

Fugate, M. 2006. Employability in the new millennium. In J. H. Greenhaus & G. A. Callanan (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Career Development*. SAGE

EMPLOYABILITY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Historically, the majority of employability research and practice pertained to vocational rehabilitation or candidate attractiveness and selection. Employable individuals are able to demonstrate a fundamental level of functioning or skill to perform a given job, or an employable individual's skills and experience fit some predetermined set of job requirements. Conceptually, both streams emphasize the degree of person-job fit in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). Employability literature utilizing this fit perspective suggests that necessary KSAs are known and stable, which is incongruent with the highly uncertain employment environment and current employee-employer relationship.

As demands confronting employers rapidly change their strategies morph, which necessitates employees to continually update their KSAs in order to execute these strategies. Thus, framing employability in terms of rigid KSAs is a liability to both employers and employees, in that it suggests that employees are valuable only to the extent their current skill set matches their employer's current strategic objectives. Instead, the new employer-employee relationship requires organizations and the employees that populate them to be flexible and adapt strategies, services, products, knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors as needed to realize organizational and individual goals. In short, both employers and employees must adapt in order to compete successfully and avoid obsolescence. Therefore, it now seems reasonable and appropriate to frame (and measure) employability in terms of individual characteristics that foster active adaptability at work rather than a traditional KSA perspective.

Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth's conceptualization of *dispositional employability* follows

this lead and provides an interesting alternative to more traditional employability research and practice. They define employability as a multidimensional constellation of individual characteristics that predispose employees to (pro)actively adapt to their work and career environments. Employability facilitates the identification and realization of job and career opportunities both within and between organizations. Conceived this way, employability is a disposition that captures individual characteristics that foster adaptive behaviors and positive employment outcomes, and it more accurately describes the action oriented, proactive, and adaptive qualities that employers now widely espouse and seek. This perspective also is consistent with more current research that views employees as proactive rather than reactive agents. More employees now initiate change and create opportunities, rather than reacting to change after the fact or waiting for opportunities to present themselves. Moreover, conceptualizing employability as a disposition seems appropriate, given the high level of uncertainty inherent in today's career landscape. According to social psychology, highly uncertain environments can be characterized as "weak situations," and thus one can expect individual characteristics to be primary determinants of behavior.

A dispositional perspective of employability also has the added benefit of being explicitly anchored in the work context, which overcomes a prevalent conceptual and operational (measurement) shortcoming of previous research related to adaptability at work. Recent reviews of literature related to adaptability at work revealed that researchers typically used broad dispositional measures as indicators of adaptability. For instance, research showed that various measures of personality were positively related with work adjustment, openness to change, innovation and career initiative, and job satisfaction and performance. Despite the benefits of this research, the generalizability of results is limited because measurement items were not anchored

to the work context. A lack of situational specificity between predictors and outcomes weakens empirical relationships, and conversely, greater specificity more precisely captures the true essence of focal phenomena and enhances predictive power. Therefore, greater alignment of context and content between measures and outcomes allows for more precise comparisons of causes and effects of related phenomena, which is consistent with Fugate et al.'s conceptualization of employability. To further highlight the importance of contextualization, the following section briefly explicates the component dimensions that comprise dispositional employability.

COMPONENT DIMENSIONS OF DISPOSITIONAL EMPLOYABILITY

Workers must parlay person factors to identify and realize opportunities within today's work environment (i.e., to be employable). While many individual characteristics potentially support these endeavors, only a few deemed critical and representative of the active and adaptable nature of employability are discussed here: openness to changes at work, work and career resilience, work and career proactivity, career motivation, social and human capital, and career identity. The construct of dispositional employability subsumes the commonalities between the component dimensions, and thus represents the conceptual and empirical overlap between the dimensions that contribute to proactive adaptability at work. The individual component dimensions are explained next.

Openness to Changes at Work

Openness to changes at work supports flexibility in uncertain situations and facilitates continuous learning. For example, in the context of organizational change open individuals exhibit more positive attitudes toward changes, as well as greater job satisfaction and lower intentions to quit. Open people also are likely to perceive change as a challenge rather than a

threat and be receptive to new technologies and processes. Therefore, people who are open to new experiences and change are adaptable in dynamic work and career environments, which enhances their employability.

Work and Career Resilience

Work and career resilient individuals tend to have high self-evaluations and be optimistic in terms of their work and careers. Cognitive adaptation theory and research show that these qualities are highly adaptive. Positive self-evaluations precipitate positive and productive attitudes, and optimism fosters positive expectations about future events. Consequently, work and career resilience affords individuals confidence in their abilities to handle the objective and affective challenges associated with their work and careers. Accordingly, work and career resilience fosters the identification and realization of career opportunities (employability) in turbulent environments.

Work and Career Proactivity

Work and career proactivity is a hallmark of adaptability at work and is similar to proactive coping. Proactive coping consists of individual efforts to identify potential stressors and to acquire the skills and resources necessary to deal with stressors should they occur. In terms of employability, work and career proactivity subsumes the acquisition of information related to possible opportunities and challenges associated with one's current position and future opportunities. It also includes preparatory actions to cope with and/or exploit said opportunities and challenges should they occur. This may involve actions such as considering the implications of a possible downsizing or merger, or exploring the benefits of taking an international assignment. Moreover, individuals with high employability periodically assess their value in the marketplace, comparing their skills and experience with current job opportunities and

requirements. One benefit of this activity is that it may serve as a form market feedback, informing the individual of the value of his/her current skill set and experience in the eyes of the market. Thus, work and career proactivity has important implications for identifying and realizing opportunities.

