# IDENTIFYINGEMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS OF GRADUATES USING A COMMON FRAMEWORK OF JOB CLASSIFICATION – A STUDY AMONG HR MANAGERS IN KERALA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a comprehensive survey of employers' perceptions of graduates of the state of Kerala towards assessing measurable qualities and skills that the employers think are mandatory for recruitment. For the purpose of this paper, entry level job roles across domains have been classified into four clusters considering the nature of the activity involved and associated skills with each cluster was arrived at. A job classification matrix based on interactivity and creativity was designed and used as a job classification framework for the purpose of the study. A total of 100 employers from the domains of IT / ITES, BPO, Software, Banking, Automotive, BFIS, FMCG, Education and Manufacturing sectors were chosen for the survey by using a set of questionnaires on five-point Likert scale, to rank indicated skills within job clusters to arrive at must have skills to enhance employment options. The study conducted during June – September 2018 also extends cues towards key insights and supplementary

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findings, which will help businesses formulate new HR policies and re-thinking the existing ones as to welcome the millennials into the workforce. It intends to be a generic guideline to the job seekers irrespective of domain to associate themselves and the jobs they aspire to; to perform a skill match, assess themselves for the competencies sought for by the employers and improve to surpass required levels in the desired profiles.

Key words : Employability skills, softs skills , HR recruitment

## INTRODUCTION

Globalization and advancement in technology have changed the work environment of today's organizations. The functioning of today's organizations demands skills different from what were required earlier. The advent of process automation and robots have transformed the way organizations carry out operations. Booming of educational institutions, rising number of the working population, high literacy rate in Kerala state coupled with dismal unemployment figures needs to be considered with utmost importance.

"When hiring key employees, there are only two qualities to look for: judgement and taste. Almost everything else can be bought by the yard." Said John W Gardener, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) under President Lyndon Johnson. Does it hold true even now? With an approaching hiring season what are the skills, businesses are looking for in the candidates? The previous assumption that expertise in a particular field was the only criteria for effective employment has now paved way to a combination of soft skills and technical skills to have a successful career.There are several studies in this area in the past decade (Rosenberg et al (2012) , Jackson & Chapman (2012) , Lowden et al (2011) ) which dwelve into the subject of understanding employers' perception on employability skills of graduates. The authors also have conducted similar studies in the year 2015 – 2016 to identify major soft skills competency expectations of employers (Cvadhana et al (2016)) and have arrived at top soft skills expected from fresh management graduates. However most of the studies have been conducted with specific job roles or based on specific qualification.

In this context, it will be a good attempt to understand in periodic intervals , the employability skills expectations of employers at periodic intervals with a regional focus and with a wider job role classification .

This research paper is an outcome of a regional survey conducted involving 100 HR professionals, recruiting consultants and business heads. The goal of this survey and deliberation has been to understand key employability skills employers look for in the current job market and mapping these skills to the categorized jobs. There has also been an effort to classify the available jobs across domains considering the key skills desired by the employers and also to rank those identified skills with respect each cluster. This research paper is intended to be a resource for governments, business and other stakeholders interested in strengthening the enabling environment for human capital formation in the current age of automation. The paper also extends cues towards key insights and supplementing findings, which will help businesses formulate new HR policies and re-thinking the existing ones as welcome the Millennials into the workforce. It also intends to be a generic guideline to the job seekers irrespective of domain to associate themselves and the jobs they aspire to; to perform a skill match, assess themselves for the competencies sought for by the employers and improve to surpass required levels in the desired profiles.

## LITERATURE REVIEW
## WHAT IS SKILL?
The Oxford Dictionary describes skill as the "ability to do something well". The expertise of a skill gives you an ability to perform a particular activity with more sophistication. Considering the recruiter's lens, skills are the collection of certain behavioral attributes such as trustworthiness, ability to work without any supervision and stability (Oliver and Turton, 1982). Based on their nature and requirement, skills are broadly categorized into soft skills and hard skills.

## GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS
While there are variations in the classification of employability, there is a broad understanding of what qualities, characteristics, skills and knowledge constitute employability both in general, and

specifically for graduates. Employers expect graduates to have technical and discipline competences from their degrees but require graduates also to demonstrate a range of broader skills and attributes that include team-working, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem solving and managerial abilities.

