

“Identifying The Key Employability Skills: Evidence From Literature Review”

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Abstract: *The importance of employability skills has increased with time. The term ‘employability’ has been used by researchers for many years in the perspective of employment and labour markets. Employability relates to **the ability to be in employment**, and, in particular, the set of quality that enhance the probability of an individual being in work. At present, most of the Higher education institutions as well as the employers give prime importance to employability skills. The key factor for getting into a job today depends upon the additional skills apart from the subject specific skills. Employers today seek employees with the right combination of generic, technical and job specific skills and ensure that they can transfer skills from one context to another. The employers are more interested in recruiting a ‘right’ candidate with multi dimensional skills rather than a graduate with very high academic knowledge but poor interpersonal skills. The change has taken place gradually but very steadily. With the gaining importance of employability skills, the higher education institutions are also looking into these factors seriously and are trying to include these skills as a part of their curriculum so that the students can readily adapt them during the study tenure and remain in the competition.*

The purpose of this study is to perform an in-depth study of employability skills necessary for the graduates to achieve employment in different fields. The entire exposition is supported by relevant literature review. So, the study is exploratory in nature.

Key Words: *Employability, employability skills, graduates, employers*

I. Introduction

Being a multi-aspect concept, employability is difficult to define. The requirement of graduate skills by the labour market and the employers differ from one country to another. With the changing business environment the importance of employability in education has increased a lot. To provide the graduating students with an edge over others in the employment race, the requirement of employability skills has gained parallel importance with subject specific knowledge. The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are finding their own way out in the amalgamation of this requirement. Employability skills refer to those skills that make a graduate able to obtain, sustain and perform well in a job. It can also be termed as job readiness skills. Employability skills can be divided into three basic categories namely: (a) basic academic skills, (b) higher-order thinking skills and (c) personal qualities. The basic academic skills comprise of writing, reading, and communication skills. Higher order thinking skills comprise of reasoning, problem solving and learning skills etc. while the personal qualities include team spirit, self motivation, teamwork, leadership skills etc. As stated by most of the employers, the real problem is to find graduates with job readiness skills.

II. Objective And Methodology

The methodology adopted for the entire elucidation is on the basis of deductive reasoning. In a way, the exposition is based on exploratory work but it is theoretical in a sense that its issues have not been studied in the empirical setting. The purpose of this research is to acquire deeper insight into employability and employability skills. The entire elucidation is supported by relevant literature review. So, the study is exploratory in nature and the broad objectives are to include:

- a) Study definitions of employability and employability skills
- b) Analyze the need of employability skills
- c) Appraise the importance of employability skills for the graduates.

