Skill gap

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Even in skilled workers it is not usually about very specific training and so on, it is more about the ability of the worker to understand the needs of the job, the willingness and ability to innovate to make the process more internalised.

Everyone is right now talking of the skill gap that exists between what industry and the economy are demanding and what the manpower in Pakistan offers. They talk of the outdated and outmoded education that our institutions are imparting, the old skills we are giving and the poor job technical and vocational training institutes are doing of giving skills. So the government is going to act to address the issue urgently.

The action set has many facets. On the one hand HEC is going to spend a lot of money starting new Ph.D. programmes, upgrading Information Technology (IT) institutes, and revamping curricula of other degree programmes as well. The federal government is going to set up a Technical Education and Vocational Training Authority (TEVTA) like authority at the federal level, and the ministry of industries is going to set up a technology and human resource upgradation company. All of these initiatives will, the government hopes, alleviate the problem of skill gap. My strong feeling is that this is not going to be enough and in fact, I feel that we are not even making an effort to address the problem.

in normal schools and about looking at some of the values that we are able to give to our children in our homes. Since the latter is less amenable to change through public policy let us talk of the former.

students in the habit of working on themselves. They can inspire and open new doors, they can in fact open new universes for students, but as the saying goes, it is then the students who have to walk through these doors and go where even their teachers have not been. I can still remember the thrill my physics teacher had produced in me when he gave us the first lecture on Newton's laws of force in grade nine. And then the thrill I got from reading Richard Feynman's lectures on physics later when I was able to pursue things on my own. My philosophy tutor of ethics opened my eyes to what David Hume and Immanuel Kant were all about and what beautiful structures of thought they have erected.

Teachers can also be guides in terms of showing how the learning that they have has been translated into the kind of persons that they are. Newton was all the more beautiful because of my physics teacher, and I am sure he went to heaven just for being the kind of person that he was, and for a long time I wanted to grow up and be like him, till I learnt that I just had to make my own path for myself. When we went up for undergraduate studies the head of the institution, in his opening speech, said 'you are here to learn how to learn', and nothing more. It was not about any subject skills, but about the skill of crafting a personality.

Even in skilled workers, when industrialists complain about poor quality, it is not usually about very specific training and so on, it is more about the ability

to address the problem.

Why is it that when we talk to retailers they say that they do not get good sales staff in Pakistan? What sort of training and education does one need to go into sales and retailing at an ordinary shop level? One can understand if one is going to be an insurance salesman or medical representative that there is a fair amount of information that one needs to understand before one goes into the field, but this sort of information can only be imparted through company-specific training programmes and more importantly, this definitely does not apply to salesmen in smaller retail stores and even in the departmental stores.

The complaint is actually not about training, it is about the quality of education in this case. The people who are available, whether they are matric, F.Sc. or even graduates, have had such poor education that the majority are unable to acquire even an acceptable level of interpersonal skills, language skills, and skills needed for learning, improvisation and innovation. If a customer asks something that is even a little out of the ordinary, or asks about some characteristic of a product, most sales staff are at a loss as to how to respond to such queries.

More importantly, the basic skills regarding how a customer needs to be treated, how a sales person should ensure higher level of sales for the establishment, how the needs of customers need to be met and addressed, how new needs should be created, and how the interaction has to be based on politeness and courtesy are some of the things that businessmen complain about. The question here is not then of starting up more vocational training institutes, it is about improving the quality of our normal education

through public policy let us talk of the former.

Education quality in our schools, public sector as well as the low end of private sector, is very poor. There are plenty of surveys that show this graphically. We are not able to give skills to students when they are the most receptive for them. Children are like high quality blotting paper - they can absorb so much and so well - but if we do not give them good quality inputs to soak up they will not be able to do much with the material. But it is not just the language skills, mathematics and knowledge of science that we are failing to impart, it is also the sense of wonder that a student and child should have, a sense of curiosity about the world, a respect for hard work and need for personal growth that we are failing to impart. This is probably the biggest problem in our education system.

My feeling about education is that once a student has the basics, most learning has to be autodidactic (self-learned). This is how I have seen most people learn. You take up subjects and books that fascinate you and you devour them independently of whether they are a part of your course or not, independently of whether they are prescribed or not, and most importantly you bring every good thing that you learn to be a part of your personality. This struggle is not about getting degrees and diplomas and getting jobs, though of course good education helps there, but it is about being better persons. It is about being people who can learn, grow and become better and these are the students who will end up being better technicians and engineers, and better salespersons and entrepreneurs.

Of course good teachers are essential for getting

specific training and so on, it is more about the ability of the worker to understand the needs of the job, the willingness and ability to innovate to make the process more internalised. Making a worker skilled at overseeing and performing a repetitive task is not very hard, but making her understand the basics of the task so that he can understand the needs of the factory is the main challenge. And this can only come if we are able to produce the kind of curious minds mentioned above.

If you have ever hired a plumber or electrician to do a slightly out of the ordinary job at your house or place of work, you would understand what is meant by what has been said above. One has to explain what one wants endlessly, and supervise closely if quality has to be ensured. Seldom does one come across a thinking plumber or electrician. This is also true of the workers that employers complain about.

Of course we need better vocational training and we need more Ph.D.s and we need more IT colleges and universities, but what we need much more is quality. Quality in our teachers to inspire students, quality in our ways of teaching and teaching material to create curiosity in students, and quality to create thinking individuals at all levels of society. But the current initiatives, including the initiative to produce 5000 doctorates, is a too narrow technician style to give us the quality that we need. Even the higher quality private institutions have fallen into the same trap. We need a much bigger revamping of our education system to achieve real quality that we require.

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