In the context of a rapidly changing informationand knowledge-intensive economy, employability involves far more than possession of the generic skills listed by graduate employers as attractive. Rather, for optimal economic and social outcomes, graduates must be able to proactively navigate the world of work and self-manage the career building process (Bridstock, Ruth 2008)  It is arguable that specific definitions are less important than an agreed focus on approaches to promote such transferable skills and fostering attributes that will enable graduates to find appropriate employment, progress in their work and thus facilitate the success of their organisations and contribute to society and the economy.

Considering the ever changing job roles in a new economy characterized by technology infiltration , the employability skills also needs to be revisited in a frequent manner by the academia. However, one of the key challenges in identification of employer's expectation of employability skills is the diverse types of job roles and the new age  flexible jobs that are now reigning the industry. Some of the job roles which are existent today were not inexistent a few years back.

LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman(2014) believes that careers are now simply "tours of duty,"prompting companies to design organizations that assume people will only stay a few years. And data bears this out: 58 percent of companies believe their new employees will stick around less than 10 years. Hence the importance of easily transferable employability skills becomes a critical expectation for any employer.

However, the difficulty in identifying and arriving at a benchmarked set of employability skills for each job role will be a challenging task. Hence, we need to derive a framework for classification of job roles and to arrive at a set of softskills and their importance levels .

This paper is thereby an attempt to bring a framework based on classification of jobs and their related employability skills.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To derive a framework for classification of job roles for employability skills
- To understand the importance for a set of employability skills expected by the employers based on this framework in the Kerala context.

Apart from these two main objectives, the paper also tries to bring some latest trends on the hiring and retention patterns which could serve as insights for academia and students.

## THE CLASSIFICATION OF JOB ROLES

To understand the generic skills required various entry level job profiles for graduates; the total job profiles available were studied. The sources included recruitment potals, careers page at employer websites, job descriptions and responsibilities listed in newaper advrtisements. The data hence obtained was coraborated to arrive at this classification which forms the basis of the survey elements. The researchers decided to form a matrix of two charectistics of these jobs – based on Interactivity and Creativity. Thus the job profiles were classified into non interactive and creative jobs, non interactive and routine jobs, interactive and creative jobs and interactive and routine jobs.

| Interactive – Routine jobs | Interactive – Creative |
|---|---|
| Non Interactive – Routine Jobs | Non- Interactive – Creative |

Table : 1 : The Job Classification Matrix

The recruiters thought that non interactive creative jobs required great deal of analytical skills, creativity and multitasking. These tasks involved less interaction with others but high levels of creativity. These are the individuals employed mostly in programming and design in various companies.

In interactive and routine jobs the major skills required are organisation skills, multitasking ability and critical thinking skills. These included work in clerical, transcription and accounting sector. There is high need for interactions during work. The work is routine and requires less creativity.

In interactive and creative jobs viz consultant, sales and middle management etc; requires high levels of interactions and creativity. It was one of the important jobs in the organisation. The majority of HR managers stated that these professionals require communication skills, interpersonal skills, leadership, creativity, critical thinking and presentation skills. This was a challenging job that requires various abilities to handle the job effectively.

The last category in which work was divided includes interactive and routine jobs. These involve various call centres and service sectors.  Communication and writing skills were considered to be most essential in this area. There is high need of interaction with others of the team.

## DERIVATION OF MAJOR EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

A comprehensive literature review as well as the content analysis of the various job advertisements enabled in the listing of the most important employability skills valued by the employers. Inorder to derive the same systematically, the following methodology was used. We visited the major job portals in the internet like www.Naukri.com , www.indeed.com , www.monster.com , www.shine.com ,www.quikr.com and a content analysis of the job advertisements posted in the past 6 months was done . The major employability skills quoted in such job advertisements was compiled and the skills with the highest number of tally points were further chosen for the study. A total of 376 job postings from all these websites were used as a referral point. Thus the following Employability skills were found to be most repeated in the job

advertisements. The Top Ten Ranking based on the usage in job advertisements is given in Table 2 below.

