



EFFECTIVE AND INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR INTENSIVE TRAINING IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate colleges in India have directed their attention and training toward enhancing the employability of their students with a view to meeting the needs of changing job market and industry demands and expectations. Most technical institutions have designated training and placement (T&P) units with specialist training and placement officers (TPOs), whose job entail, among other things, conducting campus recruitment training (CRT) programs and campus recruitment drives (CRDS). Group discussions (GDs) and personal interviews (PIs) are the two key communication components in CRT programs. Provision of impactful training in GDs and PIs will ensure the development of communication and confidence levels and the enhancement of employability potential. This paper seeks to present a cluster of effective and innovative strategies for intensive training in GDs and PIs. The paper asserts that the proposed training strategies could be of help to TPOs to model their CRT programs. They can train their team to deploy these strategies during the training of GD and PI components. The paper also recommends that successful implementation of these strategies will help students to face CRDs confidently and hone their job seeking skills.

Keywords: *group discussions, innovative strategies, interviews, training and placement units, campus recruitment training, campus recruitment drives, job seeking skills*

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the spread of the internet have brought about tremendous changes in education, economy, business and trade. The growth of multinational companies (MNCs) and various other business establishments opened up job opportunities for graduates from undergraduate and other colleges. The demand for graduates with requisite skills for market has increased. Educational institutions, especially undergraduate colleges geared up to meet the challenge of preparing qualified workforce for the emerging job market situations. Even the MNCs and other industrial establishments began to tap the young workforce in educational institutions. These developments have led to synergy between educational institutes and the industry. To cater to the growing job demands educational institutions have started organizing specialized training in developing technical skills, aptitude, logic and reasoning, verbal ability and communication skills via intensive programs both long-term and short-term. CRT programs and campus recruitment drives have become the order of the day in most educational organizations. It has now become a common practice for companies to visit colleges to identify and recruit young talent, and even the colleges invite companies to their campuses for training and recruitment purposes. Recruitment process has become stabilized and standardized. Recruiters follow set procedures which involve written tests, group discussions, and personal interviews. Students' technical skills, aptitude, communication skills, interpersonal skills, multicultural skills, team working skills, innovative problem-solving skills are tested.



Communication skills have become essential requirements for job seekers and job providers. A fresh hire's success in the workplace is determined by clarity and effectiveness in communication. Alison Doyle (2019) asserts, 'The ability to communicate effectively with superiors, colleagues, and staff is essential, no matter what industry you work in. Workers in the digital age must know how to effectively convey and receive messages in person as well as via phone, email, and social media. Good communication skills will help you get hired, land promotions, and be a success throughout your career.'

TRAINING AND PLACEMENT UNITS IN COLLEGES

To cater to the growing demands of the job market, most colleges have established T & P units on their campuses. They offer training to suit the needs of job market, partner with MNCs and industrial establishments, provide guidance for exploring job opportunities, foster continuous institute-industry interaction, maintain databank of recruiters and job seekers, provide training in group discussions, interview skills, resume' preparation and psychometric tests, enhance English language skills, communication skills and soft skills, provide training in technical skills, aptitude, and coding skills.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS AND PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

In response to change in work culture, organizations have given top priority to communication skills of their recruits. Group discussions and personal interviews have become essential tools to assess prospective job seekers' communication skills. In a GD, Suresh Kumar et al (2010) state that employers look for the candidate's ability to fit into the group, to influence the group, to solve problems, to communicate effectively, to remain calm and composed in a stressful situation, and to stay positive, irrespective of his views being accepted or rejected.

Talking about appropriate body language at interviews, Suresh Kumar et al (2005) suggest that candidates should look calm and confident and not tense and confused, sport a smile and don't be serious, make the impression, through their facial expressions, that they have come to discuss things about them and not to be grilled by the interviewers and be energetic and enthusiastic and not dull and docile.

THE PROPOSED TRAINING STRATEGIES

The present paper seeks to propose the following 10 strategies and approaches for conducting intensive training program for cultivating students' knowledge of GDs and PIs.



