Train-the-Trainers: Why we are so focused?

Abstract

The paper describes the Train-the-Trainers to offer some help to the students to understand the expectations and requirement of multinational corporations (MNCs). We embarked on the training sessions by our industry Advisor to the identified future trainers i.e. the lecturers in preparing the graduating students with various interviewing skills. The main agendas in two sessions were, 1) English language proficiency is also a national issues as stipulated in the Graduate Employability Blueprint and 2) simulation case exercise for the critical thinking and problem solving skills. The program muted in the university agenda to get the MNCs engaged and continuously help the university to increase the students' capabilities to compete in global arena. As showed in the findings, the very first step is to change their mindset and mentality.

Keywords: employability, interview, train-the-trainers.

Train-the-Trainers for Interview Training

Interview is a common practice in many organizations especially for recruiting new manpower. Often interviewers set the rules of a survey and determine series of structured interview prior to the real session. The ultimate goals of such settings are to gain feedbacks from the interviewees and to confirm the selection. Structured interviews can be quite demanding for interviewees as it combines social and cognitive processes (Dipboye, 2005). At a minimum, interviewees will be engaging in some level of conversation, interpreting type of information being requested,

recalling relevant information, choosing among the options in memory and clearly communicating this information (Maurer, Solamon & Lippstreu, 2008).

In universities, interview skill training is carried out to prepare students for employment. The training is delivered in various approaches including workshops, mock interviews, industrial talks and one-to-one consultation. However, the outcome of the interview training is sometime questionable. We have experienced on receiving responses from organizations especially among the multinational corporations (MNCs) that the students are not well prepared for the interview. Lack of communication skills, incapable to discuss the answer clearly and attitude are among the listed weaknesses. Furthermore, students are claimed of having less proficiency in English, a common used communication in business, private and even some government departments in Malaysia nowadays. Our experiences are shared by many. Besides, the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012–2017 reported that deficiency in students' generic skills including failure to excel during the interview is the major factors that affect the level of graduate employability (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2012).

The new working style that require people to be flexible and industry focus that driven on soft skills and generic skills possessed by graduates become another challenge for graduates (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Apparently, many talent development programs have been introduced and carried out by schools, universities and industries. However, one cannot deny that a key to the success of the trainings is the quality of trainers and their training methods (Maurer et al., 2008; van Wyk, 2013).

We have taken some actions to the responses of MNCs and the blueprint by (i) developing structured internship models and (ii) enhancing the quality of trainers in various skills. In developing the structured internship (SIP) models, internal alignment of functions among academic schools and training centers have been addressed (Nor Idayu, Mohamed Mustafa & Hartini, 2013). Meanwhile, an intervention program was designed in attempt to enhance trainers' skills and knowledge of the developed SIP. This paper will describe one of the train-the-trainers programs conducted to offer some help to students to understand the expectations and requirement of MNCs. The program aims to exposed trainers, among lecturers, with real job interview process, techniques and candidates' evaluation scheme which play as a vital role prior to the job placement. We begin our discussion by viewing some existing studies about the train-the-trainers especially for interview enhancement skills. Then, we elaborate the methodology used in this intervention program and report the results of the analyses. Finally, we end up the discussion with conclusion.

Literature Review

Over decades, career development literature have examined the issue of employability which relates to recent graduates and the effectiveness of academic programs aimed at developing students with the appropriate skills for the industry or workplace. The discussions merely on two pillars: (i) the effectiveness of developed career development program (e.g. Miller & Liciardi, 2003; Brown, Hillier & Warren, 2010) and (ii) industry demands (e.g. Ahadiat, 2002; Mroz & Savage, 2006). The effectiveness of career program is often measured from perceptiveness of students whether the program helps to provide them with career direction, test or comparison between programs approach and indicators of return of investment (ROI). Meanwhile, studies on

industry demands usually come out with lists of skills desired by employers and the forecast on demand of manpower (Neumann & Topel, 1991).

The concern on interview studies is, varies among others includes the discussion on the design of interview (Alvesson, 2003), behavior of interviewers (Olson & Peytchev, 2007) and train-the-trainers for interviewers (Maurer et al., 2008). In general, researchers believe that interviewers learn their role as they gain experience in conducting interviews. They could learn from the mistake or something that occur in the early interview pace (Pickery & Loosveldt, 2001; Olson & Peytchev, 2007). The accumulation of experiences from the interviews will give better skills to interviewers in carrying out future interview, but it may create greater expectation which sometimes found difficult by young job hunters.