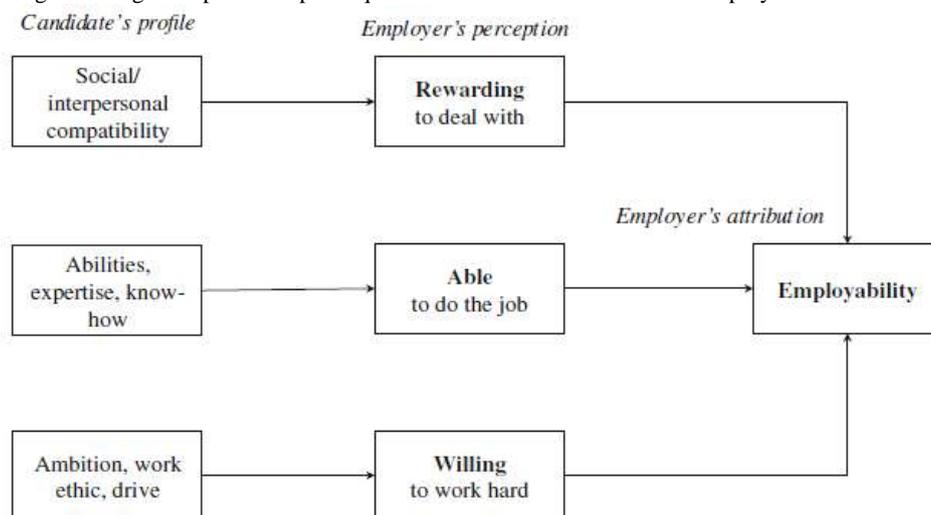
III. Employability

J Hillage and E Pollard (1998) in their research paper “Employability: Developing a framework for policy analysis” discussed about the origin of employability. They stated the concept of employability has been in literature for many years. They defined employability as an ability to be employed i.e. a) ability to gain initial employment b) ability to maintain employment c) ability to obtain new employment if required. Employability in other words is about being capable of getting and keeping full filling work. Individuals’ employability assets comprise of basic skills, occupation specific skills and involvement skills. Employability is not just vocational and academic skills, an individual requires relevant and updated market information to take the right decision.

Lee Harvey (2001) in his paper “Defining and Measuring employability” indicated about effectiveness of the institutions in developing employable graduates. The ability to obtain a job depends upon the institutional effectiveness. The effectiveness may also be measured by an audit of developmental opportunities as well as the satisfaction of graduates in their programme of study. The employability development indicator of institutions are sometimes closely related with future employment like in case of courses such as engineering, nursing, hospitality etc and at times may not be linked with studies like philosophy, literature, social science and many more. Morley (2001) reported that the concept of employability has gradually become a performance indicator in the quality framework in HEI’s. The researcher argued that academic

institutions in UK while trying to promote the transferable key skills, fear that education is getting replaced by instruction and training. Globalisation has had a negative impact on higher education policy by driving out its cultural and the social essence. Over regulations and surveillance of the professional groups with poor remuneration and tough employment conditions has made many professionally trained graduates leave the labour market. The need for ‘employer – ability’ to balance out the power relations embedded in the employability discourse for retention of employees is the need of the hour. The values of the consumer society are now embedded in educational relationship. Education has been redefined in terms of skilling young workers and providing professional and in-service courses rather than expanding the minds and developing citizens. The political decision of expansion of higher education in UK in early 1990’s was due to the shortage of graduates in the labour market. But with the saturation of industry, graduate unemployment has increased rapidly with employers adding more and more parameters in the employment condition with surplus supply of students.

McQuaid et al (2005) in their paper introducing employability explained the term employability from various concepts illustrated by different researchers for over 100 years. They specially argued about the narrow and broad perspectives of the approach to employability. “In dealing with different facets of employability policies range from those seeking to improve employability skills and attributes, to helping the job search process, influencing personal circumstances or dealing with aspects of labour demand.” An important facet of employability relates to the job search process. Dependency on higher education qualification and associated transferable skills and competencies has increased in recent years. A decline in traditional occupation has left many unemployed. Geographical location has a very important role in creating access to employment and training opportunities. Policies are required to enhance the mobility of disadvantaged people in the labour market to make them more experienced and confident. Communication technologies particularly internet should be utilised to improve the job search provision among the unemployed people. Policies to link local labour demand to training including local partnership is required to meet the difficulties of unemployment.