| Rank | Employability Skills | Tally points |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Communication skills | 235 |
| 2. | Leadership Skills | 220 |
| 3 | Organising skills | 189 |
| 4 | Interpersonal Skills | 176 |
| 5 | Writing/Reporting  Skills | 170 |
| 6 | Presentation Skills | 120 |
| 7 | Creativity | 114 |
| 8 | Multi tasking skills | 105 |
| 9 | Critical thinking | 89 |
| 10 | Analytical Skills | 81 |

Table 2: Ranking of major Employability skills based on occurrence in job advertisements

## SURVEY FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Considering the objectives of the study , after preliminary literature review, it was decided to conduct a quantitative survey among the employers – comprising of HR managers  to understand their perspective on employability skills as well as confirm the validity of the framework proposed.
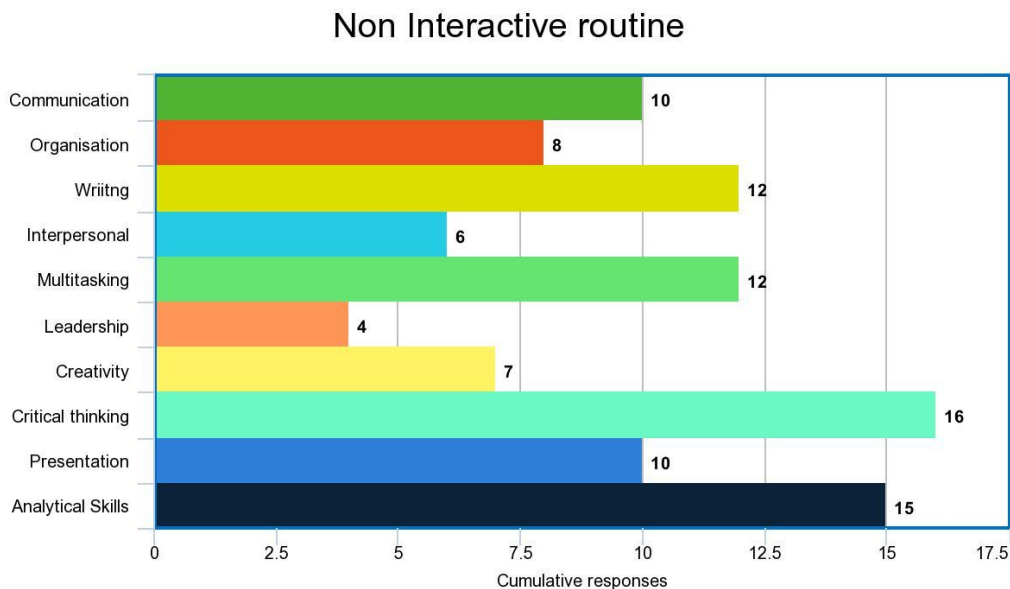
A sample of HR managers from various industry domains in Kerala was invited to participate in the study . 104 HR Managers were conducted personal interviews using the structured questionnaire which captures the importance of employability skills for these job roles. However, 4 samples were later dropped due to incompleteness. The HR managers belonged to major domains  of IT / ITES, BPO, Software, Banking, Automotive, BFIS, FMCG, Education and Manufacturing sectors by convenience sampling by visiting or telecalling them at their workplace. The major respondents were from the Infopark Kochi (43 of them) and the remaining belonged to other domains within Kerala. The survey questionnaire consisted of items for

providing rating of the employability skills on five-point Likert scale, to rank indicated skills within job clusters to arrive at must have skills to enhance employment options. The data hence collected was analysed to arrive at top skills in each job domain cluster which the employers thought are a must have for a job placement. Supplementary questions in the survey has revealed industry trends in HR policies, employee career progression, challenges in training and development etc. Major findings of the survey is presented next.