Nevertheless, interviewees will be skillful in responding to structured interviews if they are familiarized with the varieties of structured. As discussed in details by Maurer et al. (2008), interviewees might prepare for important interviews if they are coached and guided effectively. Besides, a good coaching will provide an opportunity to influence interviewees with quality behavior, preparedness and quality data capture during the session (Tross & Maurer, 1999). Such findings have driven us to introduce an intervention program in order to equip trainers, among lecturers, with some current exercise in interviews.

Methodology

Train-the trainers interview design

The interview training program was designed using a simulation based conducted by our industry advisor from one reputable MNC. The interview simulation was run in three sessions namely (i) case study, (ii) job prioritization and (iii) debate. The case study session aims to check lecturers' tacit knowledge about business, management activities and job understanding. In this session, a real dilemma of an organization was given and lecturers were asked to identify the root of the problem. Each lecturer has to response to the case and to articulate their opinion diligently within 10 minutes. Meanwhile, job prioritization session exercises lecturers' ability to managing their time in completing some tasks. Overall, each lecturer was given about 10 tasks, some of which are related to each others. Each lecturer must decided whether the task should be delivered immediately, to be delayed later or to be assigned to others. Also, they need to justify why such decision was being made. The time set for completing this exercise was 5 minutes. Upon completion the second sessions, all lecturers were divided randomly into two teams. A continuity case study was given and they have to debate the topic based on the assignable job position.

Evaluation

An industry advisory acted as a trainer to train all lecturers on the interview skills and training methods. Besides, a panel was allocated in each interview session to evaluate performance of each lecturer using a four point, behaviourally anchored, guided rubric. The measured performance covers the ability of one (i) to recognize the main issues, (ii) to analyze the issues, (iii) to articulate solutions or strategies and (iv) to link the solutions with readings, existing published reports and real case studies. The guided four point scales explain the level of performance as below basic skill, at a basic skill, proficient and advance.

Beside the performance assessment, each lecturer was evaluated on other criteria during the interview including (i) maintains good eye contact, (ii) speak in a clear voice, (iii) answers the questions directly, (iv) remains focused on the question asked and (v) provides full justification for answers. Evaluation on these items was designed to provide feedback to lecturers based on behavioural observation scales (BOS) following Latham and Wexley (1994) at the end of the training.

Sample

23 selected trainers among lecturers were selected to attend the half-day train-the-trainers to reflect themselves on their current duties. They were chosen based on their work nature that involves with students cooperative educations at department, school and university levels. The lecturers would attend the designed half-day interview training and would be evaluated upon completing the training. The successful ones will undergo the second level of skill enhancement training, whilst others may consider on attending more training related to interview skills.

Analysis and findings

The analysis was performed in two folds: (i) the appropriateness of conducting a focus train-the-trainers program on interview and (ii) the level of readiness among lectures to conduct such interview training. In measuring the appropriateness of training, most participated lecturers claimed that the training was merely focusing on the interview skills in depth. They found that interview is not merely about knowing the candidate for recruitment, but it is a crucial part of identifying good talents for a succession plan in an organization.

Response from the participants whom involved in the interview training on four items using a five scale-point, from 1 (strictly not agree) to 5 (strictly agree) is tabulated in Table 1. Overall, the feedbacks from participated lecturers found that the content and methods of the training are excellent and somewhat new to their experience. Besides, the facilities provided for the interview and the structured interview activities are effective to bring in lecturers with the real interview sessions organized at industry.

Table 1. Evaluation on the train-the-trainers program.

Item	Mean	Standard deviation
Training content	5.000	0.0010
Interview methods	4.944	0.236
Supporting interview facilities	4.722	0.461
Interview structure and session	4.944	0.236

The evaluation on lecturers reveals that most of them possess good traits while having an interview. Most lecturers/participants are able to discuss the solution for the case study clearly, having good eye contact and body language, focus in the discussion and speak clearly. Nevertheless, the comments from the industry advisory highlighted some important keys:

English is a challenge that needs to be taken care. Some participants struggle to carry out more discussion but were limited to some vocabulary. Therefore, some confusion statements were made which created difficulty for evaluators to understand the idea.

Problem solving is a skill that determined by experience. Although all participants in the train-the-trainers program are capable to come out with working ideas, solutions and strategies, such ability may not be repeated by students. Therefore, lecturers should

embed more real activities, cases and problems in industry in teaching and learning activities.

