

WORKSHOP REPORT

CSM-WBUT Workshop on ICT Industry & Education in West Bengal: Bridging the Gap

on 1 October 2005 at WBUT Auditorium, Salt Lake, Kolkata, India

The workshop titled **ICT Industry and Education: Bridging the Gap**, organised jointly by the **Centre for Social Markets (CSM)**¹, initiator of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Forum and the **West Bengal University of Technology**, concluded on a reflective note on 1 October 2005, with elements emerging for a concrete action plan initiated by CSM with the cooperation of partners viz the University and the members of the ICT Forum. These steps forward will begin with a pilot training initiative on the basis of some suggestions that have been made at the workshop, with a few institutes participating in the process to begin with.

BACKGROUND

The **ICT Forum**² was formed in Autumn 2004 out of the ICT Initiative of CSM under the banner of West Bengal Forum on Business Partnerships for Sustainable Development, with participation from government, the industry and civil society. The Forum seeks to promote innovative tri-sector initiatives for the betterment of West Bengal in general and the ICT sector in particular. The WBUT, being the largest prospective source of ICT industry recruits, is a key ally in the ICT Forum's work.

The workshop sought to address the current need for better communicative and soft skills among new recruits in the ICT industry, being keenly felt by recruiters. Focusing on teaching communications skills is one of the crucial tasks facing educators, without which the students' employability is affected. This is because a poor communicator with good technical skills will hardly be a good employee in today's globalised world. Industry and academia therefore decided to address the most important issues regarding developing the communication skills of prospective IT professionals, through the workshop on **October 1, 2005**.

PROCEEDINGS

The workshop saw participation by the corporate sector which included Wipro Technologies, Cognizant Technology Solutions, VSNL, Tata Consultancy Services, IBM and a host of others. There were academicians from engineering colleges under WBUT i.e principals, directors and teachers teaching Communicative English and also senior educators like Pro Vice Chancellor as well as Dean, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, Jadavpur University. The attendance, though somewhat thin, had an even representation from both the corporate sector and the academia.

KEY ISSUES

Employability: Industry members of the ICT Forum were unanimous in their opinion that communication skills needed to be looked at as a useful and integral part of learning for employability in any sector, not just the ICT sector. Speaking for the industry, Cognizant India Vice President Human Resources Bhaskar Das laid out all the important aspects of effective communication that was necessary for an aspirant to be "employable". The overall message was that communication was a combination of language skills, listening skills, as well as body language. While domain knowledge was crucial, personal orientation and alertness was vital to groom oneself to be successful in the long term. A strong sense of focus on work priorities was not enough, being able to communicate that to the requisite people was equally important. One needed to

¹ The Centre for Social Markets is a UK and India-based non-profit that promotes responsible business and advocates for markets to be attentive to sustainable development, in order to bring about positive social change. Founded in 2000 by social entrepreneur Ms Malini Mehra, CSM takes pride in being a predominantly women-run organisation and stresses the importance of addressing critical human issues while acknowledging the power of the markets.

² For a better description of the genesis of the ICT Forum, please refer to www.csmworld.org

internalise the English language over time and for that mastery over speaking, writing and listening needed to be built up. Recounting experience, Mr Das said using university campus language in an office environment was not desirable or acceptable. In addition, sarcasm had to be avoided and speaking had to be concise. Industry's message seemed to be that every organisation would have its own method of teaching basic things like accent neutralisation and proper verbal communication, which are important for an employee's productivity. But being able to generate productivity with comparatively shorter training would be possible only when any job aspirant with good domain knowledge would also understand the importance of speedily picking up good communication skills.

Of course, within the industry, the level of communication skill needed would vary with the job profile. While BPO jobs hinge on communicative expertise, more technical jobs need language as a value added. It was important for any employee to be able to assess early on the level of skill required in the organisation and mould oneself accordingly.

Cross-cultural adaptability was also an important issue. Perhaps a less noticed aspect of communication, it included things like tele-conferencing as well as email etiquette, being tuned to the speaker irrespective of the latter's cultural background and speaking style etc. The art of communicating across cultures was an important learning in the ICT sector as diversity of employees was a common occurrence.

Mr Kushal Banerjee of TCS said that during any interview, chiefly two things were assessed: the recruit's ability to think logically in a given subject as well as a certain minimum amount of presentation and communication skills. Ms Sujata Roy of IBM added that the journey actually began with learning how to write a good CV, which stood out among the applications that a company received in response to a job. So the issue of employability had a lot of facets.

To this industry message Prof Manoj Mitra, Dean, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, Jadavpur University observed that while these skills were very important, industry needed to be clear that domain knowledge was still the crucial requirement which had to be balanced with an ability for good communication – or else job aspirants may begin to think of communication skills as a core requirement rather than an additional one.

On the employability issue, WBUT Vice Chancellor Prof Ashoke Thakur felt that part of the problem was that a lot of damage had already been done by the time the students came to the engineering colleges. One of the ways to get around the issue was probably to revive the practice of asking the students to give seminars on topics of their choice. This suggestion met with general approval. Prof Thakur also added that email servers could be another method of encouraging conversation among students and this could be started right away.

Motivation: The primary cause of poor communication skills was traced to a lack of motivation by Prof Mitra. Keeping in mind the number of experiments conducted with communicative English teaching in Jadavpur, he stated that past experience shows that without the right kind of motivation, students were unlikely to see the importance of communicative skills in the correct perspective. Such motivation could be a specification by the employer about the necessity of good communication skills. So if the employer was recruiting in the 3rd year, then Prof Mitra suggested that the employment could be confirmed even before that, on the basis of intelligence and core competence of a student, with the stipulation that the student would have to master communication skills in the remaining period. This would ensure that the student brought along requisite communication skills when actually joining the job. An alternative would be to recruit at the end of the fourth year.