## SURVEY FINDINGS & INSIGHTS

### Key employability skills across domains

The first part of the questionnaire tried to assess the importance of the top ten softskills by asking the HR managers to rank the order of the Employability skills based on the job classification . This ranking was then analysed to come up with the following results which is tabulated in the below Graphs no 1, 2 ,3 and 4 .
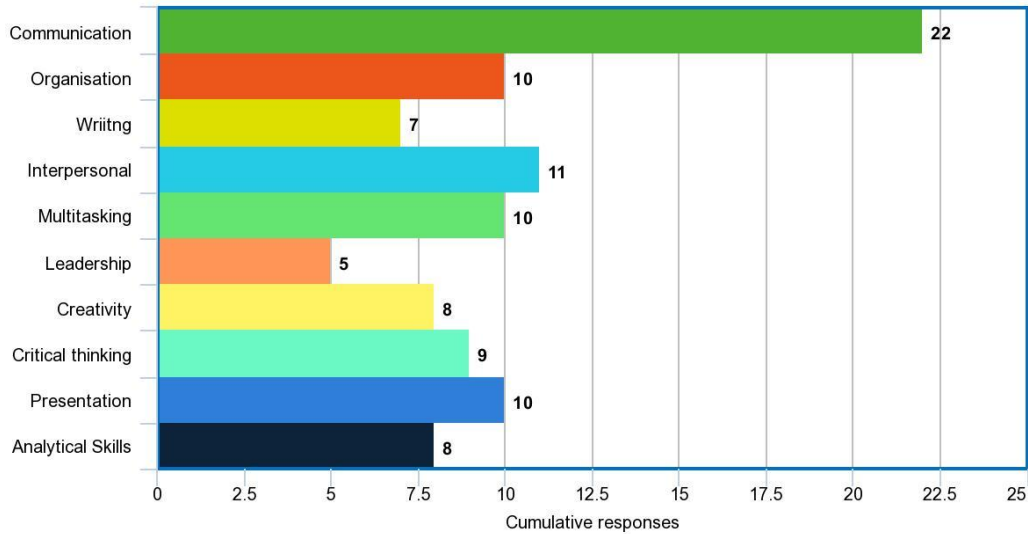
**Non Interactive routine**

| Skill | Cumulative responses |
|---|---|
| Communication | 10 |
| Organisation | 8 |
| Wriitng | 12 |
| Interpersonal | 6 |
| Multitasking | 12 |
| Leadership | 4 |
| Creativity | 7 |
| Critical thinking | 16 |
| Presentation | 10 |
| Analytical Skills | 15 |

Graph 1: Employability skills for Non- interactive and Routine Jobs

As can be seen from Graph 1, the top rated employability skills for Non- interactive and routine jobs are Critical thinking , Analytical skills  and writing skills and multitasking skills. The

examples of non interactive routine jobs are accounting , writing reports, processing documents , data entry jobs and similar  clerical jobs.

## Interactive, routine jobs



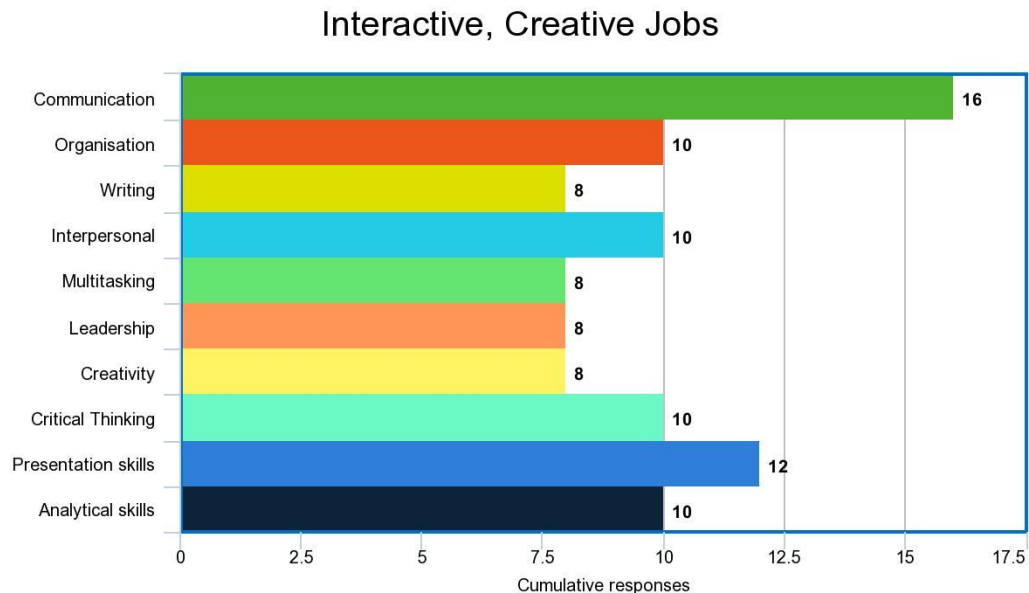Graph 2:  Employability Skills for Interactive and Routine jobs

Grpah 2 shows that the top rated employability skills for interactive and routine jobs is communication skills and interpersonal skills . Organisation skills, multitasking skills and presentation skills are rated next in this set of jobs. The job roles in this category includes customer service, call center , chat support and similar process oriented interactive jobs.