The measured performance of the lecturers in the interview train-the-training program is depicted in Figure 1. The plot shows that the performance of the group, in average, close to target at point 5. The results indicate that the trained lecturers possess good traits that are often measured in an interview session.
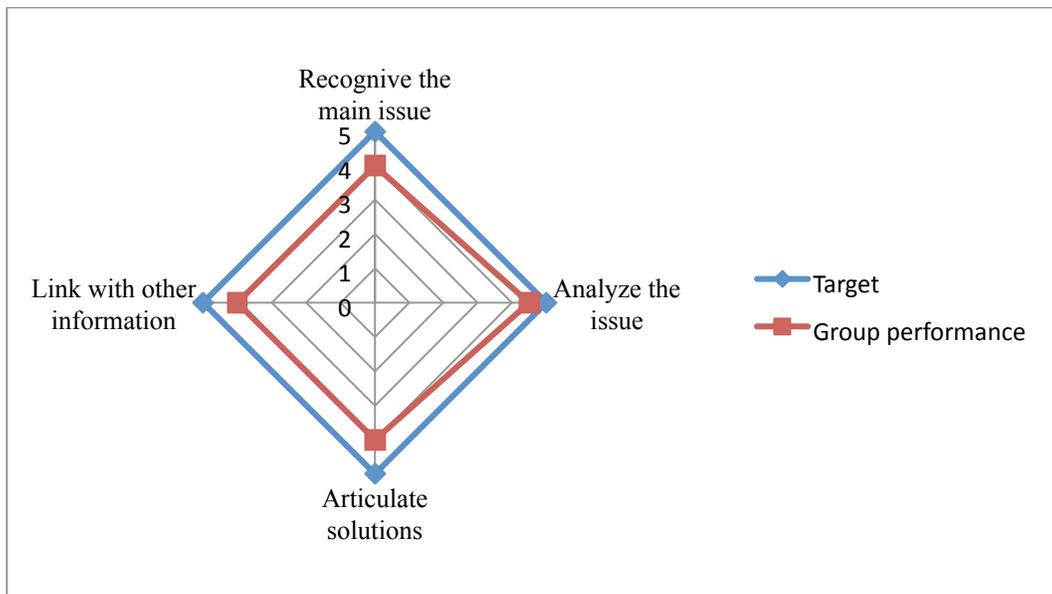

Figure 1. Group performance in the interview training.

The results displayed in Figure 1 do not reflect students' performance, but the trainers. In this study, the involved lecturers are new to these sessions. Therefore, if they are able to remain the momentum of training and master the methods being exposed, the similar skills can be transferred to the students.

The sessions conducted in the train-the-trainers program measured several generic skills. 80% of the participated lecturers discovered that the given case study was common, but it could be difficult for students whom are not aware on current news. The remaining 20% lecturers found that the case given was difficult and claimed that they are related to technical fields, e.g. information technology and sciences, limited their understanding on some management terms. In job prioritization session, all participated lecturers agreed that the exercise is challenging especially if one does not have experience in leadership. Finally, the debate session clearly split the lecturers into two groups, one group controls the debate and the other groups remain listening.

The scenarios recorded from the sessions explain that despite the leaking in English communication and problem solving skills, a major challenge also lay in transforming the mind set of participants to make themselves competence for the job using the interview platform. A background of studies should not be a barrier for one to not to make a good decision making. In the era of cross border information access, one may easily equip themselves with information around the world hence being informative should not be an issue. Meanwhile, the prioritization task demands for one to be creative and good at managing things. Sometimes, some arrived tasks are not in our control, so we need to pass the tasks to the right people. Besides, identifying which tasks to be executed based on time line should be master at hand. Such attitudes will prevent one from delaying the jobs or overdue.

Conclusion

The train-the-trainers program that solely focuses on interview is able to give lecturers an insight knowledge and skill about it in depth. The close training and discussion with the industry Advisory has created more awareness among the lecturers about the expectation from industry. The training highlights the demand on English proficiency as well as problem solving, but much work need to be concentrated on setting students' mind and mentality in preparing themselves for the interview.

The practice on train-the-trainers that involve university-industry knowledge sharing may resolve the issue of gaps between academia and industry in bringing up the human capital. In this study, participated lecturers have claimed that new knowledge and skills from the interview training have being exposed. Subsequently, the experience from the training gives them ideas and direction on how the similar training should be designed for the students. At the end, students get benefit and well prepare them for the various interview techniques.

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