

SKILL DEVELOPMENT IN RETAIL SECTOR: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH USING SMART TECHNOLOGY FOR THE UNDERPRIVILEGED YOUTH IN DELHI

Abstract

India is far better placed in comparison to the developed world in terms of the youthful population. The youth have the potential, zeal and determination to usher transformation in the social patterns and the policy initiatives.

Even with better facilities and amenities available today, there is sizeable proportion of the youth especially in the underprivileged sections of the society, who can barely complete their school education due to various reasons. The concept of 'on the job' skill development has become a far cry now and the chances of getting good employment with an institutional degree are lessening day by day. Thus, the employment opportunities for youngsters from such sections are bad and the chances of their continuing in the jobs even when they get it are bleak and often fraught with problems. The severest being a high attrition rate with the employers.

This paper presents an innovative approach to build 21st Century Skill Set of the youth (age group 18-27) years to make them job ready for retail sector in the National Capital Region (NCR) of Delhi. It also discusses the prevalent system of employment in the retail sector and the ways and means to plug the gaps for holistic development of the youthful workforce and for providing them sustainable source of livelihood through Smart Learning.

Keywords: Attrition; livelihood; holistic development; mentorship, placement, skill development

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I. INTRODUCTION

Lot of emphasis has been given by the policymakers since independence on the propagation of education and building up the necessary infrastructure. It has resulted in an overall increase in the literacy levels, a distinct rise in the standard of education, availability of diverse educational venues and reduction in the gender divide ratio during education. At the same time, there had been a continuous rise and diversification in the avenues of employment resulting in a greater demand for the skilled persons.

Past experience of the researchers with the corporate and social sector institutions has shown that there exists a large gap in the knowledge acquired through the educational institutions and the skills required in the profession. A deep understanding of the problems being faced by the youth who complete their education at various levels and the requirements of the employers for the jobs is thus required. The situation is starker when it comes to the school level education and the requirements at the lowermost ladders of the employment in the corporate sector. The youth (18-30 years age group) from marginalised sections of the society are worst hit in terms of getting the employment. The main reasons being, low education levels, inability to communicate, poor awareness and self-grooming standards. A combination of all these factors ultimately leads to lack of direction, low confidence, and lower self-esteem. Lack of Industry specific knowledge, skills un-matching the industry standards and lack of affordable avenues that can help them to improve their skill sets further complicates the issue (India Today, 2019). Besides, there is a continuous and ever increasing pressure on them to earn for them and their families.

It is observed that such youth are then left with no other options but seek employment in the unorganized sectors with poor working norms, low returns and dismal continuity. On the other hand, the corporate sector as employer suffers due to lack of readily available skilled and well groomed personnel leading to a higher attrition rate. Other reasons for the high attrition rate for the unskilled youth in the corporate sector being their inability to adapt to the new environment, un-cordial relationship between the employer and the employee, besides behavioural and distance issues (Figure 1).

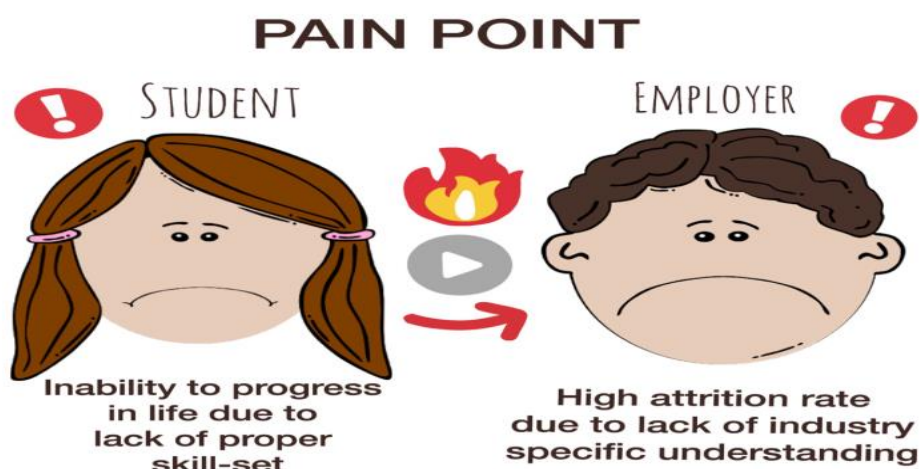


Figure 1: Pain Point Depiction. Student Vs Employer

India is a youthful country and it must turn its youthful bulge to a great advantage. This status may not continue forever, till then, using the sustainable development goals (SDGs) 2030 promulgated by the United Nations as the guiding beacons, India can usher in an era of wellbeing and the prosperity. However, there is a strong need for making the youth employment ready, especially those belonging to the resource poor communities, through skill development. Up-skilling is seen as a major process behind improved employability, enhanced productivity and sustainable growth.