## Non Interactive, Creative Jobs
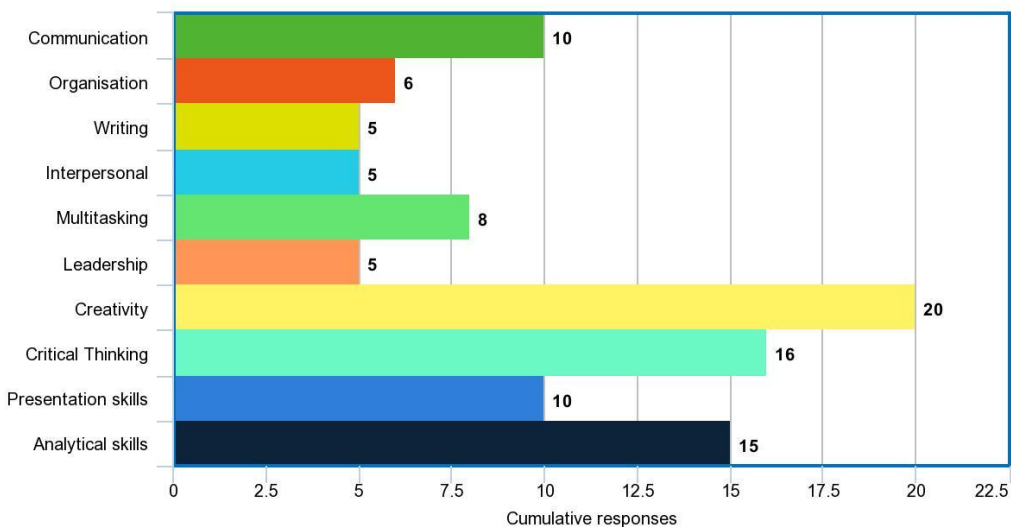
Graph 3: Employability Skills for Non interactive , Creative jobs

As can be seen from Graph 3, the top rated skills for creative but non interactive jobs include Creativity, critical thinking and analytical skills . Examples of these jobs include programming, designing , creative writing etc .

## Interactive, Creative Jobs



Grpah 4: Employability skills for Creative and interactive jobs

In Graph 4, we can see that the employability skills needed for creative and interactive jobs is mostly communication skills, presentation skills and various skills like organizing skills , analytical skills , critical thinking and interpersonal skills .

It can be noticed that in all the above categories top rated skills with atleast 10 points included Communication skills and Presentation skills . Thus we can also derive that these two skills can be the most important skillsets or critical employability skills for any type of job.

**Other Findings from the Survey**

The survey also dwelved into some latest trends and perspectives from the HR managers in the employability and hiring arena . The results are also presented below based on the questions asked.

**Question 1: Do hiring managers think University Curriculum is far away from industry expectations of a recruit?**



Not Sure
28%

No
20%

Yes
52%
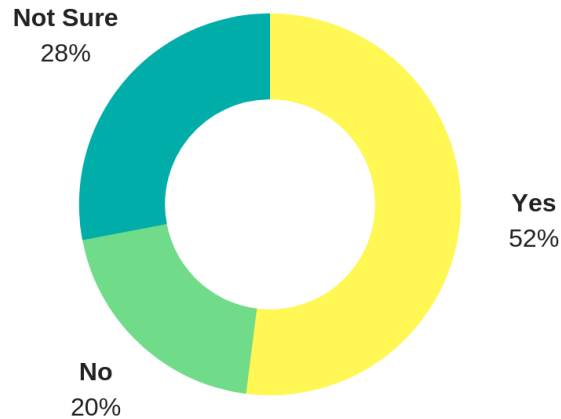
**University Curriculum vs Industry Expectations**

Graph 5

52% of HR managers feel that the current university curriculum doesn't cater to industry expectations, hence having direct impact on placements, CTC and profile offered for recruits. They also agreed to the that the training period required to produce a productive employee varies upon the individual. Some are fast learners whereas some individuals take time. At least 3-6 months are required for training to gain the basic efficiency of working in the company.

