

Managerial skills required for Agricultural Graduates for current job market - A study in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The eight agricultural faculties in eight Universities in Sri Lanka compete to produce agricultural graduates whose training meets employers' expectations that change with time. Tailoring curricula to meet these expectations could improve trainees' credibility because employers especially in the private sector hire graduates whose qualifications, training and experience they consider to be satisfactory. This survey of 30 randomly selected Sri Lankan employers in the private sector found that they seek agricultural professionals who possess the following qualities, listed in the descending order of importance: (1) Knowledge and skills of the job (2) Job commitment (3) Good working knowledge in the English Language (4) Knowledge in Information Technology (IT) (5) Ability to meet deadlines for assigned tasks (6) Punctuality (7) Maturity to handle responsibilities (8) Ability to use available resources effectively (9) Ability to work well with minimum supervision (10) Honesty (11) General intelligence (12) Ability and willingness to work hard.

Introduction

Sustained development is attained with a well-functioning education system. Education is the key to development (Thomas, 2000). It is needed to reverse the island's recent losses as a result of brain drain, to build entrepreneurs and intelligentsia, and to support the economic prosperity of the country and revolution in the agricultural sector. The rapidity of changing knowledge and the challenges of a global society in which everyone should have access to knowledge are putting pressure on both developed and developing countries to provide an education which will prepare today's youth to fit into tomorrow's competitive job market (Caillods, 1999). As providers of research and, evaluation data, information transfer and technology development, universities are critical to national /social progress and economic growth. Education should be designed to respond more to societal needs and interests and to meet, through well-planned and co-ordinated teaching, learning and research programmes, national development needs, including the high-skilled employment needs presented by a growing economy operating in a global environment (Ekong, 1999).

By knowing what employers look for in a job applicant, trainers can develop curricula that meet employers' expectations as well as the needs of future employees. Such curricular would give training institutions greater public credibility, which would help them attract better-qualified students and increased funding for their programmes.

Globally, firms are under pressure to enhance the skill level of their employees. Many people believe that education and skill levels of the workforce will provide a major competitive advantage in the twenty first century (Enrich, 1985). Stressing the value of education, the Director of the International Institute for Educational Planning, Gudmund Hernes expressed that when economies decline, the best-educated people are lost to the richer countries. This has

certainly been the case in Sri Lanka where declining economic performance, low salaries and poor conditions of service have forced many high trained professionals to migrate to Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the United States in search of better job opportunities. In Hernes' view no investment yields such long and stable returns as education. If you know how to read, he said, the competence lasts you a lifetime. No other outlay can match this. Skills in use enhance human capital while ordinary capital is diminished and depleted by use. Many other investments fail but education is both portable and liberating. Once you have it you can take it wherever you go. You may be sacked from your job but no one can deprive you of the education you have received (Hernes, 2000). However, skill capacity is only one of several conditions for solving competitive difficulties. Skills development should blend with larger goals such as promoting a work environment that facilitates lifelong learning and responses to change. Because adults who are poorly educated cannot even make it into the workforce, education should take greater responsibility to ensure that students are well prepared for later employment (Benton, et al, 1991).

Today's workplace is driven by developments such as the emergence of a competitive global marketplace, the use of new technologies in producing goods and services, and the introduction of different forms of work organization (Frantz, Friedenber, Gregson & Walter, 1996). These developments have important implications on how students are trained in order to enter into and succeed in a changing work environment. In Sri Lanka, structural adjustment and liberalization of the economy have reduced entry barriers to the local market and exposed many previously protected industries to global competition. To help firms successfully adjust in this environment, universities need greater insight into the human resource needs, especially those of the private sector. Such knowledge will facilitate better curricula while helping students discern the demands of the job market.

Studies done in the United States of America to identify new skills requirements indicate that changes in the way industries operate have created new demands in the workforce (Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990; Carnevale, Garner & Meltzer, 1990). These demands include more complex tasks, use of new technologies, less direct supervision of workers, requirement of higher skills and knowledge levels in making decisions, and working as team members (Frantz et al., 1996). For developing countries such as Sri Lanka, it is increasingly crucial that similar work be done to help prepare a workforce that can compete in the global marketplace.

The Problem

Good training largely depends on a curriculum that is frequently reviewed to meet the challenging needs of the learners. Curriculum review is a dynamic process, which should involve trainers, trainees and employers. The employers in the private sector are particularly important because they are unlikely to hire local graduates whose qualities they consider unsatisfactory. Today, major challenge of the Universities is to produce marketable graduates. Therefore they need to know what is expected of them. These expectations change with the changing demands of the workplace and are best determined through research. Sri Lankan national Universities are still not in a satisfactory situation in training their graduates to fit into the expectations of the employers, especially those in the private sector.