This position drew strong responses from across the corporate sector, which was of the opinion that the prospect of better employability rather than actual employment should serve as the driver for mastery over communication skills, and asking the recruiters to come later than they now did would send the wrong message to them. This is was hardly desirable in the longer-term interests of the sector or the state.



As initiator of the ICT Forum and a key stakeholder in this debate, CSM feels that the motivation issue needs due attention. A novel experiment has begun in Bengal Engineering College whereby a psychiatric counsellor has been hired on an experimental basis to see how well students respond to the institution's efforts to help them overcome their language handicaps. The task will be to help students overcome through counsel their possible fears in learning the language.

It will be interesting to see at what point industry and academia can meet on the motivation issue. At present, there are differing views and it is unclear how a reconciliation is possible. However, till such time as this

issue can be addressed jointly by both stakeholders, the turnaround time per employee will continue to be at present levels and will certainly not prove helpful in the long run.

Linking competitive potential with ability: Principal Secy in the Dept of IT Dr G D Gautama spoke of the need for much greater introspection on part of academia regarding its role in being the raw material pipeline for the industry as West Bengal had not gone anywhere near its full competitive potential and the academia had a great role to play in the realisation of that potential. He pointed out that at the college level various novel steps could be taken to encourage constant English speaking, quoting his own experience at a college where students were fined progressively steeply if they used their mother tongue in common conversation. Seconding his observation, Dr R K Handa, the Director of that college who was also present at the workshop, observed that at JIS College of Engineering, he always insisted that more than grammatical accuracy, it was confidence-building that was important. This is what would ensure better future prospects for students.

Mr Dipak Ojha of the British Council specified that in the light of his experiences all over India, he found that the exact meaning of communication skills was not very well understood in many of the engineering colleges in Bengal. He appeared to suggest that the idea was to inculcate English language fluency in the students followed by accuracy, and not the other way round. In Bengal, knowledge base of the students are possibly better than many other places but the speaking skills are bad, and they key issue is confidence-building.

Ethics: Mr Kushal Banerjee of TCS observed that over the years the new recruits have presented a serious values crisis, and the spirit of teamwork is lacking. Some of the students are very shallow, both in terms of knowledge and qualities of sharing – many of them are quite selfish and inappropriate for teamwork. To this Prof Mitra observed that this is an area where educational institutions have fallen short of what they have been mandated to do. While corporates suggested that value education classes may be tried again, Prof Thakur expressed his reservations about the efficacy of this.

One of the bad influences on any student, Mr Banerjee observed, was possibly the amount of politicking that took place in the colleges. While Prof Thakur confirmed the existence of politics even among teachers, Prof Mitra said no administrator would like to see dirty politics play itself out on any institution's campus.

On an allied issue, Prof Mitra also referred to Jadavpur University's situation and requested industry to be careful in obtaining accurate information from the right people before reacting to media reports on the happenings on campus. Clarifying that he had received no less than a few thousand mails during the period of campus unrest when students were beaten up and giving details of how teachers were beaten up by the students earlier, forcing the authorities to bring police on to the campus, Prof Mitra said any ill-informed public reaction by the corporate sector can prove very damaging. The point was that ethical lessons in such situations weigh as much on the minds of the students and affect their future professional lives, as any other standard situation that commands a value-based approach to work.

Poor sense of judgment: Ms Indu Khattar of Wipro Technologies said on the basis of her experience at Wipro that in Bengal, her experience was that colleagues were aggressive when they needed to keep quiet and quiet when they needed to be aggressive. So there were many instances of misplaced emphasis in communication, which she felt had to be addressed adequately. Wholeheartedly agreeing with her, Prof Mitra pointed out that this was the real problem of communication. From the discussion that ensued, it

became clear that though this may begin to be addressed at the academic level, it had to be finally set right at the professional level.

STEPS FORWARD

Mr Bhaskar Das committed that on part of Cognizant he could commit that if a set of educators pre-selected by the University were ready, then Cognizant could draw up a set of dates then it would invite this university team to get first hand exposure of what communication skills were demanded from prospective recruits. CSM suggests that this can be done on a pilot basis, starting with the institutes that participated in the workshop, though they were few. VSNL has also shown enthusiasm towards such a pilot.

One set of institutional responses to the workshop was that rather than the directors, the teachers who actually took communicative English classes should have been invited to the workshop in greater numbers. CSM suggests that the pilot should zero in on the teachers, giving them a practical exposure that they need to use to properly orient their students. The timeframe for this is being worked out.

ABOUT THE WEST BENGAL FORUM

The **West Bengal Forum on Business Partnerships for Sustainable Development** was formed in 2002 by the Centre for Social Markets, a U.K and Kolkata-based non-profit organization committed to promoting responsible entrepreneurship and sustainable development.

The West Bengal Forum's three-fold goals are to:

- Raise awareness of current initiatives regarding business and sustainable development;
- Promote information exchange, networking and mutual learning for greater impact;
- Provide a lasting forum for co-ordination, partnership development and promotion of best practice in West Bengal.

The Forum's members comprise a select group of West Bengal-based businesses, civil society organizations, government and multilateral agencies active on all three dimensions of sustainable development: economic development, environmental stewardship and social justice.

For further details, please contact:

Ms Dhruva Das Gupta
Programme Coordinator
Centre for Social Markets
dhruva@csmworld.org