A recent survey by the Retailers Association of India (Business World, 2020) shows that the retail sector in India has over 15 million traditional and modern traders, and it employs nearly 40 to 50 million people. Modern trade alone has a share of about 12% and it employs over 6 million people (Business World, 2020). It is well known that the customer experience in retail sector is enhanced by the skills of the frontline store staff who deal directly with the customers and are thus called the ‘Brand Ambassadors’ of the sector. However, the retail industry does not define these “frontline jobs” formally.

This study pertains to those frontline workers in the retail sector who are on the first rung of their career ladder. This entry level requires a minimal or no prior work experience, and includes various occupations reflecting the changing nature of the retail work. The traditional frontline retail jobs, such as cashier, retail sales associate and associate manning the ticket counters are also a part of this study. It is observed that the frontline workers largely come from economically weaker sections of the society, are in need of skill up-gradation and are eager to do so. (Ramaswamy et al., 2020)

SWAN (Skilled Workforce Advancing Nation) Livelihood is a start-up based at Delhi that aims to empower the youthful workforce through specially designed training and learning programs. It aims to turn the youth to confident individuals through mentor – mentee support and assist them in gaining suitable employment through a systematic user centric process to behaviourally equip their skills and personality and thus contribute towards the wellbeing of the Nation.

Paper has been divided in nine sections. First section captures the need for effective skill based training programmes in India and the role of SWAN Livelihood in implementing the Skill Training Model in the NCR of Delhi. Second section talks about the objectives of conducting the study. Third section gives the details of the methodology adopted during the current study. Fourth section presents the analysis of the data collected from each stage for effective implementation of Skill Development Training Programmes. The implications and the conclusions of the study are discussed in fifth and sixth section. The last two sections outline the Conclusions and the limitations of the study.

II. THE PRESENT CONTEXT

The United Nations has proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2015- 2030) for the people, peace, and prosperity of the planet earth. These include 17 goals to end poverty, fight inequality and injustice by 2030 (Messerli et al., 2019). Young people who have the potential, energy and drive to bring in the transformation in the social patterns and the policy initiatives have a major role to play in transforming these goals to reality. Data shows that there are about 2 billion youth (between 10–24 years of age) globally, out of

which about 90% belong to the developing world. (Mohanty, 2019) India has a significant percentage of the youthful population and thus empowerment of the youth with necessary skills becomes a major objective if we have to take our economy to soaring heights in the future.

It may be mentioned here that the UN projections show that 475 million new jobs need to be created in the next decade to absorb the currently unemployed 73 million youth and the 40 million new annual entrants to the labour market. (Dewan, 2018; McCourtie 2019; Mohanty, 2019). These projections present a dismal picture for the developing world when viewed in the context of the surveys conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which says that the employers consider many graduates to be ill-prepared for the world of work. Our observations on the school pass-outs are similar who consider themselves to be underprepared for the job market. Thus, it becomes more relevant today to revive interest in skills and vocational training to make learning outcome-based and industry-relevant.

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the earliest proponents of linking curriculum with industrial needs. The essence of making education work-integrated is still relevant and the syllabus should be woven round vocational training. Our efforts at rectifying the imbalance in our education system through skill development process finds a deep connect with the Gandhian principles of craft- centred education. While using the term skill in its widest sense, Gandhi Ji believed in a continuous learning process and experimentation, an approach defined by him as practical idealism (Dubey, 2017). The current Government policies are also being directed towards the need to impart skills and ability to the youthful manpower in order to tackle global challenges. The Prime Minister has cautioned that unless we accomplish the task of empowering the youth through skill development, the huge manpower availability in itself would become a challenge in the years to come. (Jain, 2015; Dubey, 2017; Anand, 2020).