Objectives Of The Study

The main objective

To determine what employers, especially those in the private sector, look for when recruiting new graduates for agriculture-related professions.

The specific objectives

1. To describe employment procedures of selected potential employers
2. To ascertain and rank the management qualities that employers look for in a job applicant
3. To propose, from employers' perspective, concerns that universities should address in training future employees

Research Method

A cross-sectional survey was used to collect data related to the objectives. Structured interviews and open-ended questions were used to interview 30 randomly selected employers. Senior executives of the private sector institutes in the agriculture and related area were interviewed. Interview guides were reviewed and content validity was found by a panel of experts. Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for the quantitative portion of the interview guide was 0.75. Hair & et al (1992) indicated that a commonly used threshold for acceptable reliability is 0.70 and said that values below 0.70 are acceptable if the research is exploratory in nature. Since the panel of experts found the instrument valid and its alpha coefficient exceeded 0.70, the researcher concluded that it was suitable for data collection.

The Chi- square test of significance was used to make comparisons between overall management quality of the graduates and their individual management skills. A level of significance of 0.05 was used to determine whether the relationships among the variables are significant.

The independent variables (individual management skills) that are significantly associated and had strong relationship with the dependent variable (overall management quality of the graduates) were used to develop multivariate models. To select the best fit model for different combinations of variables, CATMOD was used.

Results and Discussion

The organizations surveyed usually recruited graduates by following two methods, i.e by advertising available positions through the press and thereafter calling short-listed applicants for interviews and by using personal contacts. Some inducted newly recruited employees into their assigned roles and responsibilities to enhance their job performance. Organizations targeted by the study performed different roles. Majority of the remaining institutions were involved in production, processing, distribution, local marketing and export of agricultural products. Financial institutions offered banking and credit facilities for agricultural development and agri business activities. Educational institutions provided academic and professional training at secondary level or higher.

Employers prefer job applicants with better academic qualifications, professional training, experience on the job, possession of practical skills, good personality (appearance, dress, and maturity), computer literacy, oral communication skills, and leadership skills. According to them, possession of these qualities enhance productivity and reduce the cost of running the organization. Employers preferred that graduates with some job experience, for instance, industrial training during the university education. It is obvious that employers value individuals who are capable of bringing positive economic benefits to their organizations. Consequently, they sought to recruit job applicants who they considered able to deliver or produce goods and services more efficiently or those who could take charge of their continued employment and employability by updating their skills to meet performance expectations of their employers. They include strong identification with business goals, flexibility to switch to new roles or tasks when one is no longer required, ability and willingness to retrain or to find a job elsewhere if no longer required.

Employers preferred graduates from institutions whose training they perceived to be more practical-oriented. Such graduates, they reasoned, were more productive in the workplace. Some employers preferred graduates from local national universities whom they perceived to have a better understanding of the Sri Lankan agricultural sector than their colleagues from universities abroad. Some employers perceived graduates trained in Indian and Russian universities as generally weaker than their Western-trained counterparts in terms of academic ability, communication skills (particularly in using the English language), and in teaching subjects related to agriculture, science and technology.

Some of the weaknesses that employers had observed among new employees include poor attitudes towards work, insubordination, dishonesty, inability to manage organizational resources properly, absenteeism, disinterest in the job and poor oral and written communication skills. Some new graduates, they said, expected large offices and vehicles soon after being offered employment. When these expectations were not met, they tended to become frustrated and demoralized.

The employees interviewed indicated that they expect the graduates to have skills in management and administration, public relations, handling stress particularly when working long hours under stressful conditions, and entrepreneurship. They also required these graduates to have IT skills especially in word & data processing and statistical data analysis. Sri Lankan employers prefer to absorb graduates with good working knowledge in the English language and IT skills. This finding seemed to support Munene's (2000) view that for middle managers to successfully become mentors of the empowered worker, they must acquire multiple competencies rather than narrow specialization. The current selling competencies include computer literacy, interpersonal skills, communication techniques, languages, team work, negotiation, financial management and strategic analysis (Munene, 2000).

When asked why employees changed jobs, the respondents gave several reasons that included prospects for better pay and harassment by superiors (e.g., being denied promotion when it is due, ethnicity, and corruption). Other reasons included moving to a more interesting job, poor work environment and social considerations (e.g., moving to join family).

Employers suggested that Universities should strengthen the practical component of their training programmes by improving field attachment and other practical courses such as industrial training in order to improve training of future professionals. Other suggestions were to include courses that improve one's interpersonal relations, provide skills in guidance & counseling, sharpening one's skills in managing agricultural co-operatives and those that improve one's oral and written interpersonal communication skills. Some have stressed the importance of driving and maintaining vehicles. Driving and vehicle maintenance courses(both land vehicles and motor vehicles), if offered within the university curricula, would therefore enhance employability of future agricultural professionals.

