

1. Introduction

Employability skills are central to gaining and keeping employment (e.g. whether paid or unpaid, as an employee or self employed) as well as career progression. The lack of such skills is regularly referred to as one reason for the United Kingdom's often cited long tail of underachievement.

The Leitch Review reinforced the need for a good platform of basic and employability skills:

“one should have a good grounding of basic skills and the wider platform of skills for employability represented by Level 2”.

Employability skills are at the forefront of government policy to increase the workforce from around 75% to 80% of the working age population. Demographic trends mean that, despite current economic gloom and the likelihood of an increase in unemployment, there are still too few young people entering the labour market to take all the jobs that will become available over the period of the current skills ambition, to 2020.

2. Definitions of employability

It is difficult to find an agreed definition of what employability is, or what employability skills are. The Sector Skills Alliance, which represents employers of the vast majority of UK occupations, offers:

- Employability defines the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours required to seek, obtain and sustain employment at all levels in the labour market, employment, and obtaining new employment if required'. (Hillage and Pollard, 1998).
- ...the combination of factors and processes which enable people to progress towards or get into employment, to stay in employment and to move on in the workplace (Effective Interventions Unit in the Health Department).
- ..(any definition must reflect) the mix of skills, attributes and behaviours to find and sustain employment (LSN, 2008)
- Employability means what it says – it is about having the skills needed to perform well at work (DFES, 2006)
- Employability development has three aspects:
 - The development of employability attributes
 - The development of self-promotional and career management skills
 - A willingness to learn and reflect on learning (Universities UK, 2002)

Employability is a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure that they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy. There are eight top employability skills:

- *Self management*
- *Team working*
- *Problem solving*
- *Communication – application of literacy*
- *Business awareness*
- *Customer care*
- *Application of numeracy*
- *Application of ICT* (CBI 2007)

Asset Skills compiled a list of which employability skills are the most important to recruiters:

- *Motivation and enthusiasm*
- *Teamworking*
- *Oral communication*
- *Flexibility and adaptability*
- *Initiative / proactivity*
- *Ongoing development*
- *Employability skills / qualities not qualifications* (McDonalds, 2006)

It is clear from stakeholders in employability, government, employers, learning providers, that employability skills are not just about worklessness. They cover the ability to retain employment and progress in employment as well as the ability to acquire a first or subsequent job. These two aspects of employability are known as *threshold* employability and *sustainable* employability.

What is also clear is that all definers of employability consider that basic literacy and numeracy are essential employability skills.

3. Recent developments

The biggest body of work on employability comes from Asset Skills, the Sector Skills Council for facilities management which has responsibility across the Sector Skills Alliance (SSA). For the last two years Asset Skills has been running an employability project which has produced an employability matrix, an employability “toolkit” (for employers), employability strategy for the SSA and reviews of employability initiatives throughout the UK. All Sector Skills Councils are expected to include employability skills in their Sector Qualification Strategies.

The second piece of recent work on employability is the research report published earlier in 2008 by LSN, *Employability Skills Explored*. Researchers surveyed more than 1100 employers to find out the ranking of employability skills for workers on the threshold and for sustainable employability.

The 4 top employability skills at the threshold are:

- timekeeping (80%)
- literacy (79%)
- numeracy (77%)
- enthusiasm / commitment (75%)

and for sustainable employability:

- literacy (89%)
 - timekeeping (88%)
 - communication (87%)
 - enthusiasm / commitment (86%)
 - personal presentation (83%)
- (an employer could select more than one skill)

However, even though employers said that these employability skills were essential to be fully developed both at the threshold and for sustainable employability, they were less clear that they had responsibility towards paying for or otherwise developing these skills. The skills more likely to be described as attributes score far lower on the employers' responsibility rating than those which could more traditionally be described as "teachable".

The table below shows employer responses to the notion of payment or responsibility for development of the following employability skills (employers could select more than one skills if they thought the responsibility should be shared).

Skill for development	Responsibility lies with		
	Company	Individual	State
Literacy	26.5%	63.4%	41.5%
Timekeeping	25.1%	82.7%	4.2%
Communication	63.8%	60.9%	13.4%
Enthusiasm	26.4%	85.8%	2.5%
Personal presentation	24.5%	85.7%	5.5%

Another recent government development in raising employability skills is the emergence of discrete qualifications in employability. These are particularly used by DWP - Jobcentre+ with their clients and are particularly aimed at jobseekers. A list of current employability qualifications is available at <http://www.assetskills.org/CrossSectorSkills/Employability.asp> and Asset Skills are also responsible for ensuring that units in these qualifications fit the QCF.