When asked about the quality of candidates who turn up for interviews, the degree they possess and skill sets, the recruiters thought that there is a great need to identify an individual passion and calling. They called for more field work and having classes taken by experienced individuals who are experts in a particular job as a part of education (Guest lecture series). There were also suggestions to include more training in confidence building, attitude and developing a good personality as essential skills for succeeding in jobs and careers. There should be a practically oriented approach rather than theoretical in educational institutions.

**Question 2: Are you willing to hire candidates with Online degreesover regular degrees ?**

Not Sure
6%

No
17%

Yes
77%
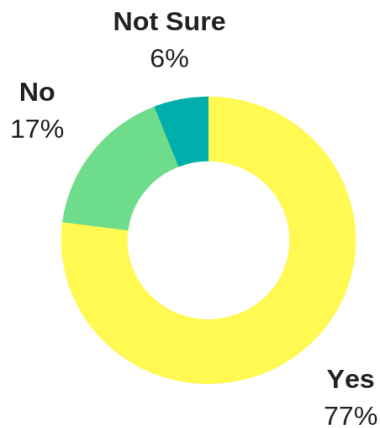
**Online Degree Acceptance for placement**

Graph 6

HR managers are willing to offer roles for recruits who have taken online degrees; provided they demonstrate expertise and are capable enough to handle the job responsibilities. Though 77% of the recruiters were positive out online degrees, they expressed the importance of the education provider, the credentials of the institution offering the same, and how the degree is being awarded (tests, mandatory modules, capstone projects etc). There are few job roles that require certain technical skills that can only be provided byformal education, or few job roles which mandates an educational qualification under existing policies or government regulations; hence the formal degrees become a must have.

**Question 3: What is the ratio of men and womenemployed in the companies on an average for various jobs?**
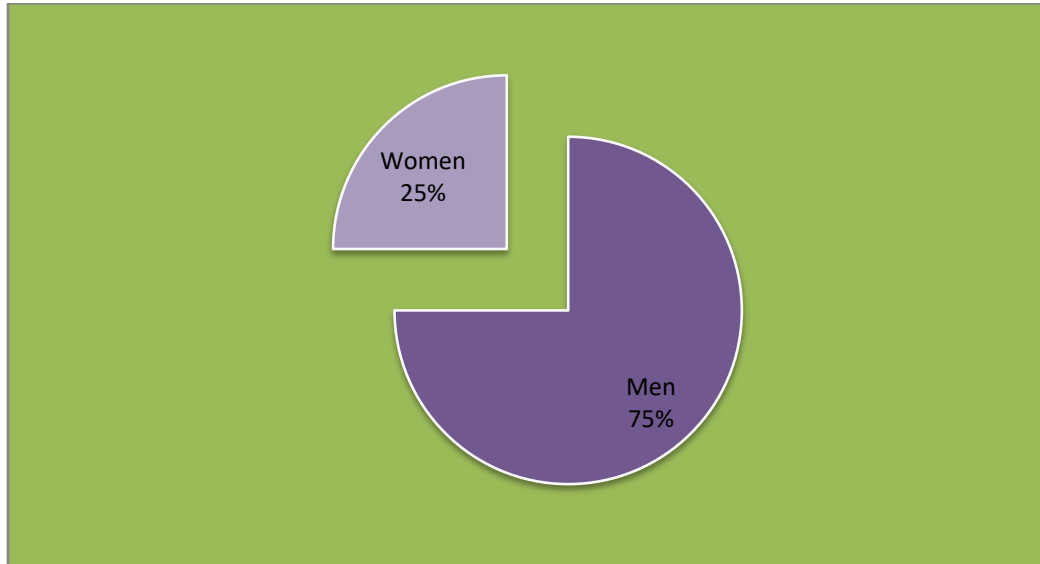