The Indian perspective when viewed under the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) data reflects that out of 470 million people of working age in India, only 10% receive any kind of training or access to skilled employment opportunities (Mohanty, 2019). It states higher unemployment in the urban areas (7.8%) in comparison to rural parts (5.3%) and shows that unemployment is higher among urban females (27.2%) in comparison to urban males (18.7%). Projections also predict a huge mismatch between the demand and supply in terms of skilled workforce in the years to come that may put a great strain on the national economy. (Booz, 2018).

Recent reports show that only 5% of India's workforce is formally skilled in comparison to other countries like South Korea (96%), Japan (80%) and Germany (75%), where this proportion is very high. It goes on to show that retailing is amongst the top seven employing sectors in 2019 (Shukla et al., 2019).

Thus there is a need for an efficient skill based training mechanism in urban areas. The experience generated by SWAN Livelihood while conducting field surveys in different parts of the national capital region (NCR) of Delhi shows a great need to enhance the skills of the youth of the resource poor communities. It can be achieved by understanding the pain points and imparting innovative training to boost their confidence and personality. The skill

enhancement across urban areas should also focus on a strong mentor-mentee relationship leading to a better relationship with the employers and a stable workforce.

It is firmly believed that skill development needs more attention in the years to come through a design centric approach. To enhance the productivity and the economic development of India, skill development should be addressed in a comprehensive manner by all concerned including the Government, Private players and the NGOs through concerted efforts.

The current situation needs a quick reassessment of the prevalent skill development mechanism in the country through a systematic user friendly approach. The attention of the policy makers should be drawn to give a fresh outlook to the skill development ecosystem of India in order to convert the nation to a competitive and thriving economy. It may act as a catalyst for ushering social equality, a step towards providing opportunities for all and a move towards eradication of poverty. It may involve taking strong steps in redefining the relationship of education, employment and skill development.

III. OBJECTIVES

This study discusses real life experiences of the researchers associated with the project in different capacities. It presents a comprehensive model exhibiting various stages of the implementation of the Skill Development Programme for creating a stable workforce in retail sector. Best practices adopted in the implementation of Skill Training Programme are outlined here to reduce the attrition amongst the employers and the employee in retail industry.

IV. METHODS AND PROCEDURE

The SDGs-2030 advocate technical, vocational education training (TVET) and decent work opportunities for promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth and providing help to young adults (Bhurtel, 2015).

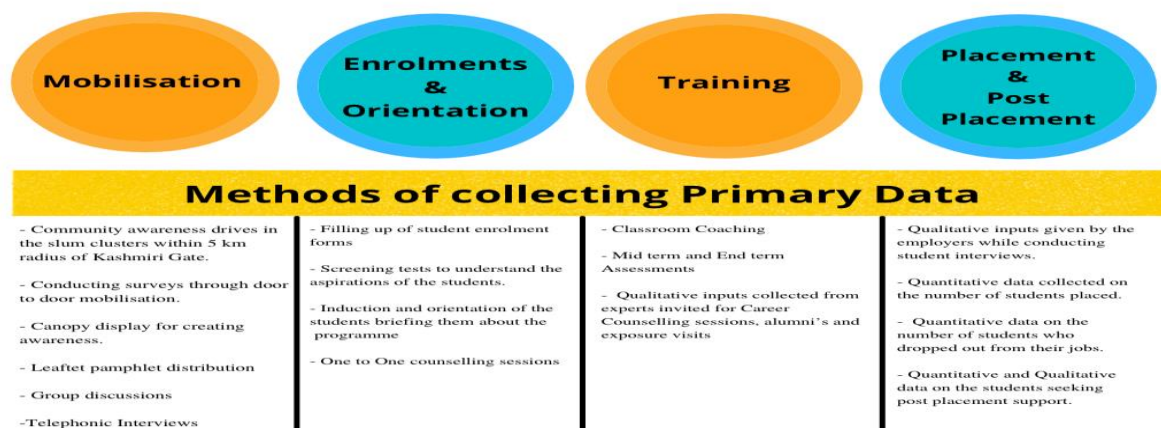


Figure 2: Flowchart Describing the Comprehensive Model Exhibiting Various Stages of the skill Development Training Programme and Methods of Collecting Primary Data at Each Stage

Possessing a large educated and skilled youthful population would be a valuable asset for the Nation's developmental goals. SWAN has taken up this challenge through skill upgradation of the youth in the NCR of Delhi. (PTI, 2019)

A comprehensive model outlining various stages like sustained field activity, class room practices, counselling sessions and on the job training programmes combined with past experience of working in the social sector enterprises is discussed below. The primary data for the work was collected through various stakeholders through various clusters.

