

# Nurturing Learning Agility: Investigating Self-Determined Learning and Skill Enhancement During COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

In the modern era, the acquisition of learning skills has become crucial for personal and professional success due to technological advancements and changes in the nature of work. The rise of automation and artificial intelligence has displaced traditional jobs, necessitating continuous skill development to remain employable. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need for digital skills in the transition to remote work. Learning skills are vital for personal growth, expanding perspectives, and enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. They also promote innovation, collaboration, and interpersonal interaction, essential for success in personal and professional situations. This study aimed to explore the importance of learning skills in the modern era and its impact on employability and career success. It investigated individuals' involvement in skill acquisition through self-determination or heutagogy, a learner-centered approach emphasizing autonomy and capacity development. The study employed an exploratory research design and a survey method to attain the objectives. The tool used was a researcher-administered questionnaire shared through online digital platforms. The sample included more than 700 counts consisting of individuals belonging to each age group and employment status. The research found that 84.24% of individuals learned new skills during the COVID period, indicating a positive response to the opportunity for self-improvement. The majority of participants focused on Personality Development Skills (PDS) and Communication Skills (CMS) for personal growth and career advancement. Leadership and Management Skills (LS), Analytical Skills (AS), and Technical Skills (TS) were also highly valued for career progression. Overall, the study highlights the importance of continuous skill development and the role of self-determined learning in enhancing employability. It suggests that individuals who took advantage of the COVID-19 period to acquire new skills have increased their career prospects and contributed to a growing pool of skilled workers in India. The research underscores the significance of lifelong learning and the potential of online digital education to foster innovative teaching and learning strategies, especially in resource-constrained settings.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Learning skills, Heutagogy, Self-determined learning, Career progression.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the modern era, learning skills have become increasingly essential for individuals to excel in their personal and professional life. Individuals must constantly learn and adapt to new skills and information as technology advances and the nature of work changes. The necessity of acquiring skills in today's world cannot be underscored. Numerous jobs which were formerly undertaken by people are nowadays carried out by machines, primarily due to the rise of automation and artificial intelligence. This means that people must constantly acquire new skills and knowledge to be viable in the job market (Metilda & Neena, 2017). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened the transition towards remote employment, making digital skills more crucial than ever (Hettiarachchi et al., 2023).

The pandemic scenario caused panic in people's lives but also created a window of abundant learning opportunities for learners at the same time. People had choices that either they live in panic or they could use this opportunity to enhance their skills through various interactive learning tools and develop their talents in desired fields. Many people took this as an opportunity to spread their businesses with the help of the Internet and continued their professional life without much hindrance and some people chose to connect with old friends or distant family members.

Learning skills are necessary for personal growth and development. They allow people to learn new things, widen their viewpoints, and improve their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Jamil et al., 2021). Furthermore, learning skills may foster

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interpersonal interaction, innovation, and collaboration, all of which are crucial for success in situations that are personal as well as professional (Sekhar, 2018).

Learning abilities are essential for modern-day employability. Employers are increasingly searching for employees with a varied set of skills, such as digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities (Xu & Zhou, 2022). According to a report by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the employment rate in India was reported at 46.3 % covering people of the age group from 15-64 years as of 2018 (Wikipedia contributors, 2022). This low employment rate is due to limited job opportunities and skilled workers. It was observed that those with college degrees are not benefiting in terms of suitable employment which makes large numbers of graduates unsuitable for employment that is commensurate with their education. While the employability rates of college students have improved over the years, yet it remains under 50% (Gupta & Pushkar, 2019). The key factors which can improve this rate are emerging entrepreneurs and

skilled workers. We can contemplate and admire the participation of many people who chose to enhance their skills by utilizing the available resources, as this will gradually improve the number of skilled workers.

This research article aims to explore the importance of learning skills in the modern era and how it affects individuals' employability and career success. It further explores the involvement of individuals in skill acquisition through their self-determination by employing approaches such as heutagogy. Heutagogy is a type of self-determined learning that focuses on learner autonomy as well as the development of learner capacity and capability. It is a promising framework for developing lifelong learning skills that are based on well-established learner-centred education theories that place a significant emphasis on learner autonomy (Blaschke & Hase, 2019).

