

The Shifting Sands of Employability

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The term 'employability' has gradually permeated the national consciousness, increasingly used across a variety of policy areas including higher education, social welfare and public finance. However, despite its offhand use in government policy discourse, employability is a problematic term with shifting and diverse meanings, holding different connotations for statisticians, economists, healthcare professionals, policymakers and HR managers. The purpose of this article is to discuss the development of alternative definitions of employability, the components that make up individual or collective employability and to discuss some of the problems associated with its use.

Defining employability

An oft-cited definition of employability is provided by Hillage and Pollard (1998: 1): '*Employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required*'. They identify four factors upon which individual 'capability' is dependent: possessed assets (knowledge, skills and attitudes); how these assets are used and deployed in the labour market (reflecting career management skills, job search skills, labour market information and personal adaptability); the way these assets are presented to employers (for instance, in applications, CVs and personal and aesthetic presentation) and, the context of their deployment and in which the individual works (the supply and demand for skills and jobs and personal circumstances). Whilst this definition no doubt encompasses the core dimensions which constitute an individual's ability to obtain, retain and regain employment, employability often appears a more slippery notion than such a neat conception would imply and there are multiple approaches to defining employability. In respect of the graduate labour market, for instance, Yorke (2006) identifies three concepts of employability: employability as employment outcome (i.e. the achievement of suitable employment); employability as a learning process; and employability as a set of credentialised or demonstrable learning outcomes. Within and informing these multiple constructs, as Yorke notes, accounts of employability tend to take one of two alternative perspectives (or a consideration of both):

- employability as the possession of the necessary characteristics (i.e. the potential) to obtain and retain desired employment
- employability as having obtained desired employment, which attests to the individual possession of required attributes (what could be called 'realised employability')

There is an explicit consideration of both approaches in Hillage and Pollard's four components of employability, the former reflected in possessed assets, their deployment and presentational skills, the latter reflected in the acknowledgement of context. This is what Brown *et al.* (2003) refer to as the *absolute* and *relative* dimensions of employment; the former being the attributes of the individual, the latter being the context in which they are deployed. Brown and Hesketh (2004) argue for a holistic concept of employability which considers both these dimension because, whilst an individual might possess the potential (i.e. the required attributes) to obtain and be effective in desired employment, it is still possible to be unemployed or underemployed, depending on things like the structural conditions of the labour market and macroeconomic performance. These conditions include the supply of and competition for particular types of job, the sectoral and occupational distribution of employment in a given geographic area and the extent to which inequality between social groups (such as men and women) persists.

The origins and development of the term

Whilst the use of employability in, for example, higher education policy, has a relatively recent origin, Gazier (1999) identifies the development of at least seven different operational versions of employability in three waves since the 1940s (Table 1).

1940s	Dichotomous employability	Concerned with identifying whether an individual is or is not able to work depending on age, ability and family burdens. Associated with WW2 and identifying among the population those able to contribute to the total war effort.
1960s	Socio-medical employability	A quantitative scale of employability to assess the 'distance' between an individual's medical characteristics and the requirements of the labour market. This scale then used as a measure of required rehabilitation for disabled members of society to improve their chances of employment.
	Manpower policy employability	As above, a quantitative scale of employability, but with a focus on both skills and medical condition, applied to all employees and used as a measure of the individual's distance from regular employment. Used to a tool in policy interventions to help the disadvantaged.
	Flow employability	Concerned with the collective 'speed' at which particular social groups leave unemployment and which, rather than considering individual attributes and behaviours, focuses on the demand side of the labour market and the absorption capacity of the economy. Individual 'relative employability' considered secondary to the 'mean employability' of social groups determined by overall economic conditions and the 'place' occupied by this group in society.
1980s-90s	Employability as 'expected labour market performance'	A neutral statistical definition which seeks to measure individual productivity, in its dynamic context, through an assessment of both individual and collective characteristics for the purposes of assessing the effects of labour market or training interventions.
	Initiative employability	Employability as the marketability of cumulative individual human, social and cultural capital, with an explicit focus on individual responsibility for one's own employability. Associated with a policy focus on promoting lifelong learning, labour market flexibility and the provision of labour market information.
	Interactive employability	The relative capacity of an individual to achieve meaningful employment given interaction between personal characteristics and the labour market, and connected to observed or predicted labour market performance. Policy emphasis on worker adaptation, alongside activation and preventive programmes..

TABLE 1: Seven Operational Versions of employability (Gazier 1999)

The seven 'varieties' of employability outlined in the table take a number of perspectives on the question of what it is to be 'employable', notably whether employability is an individual or collective concept and whether comparative employability is a supply-side (e.g. human capital) or demand-side (e.g. structural) issue or both. Moreover, if we trace the historic development of the concept, employability moves from a non-judgemental 'tool' for identifying and remedying the underutilisation of labour as the basis for policy interventions designed to maximise the productivity of the whole labour force, to conceptions that stress individual responsibility for ensuring continued employability. In short, according to Gazier, employability was first used in a value-free sense concerned only with assisting those deemed 'unemployable' relative

to the demands of the labour market, but later becoming a more politicised term, where lack of employability is associated with lack of effort or willingness to adapt to or engage with labour market realities.