The primary data of the students during the first stage of community mobilisation was collected from various clusters of Old Delhi, about 5 km around Kashmere Gate. The areas where the drives were conducted include Kashmere Gate, Seelampur, Old Fort, Chandni Chowk, North Campus, Shastri Park, ISBT, Civil Lines, Lal Qila market and Loni.

V. RESULTS

The analysis of data collected from each stage is given below for effective implementation of Skill Development Training Programmes.

1. Stage 1: Mobilization and Community Outreach

Creating awareness about the purpose and objectives of the training programme is an essential component of the initial stage of the implementation process. It involves undertaking activities like door-to-door mobilization, pamphlet distribution, canopy display at public places and other types of publicity campaigns to strengthen the visibility of the Start-up in the community. These measures play a key role in reaching out to potential target group of unskilled youth near the centre. Mobilisers involved in this activity should be keen, dedicated people and well conversant with the area layout.



Figure 3: Community Outreach Sessions that Include Door to Door Mobilization, Campaigning with Widespread Pamphlet Distribution.

They should be in a position to convince the communities about the benefits of the programme and how the training is going to provide employment opportunities to the youth.

The Mobilisers should also be patient enough to answer to the innumerable queries that may come up. A friendly and sympathetic touch always helps in getting the attention of the young people in the communities. Once the listing is done, it is essential to carefully screen the candidates for enrolment in the training institute by assessing their desire to learn, become financially stable and independent. Essential criteria for selection should be that the candidates must show motivation and positive attitude to rise despite hardships. It is observed that ineffective pitching style of the field staff, wrong selection of community group/locations or lack of adequate branding material in the form of a canopy, pamphlets and mobilization kits (Figure 3) often leads to improper selection of the candidates for a training course.

It may be mentioned here that branding material should state clearly and in simple words of the local dialect about the entire activity and how it is going to benefit them. It is good to have pictorial pamphlets, bright attractive banners and canopies to attract the people. The contact numbers and the centre location should be prominently shown in the publicity material (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Sample Pamphlet Sample that was Distributed for Community Outreach and Branding of the Swan Livelihood.

2. Stage 2: Enrolments and Orientation of Youth

On successful completion of mobilization drives, the interested students are required to submit their documents to complete the beneficiary profiling and the admission process. An orientation and counselling session is then held with all the enrolled persons and they are informed about the benefits of the training programme and the course curriculum. A general opinion of students about their career prospects is also discussed during the orientation.

Counselling forms a crucial part of the entire training programme. Improper counselling of the beneficiary and their parents in the field during mobilization has been observed as a major cause of dropouts in the middle of the training sessions. These dropouts often turn up for placements after the training sessions are over without understanding the requirement of completing the module. It is also seen that the zero-fee based model does not attract the right candidature. Courses without any monetary commitment are taken for granted with no regular attendance and seriousness during the sessions.

3. Stage 3: Training

It constitutes the most vital component of the programme being conducted by the SWAN Livelihood. The students undergo rigorous training in theoretical classes and practical sessions for a period of 1 month for becoming ready for the employment. It has been observed from past experience that under qualified and inefficient training instructors who are incapable of conducting the sessions are big negative points. Such instructors fail in motivating the candidates and in bringing about any change in the mind-set of the students who are mostly from the underprivileged section of the society. Presence of such trainers is a big deterrent and one of the major causes of absenteeism/dropout cases of target beneficiaries (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Classroom Training Sessions in Progress
in The Premises of the Swan Livelihood**

- **Classroom/Theoretical Learning:** The training modules at SWAN are based on student inquest, mutual interaction, industrial exposure and cognitive empathy. These training sessions are created to enhance the overall awareness of the youth towards teamwork along with personal grooming and improvement in the skill-sets. The classroom/theoretical learning programme at SWAN Livelihood helps the students in gaining insight on the course curriculum that includes Basic Retail and Sales Management, English for workplace, and Personality Development. In addition to this, psychological counselling and mentorship support is provided to the students and their parents. Mentors work with students and their families to keep a track of individual's progress under the training period, at the time of placement and during the post placement phase making a non-judgemental space for the

students to learn & relate. During the Covid-19 pandemic based on the responses of the employees who got fired from their jobs, a need was felt to inculcate Digital learning in to the curriculum.

