

ISSUES AND INSIGHTS IN EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

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Abstract

The demand for basic, higher-order and affective employ ability skills reflects profound changes in the Nigerian workplace. In this new environment, work is problem oriented, flexible and organized in teams; labour is not a cost but an investment. Businesses use all of their workers skills to relentlessly pursue excellence, product quality and customer satisfaction. They combine technology and people in new ways, moving decisions closer to the front lines and drawing more fully on the abilities of all workers. The advent of sophisticated technology has revolutionized the workplace and its skills requirements; many kinds of routinised, repetitive work will be completely eliminated. This paper is of the opinion that employers find far too many entry-level job applicants deficient in employability skills, and want the schools to place more emphasis on developing these skills. Employability skills in the opinion of this paper are the attributes of employees, other than technical competence, that make them an asset to the employer.

Introduction

Business and industrial representative are expressing considerable dissatisfaction with the general level of preparedness of prospective entry-level employees. According to research conducted-by Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (CANS) (1991:15), "More than half of our young people leave school without the knowledge or foundation required to find and hold a good job". Employer's dissatisfaction with young applicants is not primarily due to inadequate technical knowledge or skill. In the words of Wentling (1987:354)

A review of the Literature indicated that employers have no quarrel with the skills performance of today's graduates, but they do have serious reservations when it comes to their non -technical abilities.

Another name for these "non-technical" abilities is employability skill. Buck and Barrick (1987:29) write that employability skills are the attributes of employees, other than technical competence, that make them an asset to the employer. These employability skills include reading, basic arithmetic and other basic skills, problem-solving, decision making, and other higher-order thinking skills, and dependability, positive attitude, cooperativeness, and other affective skills and traits. Employability skills according to Sherer and Eadie (1987:16), are not job specific, but are skills which cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs from entry level to chief executive officer.

Employability Skills Literature

Findings, cited in this paper are drawn from 63 documents pertaining to the topic of employability skills. Of these research documents, 41 studies address question such as:

- > What skills and traits do employers value most in prospective entry-level employees?
- > Why have employability skills become so important in contemporary work place?
- > What educational practices has research shown to be effective in imparting employability skills and traits to students?

The other 22 documents arc related writings chiefly opinion pieces, curriculum guides,, programme descriptions, and guidelines for programme development which complement the findings. The researchers looked at the variety of classroom management and instructional practices, including indoctrination versus democratic teaching strategies, cognitive versus experiential learning, and other effects of different kinds of teacher-student relationships, classroom structures, teacher expectation and degrees of teacher autonomy.

The research findings of Barter and Young 1982, Beach 1982, Buchanan 1990, Busse 1992. Stemmer and

Smith 1992, Van Shelhamer and Bishop 1984, state that "employers want entry-level employees to possess an array of basic, high-order, and affective employability skills". The criteria-employability skills identified by (hsc different researchers vary considerably in the way they are organized. One researcher identified 76 different skills in nine categories (Poolc J985); another researcher group named 36 skills and traits in eight categories (CANS, 1991).

Comparisons of the employability attributes listed by these different researchers revealed those that were cited most frequently. These attributes were then organized into three categories of basic skills, higher-order thinking skills, and affective skills and traits as shown in Figure 1 below:-.

Fig 1

Basic Skills	Higher-order Thinking Skills	Affective Skills and Traits
Oral Communication (Speaking and Listening)	Problem solving	Dependability/Responsibility
Reading, Understanding and Following instructions	Learning skills strategies	Positive attitude towards work
Basic arithmetic	Creative, innovative thinking	Conscientiousness, Punctuality, efficiency
Writing	Decision making	Interpersonal skills, cooperation, working as a team member
		Self-confidence, positive self-image
		Adaptability, flexibility
		Enthusiasm, motivation
		Self-discipline, self-management
		Appropriate dress, grooming
		Honesty, integrity

Ability to work without supervision

Source: Packer, 1992

Some general comments are made about these findings. While a number of employers identified the "3Rs" and various higher-cognitive abilities as critical, employability skills, virtually all of them named affective characteristics particularly "dependability", "responsibility" and "positive attitude towards work" as vital. It should also be noted that, within each of the three categories, the skills and traits are arranged in descending order according to the frequency with which each was cited in the research. The research findings of Canievale, Gainer and Meltser, 1988, Commission on Skills 1990; Greathouse 1986; Lankard 1990 and Junge, Daniels and Karmos 1984, reveal that "Employer value these generic employability skills above specific occupational skills". This well supported finding applies to employers in large, medium and small companies, public and private and reflects the view of workers holding different management positions and this holds true regardless of the nature of the work the company is engaged. The Committee for Economic Development (1985:17), writes: Specific occupational skills are less crucial for entry-level employment than a general high level literacy, responsibility, attitudes towards work, the ability to communicate well and the ability to continue to learn.

