

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

Stella Williams1,2, School of Psychology
Supervisors: Catherine Steele1, John Maltby1, and Lorna Dodd2.
Leicester University1, Newman University2.

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

(a) 

(b) 

(c) 

Procedure: The participants were asked to identify six employability/ 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core values</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal attributes</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

Author correspondence: sw309@le.ac.uk