The classes of the training course otherwise focuses on improving the communication skills, personality, and building confidence among the students with the overall aim of imparting industry specific etiquette. Innovative activities like role play sessions, class presentations, usage of audio-visual contents and practical exposure facilitate a better understanding amongst the students (Figures 6 and 7).



Figure 6: A Glimpse of the Practical Demonstrations



Figure 7: Individual and Group Counselling session's Helps in Creating a Comfortable Space for Experience and Expression in a Non-Verbal Medium through Activities

4. Stage 4: Practical Learning/Exposure

Overall, under the Practical Learning Exposure, the following activities are undertaken,

- **Career Counselling Sessions.** A student's career development is influenced by a number of factors that include interest, ability, values, personality, background, and the family circumstances. Career Counselling sessions thus form an important part of the training curriculum and are conducted once the initial theoretical part is over. In every session, HR's

and recruiters of reputed organizations are invited to visit the centre to conduct sessions for the students which helps them decide the type of employment they would like to opt once the course is completed. These sessions help the students in making career and life decisions while providing an opportunity to interact with professionals from various fields (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Career Counselling Session being conducted by a Senior Hr Officer of the Wave Cinemas at wave Mall, Noida

- **Exposure visits.** These before are organised for the students to give them first-hand experience of the workplace. These visits form a part of the practical learning experience and provide an opportunity to interact and learn from the executives working in the industry. The exposure visits have helped students to imbibe the work culture of the industry (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Exposure Visit Being Organized as a Part of Practical Learning Experience. Venue is Big Bazaar, The Oldest and the Largest Retail Chain of India.

- **Alumni Interaction.** It is observed that a substantial impact is created when a person of the same age group and similar background narrates his success story to the trainees.



Figure 10: Career Counselling Session is being Conducting by an Alumnus in the Training Centre

Keeping this aspect in mind, an alumnus who is doing well in life now is invited to share his experience with the students (Figure 10).

- **Employee Engagement Sessions.** In the employee engagement sessions, mock interviews and group discussions are conducted by the invited professionals. Alumni interaction forms an integral part of the course curriculum in which the executives are invited to interact with the enrolled beneficiaries at the centre. This enables the students to be prepared for interviews and to further gain insights on the practices of the Industry.

5. Stage 5: Placements

The centre coordinates placements of the enrolled students by informing them about upcoming vacancies and providing them leads for employment in various profiles based on their interest. After successful completion of the training programme at the centre, the enrolled students are lined up for interviews in various organisations based on the vacancies, position and their career aspirations.

6. Stage 6: Employee Assistance Program

The centre provides post placement assistance to the students for a period of 6 months after they get the employment. Mentors are assigned to the employed students, counselling and feedback meetings are held with them and their employers every month to track the progress. This process helps in maintaining a harmonious employee-employer relationship, gives a leeway for improvement and cuts down attrition. Employee Assistance Program helps in nurturing the employee and improving the business performance. It is seen as a good way to promote corporate trust, confidence and resilience in the workplace.

The assistance programme also keeps in sight the personal and workplace related problems of the employees that might negatively impact their work performance, health, and wellbeing. It goes without saying that the physical and mental health of the employees forms an intrinsic part in the successful operation of an organization. Wellbeing and security form two important parameters to inspire productive and smart work. Under this programme, assistance being provided to the former students (now employees) follows,