### Objectives of the study

This study aimed to find and analyse the participation of people in learning skills through self-determination. The skills they sought to improve, their purpose for acquiring skills and the importance of those skills for their personal or professional growth. Another motive of this study was to find the usefulness of this COVID-19 period for their learning and career growth.

### Scope and Limitation

The scope of this study is to identify the skills developed by people during the COVID-19 era for their interests and their roles in career growth. Their interest includes developing skills as a hobby or for their career progression. This study discusses the perks of enhancing skills for their career progression. The data collection for this study has been performed using an online survey. Although the sample covered a wide range of participants, the results are not generalizable for all the citizens of India. Future research using a more extensive quantitative data set would be required to confirm the generalization of the results of this study.

### METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to educate and collect information on people's engagement in learning activities and skill acquisition with the help of self-learning or self-determination during this period. It followed an exploratory research design and survey method for attaining the study's objectives. Convenient sampling, a type of non-probability sampling was used to collect data. The tool used was a researchers-administered questionnaire on GoogleForms and was developed through focus group discussion, qualitative item analysis, and validation through five external experts. It consisted of items relating to their skill acquisition activities, the purpose of acquiring skills and the benefits of acquired skills in their personal or professional growth. Followed by sharing the survey link using online digital platforms to reach the desired sample during the COVID-19 era. The collected data were then statistically analysed using spreadsheets on Microsoft Excel to obtain the results and presented in tabular form.

### Sample distribution

A total of 736 responses were received from individuals of all age groups and diverse employment statuses. The participation of individuals can be seen in Table 1 as per their characteristics.

These 736 participants were classified into five age groups i.e. Group A (GA) < 15 years, Group B (GB) between 15 and 25 years, Group C (GC) between 26 and 35 years, Group D (GD) between 36

**Table 1:** Characteristics of participants (n = 736)

Characteristics	No. of People	Percentage
<b>Age Group</b>		
A (15 years and below)	21	3
B (16–25 years)	391	53
C (26–35 years)	136	18
D (36–55 years)	163	22
E (Above 55 years)	25	3
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Employed For Wages (EFW)	182	25
Homemaker (HM)	38	5
Retired personnel (RP)	17	2
Self Employed (SE)	113	15
Student (ST)	386	52

Source: Survey responses.

and 55 years and Group E (GE) > 55 years. The participation based on their age group was 3% GA, 53% GB, 18% GC, 22% GD and 3% GE and based on their employment status 25% Employed for Wages (EFW), 5% Homemaker (HM), 2% Retired personnel (RP), 15% Self Employed (SE) and 52% Student (ST).

### RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

As can be observed from Table 2, around 84.24% of people learned skills or achieved new things during this lockdown period, whereas 15.76% of people did not. Most people tried or successfully performed something new in this period which they've never executed before which shows that due to their sojourn at their homes, they experimented with new tasks or used their time to achieve something special. Also, 82.34% of people acquired a new skill which shows that their sojourn at their home also motivated them to utilize their time in acquiring and improving their skills which will result in a gradual increase in the number of skilled people.

Many respondents have been actively interested in each category of Skills, but some have opted not to select any category. The participation of respondents in skill enhancement was 20% Analysis & Research Skills (A&RS), 42% Personality Development Skills (PDS), 28% Technical and Information Skills (T&IS), 21% Leadership and Management Skills (L&MS), 39% Creativity & Communication Skills (C&CS) and 15% none. The most popular choice of respondents was to improve their PDS and C&CS which are very crucial for their growth and career advancement. The participation based on the purpose of acquiring skills was 25% PG, 14% PRG, 48% Both PG & PRG and 13% none. The engagement of aspirants in acquiring numerous skills was 15% Zero Skills (ZS), 44% One Skill (1S), 23% Two Skills (2S), 12% Three Skills (3S), 3% Four Skills (4S) and 2% Five Skills (5S). The responses of people for the usefulness of the COVID-19 period for their growth was rated as 22% five stars, 34% four stars, 29% three stars, 8% two stars, and 7% one star. Since numerous respondents were involved in developing more than one skill, hence during the analysis the total number of skill enhancement activities that can be seen in Tables 2 & 3 was considered to be equal to the count of aspirants multiplied by the number of categories of skills they acquired.

