

Beyond credentials, the mindset that will get you a job

Employers now demand a lot from fresh hires. You'll need smart planning, curiosity and a willingness to keep learning.

Wei Kwok Kee

A degree was once seen as a passport to success. Today, it is merely an entrance ticket to compete in a stadium full of qualified contenders.

The reality that graduates face today is defined by rapid technological change, shifting employer expectations, and fiercer competition. In Singapore, as in many parts of the world, academic excellence alone is no longer enough to snag a job. Employers now try to assess whether a candidate can adapt, communicate, and contribute from day one.

At the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM), we often hear this concern from our students. Many are already thinking ahead to life after graduation, wondering if they are truly "work ready" and how they can not only build skills but also effectively market themselves through strategic networking and a strong personal brand to stand out in an increasingly crowded field. They have realised that a degree is not a destination but only the beginning of a lifelong journey in which they will have to keep learning and developing their skills.

There is a growing emphasis on soft skills. As early as 2011, we began seeking employer insights on the type of soft skills they look for in graduates. The top three common attributes were: adaptability, resourcefulness, and

a positive attitude. In our 2024 employer dialogue session, curiosity, the willingness to learn and possessing initiative were key. Crucially, this learning mindset must be paired with a commitment to maintaining digital fluency. These attributes remain just as vital today, defining the graduates who can thrive amid constant change and uncertainty.

PREPARING SMARTLY FOR JOBS

In response to this new reality, we re-thought how we can better connect learning, skills and work, to help our students be more industry ready. We developed CareerSense, a career app that helps students plan their careers and strategically go about building the skills they will need. The app itself embodies the academia-industry connection: it uses industry data to identify the competencies in demand, helping students make informed learning choices that will prepare them better for roles that the market needs.

CareerSense goes beyond simple career matching. It profiles a student's values, interests, personality and skills, analyses their resume, and then recommends suitable courses to upskill for the role they desire. Since its launch, the app has been downloaded by nearly 12,000 SIM students and has supported over 1,500 career coaching sessions, helping students map the journey from where they are today to where they want to be,



Students have realised that a degree is not a destination but the beginning of a lifelong journey in which they will have to keep learning and developing their skills, says the writer. There is a growing emphasis on soft skills. ST FILE PHOTO

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highlighting the steps, learning and skills needed to get there. Take the case of Ms Smruthy

Umachandar, a final-year student who used CareerSense to profile her strengths and interests. The

app suggested potential career paths for her, including one as an SAP (Systems, Applications, and Products in Data Processing) Lead, a direction that resonated with her current internship at Deloitte. By analysing her resume and skills profile, the app not only contextualised her strengths but also identified technical and professional areas for development.

The app, while not a silver bullet, illustrates a larger shift in how higher education must prepare graduates for the workplace. The goal is no longer

to produce degree holders, but adaptable professionals who can learn, unlearn and relearn throughout their careers. We see the app supporting that direction.

WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT

Conversely, the employer landscape has also evolved. Organisations now expect graduates to translate academic knowledge and skills, and apply it in practical settings, collaborating across functions, and be able to contribute from day one. This reflects a wider reality: that technical depth and essential digital skills – such as data analysis, artificial intelligence (AI) and cyber-security awareness – must now be paired with a good dose of soft skills to boot, for graduates to stay competitive or even be considered for a role.

One avenue to gain these soft skills is through internships, industry projects, mentorship programmes and initiatives like the Government's Graduate Industry Traineeships, where students gain first-hand exposure to real work environments while employers shape the future talent pipeline. These partnerships are becoming central to how education systems remain relevant, ensuring that curriculum design, learning experiences and assessment evolve in step with workplace needs.

Students gain confidence and capability, while employers help shape talent that can meet the demands of tomorrow. It is a virtuous cycle that keeps Singapore's workforce responsive and future-ready.

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In a world defined by flux, the true measure of a degree is not the paper it's printed on, but the mindset it sets in motion for curiosity in lifelong learning. This is what will make you consistently employable over the long term.

• Professor Wei Kwok Kee is president and CEO of Singapore Institute of Management.