Graph 7: Men to women ratio in the organisations interviewed

Even though most Human Resource managers agree that their major criteria for hiring is based on the skills of the individuals it is clearly evident that there is huge disparity that exists in the ratio of employed men when compared to women. This might be due to many factors like lack of availability of women willing to work in flexible schedules, need to provide additional facilities to women like maternity leave etc.
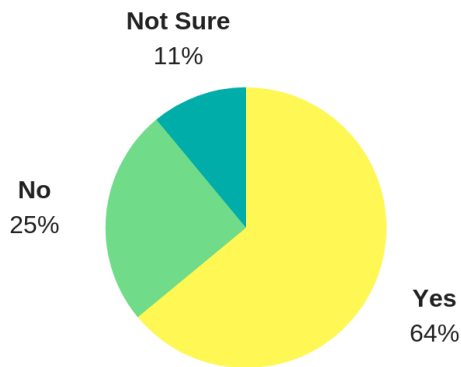
**Question 4: Is there a diversity inclusion policy in the company?**

The managers were asked whether there was a diversity inclusion policy in the company and the result is derived in the Graph : 8
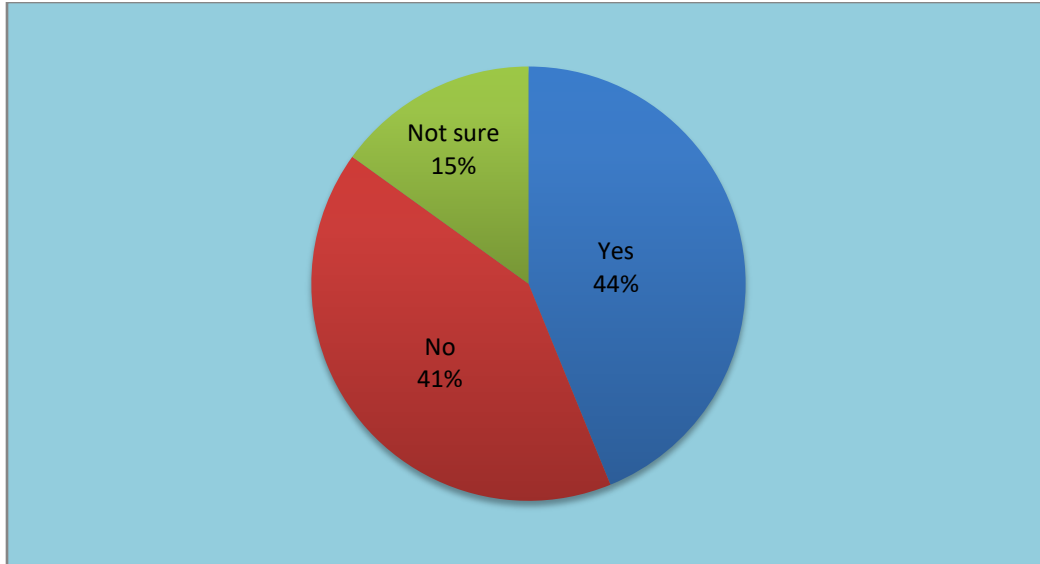
Graph 8: Is there any diversity inclusion policy in the company?

**Question 5: Are companies willing to recruit remote employment in future?**



Respondednts open towards remote employment

Many companies are willing to give remote employment only if it is very essential for the employee. Some companies give work at home option once a week. This also depends on the type of work which is undertaken by the employee of the company.

## CONCLUSION

This paper was an attempt to derive the major employability skills as expected by employers and then get their importance for each job role based on job type classification. The research started with a review of literature to understand the different the various studies conducted in the field of employability skills. The field research started with the compiling of the top employability skills by arriving at a tally point for each time that skill was visible in the job advertisement. Further, based on this tally point, the top ten employability skills was arrived at. These skills were then rated by employers based on importance for the job classification matrix of interactivity and creativity. Apart from this, a few other questions related to hiring trends was asked to the HR managers and the results are also included in this paper. Some of the key findings include the result that communication skills and presentation skills being critical employability skill for job roles across sectors and the receptivity towards skill based expertise over educational qualificaitons . The study also brought out perspectives on diversity and inclusion strategy followed by companies and it was found that only around 44% of the companies had such a strategy in place. Future hiring trends include remote employment to consider for the talent scarcity that the companies face.

The paper is a result of a research work to understand the latest perspective from HR managers about employability skills in Kerala and throws light on the critical employability skills expectations of employers. It also hints at the skill gap and points at the focus to be given for training for better employability. We recommend similar studies at regular intervals (preferably per annum or biennial) to understand changing perspectives of HR and hiring trends based on employability skills.

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