From the above table, it is ideas of interactive and initiative employability that are in most common usage in the field of HRM and contemporary labour market policy. In the context of economic restructuring, the corporate drive for ever greater flexibility of both labour and organisational form and the supposed 'end of careers', employability has become associated with individual self-sufficiency in managing one's own career. From such a perspective, an emphasis is placed upon individual responsibility for employability through developing an understanding of the labour market, one's own place in it and the continuous accumulation of marketable skills and competencies to ensure employment. If workers find themselves without employment, it is beholden upon them to 'retool' and acquire those attributes that are in demand. From a positive perspective, the notion of employability is associated with greater freedom, personal fulfilment and self-determination in shaping one's own working life, through a series of 'new deals' or short term 'transactions' with employers, across occupations and industries. The alternative perspective suggests, however, that this positive rhetoric is simply a smokescreen behind which employers (and governments) have sought to divest themselves of responsibility for career development for all but a few chosen employees. Therefore, in lieu of job security provided by (public and private sector) organisations, individuals are encouraged to create their own employment security through skills development and lifelong learning.

Employability and the Graduate Labour Market

In the UK, one area in which employability has gained significant traction as a policy objective is in higher education and, by extension, the graduate labour market (Leitch 2006). The greater requirement placed on higher education institutions to contribute to graduate employability through the development of key or generic skills, reflecting the demands of governments, students and employers, can be understood as one aspect of the recent policy focus on the supply-side of the labour market (Lloyd and Payne 2006). However, this overt focus on 'tooling up' graduates for employment ignores the evidence that points towards the saturation of the graduate labour market (where the creation of high-skill jobs has not kept pace with the rise in graduate numbers) and that the greatest impediment to appropriate employment for many graduates is not their possession or otherwise of the skills demanded by employers, rather their social and educational group characteristics, such as type of university attended, gender and ethnicity (Wilton 2011). This is despite the fact that successive governments have sought to use social justice as part of the rationale to promote a universalistic notion of graduate employability through the adoption of the language of 'key skills' in order to remove the impact of local and potentially discriminatory notions of employability from occupational groups and organisations (Boden and Nedeva 2010).

Social group disadvantage may also have been reinforced through the contemporary process of redefining what constitutes 'skill' (and, by association, employability) to incorporate personal characteristics, attitudes, traits and predispositions, such as motivation, respect and willingness to compromise (Grugulis *et al.* 2004). These attributes are integral to the notion of interactive and initiative employability and which may actually act to reinforce labour market disadvantage where the personal and transferable 'skills' required for preferential employment are those of '*whiteness, maleness and traditional middle-classness*' (Ainley 1994: 80). The widening definition of 'skill' beyond those whose development can be assessed, planned and, subsequently, funded by government would actually seek to provide further scope for the gatekeepers to employment to exercise discretion in appointing someone who is more likely to 'fit in', further limiting the chances for those currently disadvantaged or excluded. For instance, Brown and Hesketh (2004) suggest that success at assessment centres for applicants to highly-prized places on graduate training programmes often comes down to personal 'feeling' amongst recruiters of which candidate they would most like to work and socialise with. Therefore, individual employability (in its purest form, the ability to successfully undertake desired employment) is rendered null if the opportunity to participate in employment is denied by the 'gatekeepers' to jobs because of immutable social characteristics. This raises the criticism that the

exclusive policy focus on cultivating specific graduate skills (such as problem-solving, critical thinking and teamworking) ignores the fact that social and cultural capital are among the key determinants of relative employability. Whilst issues, such as being the right gender, having the right accent, or the right 'school tie' have always limited admission into particular organisations or occupations, the problem is exacerbated through the adoption of the contemporary notion of employability associated with individual self-sufficiency, which fails to acknowledge the social context in which workers deploy their accumulated employability. At worst, this focus acts to perpetuate long-established disadvantage by removing such analysis from the broader assessment of graduate unemployment or underemployment.

Conclusion

The term 'employability' was originally used as a means of remedying the failure of the demand-side of the labour market to make adequate use of available labour and became associated with levelling the playing field for those of which the labour market makes inadequate use and who suffer disadvantage. In contemporary political discourse, and in the context of an explicit policy focus on the supply-side of the labour market, it is more likely to be associated with placing responsibility for a lack of employability on the individual. As such, in its current guise, employability is associated with the attribution of fault rather than seeking remedy for unemployment and effectively disregards structural explanations for unemployment or underemployment such as geographical immobility, the collective experience of labour market inequality and the recruitment behaviours of organisations.

Arguably, for a focus on employability in labour market discourse and policy to be both fair and effective we need to consider the wealth of reasons why those without employment are unable or unwilling to work. In particular, recognition must be made of all dimension of individual employability, beyond possessed competence, including the social group characteristics which clearly shape labour market opportunity. Moreover, the demand-side also needs to be addressed not least the specific skills required in many jobs that can only be obtained once in employment or in funded vocational training. Therefore, without access to jobs or specific training, and recognition by employers of the worth of that training, then employment is likely to be difficult to come by for many of the most disadvantaged in society. Therefore, investing in the means by which all those in the labour market or prospective labour market entrants can attain the attributes desired by employers and the ability to present and 'sell' these attributes effectively will only be effective alongside wider social and educational policy, such as the development and proper enforcement of equal opportunities legislation and effective active labour market policies to support those seeking employment. It would seem to require a broad demand-side focus including employer engagement both to identify and address required competencies and deficiencies and also to promote employer responsibility for both providing training and in recruiting from the broadest spectrum of workers possible, as well as generating the conditions for the creation of adequately-rewarded and satisfying work accessible to all.

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