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What is employability? A comparison of employers and instructors implicit theories

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Background

Employability is a term which is becoming ever more prevalent in our daily lives, particularly within Higher Education (HE). Yet the validity of assessments around HE's contribution to employability remains under question (Harvey, 2001). If valid measurements are to be developed then a strong theoretical base is required. However, among the multitude of theories in existence, there is limited data-driven theory formulation, and a comparison of stakeholder's viewpoints is lacking (Williams, Dodd, Steele and Randall, 2015).

This research aimed to explore what 'employability' means to those involved in recruitment (employers), as well as those involved in developing employability within HE (instructors).

Method

Design: A repertory grid technique was employed as a means of accessing their understanding of employability. This method relies on a comparison of examples of the phenomenon, in this case employees or students; to identify what is important when understanding the topic under investigation i.e. employability.

This method is less prescriptive than a questionnaire, offering an open canvas for participants to communicate their understanding of the concept. Repertory grids have also been found to elicit more information than a standard semi structured interview (Lemke, Clark, and Wilson (2011).

Participants: A purposive snowballing sample of 22 employers and 15 instructors was recruited via personal contacts and a relevant JISC mailing list.

Materials: Participants received an information sheet outlining the purpose and nature of their participation. A Repertory grid was used to record data.

Image 1. Example repertory grid

Procedure: The participants were asked to identify six employees/ students. Two representing a high level of employability, two representing a low level of employability and two representing a moderate level of employability (Goffin, Raja, Claes, Szwejczewski, and Martinez, 2012), this allowed for a range of responses.

These individuals made up what are referred to as 'elements' **(a)**. The participant compared two elements at a time, being asked '*In what ways are these two individuals similar in terms of their employability?*', and '*In what ways are these two individuals opposite in terms of their employability?*'.

Participants would identify a way the elements were different **(b)**, referred to as a construct, and discussion then occurred to identify the opposite **(c)** of this. e.g. element one and two are both hardworking. The opposite of this may be lazy, or distracted.

Once a bipolar construct was created each element was rated on this construct e.g. from 1=lazy to 7=hardworking. After all elements had been rated the participant moved on to identifying another construct.

Analytical design: Content analysis was used to aggregate meaning across multiple grids. This process involved the comparison of each individual construct, with another, to determine whether they present the same underlying meaning. If it was believed they have the same meaning they were placed into the same category. If they were believed to have different meanings, they were placed in different categories reflecting this difference. This is a common means of aggregating content from a number of repertory grids.

Results

A total of 509 constructs were identified (Instructors = 159, employers = 350). Results of a content analysis of these repertory grids identified a number of employability competencies, presented below.

Table 1. A breakdown of category meanings & proportions.

Superordinate categories	Subordinate categories	Employers	Instructors	Whole sample
Commitment Dedication – Just a job: Directed, pledged or bound to interact with others appropriately.	**Passion-not interested:** Show a passion or interest in the role. About implicit motivation driven by interest in role.	4%	3%	3%
	Interest in company - need a job: Interest in company leading to commitment to it. Implicit interest in company as motivator	3%	-	2%
	Share company values: Considered the goals and ethos of the company above their own ego. Or represent a match between their values and that of the company.	1%	-	1%
	Conscientious-don't care: Driven to perform at a high standard. Hold a consideration for quality in their output.	3%	2%	3%
	Long term commitment – stop gap: Committed to the role or company for the long term, rather than a temporary destination.	1%	-	1%
	Persistent – give up: Committed to the completion of work activities.	1%	3%	2%
	Hard worker –no just enough: Engages with work rather than avoiding aspects.	8%	6%	8%
Interpersonal skills: The skill to interact with others appropriately.	**Collaborative – lone worker:** Will work with others, as required, towards a common goal. Exchanging information in an open and receptive fashion, and adapting personal ideas or plans in the pursuit of a common goal.	9%	4%	7%
	Personable: A pleasant appearance and manner. Others feel comfortable around them.	**13%**	5%	**10%**
Intra personal components: Skills and abilities that occur within the person	**Optimistic:** Hopeful about the future.	1%		1%
	Resilient: Able to withstand or recover quickly.	3%	3%	3%
	Honest: Truthful in their communications and actions.	2%		1%
	Self-awareness: Is aware of their own skills, knowledge, character, motives and desires, and utilises an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in these to select appropriate roles, and accept input from others.	2%	9%	4%
	Confidence: Express a belief in self and one's abilities which may lead to generalising beyond behaviours outside of their comfort zone, including questioning decisions. Reducing evidence of anxiety around high pressure performance.	4%	8%	5%
Adjustable: Openness to changes to values, skills, behaviours, in response to external demands.		4%	5%	4%
Professional development: Willingness and/or effort to engage staff development.		3%	5%	4%
Experience and Knowledge	**Experience and Knowledge:** Job specific knowledge and skills identified by supervisors as necessary for competent functioning within the role they are placed, which fill an existing need or add additional value.	7%	4%	6%
	Recruitment understanding: Act in a way that suggests an understanding of expectations within the recruitment process.	5%	8%	6%
	Business awareness An awareness of the world of business.	1%	3%	1%
Strategic: Behave in a manner which illustrates they can relate their current situation or behaviour to long term or overall aims and interests, so that they might effectively achieve these.		5%	8%	6%
Creativity: Come up with novel ideas or solutions.		1%	1%	1%
Evidence- based: Can apply knowledge to relevant settings.		1%	1%	1%
Proactive-no initiative: An interest in or tendency towards creating or controlling a situation for themselves rather than requiring other people or circumstances to direct their behaviour.		3%	8%	5%
Professionalism: Appropriate controlled, behaviour presenting to others a commitment and/or membership to the company commitment.		4%	4%	4%
Takes responsibility: Take a level of ownership which induces a feeling of accountability for something. Can be left to work on tasks without external monitoring.		6%	3%	5%
Communication skills: The ability to communicate a point to an audience.		4%	9%	6%

Implications

The researcher is now developing a measurement tool based on these categories of employability. This tool will facilitate the accurate assessment of employability development interventions, and allow for self-auditing of employability. This will highlight any areas neglected by interventions and/or individuals.

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