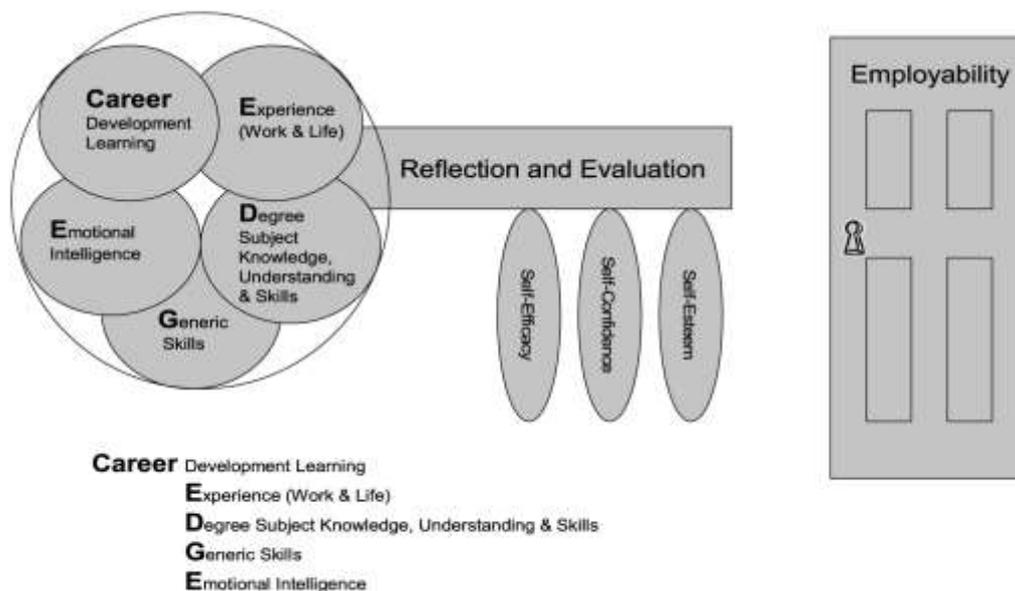
Determinants of Employability: Hogan et al, Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 6 (2013), 3–16.

Darce Pool and Sewell (2007) mentioned that the term employability is carelessly used with enterprise and in turn confused with entrepreneurship. Employability measured in simplistic terms indicates the ability of a graduate to achieve employment within six months of graduating. The authors argued that employability is much more than gaining employment. The four main elements of employability as proposed are

- 1) Employability assets- Knowledge, skill and attitude
- 2) Deployment – Career management skills, job search skills
- 3) Presentation n- Job getting skills (CV writing, work experience and interview techniques)
- 4) External factors- opportunities available in the present market condition

A career EDGE model proposed by the authors described the step by step achievement of employability through

- 1) Career development learning
- 2) Experience
- 3) Degree subject knowledge
- 4) Generic skills
- 5) Emotional intelligence



Career EDGE – The key to Employability: Dacre Pool, L. and Sewell, P. (2007)

Gunn, Bell and Kafmann (2010) argued that ‘Employability’ is about development of range of attributes and skills that is transferrable in situations ahead of education. The HEIs should take into account the skills and abilities required during employment and develop the curriculum so that the programs can be designed keeping in mind the employability agenda. The challenges with the employability agenda are as follows:

1. Confusion and ambiguity on the definition of employability
2. Non engagement of students
3. Inter-professionalism mismatch between academicians and industry experts
4. Unrealistic needs requested by employers
5. Ideology and priority mismatch

Effective inter-professional working is required to maximize the opportunities for the students to develop their attributes beyond the university curricula. Embedding personal development programs (PDP) through workplace-based learning across different levels of study may likely fulfil the employability agenda.

Employability skills

Leroux and Lafleur (1995) elucidated that employability skills can be grouped into three categories.

- 1) Academic Skills- Communication, Critical thinking, Problem Solving, Life Skills
- 2) Personal Management Skills- Goal Setting, Positive Attitude, Self Esteem , Initiative
- 3) Team Work Skills – Inter Personal Skills, Leadership Skills, Respect for others, Learning Skills

The researchers in their study took samples from two secondary schools in rural and sub urban areas. The students of the ninth and tenth standard have shown reluctance about awareness and importance of employability skills while the higher secondary students were eager for the application as they felt that these skills will be helpful for their future. The teachers strongly agreed on the importance of employability skills and majority advocated for the inclusion of the same in the education programmes in the secondary level. One of the concerns shown by some of the teaching staff in regard to the addition of employability skills in the curriculum was about inadequate time for them to prepare the student academically. Instead some proposed workshops on professional development at a regular basis.

Mgangira (2003) advocated on problem based learning approach for development of employability skills in Civil Engineering curriculum. Groups required to be formed with projects planned in such a way so that a form of partnership can be developed among different groups. Group managers were formed to ensure fulfilment of specific tasks. Samples were provided for preparing material out of soil samples and a single group report was prepared. The whole process enhanced the presentation skills, teamwork; inter personal relationship as well as skills in data collection and analysis. Students perceived that the problem solving skills, communication skills and team work had been enhanced during the process.

