Process	3	2	3	4	4	3
M*** Global	Sales Executive	3	2	3	3	3	3
M*** Wealth	BDE	3	4	4	4	4	3
S*** securities	Sales Executive	3	3	3	3	2	3
SB*** securities	Relationship Officer	4	3	4	4	3	3
V*** Finance	Relationship Manager	4	3	4	4	3	3
V*** Finance	RM	3	3	4	4	4	4



For every new job offer we get, we can proactively estimate how many qualified students we have available and who they are, as per the table below:



COMPANY NAME	JOB PROFILE	Banking Knowledge	Sales Orientation	Problem Solving	Oral Language	Listening Skills	Personal Grooming	No. of Eligibal Student
H*** securities	RM	2	2	2	4	2	2	37
K*** securities	KYC	4	4	4	4	4	4	29
K*** securities	KYC Profile	4	4	4	4	4	4	29
V*** Finance	RM	3	3	4	4	4	4	30

We believe that this data could be a potential gamechanger as this provides an objective framework for both employers and educational institutions to determine the right candidate for the right job. It removes a large amount of guesswork from the process and reduces failure rates once a candidate joins a specific job role.

5 RECOMMENDATIONS



It is quite clear that employers consider candidates' soft skills to be more important than their industry domain knowledge when considering them for a white-collar job. However, training providers and educational institutes primarily focus on imparting theoretical knowledge with a cursory addition of a few hard skills, which causes the current employability skills gap. If training providers worked closely with employers to determine the specific soft skills they require and how they assess them during the hiring process, they would have a starting point to train their students more appropriately.

We hope that this whitepaper shows other institutions how this can be done and encourages them to start their own efforts to enhance their students' employability.

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