

Defining Employability for the New Era of Work

A Submission to the Select Committee on the Future of Work and Workers

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About the Author

My substantive employment is with an Australian university as an academic researcher with a focus directly related to the topic of the submission, “employability” and work. My research publications appear in international journals at the highest rankings in my discipline (e.g., *Journal of Vocational Behavior, Teaching & Teacher Education, Personality & Individual Differences*). My formal qualifications include Doctor of Philosophy, Master of Science, Master of Education, BAppSc(Hons). I am a psychologist registered with the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Agency and the Psychology Board of Australia.

Specific Terms of Reference

This submission is focused on the concept “**employability**” which frequently appears in current debates about employment and the future of work. The submission recommends a revised perspective on and definition of employability. This submission is relevant to Terms of Reference

(a) the future earnings, job security, employment status and working patterns of Australians; and

(c) the wider effects of that change on inequality, the economy, government and society.

The Submission is in three parts: A, B, and C. Part A refers to the *Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework* and its relevance to employability. Part B provides a contemporary definition of employability. Part C provides a broader statement on the future of work.

Key Points

1. Understandings, definitions and approaches to employability should capture the idea of it being a psychosocial concept that includes (a) career adaptability (dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations) for the (b) individual-work interface.
2. Understandings, definitions and approaches to employability should assume that (a) employability is not a list of knowledge, and cognitive and behavioural skills, and (b) employability is not the same as employment rates.

Recommendations

1. The Committee should address the operational definition of “employability” in its enquiry and findings.
2. The term “employability” should be defined on the basis of the most up-to-date research and knowledge.

PART A: THE CURRENT APPROACH

The Government’s **Core Skills for Work Developmental Framework** [1] builds upon the **Employability Skills for the Future** [2]. The Core Skills Framework is directly relevant to the future of work and workers as it has potential for applications in education and training across all sectors. This submission argues that **the Core Skills Framework definition of employability is restrictive** and therefore has implications for the formulation of education and training for employability.

Employability is more than a list of skills that are in demand at any given time in the labour market. Certainly, skills are part of the elements of employability but other elements must be included. The Australian Government’s Core Skills Framework (p. 1) states, “generic or employability skills, contribute to work performance in combination with technical or discipline specific skills and core language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills”. This statement delimits employability to a specific set of skills. The world of work changes too quickly to simply list skills—indeed, the skills in-demand continue to change. This focus on skills alone does not concur with current research and evidence that demonstrates employability to be a much more complex phenomenon. Therefore, other elements must be added to the mix of what is employability.

PART B: A REVISED DEFINITION OF EMPLOYABILITY

The most highly cited definition of employability describes it as “a psychosocial construct that embodies individual characteristics that foster **adaptive cognition, behaviour, and affect**, and enhance the **individual-work interface**” [3]. This definition is not used in the Core Skills Framework. The definitive features are: (a) adaptive cognition, behaviour, and affect, and (b) the individual-work interface.

Adaptive Cognition, Behaviour, and Affect: This dimension of employability is often referred to as **Career Adaptability**. Career Adaptability can be observed in a person’s (a) dispositional traits and (b) characteristic adaptations. These two facets of career adaptability are crucial to employability. **Dispositional traits are relatively stable feature of a person are associated with specific behaviours.** Conscientiousness, for example, is a dispositional trait that is observed as a person’s active dedication to tasks and high levels of productivity in work. **Characteristic adaptations are more flexible and can be learned and developed over time and with experience.** Self-efficacy, for example, is a characteristic adaptation that comprises a person’s beliefs about ability to perform a certain task. Self-efficacy can be learned by quality experiential learning, observational learning, persuasion, and positive emotional experiences. Taken together as Career Adaptability, dispositional traits and characteristic adaptations effect an individual’s employment-related decision-making and actions toward attaining and maintaining a desired volume and type of work.

Individual-Work Interface: Employability is context-sensitive and can only be understood within a turbulent confluence of factors that greatly influence any given individual’s chances of working. An individual may enjoy great opportunities in one context but very few in another context, at another time, or another place. For example, a person who is qualified to practice a profession or trade in one context may not be in another. Employability affects a person’s confidence and motivation in their engagement with the new context.

Employability may motivate an individual to acquire certain knowledge and skills that are presently in demand and, thereby, increase the probability of employment. Employability is reflected in an individual’s assessment of himself/herself in a specific context. This assessment of **self-in-context** influences the decisions and actions taken to acquire additional knowledge and skills. Thus, **employability is not knowledge and skills per se; it is the propensity to understand their personal value and act toward their acquisition for deployment in a specific context.**

Context and access to resources in context (e.g., knowledge, finances) may foster or inhibit a person’s employability. For example, knowing how to acquire and critically

appraise information about the world of work (e.g., job market requirements) is dependent on knowledge of context. Furthermore, discovering information about affordable training (and being able to afford it) may be attractive to one person who recognizes the potential to personally benefit from the training; but, the same training may be inappropriate to the aspirations and volition of another person.