**Table 2:** Responses of participants (n = 736)

Characteristics	No. of People	Percentage
<b>Done anything new</b>		
No	116	16
Yes	620	84
<b>Learned anything new</b>		
No	130	18
Yes	606	82
<b>Skills Acquired</b>		
Analysis & Research (A&RS)	148	20
Personality Development (PDS)	309	42
Technical & Information (T&IS)	204	28
Leadership & Management (L&MS)	151	21
Creativity & Communication (C&CS)	289	39
None	114	15
<b>Purpose</b>		
Both PG & PRG	354	48
Personal Growth (PG)	186	25
Professional Growth (PRG)	99	14
None	97	13
<b>Learned Skills Category Count</b>		
Zero Skills (ZS)	114	16
One skill (1S)	323	44
Two Skills (2S)	172	23
Three Skills (3S)	90	12
Four Skills (4S)	21	3
Five Skills (5S)	16	2
<b>The usefulness of the COVID-19 Period (Ratings)</b>		
One Star	54	7
Two Stars	58	8
Three Stars	212	29
Four Stars	247	34
Five Stars	165	22

Source: Survey responses.

Table 3 demonstrates the analysis of participation based on the purpose for acquiring skills, Age groups and Employment status in skill acquisition activities. Participations in acquiring various skills for the purpose of PG and PRG acquired 13% A&RS, 27% PDS, 19% T&IS, 15% L&MS and 26% C&CS. Participations in acquiring various skills exclusively for PRG preferred to acquire 29% A&RS, 09% PDS, 34% T&IS, 19% L&MS and 09% C&CS. Similarly for PG 04% A&RS, 44% PDS, 07% T&IS, 07% L&MS and 38% C&CS. Participants without a particular purpose acquired 11% A&RS, 22% PDS, 22% T&IS, 11% L&MS and 34% C&CS. From the participation based on the purpose of skill acquisition, we can observe that people preferred PDS and C&CS for their personal growth whereas people preferred A&RS and T&IS for their professional growth.

**Table 3:** Skills Acquisition by Participants (n = 736)

Characteristics	A&RS (%)	PDS (%)	T&IS (%)	L&MS (%)	C&CS (%)
<b>Purpose</b>					
Both	13	27	19	15	26
Personal Growth (PG)	4	44	7	7	38
Professional Growth (PRG)	29	9	34	19	9
None	11	22	22	11	33
<b>Age Group</b>					
A (Below 15 years)	7	33	11	7	41
B (15–25 years)	10	31	17	12	30
C (26–35 years)	19	23	18	20	20
D (36–55 years)	18	24	24	13	21
E (Above 55 years)	11	32	16	11	32
<b>Employment Status</b>					
Employed For Wages (EFW)	13	22	25	15	26
Homemaker (HM)	3	49	5	5	38
Retired personnel (RP)	33	44	0	11	11
Self Employed (SE)	25	20	23	20	12
Student (ST)	10	32	15	12	31

Source: Survey responses.

Participation in acquiring various skills based on age groups acquired 07% A&RS, 33% PDS, 11% T&IS, 07% L&MS and 41% C&CS from Group A (15 years and below). 10% A&RS, 31% PDS, 17% T&IS, 12% L&MS and 30% C&CS from Group B (16-25). 19% A&RS, 23% PDS, 18% T&IS, 20% L&MS and 20% C&CS from Group C (26-35). 18% A&RS, 24% PDS, 24% T&IS, 13% L&MS and 21% C&CS from Group D (36-55). 11% A&RS, 32% PDS, 16% T&IS, 11% L&MS and 32% C&CS from Group E (Above 55 years).