Career Motivation

Career motivation relates to career goals, planning, and an orientation towards learning. As such, career motivation draws on the concepts of motivation control and learning goal orientation. Career motivation provides many benefits to workers: enhanced drive for work related endeavors, persistence during periods of boredom or frustration, and sustained effort in the face of challenges. Individuals with a high level of career motivation also are interested in mastering new skills and approach new situations as opportunities. As a result, career motivation is a critical determinant of continuous learning--a critical aspect of employability.

Social and Human Capital

Social and human capital are important elements of employability. Social capital consists of the resources available in social networks that can advance a person's interests. One's ability to identify and realize career opportunities is greatly influenced by such capital. The size and diversity of an individual's social networks are directly related to the amount of information and influence available. Similarly, employability is influenced by human capital. Human capital refers to a host of more traditional factors that influence a person's career advancement, such as age and education, work experience and training, job performance and organization tenure. Together, investments in these types of capital contribute to employability.

Career Identity

Career identity is the cognitive basis of dispositional employability, as it describes one's

self-definition in the career context. Career identity provides direction for future opportunities and behaviors, while at the same time it organizes past experiences. It coheres the plethora of career related elements both for the self and others. For example, people's career identities are often revealed when they answer the question: "What do you do for a living?" The answer to this question often communicates the individual's interpretation of his or her career past, present, and future. As such, career identity assembles past, current, and future career experiences and aspirations into an understandable whole, and it also acts as the cognitive glue that integrates the other dimensions of employability. In a sense, it is the cognitive canvas on which the other dimensions of employability are painted. Moreover, the career identity dimension gives employability particular relevance for career development, in that career identities help fashion career trajectories in the absence of traditional career tracks. Now that the dimensions of employability were explained, the following section explores the influence of employability on career development.

EMPLOYABILITY AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

It is important to illustrate the utility of this new conceptualization of employability as it is dramatically different from historical perspectives. This section thus briefly describes how a dispositional perspective of employability influences two important career development topics--career exploration and job search.

Due to substantial changes in the employer-employee relationship, the onus of career management resides increasingly with the employee. In response, some researchers and vocational counselors propose career exploration as a means for employees to manage this responsibility and cope with the increased complexity in careers today. Through career exploration employees learn important information about themselves and their career prospects.

Such internal and external information gathering has been linked to increased job search intensity and job search effectiveness. Thus, career exploration has important implications for career choices and experiences. This led other researchers to examine a wide variety of predictors of career exploration, such as ego-identity status, goal directedness, and vocational decision-making style. Unfortunately, however, identification of powerful predictors has been disappointing, that is, those investigated have explained relatively little variance in ultimate career outcomes. A dispositional approach to employability helps fill this void.

It is reasonable to assume that employability is a powerful predictor of career exploration, as it influences the two fundamental foci of information gathering: internal/self and external/environmental. For instance, consider the internally focused activity of inventorying and evaluating one's career interests (i.e., desirable characteristics of a job or career). Those with high employability are likely to have both a broader and clearer array of interests and possibilities, than those with lower employability. They are predisposed to identify opportunities that are consistent with and motivated by their career identities and facilitated by social capital. Furthermore, the active orientation inherent in employability means that these individuals are more likely to engage in self-exploration activities in the first place. In addition to the internal influence, employability also has implications for externally directed career exploration and job search.

Job search has become an evermore important and frequent endeavor for workers. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics stated that American workers now often make a dozen or more transitions during their working lives. In response, researchers have identified and investigated numerous individual difference factors that influence both job search behaviors and employment outcomes: personality traits (five factor model), generalized expectancies (locus of control and

optimism), self-evaluations (self-esteem and job search self-efficacy), motives, social context, and biographical variables (age, gender, education, race, and work-job tenure). It was shown that these non-ability individual differences affect self-regulatory processes that influence both job search behaviors and ultimate job search outcomes.

Not only does employability subsume many of the individual differences noted above, but it also presumably affects self-regulatory job search processes and associated outcomes. Employability makes unique contributions to job search behaviors, job choice, and job search outcomes. For example, individuals with high employability are predisposed to proactively identify reemployment goals (opportunities) when job loss is anticipated or advance notice provided. Moreover, the opportunities identified are directed and driven by the career identity dimension of employability. Employability also connotes confidence with and the active use of multiple search modalities, and it likely enhances job-search self-efficacy. Therefore, employability not only influences the choice of employment goals and enhances ultimate reemployment outcomes, but it is also positively influences the ultimate quality of reemployment, as they both likely align with one's career identities.

CONCLUSION

To be employable it is important to possess baseline KSAs that fit a given job, and while traditional KSAs are necessary, they are no longer sufficient in today's turbulent career landscape. Because intense competition creates ever-moving targets for employers, they must adapt in order to compete and survive. The same is true for their employees. Therefore, now it is more accurate and appropriate to expand our perspective of employability beyond KSAs (person-job fit) to include individual characteristics that facilitate individual action, proactivity, and adaptability. The construct of dispositional employability presented here does just that. As such,

a dispositional approach to employability has important implications and predictive power for career development and other aspects of organizational behavior.

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Suggested Additional Readings:

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