Employability is reflected in an individual’s career adaptability which informs his/her (a) knowing the difference between what is appropriate and inappropriate training and, if choice is available, (b) making an informed and meaningful decision and taking actions that benefit the individual. Consider, for example, those workplaces in which staff are directed to take mandatory training in some particular topic that is essentially irrelevant to the person’s aspirations and goals, and that when not completing the training results in penalties such as withholding salary increments. This scenario diminishes employability. Also consider those government initiatives which direct unemployed people to take on training with little relevance to their aspirations and goals, and instead merely soaks up precious time and resources needed for pursuing relevant opportunities, and then these governments impose financial restraints on the person for not completing the training. In these situations, there is no choice. Being compelled to training by force of withholding salary increments or unemployment allowance is not a choice—it is conscription—and does little to enhance employability.

PART C: THE FUTURE OF WORK

How individuals perceive and interact with the opportunities in their economic contexts reflects their employability. In some economic conditions, an educated, conscientious and adaptable person with all the best goals and reasons in the world for working is unable to secure the work that is desired. If there is just one job for every five people then four people wanting that one job are inevitably bound for disappointment. Incongruity is inevitable; dissonance arises; compromise ensues. In other words, **employability is dependent on there being opportunities for those who want work.**

Employability is about individuals consciously **deploying career adaptability** (i.e., dispositional traits and characteristics adaptations) to actively secure work that rewards them for their knowledge and skills that actually are in demand **in a given context**. The word “actively” is used deliberately to highlight employability as a self-regulatory resource for self-determination. The preponderance of evidence reveals a direct link between employability and job search behaviour [e.g., 4, 5, 6].

Too few jobs in the labour market will thwart employability (e.g., if organizations are not buying knowledge and skills because capital for growth is unavailable). On the flip side, too many jobs demanding certain knowledge and skills will diminish the need to actively deploy employability. This hypothetical relation may look something like a parabolic curve climbing upward as the availability of work increases but then declining when the availability of work become so high in conditions of full employment that any person is essentially guaranteed work regardless of their employability—when one “walks into a job” because the employer is desperate.

Employability must be reconsidered in the era of artificial intelligence and machine-learning. Globalization’s acceleration in the present century is spurred on by technologies that are beyond the wildest dreams of the earlier pioneers of global trade whose expeditions furnished imperial intent. Times and technology have changed, but the calculus of supply and

demand has not. Consumers’ seemingly insatiable appetite for more is whet by lower prices resulting from automation. Automation of production and services effectively drives down prices, and generates new products and services in a virtuous cycle of consumption and production. Like shareholders, consumers care for their bottom line and may be unaware of or indifferent to the pernicious effects of the lower price of the product made affordable by automation.

Forecasts of the new forms of work emerging in the present era cannot compensate the cost to a person whose workplace has downsized, rightsized, rationalized, or just plain shut up shop because somewhere in their industry an automated process extinguished the work of human hands. Unemployment, underemployment, the lack of decent work, and “indecent work” cause significant health, psychological, and social problems [7]. The chain of causality between unemployment and mental illness is short—the evidence is convincing [8-12]. The loss and cost are not only materialized at the level of the person but also the effects spread across the relational matrix in which work is inherent. Business partnerships, collegial networks, friendships, and whole communities, will change when a nation is riven by inequality, poverty, and socio-economic structures that inhibit an individual’s attempts to flourish using their employability.

Employment is germane to both personal and community health and wellbeing. It is in the best interests of governments and industries to generate economic contexts that maximize opportunities for employment to sustain a satisfactory quality of life. Society must be prepared for the psychological consequences of an era of automation and machine-learning. Thus, understanding the future of work, employment, and employability demands an entirely different perspective that draws on psychological theory and research to inform policy and practices in which work is regarded as a prime source of **self-determination** [e.g., 13, 14]. Psychological approaches will not only account for the personal experiences of having decent work in the future but also the experience of insufficient work.

Conclusion

The Core Skills Framework is relevant to the Committee’s enquiry with respect to the future of work and workers. However, the framework falls short of appropriately capturing the meaning of employability. Reformulating the framework (or its future revision) to better account for the contemporary definition of employability would likely enhance its relevance to the Committee’s enquiry and, moreover, its applicability to developing solutions for policy, education and training that serve to better prepare workers for a very uncertain future.

Recommendations

1. The Committee should address the operational definition of “employability” in its enquiry and findings.
2. The term “employability” should be defined on the basis of the most up-to-date research and knowledge.

References

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