Robinson et al (2007) in their paper discussed about the employability skills required in the work place as per supervisors of college of agriculture. As per research “the skills most in demand are least in supply”. Companies provide employees more in technical areas for fulfilling their respective jobs rather than offering training to develop employability skills. The reason why HEI’s fail to understand the importance of employability skills is, that the faculties do not understand what is lacking or do not possess the necessary resources to teach the students. Partnership between HEI’s and employers is required to teach the necessary skills for industry success. System model for performance improvement (SMPI) conceptualised by Swanson (1994) was used and further worked upon to check the individual performance and productivity in the organisations. The five phases of the model consists of analysis , design, development, implementation and evaluation. The study found that the perception of employability skills is having the highest demand for novices. 67 employability skills (Evers, 1998) were identified and questionnaire was developed to collect data. As per supervisors perception the most important employability skill was working well with fellow employees. Maintaining a positive attitude

was given top priority in competency. All 67 skills were moderately important to supervisors where listening attentively was perceived to be the most important in skills dealing with communication.

Maxwell G et al (2009) explored the view of employers as critical stake holders group in post graduates employability skills. They argued that the employability skill development should become a nation wide agenda at the university level. They insisted on regular dialogues between employers and academicians to bridge the employability skill gap. They mentioned that managers in organisations who recruit graduates and post graduates are the key stake holders in employability skills. So their understanding of employability skills becomes the key factor for the employment of students. Ten core skills areas were identified, namely

- Communication skill
- Decision making skill
- Independent working skill
- Information retrieval skill
- Leadership Skill
- Numerical Skill
- Personal Learning and Development Skill
- Problem solving skill
- Strategic skill
- Team working skill

The employers have shown concern about hard and soft skill components but mainly with outcome oriented skills. The communication skills had the highest importance amongst employability skills followed by problem solving skills while numerical skills were the last in order.

Bridgstock (2009) argued about the importance of employability skills in the context of rapidly changing industry. The fundamental ways of education have been affected by the change in the government policies especially in UK, Australia and Canada emphasising on the production of “work ready graduates”. The researchers prioritized the necessity of Career Management Skills (CMS) during graduation. They explained that CMS is an ongoing process which includes self management skills, career building skills, discipline specific skills and generic skills. The researchers suggested that universities must begin to comprehensively and actively engage the students with employability agenda in order to make them market ready. The balance between orthodox pedagogy of curriculum and CMS is required where a careful integration should be done into the courses from the first year with ongoing input and feedback from faculties, industry and students.

Rasul et al (2010) worked on employability skills assessment in manufacturing industry. Kepner-Tregoe (K-T) method is used in this research which consisted of 107 employers from 5 types of Malaysian manufacturing industry. Seven important employability skills broadly categorised in the manufacturing industry were

- Basic skills
- Thinking Skills
- Resource Skills
- Informational Skills
- Inter Personal Skills
- System and Technology skills
- Personal Qualities

The researchers proposed an assessment tool development model using K-T method. In the model the first phase included assessment item followed by item chosen / eliminated, weight factor, determining skills scores and validate assessment tools. This employability skills assessment tool is an analysis instrument in making decision on students and employees and can be used in comparing the decision made on two or more individuals to select the best amongst them. It can act as a guide to develop any skill assessment tool.

Omar , Bakar and Rashid (2012) used the employability skill measuring instrument developed by Secretaries Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) to measure the acquisition of employability skills in Malaysian community colleges. As explained and proved by earlier researchers both technical skills and soft skills are important in achieving employment. Lack of either of the skills creates difficulty in obtaining jobs. The main purpose of community colleges is to impart training for skills required to enter the labour market after higher education. The researchers found that prior experience does not play an important role in getting placement. Employability skills of male and female students did not differ significantly. Irrespective of any branch of study in high schools, no significant difference was noticed in the level of employability of students. Suggestions on soft skills integrated curriculum was given to the institutions for better shaping up of students.