In his summary, of 14 studies on (he need expressed by employers for entry-level job qualifications, Natrielio (1989:1), writes:

The results of these studies suggest that 1) employers place greatest importance on employee attitudes, 2) employers emphasis basic skills over job-specific skills and 3) employers deem it important for workers to have an understanding of work environment.

In the words of Kazis and Barton (1993), employers find far too many entry-level job applicants deficient in employability skills, and want schools to place more emphasis on developing these skills. Charnrc (1988:30) identified and catalogued the reasons given by employers for not hiring young people for entry-level jobs, including

- Low grades and low levels of academic accomplishments.
- Poor attitudes, lack of self-confidence.
- Lack of goals, poorly motivated.
- Lack of enthusiasm, lack of drive, little evidence of leadership potential.

- Excessive interest in security and benefits, unrealistic salary demands and expectations.
- Inadequate preparation for type of work, inappropriate background.
- Inadequate basic skills (reading, writing and mathematics).

One can easily see that employability skills are not merely attributes that employers desire- in prospective employees, rather, many employers now require applicants to have these skills in order to be seriously considered for employment. And if employers hire applicants and then find them lack these skills, Gregson and Beltis (1991:2), write:

Employers discharge, or fail to promote, most employees because of behaviours reflecting an inadequate work or attitude rather than because of deficiency in job skills or technical knowledge.

Beach (1982:69), cites that about 87 percent of persons losing their job or failing to be promoted in their jobs were found to have improper work habits and attitudes rather than insufficient job skills or knowledge.

Following their review of over 100 studies, to identify the characteristics and skills desired by contemporary employers, Sherer and Eadie (1987:16) state that it is very important that the schools provide the basic employability skills so that all students and adults are equipped to handle the complexities of their jobs throughout their lives. Focusing on a specific vocational area, Lundy (1984:23), states about the role of the school:

Teachers in the schools must not forget that there is a great need for preparing young people in their respective classes, with good work habits. Students need to be taught such things as honesty, punctuality regular attendance, productivity and conscientiousness.

Employability Skills can be Taught

The findings of (Gregson 1992, Gregson and Beltis 1991, Stasz 1993), clarify how their skills can be best taught and learned. "Democratic instructional approaches are superior to indoctrinational approaches for imparting employability skills to students and workers".

One line of inquiry in the employability skills research compares "indoctrinational" and "democratic" instruction in terms of their effectiveness in developing students work values and attitudes. According to Gregson (1992:63):

Democratic approaches are suited to raise students' consciousness about values, attitudes and workers responsibilities. Pedagogical problem solving and group discussion are democratic in nature because they encourage students to explore their attitudes and do not advocate one particular outcome, while indoctrination instruction is a process by which students are given information in such a manner that they are discouraged or prevented from questioning its validity and includes pedagogical strategies that minimize student input.

Comparison of teachers who are successful in inculcating affective employability skills in their students with those who are less successful reveals that the successful teachers rely much more on democratic strategies and much less on indoctrinational ones. Despite this finding, Gregson and his colleagues also found that "vocational education instructors frequently use indoctrinational pedagogical strategies to teach work values and attitudes" (Gregson and Trawinsk 1991:7) add that lecture, in particular is "one of the most overused and misused pedagogical strategies and has not only been criticized for being exploitative, but it has also been attacked for ineffectiveness" (Gregson 1992:67)

In the words of (Berryman 1990, 1991; Graham, Vitale and Schenk 1991 and Meyer and Newman 1988);

In school spellings, employability skills are best learned when classroom replicate key features of real work settings and students tasks approximate those performed by workers in those settings.