4. NIACE activity on employability

Nationally, work for the LSC on the Foundation Learning Tier and Progression Pathways has inevitably focused on employability and we have pressed for connectivity between this development and the DWP 'Welfare to Work' programme and 'Skills for Jobs'. NIACE has worked on employability frameworks for the Health Sector through work commissioned by Skills for Health, and has supported capacity development in the VCS and the inclusion of volunteers in Train to Gain.

Regionally, NIACE has been involved in work on learning and skills for employability, for example in the South West, where we have been engaged with the South West Regional Skills Partnership and the predecessor bodies for four years, with a strong focus on young people and on literacy, language and numeracy. Other regions, for example Yorkshire and the Humber, the Eastern region and North East, have NIACE representation on groups where this issue is likely to emerge.

The Mental Health project (all English regions) has employability and employability skills, for those with mental health issues, as a major part of their remit, working with regional skills teams, Train to Gain, Skills for Jobs etc. and Regional Employment Teams from the National Social Inclusion Programme.

Additionally, promotional materials and campaigns have strong employability messages, and we actively promote resources with employability thanks to practitioners e.g. promotion of 'Choices not Chances'.

Offender Learning: Most of NIACE's work on offender learning has a strong link with employability skills since jobs are so critical to tackling offending behaviours. This includes some work in Scotland and regionally such as the West Midlands, and the development of materials on Self Employment, distributed to all English prisons and the Probation Service.

Literacy, Language and Numeracy Work: There is obviously a great deal of connectivity here, but specifically focused work includes 'Choices not Chances', a pack about partnerships for helping adults back to work, ESOL Tools for Migrant Workers and "Numeracy Counts", a DIUS funded project working with the retail and construction sectors. The family literacy ERIQ project looked at the way family learning can be used to promote and enable employability.

Workplace Learning: NIACE was commissioned by Skills for Health to produce an employability matrix for the Health Sector. There have been two conferences addressing employability skills. Publications such as "Fast Facts for" various occupations and also for jobseekers contribute to the development of employability.

Learners with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities: We have engaged, over a lengthy period on employability and learning for work, for those with learning difficulties and disabilities. This has resulted in a suite of publications with associated conference and training activity.

Step to Success: The work of NIACE's migration team on work and employability for refugees and asylum seekers (Progress GB) made an important contribution to the employability of migrants.

The Age Agenda: Both Older and Bolder and the Centre for Research into the Older Workforce have substantial track records of work with DWP around the employability.

5. Sources of further information

- The employability challenge, full report. UKCES, UK Commission for Employment and Skills. February 2009. www.ukces.org.uk/pdf/8080-UKCES-Employability%20ChallengeFinal.pdf
- Employability matrix, funding initiatives and provision, summary report, Asset Skills, June 2008 www.assetskills.org/CrossSectorSkills/EmployabilityKeyDocuments.asp
- Employability skills explored, LSN, 2008. www.lsneducation.org.uk/pubs/Pages/080044.aspx

- Overview of the Qualifications and Credit Framework and employability provision, Asset Skills, July 2008.
www.assetskills.org/CrossSectorSkills/EmployabilityKeyDocuments.asp
- A skills toolkit for employers, Asset Skills, July 2008.
www.assetskills.org/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.asp?IID=494&slD=687
- Employability across the regions: draft report, Asset Skills, November 2007
www.assetskills.co.uk/crosssectorskills/employability
- Skills for Business Network Employability Strategy: England, Asset Skills not dated c. 2007. www.assetskills.org
- Employability; an introduction for subject learning coaches, DfES, 2006.
www.subjectlearningcoach.net/files/EmployabilityBooklet.pdf
- Employability: developing a framework for policy analysis. J Hillage and E Pollard, Institute for Employment Studies, November 1998.
www.employment-studies.co.uk/summary/summary.php?id=emplbly

This series of briefing sheets aims to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues. Other titles are available.

Requests for briefing sheets in other formats, such as large print or brail are welcomed; we will be pleased to consider your request. Copies of this and other sheets are available from NIACE:

21 De Montfort Street

Leicester, LE1 7GE

Tel: 0116 204 4200

Email: information@niace.org.uk

They are also available on the website at:

<http://www.niace.org.uk/services/information-services/briefing-sheets>

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties, or insufficient resources. Registered charity number 1002775; Company registration number 2603322.