The involvement of participants of different employment statuses in various skill acquisition was 13% A&RS, 22% PDS, 25% T&IS, 15% L&MS and 26% C&CS from Employed for Wages. 03% A&RS, 49% PDS, 5% T&IS, 5% L&MS and 38% C&CS from Home Makers. 33% A&RS, 44% PDS, 0% T&IS, 11% L&MS and 11% C&CS from Retired Personnels. 25% A&RS, 20% PDS, 23% T&IS, 20% L&MS and 12% C&CS from Self-Employed. 13% A&RS, 22% PDS, 25% T&IS, 15% L&MS and 26% C&CS from Students. The individuals belonging to the Employed for Wages category equally preferred PDS, T&IS and C&CS for acquisition whereas students majorly preferred PDS and C&CS.

In conclusion, from the analysis and observations now we know their preferences for acquiring skill/skills for improvement, the usefulness of the COVID-19 period to the participants, whether they have achieved new things throughout this period and the involvement of participants in skill acquisition activities based on the purpose of acquiring of skills, age groups and employment statuses. The majority of people from various employment statuses and age groups preferred improving PDS. All of this information was vital to analyse the benefits of their learnings for the advancement of their career and how the skills they learned during this period will help them grab new career opportunities and enhance their career province.





## DISCUSSION

Career Skills are the abilities people have that make it possible for them to perform their job roles and lead their careers. These are the technical expertise and skills required to perform their regular work. These are the combination of their knowledge, skills and experience that determines their success in the desired profession. Career Development Skills enables people to lead their career i.e. to improve performance, develop knowledge, and enhance skills & experience which will provide them with the ability to recognize opportunities when they arise, realize when change is ahead so that they are ready and can negotiate the personal outcomes they want. (What are career skills, n.d.). Let us now discuss the career opportunities created by the aspirants while learning skills during this period.

### Career growth prospects based on acquired skills

The acquisition of skills during this period will play a significant role in developing skilled workers and enhancing the possibilities of career progression of people. Personality Development Skills (PDS) are incredibly important to improve, as it prepares one for the future and cheers them even in the toughest situations. As a part of their personality development, people should make themselves credible and confident to advance smoothly in their professional life (Juneja, n.d.). People with PDS are likely to receive swift promotions and alluring growth opportunities as it enhances one's ability to adapt to changes, overcome fears, solve problems by making decisions in a better and efficient way. It makes people more interesting, creative and happier (Isabella, 2019). It helps people discover themselves and become more aware of their strengths and shortcomings. A person having good PDS is preferred by employers and are likely to inspire others and enhance their communication and leadership skills along the way.

After PDS majority of people (39%) prefer to improve their Communication Skills (CMS). CMS are essential for professionals of all cadre irrespective of their field. These are the most preferred skills an employer seeks while hiring employees. CMS involves listening & comprehensive skills, linguistic & composition skills, and interpersonal skills. Participants who want to become effective communicators should improve their active listening, responsiveness, writing skills, empathy, understanding of various styles of communication, body language and non-verbal cues. Successful communication means expressing thoughts, emotions and experiences clearly while taking the time to listen and respond to others (Mustafa & Bhaumik, 2023). It enhances clarity in communications and directions which results in great teambuilding and preventing or resolving problems more efficiently. People with good CMS are likely to receive promotions as they could create better relationships and foster trust (CLIMB Professional Development and Training, 2019).

Creativity skills (CS) play a significant role in performing daily tasks in a more effective and efficient way. These skills are the ability that enables one to adopt a unique approach to a situation and seek a new and effective solution to an issue. By thinking creatively, one can learn how to create a change that benefits them both personally and professionally. Having CS allows one to express themselves in their own unique way and enables them to smartly approach innovative solutions. People with CS are more likely to have financial and career success in either jobs or businesses as they tend to see every situation differently than others which helps them to think out of the box. This skill helps one to build an effective career shaping their personality. It boosts self-confidence and sustains

intimacy (Ranjan, 2018). These skills are admired by employers as they increase the efficiency of work. These abilities are essential to be a great leader.

The other essential qualities that a leader should have are leadership and management skills. The higher management position in any organisation requires a leader with great leadership quality and management skills. As a leader or senior management, they have to lead the work of others and motivate teams to achieve a shared goal. They conduct meetings, delegate workloads and promote teamwork across teams and departments. Well-defined LS helps one to organize activities and direct their teams to ensure that the work is carried out on schedule. Some of the LS are Decisiveness, Dependability, Conflict-resolution, Constructive criticism, Delegating tasks, Empathy, Empowerment, Integrity, Mentoring, Motivating, Patience, Relationship management, Team building, and Task delegation (Herrity, 2023). These skills play a significant role in achieving the goals within the timeline and utilizing the limited resources in the best possible ways.