Table 01 : Importance of the individual management skills to the overall management quality of the graduates according to the employers

Management Skill	Percentage			
	Very important	Important	Less important	Not important
Knowledge of the job	93.6	6.4	0.0	0.0
Job commitment	90.5	7.3	2.2	0.0
Knowledge in English language	88.3	10.4	1.3	0.0
Knowledge in Information Technology	82.1	15.4	2.5	0.0
Ability to meet deadlines	71.3	25.0	3.7	0.0
Punctuality	70.0	28.5	1.5	0.0
Maturity	63.1	32.5	2.4	2.0
Ability to use resources effectively	62.2	32.4	5.4	0.0
Work well with minimum supervision	65.6	25.9	6.2	2.0
Honesty	56.6	35.3	8.2	0.0
General intelligence	53.6	35.0	11.4	0.0
Ability and willingness to work hard	50.4	45.6	4.0	0.0

According to Table 01, employers ranked the following management qualities, in the descending order of importance, among the top twelve desirable qualities for new employees; from a list of twenty-one given in the questionnaire.

1. Knowledge of the job in terms of adequate training and professional preparation
2. Job commitment
3. Good working knowledge of the English language
4. Good working knowledge in Information Technology (IT)
5. Ability to meet deadlines by completing assigned tasks on time
6. Punctuality

7. Maturity in terms of being sensible, experienced and knowledgeable enough to handle assigned responsibilities
8. Ability to use available resources effectively
9. Ability to work well with minimum supervision
10. Honesty
11. General intelligence
12. Ability and willingness to work hard

Table 02 : Results of the Chi square analysis between dependant variable (Overall management quality) and each of the independent variables (individual management skills)

Management skill (independent variable)	Chi-square value
Knowledge of the job	12.98*
Job commitment	8.97*
Knowledge of the English language	14.75*
Knowledge in Information Technology	17.54*
Ability to meet deadlines	20.90*
Punctuality	11.56*
Maturity	34.91*
Ability to use resources effectively	16.55*
Work well with minimum supervision	19.43*
Honesty	8.16*
General intelligence	7.73*
Ability and willingness to work hard	15.12*

* Significant at 0.05 level.

Table 02 shows that the individual management skills given above have direct positive relationship with the overall management quality of the graduates. The following models were developed and tested by using log linear model (model with three variable interactions of CATMOD.

Model 1:

Overall management quality of the graduates x Knowledge of the job x Knowledge in English language
 $df=1$ $G^2 = 0.07$ $p= 0.7814$

Model 2:

Overall management quality of the graduates x Knowledge of the job x Knowledge in IT
 $df=1$ $G^2 = 0.07$ $p= 0.5623$

Model 3:

Overall management quality of the graduates x Knowledge in English language x Knowledge in IT
 $df=1$ $G^2 = 0.06$ $p= 0.3495$

Model 4

Overall management quality of the graduates x Job commitment x Ability to meet deadlines

df=1 $G^2 = 0.07$ $p = 8128$

Model 5:

Overall management quality of the graduates x Job commitment x Punctuality

df=1 $G^2 = 0.06$ $p = 8064$

The analysis of variance shows that the main effect models fit since the likelihood ratio (G^2) test for three variables is not significant. The overall management quality of the graduates can be explained by using the above models. Interaction which involves knowledge of the job, knowledge of the English language, knowledge in IT, job commitment, ability to meet deadlines and punctuality is related to the overall management quality of the graduates. The other individual management skills are also equally important to the overall management quality of the graduates. Nevertheless, the above tested six individual skills have closer relationship to the overall management quality of the graduates.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Employers complained that many new graduates lack job commitment. Not surprisingly, this quality was rated second in importance. Employers greatly valued employees who could meet deadlines for assigned tasks. This quality was rated fifth in importance and was closely followed by punctuality that was rated sixth in importance. Employers required fresh graduates to have some kind of job experience. This can be achieved by including an industrial training component in the curricula. Therefore, to improve chances of career success, employees should develop the desirable work habits discussed in this paper.

This study shed light on the criteria that employers use to determine whether or not to hire new job applicants for agriculture-related professions. The University academics can use this knowledge to tailor their curricula to meet employers' expectations by preparing students in such a way that they will have a definite advantage in the job market. Effective training, based on accurate needs' assessment, would enhance the credibility and economic productivity of new graduates. A widespread adoption of this approach may have a positive impact on the national economy at a time when the nation craves for agricultural growth, economic recovery and industrial development.

(The author wishes to acknowledge the pertinent assistance of J.M.N.G Samarakoon, Department of Social Sciences, Sabaragamuwa University, extended in conducting this research.)

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