Auwal (2013) in his research article elucidated the role of employability skills as a part of the class room curriculum. Employability is often most sought by the supervisors in the industry where problem solving skills are having the highest importance. Strong verbal communication skills are also having high importance. Super visors on one hand look for skills like problem solving, taking initiative, flexibility, listening skills, while educators emphasize on team building skills and subject knowledge. Most important skills, as agreed by the super visors as well as the students are motivation, organisation and team management. Skills like leadership, inter personal skills, adaptability, life skills and perseverance are also to be given importance. For advancement in career, skills like acquiring new occupational skill and technological advancement are very important.

Beerepoot and Hendricks (2013) analysed the skills and knowledge acquired by the workers in BPO sector through the concept of employability and general skills in global labour market. The research was carried out in Baguio sector of Philippines. The researchers surveyed the perception of the BPO employees in terms of longer-term employment prospects and the knowledge & skills acquired by them during employment. Employability of an individual is correlated with multi-

tasking, which enhances the range of job availability of an individual. The ‘hidden skills’ if identified, can be used in a broader spectrum of job. The BPO sector in Philippines started way back in early 1990s with more than 5 lakh present employment. The job profile is broadly categorized into high, medium and low end jobs. More than 90% of the respondents termed their job to be ‘not difficult’ and does not require much intellectual effort. Most respondents emphasized that the job has resulted in the improvement of Basic computer skills, followed by English communication, management skills and emotions management. Most perceived that BPO work is a stepping stone for them for enhancing their employability through development of both generic skills and personal competencies.

Saludin and Salahudin (2014) in their study on employability competencies of business management and accounting graduates explained the importance of employability enhancement and stated that it should be an integrated activity that should be undertaken in collaboration with the employers, students and HEI’s. The Malaysian government in their agenda ‘Vision 2020’ has decided to prepare skilled professional work force through a number of HEI’s to achieve the status of a developed country. The business education employability not only depends upon the academics alone it also describes the position of the requisite job performance competencies by a graduate as the degrees are strongly related to practice. The employability competencies can be broadly divided into three categories a) Basic academic skills b) higher order thinking skills and c) personal qualities. Employers today give priority to higher order thinking skills and also look for personal qualities along with basic academic skills while finding good workers. So a graduate with masters or PhD degree without correct attitude or employability skills hardly land up getting a job. In every job the requirement of both hard skills and soft skills are equally important to function well.

Dissanayake (2015) discussed about the importance of soft skills as an employability factor in Sri Lanka. It has been found that in spite of rigorous admission procedure the students completing their undergraduate degree are remarkable having low employability skills. The study emphasised on importance of soft skills as an employability factor in the private higher education institutions and also tried to demarcate the relationships between the selected soft skills with the employability of graduates at HEI’s in Sri Lanka. 5 point Likert Scale was used throughout the analysis. Graduates perceived that the most important possession at the time of applying for the first job is high verbal communication skill. They also perceived that listening skills are very important. One more perception that the students felt was that there is a significant relationship between the level of verbal communication skills and the waiting period to get the first job while there is no such significant relationship with listening skills.

IV. Findings

The significance of the study of employability and employability skills can be very well understood and recognized on the basis of the following description.

- (a) Employability of passing graduates are the performance indicator for institutions.
- (b) Employability skills are skills that are transferable in nature and can be taught.
- (c) Employability skills can be a part of the curriculum at finishing schools.
- (d) Employability skills are the key factor for employment.
- (e) Employers are more concerned on the outcome oriented skills.

V. Conclusion

Many eminent researchers have very well narrated the need of employability and the employability skills for the sustainability in the job market. In the last few decades, phenomenal change has taken place in the functioning of organizations. Employability of an individual is linked with multi-tasking, which enhances the scope of job availability. The employers are nowadays looking for ‘market-ready’ professionals who possess higher level of thinking skills who can significantly contribute in the growth of the organisation. Employees on the other hand are no longer interested in only securing jobs but are more focused on time-bound ascending mobility. The HEIs’ have a very significant role to play in the making of employ-able professionals which in turn enhances their credibility in the market.

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