This finding validates what is known about teaching vocation-specific technical skills, learning in actual or simulated work environment is far more effective than isolated, decontextualised learning. Bcrryman (1990:6) notes that:

Too often knowledge and skills are taught in settings that do not reproduce the settings in which the work must be performed. This teaching out of context impedes (he transfer of (raining to selling outside the (raining context.

Gregson and Bettis (1991:19), focusing on effective skill development found that .in successful classes, "instructors attempted to (each work values and attitudes in a context similar to what students would experience in the world of work. Similar point was also made by Junge, Daniels and Karmos (1984:145) regarding the acquisition of work-applicable basic skills:

Teaching is more than telling and learning is more than acquiring and demonstrating mastery of facts to ensure the transfer of basic skills into the workplace, teachers must engage student as active participants in the learning process. Prospective employers will expect them to be active participants in the workplace.

Closely related to the design of realistic learning settings and tasks is the practice effective teachers pursue of relating to their students the ways that supervisors in high-performance workplace relate to those they supervise, with the instructor functioning as a guide. In the words of (Spill and Tracy 1982;Nagle 1987):

In classes that effectively leach employability skills, instructors assume the role of facilitator and coaches rather than lecturers and order givers, requiring students to like much of the responsibility for their own learning.

In classes where participants acquire a high level of employability skills, learning is individualized, determined by students learning needs and styles rather than being regulated by textbook or rigid lesson plans. Teachers are most successful when they have considerable autonomy in establishing curriculum, classroom design and instructional approach. The researchers Stasz et al { 1990:1 25) who identified these circumstances elaborate this point:

This freedom to innovate was more a by-product of either school policies than a belief that teacher autonomy would lead to improved instruction. The policies that influence autonomy has to do with course pre-requisite requirements, graduation requirements and credit standard set, these policies constrain what they teach and how they teach it.

These researchers advocate that teachers in general should be consciously and deliberately given autonomy to structure their classes hi ways that support the acquisition of employability skills.

Recommendations

Federal and State Policy Makers

- > Establish as a top-priority national goal that every student should complete school possessing sufficient employability skills to earn a decent living.
- > Encourage and support continued experimentation with diverse programmes linking schools, employers and the young people.

Establish a national assessment system that will permit educational institutions to certify the levels of employability competencies their students have achieved

School Administrators

- > Include the development of employability skills among the explicitly stated school goals.
- > Structure programmes in keeping with local needs e.g. programmes should reflect the kinds

of employers in the community and local preferences for kinds of employer-school interaction.

- > Extend teachers considerable latitude for structuring their curriculum, classroom design and instructional approaches.
- > Provide teacher support by offering common preparation periods to plan interdisciplinary projects. Of all the resources required in a school none is more important than those devoted to teacher training.

Teachers

- > Arrange the classroom in such a way that it replicates key features of actual work setting and assign students tasks similar to those performed by workers in those settings.
- > Reinforce to students that employers value basic, higher-order and affective employability skills higher than job-specific technical skills.
- > Demand good deportment in the classroom. This conveys high expectations and familiarized students with workplace norms.
- > Utilize democratic instructional strategies such as role playing/simulation, problem-solving and group discussion.
- > Individualize instruction as much as possible, making use of a range of materials in different, media in response to students differing learning styles.

Employers

- > Develop internal training programmes to equip present employees with the full range of basic, higher-order and affective employability skills.
- > Communicate to schools the critical importance of instilling employability skills in students.
- > Collaborate with schools to provide learning experience that will foster students development of employability skills.

Conclusion

Failure to equip young people with employability skills has far-reaching consequences. It must be remembered that employment and employability are not the same thing. Being employed means having a job. For a youth or adult who is not adequately prepared, having a job is likely to be a temporary condition. Being employable means possessing qualities needed to maintain employment and progress in the workplace.

Work-related failure or even unsatisfactory work experience can have serious negative repercussions for the well-being of those unfortunate enough to experience it. Work is of central importance to well-being of people in our society. We take a large part of our identification from it and thus it forms a significant part of our self-concept. Therefore, there is a strong ethical and practice imperative facing all of us who help prepare people for the labour market to ensure that our clients or students are well prepared to enter working situations.

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