The quintessential qualities of people with management skills (MS) are that they fulfil their managerial roles in an organisation while resolving crises and settling disputes as soon as they arise. MS help individuals to communicate with their subordinates and understand the effectiveness of communication with their deputy colleagues facilitates the flow of activities within the organisation. A person with good govern-ability is endowed with fewer hindrances and objections from internal or external sources to achieve organizational objectives (CFI Team, 2023). The employers prefer to hire management employees with great MS and LS who demonstrates their skillsets.

Analytical skills (AS) are demanded in many fields and are often included in job descriptions. AS and analytical thinking helps to examine complex problems and make decisions based on the analysis to generate the best solutions. It is highly demanded for research or management positions as it allows people to understand the challenges and evaluate the scenario, gather evidence and information and perform unbiased analysis to obtain the best possible solutions. Developing this skill benefits people in enhancing their profession, reaching their organizational goals and eventually achieving their personal career goals (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023). Research skills (RS) are an integrated part of AS as they are used to gather knowledge about the subject, collect information based on discussions, reviews, reasoning and historical data. Researches are performed by evaluating the collected information and interpret that information in a way that creates a better understanding of the situation. RS helps organisations to create new goods or services, understand the needs and desires of their clients, strengthen what they do, keep track of their shortcomings and keep up with the trends in their business to succeed in the market. It helps to identify and analyse historic facts, trends and reviews to make a decision (Birt, 2019). AS helps one to perform unbiased data analysis/trend analysis based on research data and explore loopholes in the system to find the best-suited solution for the queries. When one is preparing to be a researcher or a scientist these skills are must to have along with technical skills and creativity & communication skills.

Other than the research skills majority of organisations demand technical skills (TS) in people for hiring to improve their daily work efficiency. TS play a major role in the hiring process especially in the field of engineering. These are the ability to perform a task pertinent to professional roles such as IT, engineering, mechanics, science or finance. Archetypal technical skills consist of coding,

analysis of complex data or the use of specialized devices. To get expertise in technical skills people require extensive professional or technical training and experience. People with professional expertise are much more comfortable when applying to other fields and are often better at multitasking in a challenging and complex role. Information skills let people stay up to date with the rapidly changing technology and be aware of the technological advancements in their fields. With sufficient technical expertise and information skills (IS), people can speak more confidently and will be able to propose a wide range of solutions to colleagues and clients using their knowledge (Dale, 2023). People with good TS and IS have great possibilities of career progression as well as their stature in their organization.

Through digital or online means individuals can direct their learning to better enhance their skills and this method has the potential acquisition of skills in terms of self-learning for self-determined learners. As has been proven, technology has the capacity to adapt instruction and also facilitate the learning process for individual learner (Varghese & Gardia, 2020). Online digital education promotes innovative teaching-learning strategies it has the potential to be a paradigm for countries which are resource-constrained (Verma & Verma, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

This study identified the involvement of people in skill-enhancement activities. It was carried out for selected categories of skills and revealed that during this period, 4 out of 5 people learned new skill/s. Overall interpretation of the observations demonstrates that the participation in developing various skills was 1/5 people A&RS, 2/5 people PDS, 1/4 people T&IS, 1/5 people L&MS and 2/5 people C&CS. It reveals that even in this pandemic situation, people used their time to develop skills using either online or offline resources rather than just living in fear of the pandemic. People of all ages actively participated in acquiring skills.

The maximum participation was from students as they would have wanted to be able to deal with every situation when entering the industry and to improve their employability. For the aspirants working for wages they may have wanted to improve their organizational stature, increase the efficiency and quality of their daily work and be comfortable in facing every situation at work, some people have acquired skills as a hobby.

It concludes that the people utilized their time during the covid era for their personal/professional growth or career advancements through self-determination or employing approaches such as heutagogy. These skill acquisitions will improve the number of skilled workers in India.

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