- **Emotional support and counselling services:** These programmes are meant to indulge the students in better life practices and include sessions on, finding work-life balance, managing stress and emotions, making decisions, achieving goals, dealing with addictions, and learning new skills.
- **Access to Self-Help tools:** These include watching inspirational videos, performing aerobics and yoga exercises, reading recreational texts, solving puzzles and participation in quizzes. Such activities have been found useful in relieving stress and anxiety. These simple things keep them cheerful and away from depression like mental health issues. These tools have also been found useful by the students in developing thought process discarding behaviours that are not working for them.
- **Helpline Support (Chat and Call based):** Students can avail the SWAN Livelihood support service for help and advice when and where they need it through the helpline, e-mail, web or text.
- **Alumni Network & Events:** Setting up an alumni network creates a win-win situation for everyone and helps to bring about synergy. Students gain access to the diverse alumni network, get connected to the specially designed seminars, workshops, and events to keep themselves up to date with the industry.
- **Relationship Management:** Congenial relations amongst the employer and employee are the hallmark of a good organization. The practice of monthly meetings with employees and the employers has helped in resolving the workplace related problems through discussions and has resulted in better performance. Relationship management has proved to be effective in maintaining a congenial employer – employee relationship thereby helping in creating a stable workforce.
- **Mentor – Mentee Support:** The main feature of this service is to provide psychological counselling and mentorship support to the students and their parents. Mentors work alongside students, employers and families to keep track of individual's progress at the time of placement and during the post placement phase.

VI. IMPLICATIONS

In the current scenario, there exists a wide gap between the demand and supply of the skilled people. It can be attributed to a dismal connect between the formal and vocational education, meagre training facilities, under-qualified trainers and lack of infrastructural facilities (Kumar et al., 2019). For developing countries like India, training providers like SWAN can play a big role in meeting these challenges.

To meet the targets of the SDGs – 2030, there is an urgent need to foster and incubate more programmes on skill development for the youth in particular. Urban youth from the economically weaker sections are the biggest sufferers on this count as they lack the grooming and other necessary skills for getting the jobs and do not have the opportunity to get into the agriculture related employment like rural youth.

The current scenario requires an increased investment in the training infrastructure. The Government agencies and the corporate sectors should ensure identification of youth working in the unorganised sectors under abysmal working conditions with minimum returns. Funding and support can be given to experienced entrepreneurs for opening up quality training centres that would cater to the needs of youth in building confidence through skill development and finding job opportunities. The training centres should collaborate with the corporate institutions for providing workplace trainings with proper certification. Public sector enterprises and private agencies can play a major role in such efforts that would ultimately lead towards increased productivity. With the availability of skilled manpower the employers would also be benefited through better quality output, lower dropout rate and better teamwork. These are the basic tenets of sustainable development and would bring prosperity and peace to the people.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The net outcome of the SWAN venture is envisaged in stable workforce that would set model of teamwork with minimal attrition, a congenial employee-employer relationship leading towards the advancement of the Nation. SWAN envisages bridging the aspirations of the youth and the requirements of the industry. The underlying thought behind the entire venture being to resolve the pain points of the youth from the targeted section of the society and train them for a harmonious and fruitful relationship with the employers.

Skill development is an important process in Nation building activity. India has a prolific youthful population that can be converted to a valuable asset through skill development resulting in generation of employment opportunities and increased productivity. The in-house expertise of SWAN Livelihood has been successfully applied in running a training centre for up skilling the youth from the underprivileged sections of the society in Delhi. In this process, targeting right locations and identification of communities have been observed to play a major role in the smooth operation of the centre. Hence, mobilization needs to be done by sensitive people who understand the fine points of the skill development process and can take youth into confidence. The initial process of registration and completion of other certifications for a training centre is time consuming and requires professional help.

It has been observed that the component of Counselling of parents and at times the community heads helps in mobilising the youth. Mapping of the aspirations of the youth and knowing their strengths and weaknesses had been put to good use during the training and the placement process. On the job trainings have benefited the youth to a great extent. Innovative post placement mentor-mentee connects as practiced in the SWAN Livelihood had been useful in reducing the attrition rate between the employee and the employer. Extreme Inclement weather, unrest in the communities and prevalent practices like gender bias can act as deterrents in the functioning of the training centre.

1. Limitations: The model is effective to the Urban cities like Delhi/NCR. The effectiveness of the model in the rural/remote cities is yet to be examined.

2. Future Research: The authors would like to implement the model in the rural – remote areas to capture more youth who might be interested to upgrade their skill set. The authors would also like to use technology based interventions to reach tier 1 and tier 2 cities for upgrading the skills of many more.

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