1) Get the trainees to understand the rationale

The trainers should treat the trainees as adults and provide them with the rationale behind the process and activities incorporated into CRT programs and CRDs. Keep reminding them of the rationale so as to enable them to understand what is expected of them in every activity and at every round in the selection procedure.

Get the trainees to understand that a variety of skills and abilities such as communication skills, team player skills, view points, attitudes, critical thinking skills and creative thinking skills, personality traits are tested through GDs and PIs. Draw trainees' attention to these skills through specific, real examples during the training program.

2) Vary the methods and styles

The training process should contain variety in terms of methods and styles. Change the formations (circular/semicircular/rectangular formations) and group sizes (small/ moderate/ big) as trainees participate in GDs. Content could be presented through a variety of means such as brainstorming, eliciting, lecturing, visuals, handouts, applications, software, etc. Conduct GDs and PIs in formal and informal settings and provide feedback too in similar ways. Involve teachers from other departments, external faculty/trainers as and when needed during the training process. Give hands on experience in varied ways of initiating, continuing and concluding a GD.

Get the trainees to read a lot of articles/information presented by professional writers and discuss them in the classes. Get them to critically look at the points, rather than receive the information passively. Ask them to critique the information they get from various sources, rather than accept the same as mantras to be followed strictly. The trainers should not make the mistake of providing huge chunks of information. Instead, they should facilitate discussion on various points and aspects in meaningful situations.

3) Vary the topics and wording

The training program should enable the trainees to develop in-depth knowledge on varied topics. Facilitators should include current affairs, general knowledge, and industry news into the sessions and discuss them. The program should include wide ranging topics related to matters such as politics, economy, religion, science, law, sports, technology, etc. The topics could be factual/socio-economic, controversial/argumentative, abstract/notional and case studies. Collect topics actually used by various recruiting companies so that trainees know what to expect. Work on the wording of the topic so that participants of the discussion can understand clearly and correctly the topic given for discussion and enable the participants to know what exactly is expected of them.



4) Arrive at a Comprehensive List of Dos and Don'ts

The training program should arrive at the dos and don'ts for GDs and PIs. This information should be provided to them contextually, not in the form of a list of points presented at one go in one session. Elicit information from trainees during the activity and consolidate the same during the feedback session. Get the participants to critique lists such as the ones presented below based on their knowledge and experience. Swati Mittal (2018) presents the following mistakes to avoid in a group discussion. These include: 1) Don't take the lead, if you don't know the topic, 2) Don't hesitate to take the lead, if you know it, 3) Don't copy or follow someone else's ideas or comments, 4) Don't contradict your own points, 5) Don't avoid eye contact with fellow participants, 6) Avoid interrupting others, 7) Don't just speak once, contribute during the entire discussion, 8) Don't lose confidence, 9) Don't mumble, be Audible and 10) Remember that you have limited amount of time. Hitbullseye website suggests the following dos and don'ts in a personal interview.

Dos in a Personal Interview

- Use a strong voice, clear diction and correct grammar.
- Make sure your personal appearance is prim and proper, and you dress appropriately.
- In case of a handshake with the panelists, make sure it is a firm one.
- Establish eye contact with the interviewer but do not stare at him.
- Do equip yourself with sufficient knowledge about the company you are seeking a job in.
- Do take criticism gracefully.
- Do equip yourself with a strong knowledge of the company (in case of prior work experience).
- Do display a sense of wit as and when possible.
- Do exhibit a mixture of self-confidence, grace and poise.
- Do take sufficient time to think before answering tricky questions and do not be rushed into your answers.
- Do make concrete goals in planning for your career.
- Do demonstrate sufficient grasp of the key graduation concepts.
- Do have sufficient knowledge of your key projects & papers.
- Do support your answers with examples, wherever possible.
- Do present yourself as a multi rounded personality with ability to learn from both academic and extracurricular activities.

Don'ts in a personal interview

- Don't be arrogant, overaggressive, or vain.
- Don't show a lack of attention or energy.
- Don't make excuses for adverse conditions in your record, such as below average marks.



- Don't condemn past institutions of education; keep comments positive.
- Don't display a noticeable aversion for schoolwork.
- Don't be uncertain and indecisive in your thoughts.
- Don't display prejudice or bias.
- Don't be late and make sure you are on time for the interview.
- Don't contradict your own answers.
- Don't glorify experiences dating back to formative years of schooling.
- Don't forget: You are the one who provides content to the interview, and you have control over what you are sharing with the interviewer.

5) Give the Assessment Criteria

The trainees should be provided with the assessment criteria. The criteria will provide clear sense of directions and aspects to focus on during preparation and to check performance themselves. In addition to faculty and evaluators assessing the performance of the participants, encouragement must also be given to self assessment and peer assessment.

Sample GD Evaluation Criteria

- Knowledge of the topic/ research skills
- Communication skills
- Team player skills
- Problem solving skills
- Critical and creative thinking
- Body language
- Personality traits
- Time management
- Stress management
- Leadership skills

Sample Self Assessment Interview Criteria

Please assess yourself on a scale of 1 to 10.

- Academic knowledge and achievements
- Technical skills
- Communication skills
- General knowledge and current awareness
- Hobbies and extracurricular activities
- Goal orientation
- Teamwork
- Innovative problem solving



- Confidence

Sample Interview Evaluation Criteria

Please assess the candidate on a scale of 1 to 10.

- Academic knowledge and achievements
- Technical skills
- Communication skills and Body language
- Confidence
- General knowledge and current awareness
- Integrity
- Listening skills
- Innovative problem solving skills
- Personality and self –awareness
- Stress handling

6) Discuss the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQS) at Interviews and Responses

The training program should collect FAQs and discuss possible responses to them. However, the trainees should be cautioned not to learn the response by heart and regurgitate them at the interviews. Instead, they should only consider the responses as possible models for the given questions.

7) Make mock interviews meaningful

Mock interviews play a crucial role in honing students' interview skills. They familiarize students with the needed interview etiquette and FAQs. An innovative training strategy that could make mock interviews meaningful to trainees is to nominate a team from among the trainees to enact the roles of recruiters/interviewers. The teams can keep changing so that most people could get practice in this activity. The author of this paper has found this to be a productive strategy to boost the confidence levels of the trainees and also to fine tune their technical and problem-solving skills. The trainer and experts from different specializations could also conduct mock interviews to provide a more challenging and more relevant experience to the trainees.

8) Address the stress

The researcher has found that even the very vocal and confident ones become a bundle of nerves at interview situations and as a result they fail to speak clearly and audibly and lose the opportunity of creating a positive impact. Counseling them after the mock interviews and real interviews will go a long way in dealing with the stress the trainees experience. Talk to them on how to stay cheerful, vibrant and speak clearly even in stressful situations such as when



interviewers cut in or when they are curt. Participants can also be trained to undergo stress interviews to test their true personality and their approach toward real life situations.

9) Make use of mnemonics

An interesting way to enable the participants to comprehend the content and key elements of GDs and PIs is to package the important information in terms of mnemonics. For instance, trainees could be asked to follow the SACC rule when participating in GDs and interviews. SACC stands for Slow, Audible, Clear and Confident. During feedback, they may be reminded if they have spoken slowly, audibly, clearly and confidently at the mock interview or in a real interview.

10) Focus on both hard skills and soft skills

Recruiters test prospective employees' knowledge and skills related to both hard skills and soft skills. Therefore, training program should enable participants to reflect on their knowledge of hard skills (technical knowledge and soft skills (integrity, poise, time management, effective listening, and emotional maturity). They need to be made aware of which aspects of the training relate to hard skills and which ones address the soft skills.

IMPLICATIONS

The paper yields some pedagogical implications. Educational institutions should provide right ambience in terms of infrastructural facilities such as the movable seating, cabins for mock interviews, and creation of expert teams across the departments for enabling training to be effective and successful.

CONCLUSION

The paper assumes significance as it presented varied innovative strategies to be deployed during the training of GD and PI components. It is axiomatic that successful implementation of these strategies will enable students of various disciplines and branches to face CRDs confidently and hone their job seeking skills.

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